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Doing swearing across languages – The curious case of subtitling[☆]

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ABSTRACT

How is swearing done in subtitling across languages? This study of subtitles in different languages for Lonergan's 2016 film *Manchester by the sea* addresses the question with a particular goal in mind: not so much to identify and typologise translation strategies for swearing in the dataset, or not just, but to inspect/document the range of resources involved, at the interface of linguistics and pragmatics, in generating meaning-making options for interlingual sense-making, and publics with very different linguistic and (socio-)cultural profiles.

Most frequently occurring swearwords from dialogues in US English are considered in subtitling representation across the languages in the dataset – English, French, German, Italian, Spanish. Frequency and concordance data are the platform for qualitative analyses of a subset of units from different taboo domains in full textual context ('fuck', 'shit', 'God' and variants), from a broadly cross-cultural pragmatics perspective.

The study is underpinned by two main lines of enquiry: how linguistic and/or pragmatic specificities of the languages considered may impact on representation; and critically, how the medium itself may shape representation above and beyond difference into a distinctive and richly expressive instantiation of cinematic discourse, as what is revealingly for translation, and pragmatics, the curious case of subtitling.

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1. Introduction

How is swearing done in subtitling across languages, how can it be? With this case study of subtitles in different languages for a single US film, Lonergan's 2016 *Manchester by the sea* (MBS), the question is addressed comparatively with a particular goal in mind: not so much to identify and typologise translation strategies for swearing in the dataset, or not just, but to inspect and document the range of resources involved, at the interface of linguistics and pragmatics, in two main respects – generating meaning-making options for interlingual sense-making, and mediating the still largely unexplored liminal space between the two, for publics with very different linguistic and (socio-)cultural profiles.

The study focuses on most frequently occurring swearwords or swear units in the source dialogues in US English, and explores their representation in subtitling across the different target languages (TLs) in the dataset – English, French, German, Italian, Spanish –, from the DVD release for the French language market. *Wordsmith Tools* frequency lists and concordance

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data serve as the springboard for qualitative analyses of a subset of units in their full textual context, from a broadly cross-cultural pragmatics perspective.

Expletives ‘fuck’ and ‘fucking’ are top of the frequency list for English. They were partly considered in prior pilot work on the representation of communicative practices more generally (Guillot, 2019, 2020), and are used here as a contextualising platform: to recapitulate and expand insights from this earlier work, as testing ground for the study of other common types in the wordlist (‘shit’, ‘God’); and, concurrently, to set out the specificities of subtitling for the pragmatics of textual representation in that context, in contrast with dubbing, the mode examined in the Pavesi and Formentelli contribution in this special issue.

The study is underpinned by two main lines of enquiry: how linguistic and/or pragmatic specificities of the languages considered may impact on representation; and critically, how the medium itself may shape representation above and beyond difference into a distinctive and richly expressive instantiation of cinematic discourse, as what is revealingly for translation, and pragmatics, the curious case of subtitling.

Section 2 contextualises swearing and swearwords intra- and interlingually by reference to translation, audiovisual translation (henceforth AVT) and MBS, to then identify the research focus of the study and its methodology. Section 3 begins with a review of complementary views on ‘fuck’ and report on quantitative data from across the MBS dataset, as a preamble for the qualitative analysis of a subset of instances in their contexts of occurrence. The final section is a critical synthesis of results and doubles up as a conclusion.

2. Contextualisation, research focus and methodology

2.1. Swearing and swearwords within and across linguistic contexts and contexts of use

Swearing is recognised across linguistic and other disciplines as “a highly complex socio-pragmatic activity, which produces different effects, depending on, inter alia, features of the context, speaker and hearer categories, speaker-hearer relationships, and cultural and social expectations/ideologies” (Stapleton, 2020: 381; see also Stapleton, 2010). The intricacies of the interactive phenomena encompassed in this definition take on even greater resonance when AVT comes into the equation, because of a range of standard factors, some relating to translation in the cross-over of languages and cultures, other to specificities of AVT and the subtitling medium.

For translation generally, the linguistic and pragmatic/interactional aspects flagged in Stapleton are challenge enough. In accounts of swearing across languages, swearing is characterised along broadly similar general lines across the MBS dataset (English, French, German, Italian, Spanish): use of (taboo) language with the potential to cause offence as inappropriate, objectionable or unacceptable in any given context, in the expression or release of (negative/annoyance or positive/social) emotions (e.g. anger, frustration, disappointment, joy, excitement, intimacy), with a range of possible interactional and identity functions, psychological or social (e.g. bonding/creating rapport, generating humour, emphasis, etc.) (see inter alia Beers Fägersten and Stapleton, 2017; Stapleton, 2010, 2020 for English; Di Cristofaro and McEneaney, 2017, (Italian); Pavesi and Zamora, 2021 (Italian and Spanish); Díaz-Pérez 2020 (Spanish); Valdeón, 2020 (Spanish)).

Inevitably, there are cross-linguistic variations in manifestations of swearing: no one-to-one semantic-pragmatic mapping of swearword units or expressions across languages; different distributions across, or variable responses to, main taboo categories – excretion and effluvia, body parts, profanity/religion/blasphemy, sexual organs, practices and orientations, ethnicity and race, family and ancestry –, for historical, (socio-)cultural, situational or other reasons (Pavesi and Zamora, 2021; Stapleton, 2010 inter alia). Pavesi and Zamora thus note that while “tabooed expressions based on ‘damnation’ and ‘hell’ are frequently occurring in Germanic cultures, religious interdiction more often shifts to deities and other dysphemistic referents in Latin cultures” (2020: 384). There is also variability in pragmatic locutionary and perlocutionary and receptive impact. All foregoing studies identify hearers’ perceptions as key to speakers’ intentions in any given context. All see subjectivity as a defining feature of swearing as a main drive in judgements of offensiveness, intralingually and, critically for translation, interlingually: there is differential tolerance to swearwords/swearing across individuals, whether nuisance or social, within and across languages.

In AVT, technical features and *de-facto* occurrence of multiple frames of linguistic and cultural reference are additional parameters that affect textual choices and prospective audiences’ responses, though arguably not necessarily adversely: while mitigation is the main tendency recorded in research on swearing in AVT (Díaz Cintas and Remael, 2021), the argument here is that there may be scope to expand perspectives and nuance our views in terms of impact (see Section 4).

Toning down is predicated on evidence of recurring strategies for dealing with swearing in dubbing and subtitling, and the textual choices they reflect. For subtitling, Díaz Pérez (2020: 404) for example identifies omission, pragmatic correspondence (i.e. with target text equivalent in tone and pragmatic function), softening (i.e. with TL swearwords milder in tone and producing a degree of sanitization), de-swearing (i.e. with the meaning of the ST swearword conveyed but encapsulated into a non-swearing textual fragment).

The sanitizing tendency Díaz Pérez observes in his study of ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’ in a 300,000-word English-Galician corpus (Veiga) is seen as standard in AVT overall across many language pairs, including the MBS set, and deemed near universal, as noted in Zamora and Pavesi (2021: 4): lack of semantic/pragmatic corresponding expressions, multifunctionality of some source swearwords at the syntactic-pragmatic interface, external restrictions on AV translators, self-censorship are flagged as main drives. Full text replacement in dubbing makes iso[time]- and lip synchrony additional factors in textual choice. For subtitling, the list includes the assumed reinforced impact of swearwords in writing as a by-product of the diasemic shift from

speech, with limited display space and time to play with (Díaz-Pérez, 2020, *inter alia*). The focus for subtitling is generally on presence, absence and modulation of swear units extracted from frequency lists and short concordance extracts, mostly limited to immediate context. Other medium-specific features like sequencing, distribution and punctuation of subtitles are mostly absent, despite their markedness as in-built features of the medium, and capacity to trigger or affect pragmatic indexing internally in the vertical dynamic of cinematic discourse, as examples below will show.

For dubbing, Vadéon (2020) has called mitigating tendencies into question with the vulgarisation hypothesis and evidence for it on two prospective fronts: shift in norms in European Spanish dubbing of anglophone materials towards greater frequency and intensity of swearwords in more recent times; and/or acculturation in the target text reflecting European Spanish speakers' acknowledged greater tolerance to swearing by comparison with Anglophones. Addition, replacement of neutral words/expression by swearwords and intensification in his 2006-16 corpus are far in excess of omission and toning down (53.14% vs. 13.88% for omission).

These are other types of relevant factors. They may extend to other languages, and to subtitling: there are examples of additions in the MBS dataset, for example (see Sections 3.2, 3.3). For now, the reference to changing norms and variable levels of tolerance to swearing just takes us back to audiences: to the individuality and subjectivity of responses; and to the curious overlap of contexts and frames of reference from the inevitable co-presence of source and target input in multimodal AVT-mediated film contexts, and peculiar multiple perceptual bind thereby produced.

How is US English swearing experienced in US-set MBS, for example, when it is represented in French, German, Italian or Spanish, in view of the multiplicity of sense-making pragmatic triggers in the interactive vertical dynamic of film viewing and cultural a-synchrony between them? What is, in other words, the impact of interaction between two complementary but distinct sources of input: the same diegetic and extradiegetic clues from characters' orientations and scenes enacted in the source, in fictional representations projected as shared or shareable linguistic and (socio)cultural assumptions; and, concurrently, textual input in target languages producing different pragmatic expectations, about swearing for example, as seen above, and variable responses?

Processes of reception are getting better accounted for from a psycholinguistic perspective with more effective empirical testing (of, e.g., reading strategies or impact of subtitle segmentation with cutting-edge eye-trackers, among other; see Díaz Cintas and Szarkowska, 2020 (Eds) for a full review). Interdisciplinary input is giving AVT studies additional tools to unravel what may be involved interculturally, with reconceptualisations, within the pragmatics of fiction, of subtitling and other AVT modes as communicative agents within the participation structures of reception (see, for example, Messerli, 2017, 2019; also Locher and Jucker, 2021).

At the level of text itself, there is scope to explore further how/what meaning-making options may arise from the interfacing of multiple in-built and other resources in AVT, as the platform for sense-making and vehicle for interlingual mediation.

2.2. Research focus

The focus in this study of MBS data is subtitle text, not just as a representational artefact, but as a pragmatically distinctive medium of expression, idiosyncratically challenged and enriched by the interplay of cues from different sources, and time and space conditions of display.

The aim is to assess how this interplay plays out in the data for MBS across languages, with application to swearing, with a twofold objective:

- capitalise on the methodological opportunities in-built in the English/French/German/Italian/Spanish dataset to compare how these different languages deal with swearing, as a function of a) what is specific to each, in terms of strategy and linguistic/pragmatic choice, and b) what they owe to the medium and share;
- further the study of subtitling as a register in its own right, with an internal pragmatic indexing potential and capacity to shape representation into a distinctive instantiation of cinematic discourse, and vehicle for intercultural mediation.

There is evidence of a distinct indexical capacity across dubbing and subtitling for a range of features, in textual choices that stand out, from both source and target options, and both on-screen fictional representations and natural dialogues, and play to intersecting but different inferencing frames: orality, address, deictics, clefts, insults, pragmatic questions, among other, in corpus work for Italian to English dubbing (e.g. Pavesi, 2009, 2013 *inter alia*; Pavesi and Formentelli, 2019; Ghia, 2019); orality, address, greetings, thanking in case studies for English to French subtitling, functional pragmatic markers/FPMs in the MBS dataset (e.g. Guillot, 2012, 2016, 2020 *inter alia*).

Does this capacity apply to swearing? To what extent and how? And are hybridization and 'shining through' of linguistic and cultural otherness observed with swearing, as they are with these other features as by-products of AVT mediation?

2.3. Methodology

The MBS screenplay and transcripts of standard subtitles for English, French, German, Italian and Spanish¹ were downloaded from online sources and processed with *Wordsmith Tools* for word counts and (frequency and alphabetical) word lists to locate potential swearword type or units, and concordance data to exclude non-relevant tokens (e.g. units in their literal meaning).

Swearwords/units were identified in line with the broad definition in Section 1.1, i.e. as words/units with a potential to cause offense, used in the expression/release of negative or positive emotions, in mostly connotative uses and a range of possible functions, against three complementary benchmarks:

- a) Typologies from research, representing consensus achieved empirically (e.g. [McEnergy, 2006](#); [Pavesi and Zamora, 2021](#) for Spanish and Italian; [Di Cristofaro and McEnergy, 2017](#) for Italian; [Vadéon, 2020](#) for Spanish);
- b) Compilations posted on-line by general users, so broadly reflecting general public perceptions;
- c) Sets of types identified in the frequency list for each language by native speaker informants as having the potential to cause offence, and related expressions.

Table 1 below shows basic quantitative information from these first steps (overall word and type counts; number, frequency range and top 5 for a) all different swearword types and b) combined variants (lexical and grammatical [plural/singular/masculine/feminine forms]; e.g. fuck, fucking, mother fucker; asshole/assholes).

Next steps focused on 'fuck', 'shit', 'God' and variants, as the subset of most frequently occurring units in the English data also representing different taboo domain: sex, effluvia, religion, as follows.

- retrieval of all instances, in single-line contexts at this point;
- classification of translation solutions in line with Díaz Pérez's strategy set (omission, pragmatic correspondence, softening and de-swearing; see Section 2.1 above), as a diagnostic platform for qualitative analysis; results are shown in [Tables 2–4](#).
- qualitative analysis across languages in two extended extracts.

MBS sets the scene for swearing in diverse contexts, interactions and registers, with Lee Chandler as the main character: Lee is a broken man turned from happy father to sullen near sociopath for reasons only revealed gradually in narrative flashbacks - a fire that lost him his home and children, wrecked his marriage and sent him away; he returns to his hometown of Manchester by the Sea reluctantly after his brother's untimely death, and unwelcome call to assume guardianship of his nephew Patrick. This variety is reflected in the sample selected for closer scrutiny, with social/nuisance swearing in adult/adolescent, adult/adult and intimate/distant/family/stranger interactions. Sample extracts are shown in [Table 5](#).

The intralingual subtitles in English in MBS are a close rendering of the make-belief screenplay, with slight expansion (+2.24%).² As shown in pilot work, TL subtitles in the dataset are calqued quite closely on the English set. This is an integral feature of the subtitling mode for MBS and all similarly mediated cultural products, with two main by-products: calquing can promote linguistic uniformization and, with it, hybridization reflecting a degree of adaptation to SL norms; it also makes difference more conspicuous, and amplifies its impact, as shown for functional discourse markers, for example ([Guillot, 2020](#)). The extent to which this may extend to swearing in MBS is a central point for the discussion.

Table 1 below shows reduction in TL subtitles by comparison with English screenplay and subtitles – more marked for French (–17.65%, –19.47%) and German (–16.15%, –18%) than for Italian (–14.65%, –16.5%) and Spanish (–11.93%, –13.86%). Numbers of types are greater, on the other hand, again differentially across French/German and Italian/Spanish: +170/+153 vs. +412/+312. Greater grammatical and lexical ranges for fewer words confirms in itself that TLs do different, in relation to English and to one another.

These contrasting figures also reflect differences in strategy: greater stylization for French and German, greater literalness for Italian and Spanish, arguably for reasons of tradition or history (e.g. primacy of the visual in cinema, or past censorship), as observed in earlier work. Here the contrasts just fulfil the methodological function of providing parallel data to address hands-on the questions signposted in 2.2.

- i) to what extent are lower frequencies of occurrence and immediate context an indication of 'toning down' in terms of potential impact in context;
- ii) what other features may play a role in indexing the pragmatic swear load of utterances and interactions;
- iii) do shifts across swear domains (eg from profane to scatological or vice versa) produce cultural shifts.

¹ of industry norm: up to about 40 characters per line, up to 5–6 s display time for 2-liners ([Diaz Cintas and Remael, 2021](#)).

² Word counts and related figures are indicative: data files integrate a few items extraneous to dialogue text which affect counts slightly (e.g. speakers' names in the screenplay).

Table 1
MBS dataset quantitative data.

	Word count – Type count	Swearword types	Top five by frequency	Combined variants	Top five combined variants by frequency
Screenplay English	20906 [100%] -----	19	37 fuckin 21 fuck 15 shut (up) 17 God {9 Christ 9 shit	13	63 [fuck21/in37/g5] 27 [God17/damn9/it1] 15 [shut (up)] 12 [bull3/shit9] 9 Christ
Subtitles ENGLISH	21376 [+2.24%] 100% ----- 1578	20	46 fucking 31 fuck 20 God 18 shut (up) 8 shit (2 <i>literal</i> [dog])	11	80 [fuck31/ing46/ motherfucker2/ing1] 24 [God20/damn4] 18 [shut (up)] 12 [shit8/bullshit4] [2 <i>lit</i>] 7 [ass4/hole2/s1]
FRENCH	17216 [-17.65%] -19.47% ----- 1748 [+170]	32	8 (la) ferme (la) 8 merde 8 putain 5 emmerde 4 bordel	22	13 [em5/merde8] 10 [ferme8/z2] 10 [foutre4/fous2/t1/u1/ foutez2] 8 [putain] 3 [cul2/trouduc1]
GERMAN	17529 [-16.15%] -18% ----- 1731 [+153]	33	11 Scheiße 10 Scheiß 7 Leck 4 Arshloch 4 Fick	22	25 Scheiß11/e10/egal4] 8 [Ver1/Arsch3/loch4] 7 [Leck] 6 [Verdammt4/e2] 6 [Voll1/Idiot4/en1]
ITALIAN	17843 [-14.65%] -16.5% ----- 1990 [+412]	17	25 cazzo 8 fanculo 7 dio 7 oddio 6 merda {5 stronzo {5 vaffanculo	10	26 [cazzo25/i1] 15 [v5/af2/fanculo8] 14 [od7/dio7] 10 [stronzo5/i1/zata2/e2] 6 [merda]
SPANISH	18413 [-11.93%] -13.86% ----- 1890 [+312]	20	25 mierda 10 puto 9 puta 6 Jesucristo 6 Jesús	13	25 [vete6/a la6/mierda13] 23 [puto10/s2/puta9/s2] 12 [Jesucristo6/Jesús6] 7 [idiota3/s4] 4 [cojones] 4 [conō]

3. Doing swearing in MBS subtitling

3.1. The case of ‘fuck’ – complementary views

In his study of ‘fuck and ‘shit’ in Galician subtitle data, Díaz Pérez shows a greater volume of omissions and toning down for ‘fuck’ (44.2%, with pragmatic correspondence at 39.3%) than for ‘shit’ (pragmatic correspondence only, 63.2%). The greater offensiveness of ‘fuck’ and availability of a direct counterpart for ‘shit’ in Galician are seen as likely reasons, with also grammatical category.

In the MBS dataset, raw frequency counts point to toning down as well: ‘fuck’ and variants (‘fuckin’ and ‘fucking’) are top of the list in English for both screenplay (63 combined occurrences), and subtitles (80, with also ‘motherfucker/ing’), way over frequencies for combined swear unit variants in the other languages (26, 25, 25, 13 for Italian, Spanish, German and French respectively; see Table 1), with a distribution that, incidentally, also runs counter to assumptions about the greater impact of swearing in writing prompting moderation in the shift from speech. Analyses of differences between TLs in full context show they reflect contrasts in strategies flagged above, from marked streamlining with French to more literal rendering for Spanish and Italian, but also that toning-down itself is relative, as a function of internal pragmatic indexing.

The offensiveness of the first ‘fuck’ to occur in MBS, in the second scene, is thus conveyed in French with a seemingly milder ‘*Je m’en tape pas mal*’ [I don’t give a toss]. It is indexed with the requisite pragmatic force to fulfil the function of the expletive in the source all the same, by a combination of features in the near and broader prior context. In both source and target the invective marks the venting of Lee Chandler’s so far contained exasperation with a nagging interlocutor he has resisted engaging with. His

talk has been bland, minimal, uncommunicative. The limited but perceptible register markedness of ‘*Je m'en tape pas mal*’ thus stands out, in a line that has other meaning-inducing features, as shown in (contextually abridged) Example 1 below, from the initial MBS pilot study.

Example (1)

Subtitles in English	Subtitles in French
[...] 98 00:08:10,760-> 00:08:12,922 I don't give a fuck what you do, Mrs. Olsen./	[...] 90 00:08:10,665-> 00:08:12,754 <i>Je m'en tape pas mal</i> , Mme Olsen./ [I don't give a toss, Mrs Olsen]

The line is reduced to essentials, relies on contextual inferencing for what is not, does away with interpersonal engagement in-built in the source with ‘what you do’, and amplifies a distance that conveys the character's disaffection. Other contrasts are at play – with Lee's talk in the previous pre-tragedy scene, in easy multiclausal, lexically diverse, extended banter. Here utterances are stark, segmented and distributed as one-liners, punctuated with full stops inhibiting interactional engagement, unlike the frequent exclamation and questions marks of the opening scene, do away with source discourse markers, downtoners, pronouns of interpersonal engagement, second pair parts in adjacency pairs, verb aspect (see Guillot, 2020). For reasons of space examples are not shown at this point but in subsequent sections, with other features identified as collectively conducive to internal indexing in prior MBS case studies (Guillot, 2019, 2020).

Small differences go a long way, differentially across the MBS languages as will be shown below. While they do not invalidate overt evidence from corpus work or Díaz Pérez's findings, they suggest that there may be more to representation than meets the eye, literally. What the combined quantitative and qualitative evidence for MBS also points to, however, is that swearing's deep-seated cultural underpinnings may make it stand out as a special case, with ultimately more limited scope to trigger a sense of difference and alert audiences to linguistic and cultural otherness.

3.2. The quantitative picture - overlap and differentiation

Beyond (relative) reduction from screenplay to subtitle text, Table 1 shows basic contrasts across subtitle datasets, reflecting deep-seated particularities in their representation of swearing in MBS, whatever they may be traced to ultimately.

- greater lexical swear range for German and French by comparison with English (33 and 32 different types vs. 20 for English; 22/22 vs. 11 for combined variants); Spanish [20] and Italian [17] are more in line with English (13 and 10 for combined variants);
- discrepancies in the frequencies of occurrence of most common swear types in the top fives, all noticeably lower for TLs: 8, 11, 25, 25 for French, German, Italian and Spanish respectively (with *[la] ferme [la]* [shut it/up], *Sheiße* [shit], *cazzo* [dick/fuck], *mierda* [shit]) as against 46 for English with ‘fucking’ (80 for combined variants [*fuck/ing/motherfucker/ing*], vs. 13 [*em/merde*], 25 [*Sheiße/egal*], 26 [*cazzo/i*], 25 [*vete/a la/mierda*]);
- uneven spread of occurrences across swear unit types: the bulk of swearing is shared between two types for English (top two ‘fuck’ [46] and ‘fucking’ [31]); the spread is more even for top twos in the TLs, despite variations - [8,8] and [11,10] for French and German (*la ferme/la/merde*; *sheiße/scheiß*), [25,8], [25,10] for Italian and Spanish (*cazzo, fanculo* [fuck]; *mierda, puto* [[male] hooker]); the same applies when variants are combined, but French stands out (13) from English (80), and from German, Italian and Spanish (25, 26, 25).
- different distributions across the (religion, sexual practices, excretion) taboo areas represented in top five lists: 20 occurrences of ‘God’ for English (profanity), no profane item for French and German in their top fives, 7 each of *dio* and *oddio* for Italian, 6 each of *Jesús* and *Jesucristo* for Spanish; excretory *merde*, *Sheiße*, *mierda* are top for French, German and Spanish (types and combined variants), sexual *cazzo* and *vaff/fanculo* are top for Italian.
- different distribution across grammatical categories, impacting on use in context (e.g. verbs, gerunds, nouns) (see Section 4.).

Representational strategies for the ‘fuck’, ‘shit’, ‘God’ and variants in one-line only contexts confirm disparities between French/German and Italian/Spanish: overall, swearing is overtly more limited in French and German, with – in Díaz Pérez's terms – more omission and less pragmatic correspondence [PC], some softening and de-swearing. Streamlining through reduction is one reason, but there are others – some to do with lack of semantic and/or grammatical counterpart and/or cultural specificities of the different TLs, some with the interaction with other textual and medium-specific resources in broader contexts. This is taken up in Section 3.3. There are basic clues in the quantitative data as well, different in nature across the three unit types.

3.2.1. 'fuck' and variants (Table 2)

Table 2
 'fuck' and variants TL coded in line with Díaz Pérez classification; one-line context.

Fuck + variant 80 [fuck31/ing46/motherfucker2/ing1]				
Díaz-Pérez coding	Omission	Pragmatic correspondence	Softening	De-swearing
French	43 7 fuck, 35 fucking, 1 motherfucker	23 16 fuck, 6 fucking, 1 motherfucking	7 6 fuck, 1 motherfucker	7 2 fuck, 5 fucking
German	43 10 fuck, 33 fucking	27 19 fuck, 7 fucking, 1 motherfucking	8 2 fuck, 4 fucking 2 motherfucker/ing	2 fucking
Italian	28 7 fuck, 20 fucking 1 motherfucker	43 24 fuck, 17 fucking, 2 motherfucking	6 fucking	3 1 fuck, 2 fucking
Spanish	34 6 fuck, 25 fucking, 3 motherfucker/ing	40 19 fuck, 21 fucking	5 2 fuck, 3 fucking	1 fuck

There are striking features in the quantitative data for 'fuck' and its main variant 'fucking'.

i) contrasts between omission and pragmatic correspondence across TLs:

In all, 'fucking' is omitted the most by comparison with 'fuck' - x35 vs. 7 for French, 33 vs.10 for German, 20 vs. 7 for Italian, 25 vs. 6 for Spanish, in most cases as a fly-off-the tongue adverbial intensifier with no real denotational meaning of its own, and a pragmatic force that will need considering in broader contexts. Incidentally, this use of 'fucking' as an intensifier makes up most of the additions to subtitles in English, often redundantly in repetitive strings, so prime candidates for deletion.

Conversely, for 'fuck' pragmatic correspondence is the most recurrent strategy by comparison with 'fucking' except marginally for Spanish (French 16 for 6 'fucking', German 19/7, Italian 24/17, Spanish 19/21), as though there was greater compulsion to retain/convey the pragmatic impact of the term in its arguably stronger and contextually more salient interactional verb form.

ii) inverted ratios of omission to pragmatic correspondence across French/German and Italian/Spanish, potentially sign-posting one or both of two possible main causes:

- French and German have more omission [43 each], less pragmatic correspondence [23, 27]);
- Italian and Spanish have less omission [28, 34], more pragmatic correspondence [43, 40]);

possible by-products of

- greater or lesser linguistic scope for pragmatic correspondence, with more readily available common counterparts like *cazzo* [fuck] and [*v/af/fanculo*] [fuck off] for Italian, and [*vete/a la mierda*] [go to the shit/'fuck off'] for Spanish – the main options in evidence in the data;
- less literal translation, as in the kind of 'less is more' practice illustrated for French in the example in the previous section.

Overall, none of the TL PC options show the level of pragmatic and grammatical multifunctionality and concomitant frequency embodied in 'fuck' (x31) and 'fucking' (x46), though Italian and Spanish come nearer with greater uniformity in PC choices.

For 'fuck'

Italian and Spanish come closest to English, both with dominant PC options, mostly sexual for Italian as in English, but excretory in Spanish, respectively.

- [*v*]/[*af*]/*fanculo* (x15 out of 24 PC instances; sexual, verb): the rest include *cazzo* (5; sexual, noun), *porca puttana* (2; sexual/status, noun [pork hooker]), *vai a farti fottere* (1; sexual, verb [go fuck yourself]), [*vuoi*] *scoparmi* (1; literal sexual, verb) (5 options);
- [*vete/a la*] *mierda* (x11 out of 19; excretory, noun base); the rest are [*vete a*] *cajar* (1; excretory, verb [go shit]), [*qué*] *cojones*' (4; body part/sexual, noun [balls], 'puta' (2; sexual/status, noun [[female] hooker]).

German and French have more even distributions across PC options and taboo domains, respectively:

- *scheiß* and variants (x7 out of 19; excretory, noun [shit]), *verpissen* [*sie sich*] (2; excretory, verb [piss off]), *leck* [*mich*] (6; sexual, verb [lick me]), *fick dich/ficken* (4; sexual, verb [fuck you]) (4 options);
- *foutre* and variants (x5 out of 16; sexual, verb [*Foutez-le camp* [decamp] for 'Get the fuck out [2], [*va te faire*]/[rien à] *foutre*' [3] for 'fuck you'/'who gives a fuck']); *baiser* (1; literal sexual, verb), [*j'e t'*] *emmerde* (3; excretory, verb/noun), [*fait/va*] *chier* (2; excretory, verb [shit]), *putain* (2; sexual/status, noun [female hooker]), [*fermez*] *vos gueules* (1; body part, noun [shut your gob for 'shut the fuck up', *Je m'en tape* (2; verb [I don't give a toss]) (6 options).

For 'fucking'

Italian and Spanish have near 100% dominant PC options, relating to the sexual domain:

- *cazzo* (x16 out of 17; sexual, noun) (with 1 *porca puttana*)
- *puto/a/s* (x19 out of 21) (with 1 *joder* [sexual, verb [fuck], 1 *vete a la mierda*);

German and French have several different PC options with comparatively few occurrences and a mix of taboo domains.

- *verdammte* (x3 out of 7; profane, past participle/adjective), *scheißegal* (1; excretory, adjective), *verpiss dich* (1), *fick dich* (1), *blödes* (1; effluvia, adjective [bloody]);
- [*em*] *merde* (x3 out of 6), *putain* [*de*] (2) [*elle*] *fout* [*quoi*] (1; sexual, verb [from *foutre*])

There are smaller volumes of occurrences for softening and de-swearing across TLs (7 and 7 for French, 8/2 German, 6/3 for Italian, 5/1 for Spanish) (e.g. *froid de loup*, *total kalt*, *freddo cane* for 'fucking freezing' [wolf cold/total cold/dog cold]). There is no space to cover them all here, but overall options are in line with general tendencies observed so far.

Overall 'fuck' stands out from 'fucking' in TL representations. Intensifier 'fucking' appears to be more easily dispensed with, perhaps because of lesser narrative impact and/or redundant repetition. It also generates more uniform PC options, at least for Italian and Spanish, possibly as easier to accommodate syntactically and grammatically. 'Fuck' as a verb is either a reactive expletive exclamation ('fuck!') or more proactive when pronominally directed at an interlocutor ('fuck you', 'get the fuck out'), so denotatively impactful and less dispensable for the narrative, as its greater presence in PC options could suggest. These overall are sexual (Italian), excretory (Spanish) or a mix (French and German), and signpost different swearing practices in this respect.

These tentative assumptions are revisited and supplemented with analyses of examples in context in the next section.

3.2.2. 'shit' and variants (Table 3)

Table 3

'shit' and variants TL coded in line with Díaz Pérez classification; one-line context.

Shit + variants 12 [8 shit][4 bullshit]					
Díaz-Pérez coding	Omission	Pragmatic cor-response	Softening	De-swearing	Other
French	2 1 shit, 1 bullshit	4	6 3 shit, 3 bullshit		
German	3 1 shit, 2 bullshit	7 6 shit, 1 bullshit			Source kept 2 bullshit
Italian		8 4 shit, 4 bullshit	1 shit	2 shit	Addition 1 merda Intensification 1 cazzo
Spanish	1 bullshit	9 7 shit, 2 bullshit	1 bullshit		Intensification 1 para retrasados y mongolos

'Shit' and 'bullshit' are few in numbers and variants and do not come across as critical translation points to the same extent as 'fuck' (i.e. as points of conspicuous decision making in target text signalling translation problem; Munday, 2018: 180).

The most common strategy for 'shit' is pragmatic correspondence, with what seem literal standard options across languages (*merde*, *scheiß*, *merda*, *mierda*), in line with Díaz Pérez findings for Galician (unlike for 'fucking'), and there are comparatively fewer omissions than for 'fuck' and variants.

French and German here again contrast with Italian and Spanish, with more omissions (2 and 3 vs. 0 and 1), less PC (4 and 7 vs. 8 and 9), more softening (6 for French vs. 1 and 1), and 2 instances for German of source word retention ('bullshit'). There is one example of addition in Italian (*merda*), and one of intensification in Italian (*cazzo*) and Spanish (*para retrasados y mongolos* for 'retarded as shit', though with omission of 'shit').

PC options other than literal translations include: [*pour mon*] *bordel* in French and [*para todos*] *porquerias* in Spanish [crap] for 'for all my shit' (both bordering on softening), *stronzate/a* for 'bullshit' [4] in Italian. Softening options for French include *j'en ai rien à battre* [I have nothing to beat about it] for 'ask me if I give a shit' [1], *conneries* [claptrap] for 'shit' [1] and 'bullshit' [3] *grave débile* for 'retarded as shit' [1] [serious idiot].

Differentiation here is relatively smaller in scale than for 'fuck' and variants, with fewer instances and closer semantico-pragmatic correspondences across TLs, but still raises the question of what factors may be at play pragmatically - of mitigation or other possible relevant elements as may be revealed in broader contexts, with hints in one-liners: in 'ask me if I give a shit' vs. *j'en ai rien à battre* [lit. I have nothing to beat], for example, the absence of the 'ask me' overt call for interpersonal engagement in French produces a sense of distance and disaffection consonant with the narrative demands of the scene at this point.

3.2.3. 'God' and variants (Table 4)

Table 4

'God' and variants TL coded in line with Díaz Pérez classification; one-line context.

God + variants (24 [God 20/damn/it 4])					
Díaz-Pérez coding	Omission	Pragmatic cor-response	Softening	De-swearing	Addition
French	13 10 God, 3 Goddam/it	7 6 God, 1 Goddam/it		4 I swear to God	
German	13 10 God, 3 Goddam/it	7 6 God, 1 Goddam/it	2 God] [<i>mein Güte</i>]	2 God [<i>he/wirklich</i>]	2 God [<i>oh [mein] Got</i>] [fire scene]
Italian	5 3 God, 2 Goddam/it	15 13 God, 2 Goddam/it		4 God [<i>ti prego/giuro</i>]	1 God [<i>oddio</i>]
Spanish	3 2 God, 1 Goddam/it	19 16 God, 3 Goddam/it		2 God [<i>hola/te juro</i>]	1 God [; <i>Oh, Dios!</i>] [fire scene]

God occurs in three main configurations - 'God', 'oh [my] God', 'I swear to God' - and stands out for different reasons.

Here again there is a larger volume of omissions for French and German (13 each vs. 5 and 3 for Italian and Spanish), and a smaller volume of pragmatic correspondence (7 each vs. 15 and 19 for Italian and Spanish).

What is striking, however, is that where Italian and Spanish maintain the link with the religious domain in all PC cases, though with limited blasphemous impact, as for 'God', French and German do not, except in very few examples.

PC for Italian includes *Oddio* [6], *oh [mio] Dio* [4], *giuro su Dio* [1] *Dio te benedica* [1], *maledizione* [1], and for Spanish [*Ho*] *Dios [mio]* [13], *te juro per Dios* [1], *Dios te bendiga* [1], *demonios* [1].

In French, *mon Dieu* [my God] is maintained twice, at points where its utterance by one character in the dialogue is subsequently questioned by another and so integral to the narrative (**Oh my God**/are you familiar with it? No./Then what are you saying '**Oh my God**' for?), and a third time as an overtly religious leave-taking benediction ('God bless' – *Que Dieu te bénisse*).

German shares these examples [*Oh Gott*], [*Gott segne dich*], has two interjectory '*Oh Gott*', and four more occurrences, including two pathos-enhancing additions at a tragic point when Lee's wife stands powerless outside their blazing house calling out that her children are within (*oh mein Gott! Oh mein Gott!/Meine Kinder sind darin! Meine Kinder sind darin!/Oh mein Gott! Sie sind da drinnen!/oh Gott*). It has two instances of softening ('*mein Güte*')

Even in this most dramatic of scenes, there is no overriding in French the ingrained republican and secular underpinnings that exclude reference to religious matters in public and much private discourse.³ Despair and pathos are expressed through plain exclamatory factual repetitions that are effective, but obscure the nature of the verbal response in English, and its cultural underpinnings (*Mes enfants sont à l'intérieur!/Ils sont à l'intérieur!* [my children are inside! They are inside!]).

Other PC options for French include common interjections *la vache* (x2; [the cow - mild oath of surprise/indignation/admiration]) and '*bordel*' (2; [brothel]).

There is one common example of de-swearing across TLs for 'I swear to God' (*je te jure*; *wirklich*; *ti prego* and *ti giuro*; *te juro*), where the deeply embedded but now relatively baseless reference to God common in English is not part of otherwise equally standard collocations in the other languages.

'Goddam' (x3) and 'godammit' (x1) show similar tendencies. Intensifier 'goddam' is entirely omitted in French and German, like 'fucking' in similar uses; blasphemous PC is maintained in Italian (*dannate*; x1) but not in Spanish (*una mierda*;

³ <https://www.gouvernement.fr/qu-est-ce-que-la-laicite>.

x1). PC for 'godammit' is non-sacrilegious in French *bordel* (1), but *verdammt* [1] for German, *maledizione* and *dannate* for Italian [1 each] and *demonios* [1] for Spanish all are.

Overall then, the quantitative evidence shows overlap in the representation of swearing across languages in MBS, but also a good deal of differentiation, both in an array of interacting factors in different configurations across languages.

3.3. Swearing in context - medium and message

Swearing in MBS is mostly concentrated in a few scenes. The sample in Table 5 is typical, in numbers of types showcased and frequencies of occurrence (5 types in the English subtitles - 'fuck' [2], 'fucking' [9], 'goddam' [1], 'God' [1], 'asshole' [2 - additions]), and in patterns of TL omission and PC.

Table 5
Contextualised sample.

Context Lee's limited patience is tested to its verbal limits first by his contrary, uncooperative adolescent nephew who refuses to see sense about what to do with his deceased father's fishing boat, then by an interfering onlooker.				
Source dialogue screenplay				
PATRICK	[...] It's my boat now, isn't it? What does "trustee" mean? Does that mean you're allowed to sell it if I don't want you to?			
LEE	[...] I don't know. But I'd definitely consider it –			
PATRICK	No fuckin' way!			
LEE	Don't be so goddamn sure of yourself! There's nobody to run it! You're sixteen years old!			
PATRICK	Yeah! I can get my licence this year!			
LEE	So what? You're still a minor! You can't run a commercial vessel by yourself!			
PATRICK	Why can't I run the boat with George?			
LEE	(CONT'D) Meanwhile it's a big fuckin' expense and I'm the one that's gonna have to manage it and I'm not even gonna be here!			
PATRICK	Who gives a fuck where you are?			
LEE	Patty, I swear to God I'm gonna knock your fuckin' block off!			
	[A BUSINESSMAN in a winter coat calls from across the street]			
BUSINESSMAN	Great parenting.			
LEE	Mind your own fuckin' business!			
PATRICK	Uncle Lee!			
LEE	Mind your own business! Shut the fuck up or I'll fuckin' shut you up, I swear to God – I'm gonna smash you in the fuckin' face if you don't take a walk! Mind your fuckin' business!			
BUSINESSMAN	No no, that's good parenting. Smash him in the face. Smash him in the face. That'll show him.			
PATRICK	It's OK, Mister. Thank you! It's OK! Uncle LEE! Are you fundamentally unsound?			
LEE	Get in the fuckin' car! [Lee fumbles the keys and they fly out of his hands]			
PATRICK	I can't obey your orders until you unlock the door.			
LEE	Just shut up.			
Subtitles in English	Subtitles in French	Subtitles in German	Subtitles in Italian	Subtitles in Spanish
[...] 1917 01:05:01,600 → 01:05:03,376 Who gives a fuck where you are? Patty, I swear to God,	[...] 817 01:05:01,489 → 01:05:02,408 Rien à foutre.	[...] 778 01:04:54,891 → 01:04:58,055 - Scheißegal. - Ich verpasse dir gleich eine.	[...] 825 01:05:01,500 → 01:05:03,180 - Chi se ne frega dove abiti! - Ti giuro...	[...] 843 01:05:01,893 → 01:05:02,581 ¿A quién le importa que no estés aquí?
918 01:05:03,400 → 01:05:04,776 I'm going to knock your fucking block off.	818 01:05:02,532 → 01:05:04,702 Je te jure, je vais t'en mettre une.		826 01:05:03,300 → 01:05:04,580 Ti do un pugno e ti rompo la faccia.	844 01:05:02,804 → 01:05:04,884 Patrick, te juro que te parto la cara.
919 01:05:04,800 → 01:05:07,041 Great parenting. What? What did you say?	819 01:05:04,869 → 01:05:06,327 - Super éducation. - Quoi ?	779 01:04:58,353 → 01:05:00,436 - Toller Vater. - Was haben Sie gesagt?	827 01:05:04,700 → 01:05:06,930 - Bel genitore. - Che hai detto?	845 01:05:05,086 → 01:05:05,782 Gran crianza.
920 01:05:07,160 → 01:05:08,650 I said great parenting. Fuck you-	820 01:05:06,452 → 01:05:07,870 - T'as dit ? - Super éducation.	780 01:05:00,647 → 01:05:03,390 - Sie sind ein toller Vater. - Leck mich, Arschloch.	828 01:05:07,060 → 01:05:08,770 - Ho detto: "bel genitore". - Vaffanculo.	846 01:05:06,038 → 01:05:07,038 ¿Qué? ¿Qué has dicho?
921 01:05:08,720 → 01:05:10,927 Mind your fucking business, fucking asshole.	821 01:05:07,995 → 01:05:09,998 Je t'emmerde ! Mêle-toi de ton cul !		829 01:05:08,890 → 01:05:10,780 Fatti i cazzi tuoi, stronzo.	847 01:05:07,501 → 01:05:07,949 He dicho "gran crianza".
922 01:05:11,000 → 01:05:13,844 Hey, hey, hey. It's okay, it's okay.	822 01:05:10,123 → 01:05:12,499 Tu vas m'en coller une ?	781 01:05:03,650 → 01:05:07,143 - Schlagen Sie mich doch. - Schon gut, schon gut.	830 01:05:10,900 → 01:05:13,700 Ehi, calma, va tutto bene.	848 01:05:08,221 → 01:05:10,101 ¡Vete a la mierda! ¡Métete en tus putos asuntos!
923 01:05:13,920 → 01:05:16,321 I'm going to smash your fucking face, you fucking asshole.	824 01:05:13,921 → 01:05:16,340 Je vais te défoncer la tête, connard !	782 01:05:07,445 → 01:05:09,687 - Ich hau dir die Fresse ein. - Schon gut.	831 01:05:13,820 → 01:05:16,180 Ti spacco quella faccia di cazzo, brutto stronzo.	849 01:05:10,174 → 01:05:12,630 ¡Pégame! - ¡Vete a la mierda!
924 01:05:16,400 → 01:05:18,801 It's okay, it's okay. Thank you, thank you. It's okay.	825 01:05:16,465 → 01:05:18,676 C'est rien, merci.	783 01:05:09,989 → 01:05:12,026 - Mach schon. - Danke, das reicht.	832 01:05:16,300 → 01:05:18,680 Va tutto bene. Grazie, tutto ok.	850 01:05:14,617 → 01:05:16,380 ¿Quieres que te reviente la cabeza, payaso? - ¡Adelante!
925 01:05:18,920 → 01:05:22,242 Uncle Lee, are you fundamentally unsound? Fucking asshole.	826 01:05:18,843 → 01:05:20,927 Oncle Lee, t'es totalement félé ?	784 01:05:12,242 → 01:05:14,985 - Onkel Lee, spinnst du? - Blödes Arschloch.	833 01:05:18,820 → 01:05:21,220 - Zio, ma sei impazzito? - Stronzo...	851 01:05:16,404 → 01:05:18,053 ¡Está bien, esta bien! ¡Gracias!
				852 01:05:19,104 → 01:05:21,080 Tío Lee, ¿estás enfermo? - ¡Maldito idiota!

Analysis in extended context confirms that the ‘toning down’ of swearing overtly signposted in quantitative evidence in MBS subtitling is relative, and nuanced by different interrelated factors, albeit more covertly and differentially across TLs: medium specific, language specific, swearing specific.

- i) form matters: line sequencing and distribution across shots, reduction, punctuation, contrasts-inducing verticality have expressive functions which can be demonstrated to impact on meaning-making options, for swearing as they were for other practices in prior work;
- ii) TL-specific language resources matter: they play a role in providing or enhancing triggers for internal pragmatic indexing, of de-swearing options as swearing for example (e.g. forms of address, markers of interpersonal engagement, register-marked elisions or deletions, e.g. of negatives);
- iii) swearing’s deep-seated cultural underpinnings make it a special case: the deeper they are, the less scope there is in TL subtitling for the ‘shining through’ effect and capacity to alert to linguistic and cultural otherness seen in other communicative practices or discourse features in prior studies (e.g. greetings, thanking; functional discourse markers in MBS): references to God are a case in point in MBS.

All swearing in the sample scene is nuisance swearing: Lee’s limited patience is tested to its social and verbal limits, in two main swearing episodes (highlighted in grey in Table 5): first by his contrary, uncooperative adolescent nephew Patty who provocatively refuses to see sense about what to do with his deceased father’s fishing boat; then by an interfering adult onlooker questioning Lee’s parenting.

Both episodes show omissions and PCs, but differently across them and across languages, and illustrate different features.

Patty/Lee swearing episode [917–918]: ‘fuck’ [1; Patty], ‘God’ and ‘fucking’ [1 each; Lee]

Lee’s ‘God’ and intensifier ‘fucking’ are omitted in all TLs, in line with earlier observations - from his ‘Patty, I swear to God, // I’m going to knock your **fucking** block off’ [917-8], a register-marked brutal retort to Patty’s pointedly insolent ‘Who gives a fuck [where you are]?’ just before [917].

Patty’s ‘fuck’ in ‘**Who gives a fuck** where you are?’ [917] is by contrast dealt with in different ways across TLs:

- French and German retain ‘fuck’ with comparatively strong PC types (*Rien à foutre./* [817] [sexual]; *Scheißegal./* [778] [excretory]), in line with the assumption that ‘fuck’ has greater denotational and narrative weight (see 3.2.1.), all the more so for their shock effect: they are the first and only instance of swearing by Patty in the scene, in contrast with English, where an earlier ‘No fucking way’ [911] primes to Patty’s show of adolescent assertive contrariness through swearing; and they are (3rd person) impersonal and offensively terse, comparatively, an index of Patty’s swearing utterances for French and German set up in his earlier retort (*Pas question! /* [812]; *Auf keinem Fall./* [774] [no question; in no case]).
- Italian and Spanish use ‘who cares’ de-swearing options (informal, verging on the vulgar *Chi se ne frega [...]/* [825] [Who rubs him/herself; originally more sexual]; *A quién le importa [...]/* [843] [to whom it matters]), but are otherwise closely calqued on English, syntactically and denotationally. Both do use PC options for ‘fuck’ in Lee’s subsequent verbal outburst (see below), and there is evidence of liberal use in their PC quantitative data, so age may be a de-swearing factor for most offensive types. Spanish indexes Patty’s swearing behaviour before as the only TL to use PC for his ‘No fucking way’ earlier (*¡De ninguna puta manera!* [in no [fem.] hooker way]), Italian does not (*Nemmeno per sogno.* [not even for a dream]), but the vulgarity of its ‘*Chi se ne frega*’ has a similar indexing function, albeit more muted

French and German omit more and draw on PC more sparingly than Italian and Spanish, as noted earlier, and that makes their use stand out, in contexts which are also lexically and syntactically barer (fewer words, hypotactic assertions, fewer lines - from reduction or full deletion, e.g. of Lee’s mitigating ‘Patty, I swear to God.’/[917] in German)

Punctuation makes a difference: full stops in French and German give the swearing statements an incontrovertible distance-inducing quality that heightens their pragmatic impact further; Italian and Spanish use interactive punctuation marks (exclamation; question) in utterances that are not meant to elicit responses, but have the capacity to do so.

Lee/interfering onlooker swearing episode: Lee’s ‘fuck’ [1], ‘fucking’ [5], ‘asshole’ [3]

There are contrasts in options in this second episode, for ‘fuck’ itself and for ‘fucking’, with more overt/marked representation than in the Patty exchange, the tenor of which had in any case been verbally indexed in previous scenes. Lee’s unreciprocated swearing outburst is narratively significant, as blatant manifestation of his uncontrolled anti-social behaviour at this point in the story.

- ‘fuck’ in his ‘**fuck you**’ to the interfering onlooker [920] is conveyed overtly with strong PC options in all TLs, and all, like ‘fuck you’, with face threatening direct address: *je t'emmerde!* [I shit you]; *Leck mich, arschloch.* [lick me, asshole]; *Vaffanculo.* [go do it in the ass]; *¡Vete a la mierda!* [go to the shit]. French draws on its T/V address system to escalate the

swearing with a T form of undue familiarity to a stranger (V would be apposite), as do German, Italian and Spanish with their verb-embedded forms of address.

- ‘fucking’ is conveyed, with PC in vulgar expressions that trigger on their own the intended offensiveness and scale of impropriety of Lee’s verbal reaction and make repetition from the source redundant:
 - o In ‘Mind your **fucking** business, **fucking** asshole.’ [921], the repetition is collapsed into *Mêle-toi de ton cul!*/[821] [busy yourself with your ass] in French, *Fatti I cazzo tuo, stronzo.*/[829] [do your own cock, asshole] in Italian, *¡Métete en tus putos asuntos!*/[848] [get into your [masc.] hooker affairs], again with undue T address. German omits the line here, and does different in the exchange overall (see below);
 - o In ‘I’m going to smash your **fucking** face, you **fucking** asshole.’ [923], the swearing is represented quite literally in Italian (*Ti spacco quella faccia di cazzo, brutto stronzo* [I’ll split that fucking face, brute asshole]). French, German and Spanish use other triggers to index the pragmatic swear load of the repeated ‘fucking’ in English: disrespectful T address, familiar register, already primed in any case with strong PC for Lee’s initial ‘fuck you’ (*Je vais te défoncer la tête, connard* !/[824] [I will smash in your head, [dickhead]; *Ich hau dir die Fresse ein.*/[782] [I’ll blow your eating hole]; *¿Quieres que te reviente la cabeza, payaso?*/[850] [Do you want that your to burst your head, clown?])
 - o In ‘**Fucking** asshole’ [925], Lee’s parting swearing shot, there are different options again (omission in French, *Blödes Arschloch.*/[784] [bloody asshole] in German, *Stronzo...*/[833] [asshole] in Italian, *¡Maldito idiota!*/[852] [damn idiot], each combining with earlier choices collectively to achieve requisite pragmatic impact for swearing for the narrative, in their own ways.

German stands out. It has only two swear-heavy lines, at the very beginning and conclusion of the exchange with the onlooker (the offensive *Leck mich, Arschloch* and the [conceding but defiant] *Blödes Arschloch*) and leaves to the framing thus established to index the overall exchange with the narratively requisite swearing pragmatic force at this point. Its impact is otherwise heightened by omission of ultimately less essential lines, here as earlier, making deletion functionally expressive. It is overall a telling example of what could be deemed ‘toning down’ from overt quantitative evidence, but seen as narrative economy, efficiency and expressivity from covert features of the text, and an embodiment in this sense of what this study set out to demonstrate.

Here again other medium and language-specific features are involved in indexing swearing internally, in different combinations across languages, just too intricate to account for in this limited space (e.g. different distributions of utterances across shots, markers of face-threatening undue informality in the elision of ‘Tu’ in T‘as dit’ [820] and form of the question in French, here as elsewhere, and in the anger-marked elision of ‘hau’ in *Ich hau dir die Fresse ein.*/[782] in German, likewise in disrespectful T address mode). Extralinguistic factors conveyed through demeanour, gestures or voice qualities, for example, can further modulate meaning-making options, e.g. tone down or accentuate, and flag otherness as ST-bound in cases of ST/TT a-synchrony.

These other features would further confirm the expressive potential that subtitling derives from the peculiarly unique interplay of form and language, that each TL has its own capacity to harness for internal pragmatic indexing as a function of its specificities, equally uniquely, in conjunction with other sources of input.

4. The question(s) of swearing in MBS subtitling across language

So how is swearing done in MBS TL subtitles, to what extent, how and with what cultural impact?

There is quantitative evidence of toning down in frequencies of occurrence and PC patterns of swear units in the dataset, of the kind that, in corpus work, is generally seen to signal overt presence or absence of pragmatic correspondence. Qualitative evidence bears out that toning down is relative, however: it shows that more covert but effective pragmatic force is released by the interaction of form and language features in context. Many are medium specific and shared across practices, and across languages. As noted before, they were documented in prior work for their distinct expressive capacity (line segmentation, distribution, punctuation; reduction and stylization and attendant scope for more marked contrast, including, for example, reduction in lexical and syntactic density – conspicuous for French; vertical interrelatedness of assigned or de facto verbal characteristics, in style or register, for example). Other are language-specific resources. A few are exemplified in [Table 5](#) (e.g. play on T/V forms of address, shifts from verb to noun forms, pragmatically marked elisions unduly flagging orality and informality, with also at other points omission of negative particles with the same effect in French). As also indicated elsewhere, there are other possible candidates: lexico-grammatical specificities of Romance and Germanic languages can thus also play a role in pragmatic indexing (e.g. the capacity of French to accommodate nominalisation and with it flag register shifts, the positioning of elements of compound verbs in German, or asymmetries across [R] verb-framed- vs. [G] satellite-languages in the encoding of manner-of-motion otherwise signposted as critical translation points ([Molés-Cases, 2019](#))) (see also [Guillot, 2020](#)).

Swearing in the MBS data draws attention to other points, including pragmatic fluidity: swear units do not have the monolithic values and uniform pragmatic force that their identification as ‘type’ could suggest. That is challenged by the differential pragmatic value assigned to ‘fuck’ in the two episodes in the [Table 5](#) sample, and reflected in their TL representations: done away with as PC in the Patty episode, for which in any case conventions and tenor of verbal exchange had

been set in earlier scenes; if anything amplified in the Lee episode, with a pragmatic impact doing justice to narrative requirements and characterisation at this point. The priority here seems to be narrative function. Where, then, does toning down end, and narrative efficiency and economy begin?

Swearing is also distinctive in demonstrating how cultural underpinnings may affect processes of representation and the capacity to alert to linguistic and cultural otherness. Unlike other features studied in MBS, like functional pragmatic markers (FPMs), swearing's potentially deep-seated cultural underpinnings make it a source of translation critical points, at least in some cases, and indeed difficult to provide effective word-for-word literal representation for (i.e. capturing the evocative shared connections perceptible by native speakers). 'Shit' in the MBS data was no issue in this respect, unlike 'fuck': the offensiveness of 'fuck' in its verb form seemed to rule out literal representation in most cases (in French, German, and Spanish, though not Italian), except at points of high narrative significance, thereby obscuring in the process the high currency of the sexual expletive in the English source. There are few examples of profanity in the MBS data, but they are emblematic. French here is the case in point: in not being able to accommodate references to God and religion for engrained political and cultural reasons, it masks for audiences the culturally-revealing acceptability and frequency of such reference in the source. This precludes the shining through seen in (more) culturally-unmarked elements, like FPMs in MBS: semantic and functional specialization of core subsets across TL subtitles gives them a frequency out of line with naturally occurring speech and therefore marked as 'other'. This seems somehow counter-intuitive, but is in the end quite logical.

Ultimately what matters for audiences is interlingual sense-making, from AVT-mediated meaning-making options processed through their individual linguistic and cultural frames of reference and socio-cultural profiles. There is overlap but no uniformity in these options across languages, for swearing as for other practices, or in audiences' responses. There cannot be, nor would it necessarily be desirable.

But whatever conclusions may be arrived at, it is clear there is rich complexity embedded in subtitle text, and that is at once blunter (in reduction) and more creatively expressive than is often recognised, with cumulative implications that do mark it out as a special and very curious case.

Filmography

Manchester by the Sea. 2016. Dir. Kenneth Lonergan. Screenplay by Kenneth Lonergan. K films Manchester LLC.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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