

# Taboo Language in Audiovisual Translation

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Translating taboo language is a daunting task and solving it with spatial-temporal constraints makes it even more challenging. Taboo language, or emotionally charged language, is often toned down in audiovisual translation (AVT) by deleting the words and expressions, if space is limited, or by using euphemisms. Studies have focused on increasingly diverse subtitling strategies and techniques in rendering taboo language in professional and non-professional subtitling (NPS). Some scholars noted the fluidity, heterogeneity, and fuzziness of NPS. One of the main issues is that this NPS term implies the lack of professional training and thus poor translation quality, neglecting the creative and flexible nature of this kind of subtitling practice.

taboo language

non-professional subtitling

audiovisual translation

danmu

creativity

video-streaming

## 1. Taboo Language

According to [Allan and Burridge \(2006, p. 11\)](#), the definition of the word taboo is “a proscription of behaviour for a specific community of one more persons, at a specifiable time, in specifiable contexts”. Taboo language or taboo words, in this sense, are “expressions whose use is restricted or prohibited by social custom” ([Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2021, p. 181](#)). Euphemism, a term that is associated with taboo words, is usually used to avoid embarrassing or unpleasant topics as an alternative to taboo language ([Hughes 2006, p. 151](#)).

Although taboo language changes over time and contexts, it is not unstable. According to [Jay \(2009\)](#), a list of 10 English words (*fuck, shit, hell, damn, goddamn, Jesus Christ, ass, oh my god, bitch, and sucks*), which account for 80% of public swearing, has remained lasting from 1986 to 2006. Jay also notes that highly offensive words, such as *cunt, cocksucker, and nigger*, occur less frequently during this period.

The classifications of taboo language are consistent in the literature. [Allan and Burridge \(2006, vii\)](#) propose four categories of taboo: (1) naming and addressing, (2) sex and bodily effluvia, (3) food and smell, and (4) disease, death, and killing. Jay (154) expanded the four categories into eight as follows and points out that it is helpful to qualify references to “taboo words” by noting what taboo category they represent:

1. Sexual references;
2. Profane or blasphemous references;
3. Scatological referents and disgusting objects;
4. Ethnic–racial–gender slurs;

5. Insulting references to perceived psychological, physical, or social deviations;
6. Ancestral allusions;
7. Substandard vulgar terms; and
8. Offensive slang;

Based on [Wajnryb \(2005\)](#); [Hughes \(2006\)](#); and [Jay \(2009\)](#)'s studies, [Ávila-Cabrera \(2016\)](#) proposes a more comprehensive taxonomy of offensive and taboo language, including abusive swearwords, expletives, animal name terms, ethnic/racial/gender slurs, psychological/physical condition, sexual/body part references, urination/scatology, filth, drugs/excessive alcohol consumption, violence and death/killing, invectives and profane/blasphemous words/phrases.

Similar to other culture-specific references, taboo language is culture-bound. However, significant works on linguistic taboos, including *Euphemism and Dysphemism* ([Allan and Burridge 1991](#)) and *An Encyclopedia of Swearing* ([Hughes 2006](#)), are silent on the Chinese language and culture, as [Jing-Schmidt \(2019\)](#) argues. In Chinese history, the idea of taboo or mystical prohibition had existed for over two millennia when it was mentioned in *The Book of Rites* from the Western Han (202-8 BCE):

入境而问禁，入国而问俗，入门而问讳（《礼记·曲礼上》）

Inquire about the legal prohibitions when entering a country, inquire about the customs when entering a metropolis, inquire about the unmentionables when entering a residence.

(Translated by [Jing-Schmidt 2019](#))

Unlike Western scholarship on taboo, which comes from various disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, psychology, history, and archaeology, Chinese language scholarship mainly comes from folklore and cultural linguistics. Folklorist [Ren \(1991, p. 6\)](#) classified Chinese taboos into six categories: (1) names (e.g., of ancestors, senior family members, rulers, and the deceased); (2) age and zodiac; (3) death and calamity; (4) vulgarity, especially sexual activities and body parts; (5) wealth decline and bankruptcy; and (6) animal names relevant to certain professions. Another Chinese scholar, [Chan \(2016, p. 380\)](#), draws on Allan and Burridge's study ([Allan and Burridge 2006](#)) and describes Chinese taboo in five thematic categories, including (1) bodies and their effluvia; (2) organs and acts of sex, and sexuality; (3) diseases, mental and physical defects, and death; (4) naming and addressing; and (5) other aspects of human existence. Despite the nuanced ways of classification, the motivations of Chinese taboo are usually associated with "uncleanness, filthiness and obscenity, privacy, fear, bad luck, and respect" (Chan 380).

Jing-Schmidt noticed a more substantial interest in examining "curse words in historical texts than in contemporary usage", and she believes the reason may be the historical texts' "comfortable distance from the embarrassment of contemporary language uses" ([Jing-Schmidt 2019](#)). Whatever the reasons, the lack of study of contemporary Chinese taboo leads to outdated classifications, especially under the successful development of new media and ongoing globalization.

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## 2. Taboo Language in AVT

Translating cultural references related to taboos is challenging and adding the spatial–temporal constraints makes it seem impossible to render. According to Díaz-Cintas and Remael, taboo language, or emotionally charged language ([Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007, 2021](#)), is often toned down in AVT either by deleting the language if spatiotemporal constraints are limited or by using euphemisms ([Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007; 2021, p. 189](#)). Some studies (such as [Lie 2013; Han and Wang 2014; Yuan 2015; Ameri and Ghazizadeh 2015; Stephan 2016; Trupej 2019; Al-Yasin and Rabab'ah 2019; and Liang 2020](#)) that examine how taboo language is rendered in AVT confirm this argument.

These previous studies examine taboo language—including swearwords, sexuality, and sexual references—found in professional and non-professional subtitles and dubbed versions of movies, reality shows, and TV series in Arabic, Brazilian-Portuguese, Chinese, Norwegian, Persian, and Slovenian languages translated from English. The conclusions consistently reveal that euphemism and omission are primarily used to translate taboo words. Some scholars argue that self-censorship and subtitlers' incompetency may be the reasons ([Trupej 2019](#)), while some link it to an increasingly improved identity in the target context ([Liang 2020](#)).

In more recent years, some studies ([Ávila-Cabrera 2015, 2016, 2020; Pratama 2017; Giulia Magazzù 2018; Díaz-Perez 2020; Alsharhan 2020; Valdeón 2020; MicKayla Wilkinson 2021](#)) have focused on increasingly diverse subtitling strategies and techniques in rendering taboo language. In Ávila-Cabrera's descriptive studies ([Ávila-Cabrera 2015, 2016, 2020](#)), he examines the offensive and taboo language in the subtitled Quentin Tarantino films into European films, and among the 645 cases analyzed, 61.2% were transferred and 38.8% not transferred (30.1% omitted, 8.7% neutralized). This phenomenon is probably because of technical constraints and the fact that Tarantino's films are full of offensive and taboo words. Thus, many of them cannot be transferred to the subtitles.

Some studies deviate from Díaz-Cintas and Remael's claim. For example, [Valdeón \(2020\)](#) analyzed 412 pairs of swearwords in four series (*The IT Crowd*, *Chicago PD*, *Brothers & Sisters*, and *Eyewitness*) and found that the number of swearwords increases in over half of the instances, while toning down and omission only account for 13.88%. [Alsharhan \(2020\)](#) also summarized a variety of subtitling strategies used to render taboo language into Arabic in addition to omission and euphemism.

Comparative studies (including [Beseghi 2016; He 2018; Khakshour Forutan and Modarresi 2018; Al-Jabri et al. 2021; Dore and Petrucci 2021](#)) and reception studies (such as [Briechle and Eppler 2019](#)) have also been conducted to help better understand taboo language in audiovisual settings. He's study ([He 2018, p. 80](#)) examined Chinese subtitles in 51 English films and concluded that the fansubbed version “transferred a higher severity of swearing” than the version rendered by the professional subtitlers. [Dore and Petrucci \(2021\)](#) jump out of this “toning down or not” dichotomy and noted the different treatments of coarse language after analyzing and comparing the Italian dubbed, subtitled, and fansubbed versions of the same American TV series. They believe that the fluidity of professional and non-professional subtitling is the main reason.

In the edited volume *Non-Professional Subtitling* ([Orrego-Carmona and Lee 2017](#)), the editors argue that the fluidity and heterogeneity of non-professional translation practices pose challenges for “proposing an exclusive and clear typology that applies to all instances of non-professional translation” (4).

Thus, the volume was entitled *Non-Professional Subtitling* to “shed light on the fuzziness and organic nature” of this field. One of the main problems with the term NPS is that it implies the lack of professional training and therefore poor translation quality, neglecting the creative and flexible nature of this kind of subtitling practice. Terms that are closely associated with NPS include fansubbing ([Nornes 1999](#)), user-generated translation ([O’Hagan 2009](#)), volunteer translation ([Pym 2011](#)), community translation ([O’Hagan 2012](#)), collaborative translation ([Costales 2012](#)), and social translation ([Jiménez-Crespo 2017](#)). These nuanced terms are much overlapped and refer to subtitling or translation practices conducted by non-professionals who do not receive and do not require monetary remuneration for the activities they perform and the translations they provide ([Orrego-Carmona 2015](#)).

In recent years, as [Orrego-Carmona \(2016\)](#) argues, NPS practices do not rebel against professionally established standards for subtitling. The focus of scholarship on non-professional subtitling has gradually transformed from the dichotomy of professional and non-professional, the excellent quality vs. the poor, to focusing more on the latter’s characteristics and even the blurring boundary between the two.

More specifically, [Jiménez-Crespo \(2017\)](#) summarizes in his book, two of the seven most common “deviations” from professional norms identified in fansubbing, including: (1) more creative and individual renditions of source texts and (2) different approaches to taboos and improper language. Khoshsaligheh, Mehdizadkhani, and Ameri’s study ([Khoshsaligheh et al. 2016](#)) demonstrates these “deviations”. By looking at the amateur AVT, or fansubbing and fandubbing, in the Iranian context, the study selects ten American movies to examine how taboo language is rendered into Persian. The paper concludes that fansubbers tend to keep taboo language in the subtitles, deviating from Iran’s current official translation norms.

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