Translating and Dubbing Verbal Violence in *Reservoir Dogs*. Censorship in the Linguistic Transference of Quentin Tarantino's (Swear)Words

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ABSTRACT

The kind of swearing which references sexual acts has been construed as the most obscene of all, perhaps because it reminds us of "a time when all sex was unholy, except as necessary for procreative purposes between married couples" (Allan and Burridge, 2006: 144). That is why the translation of sexual terms in film has not always been an easy task since the translator has had to face the predicament of trying to simultaneously please disparate audiences and distributors. In *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), a young Tarantino used a proliferation of sex-related terms, perhaps as a way of proclaiming and conveying his own style. The purpose of this article is threefold. First, I will introduce the concepts of taboo and obscenity and then move on to a linguistic taboo: swearing. Secondly, I will deal with issues such as verbal violence and (self)censorship with a focus on the sexual language in *Reservoir Dogs*. Finally, I will show some selective examples of the dubbing of the *f-word* as it appears in Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* in order to suggest that the level of swearing in the Spanish translation is lower than the original.

KEYWORDS

Dubbing, swearing, Quentin Tarantino, verbal violence, censorship.

0. Introduction

Reservoir Dogs (1992), a crime film which pays homage to both independent and Hollywood cinema, is Quentin Tarantino's debut feature film. The narrative depicts a robbery through flash-backs to recount the story from various perspectives. A low-budget classic, it elevates the B-movie to hitherto unknown levels of sophistication, largely as a result of its witty dialogue, whilst the protagonists' striking outfits — black suit, black tie and white shirt — are central to the film's iconic status. The film is imbued with black humour, often channelled through violent actions and/or the liberal use of swearwords.

It is only over the last two decades that academic studies have begun to address the inclusion or exclusion of swearwords as a legitimate field of study (see for example Allan and Burridge 2006, Battistella 2005 Hughes 1991 and Jay 2000).

Nevertheless, I believe that linguistic research is incomplete without the inclusion of all forms of discourse, in this case, swearing, and that the tone of the target text will vary depending on the choice of vocabulary. This is the reason why I decided to analyse the verbal violence in *Reservoir Dogs*. In order to meet this methodological challenge, I have first culled all the insults found in the original version of Tarantino's

Reservoir Dogs; secondly, I have selected the ones which appeared most frequently — the sex-related ones — and have compared them with the sex-related insults in the Spanish dubbed versions, focusing on the *f-word*. I have watched *Reservoir Dogs* in the original version and have extracted the insults from it in order to establish whether there was an exact correspondence between both versions. It was at this point that I detected variations in the Spanish script as I shall explain during this article. I would like to stress at this point that it is not my intention to question or criticise the work of those who have translated and adapted *Reservoir Dogs,* but to highlight the problems that translators and adaptors may encounter when analysing a film.

Western society still feels the legacy of a traditional awkwardness towards sex, since people think of it as a filthy subject that should be avoided in public and also in private. Ashley Montagu (1967: 303) points out that the most obscene, vulgar words in the English language are the four-letter words. These words derive their connotative power from being taboo, and, thus, morally or socially unacceptable, obscene. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that the first sense of the *f-word* has been maintained, other meanings have been accrued over the years and, as a result, we no longer think of it in its original meaning but as a swearword we can use whenever the situation requires.

As I hope will become increasingly apparent, the most frequently used swearwords in Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* are the sex-related ones which amount to a total of 190 (Soler Pardo 2011). Thus, since there is a significant presence of sexual language in Tarantino's directorial debut, I have decided to analyse such words in detail.

1. Taboo and Obscenity: Swearing

According to Keith Allan and Kate Burridge "tabooed expressions include sexual and scatological obscenities, ethnic-racial slurs, insults, name-calling, profanity, blasphemy, slang, jargon and vulgarities of all kinds, including the forbidden words of non-standard grammar" (2006: 250). An action or an object can be considered taboo if it causes offence or harm to other people and, in addition, taboo actions are sometimes prohibited by law. In fact, any kind of conduct could be considered taboo by a community since the judgement that a particular conduct is taboo is specific to that society, behaviour and culture. It is important to highlight the fact that the use of expletives has not been homogeneous in every country; every community has its own taboo words based on different factors, such as culture, religion, social structure, history, etc. According to Lars-Gunnar Andersson (qtd. in Karjalainen 2002: 17), most taboo words, and subsequently swearwords, in Western cultures have been based on the following classification: (1) sexual organs and sexual relations; (2) religion; (3) human waste or excrement; (4) death or disease; (5) the physically or mentally disabled; (6) prostitution; and (7)

narcotics or crime. Then, in the same way as there are some culture-specific taboos, there are also some taboo concepts that are homogeneous (intercultural taboos): sex, for instance, is a taboo subject that many cultures share, since "sexuality is one of the most tabooed aspects of human existence" (Jay 2000: 85).

Obscenity has, elsewhere, been defined by Santaemilia (2006: 100) in the following terms: "Obscenity consists in making public those human acts, words or images which are perceived as offensive or threatening to the ideological principles held to be shared by a particular society." The term obscene can be applied to any visual or verbal act which takes place in a public space — streets, church, theatres, etc. — that is considered outside of the moral rules of society. These rules vary according to religious beliefs, and the political and moral regulations of each country. Thus, obscenity can be understood as crime, sex, cruelty, violence and horror; it is engaged in a vicious circle since the word used to define it refers to other words (Toledano 2003: 66-68).

If one takes all these factors into account, then, how can an obscene text be satisfactorily translated? Carmen Toledano identifies three basic situations that could occur when translating an obscene text: (1) that the word or the sentence to be translated is considered obscene in both cultural systems. Therefore, the degree of obscenity in the source text (ST) would be transferred in this case to the target text (TT); (2) that the text is not perceived as obscene in the ST but it is perceived as such in the TT. In this case, obscenity would not be transferred but it would arise when joining a different ideological, poetic and linguistic structure. One might say, then, that obscenity appears in the transfer process; and (3) finally, one could imagine the possibility that the original text is considered obscene in the source culture (SC) and ceases to be so in the target culture (TC) because the text does not violate any applicable norm or rule in the target society. In this case, the obscenity disappears during the transference (Toledano 2002: 223–224).

In the words of Geoffrey Hughes: "[swearing] is language in its most highly charged state, infused with a religious force recognizable in the remote modes of the spell, the charm and the curse, forms seeking to invoke a higher power to change the world, or support the truthfulness of a claim" (1991: xvi). The way human beings swear has drastically changed from ancient times. We now swear *by, that, to, at* and sometimes we simply swear because we are frustrated. Hughes compares this way of swearing to asseveration, invocation, imprecation, malediction, blasphemy, profanity and ejaculation and also to obscenity, which he considers the most complex of all.

Another definition is offered by Lars Gunnar Andersson and Peter Trudgill who suggest that: "Swearing can be defined as a type of language use in which the expression (a) refers to something that is taboo and/or

stigmatized in the culture; (b) should not be interpreted literally; (c) can be used to express strong emotions and attitudes" (1990: 53).

Moreover, it is crucial to distinguish between foul language and swearing since not all foul language is considered swearing. For instance, the *f-word* can be used with its original meaning of having sexual intercourse, without the intention of being used as a swearword. Besides, swearing in public is no longer illegal, but it is still considered unacceptable and it is — at least traditionally — associated, with prostitutes, criminals, drug addicts, and alcoholics, and increasingly with young people in general [1].

2. *Reservoir Dogs* and the Language of Sex

Reservoir Dogs contains the highest number of sex-related insults of all films directed by Tarantino (Soler Pardo 2011). This way of introducing as many insults as possible can be considered pioneering in the history of mainstream cinema, a fact that cannot, I believe, be considered accidental, since it must be associated both with the time in which the film was shot, and the impact he wanted to create. The date was the 1990s, and, at that time, the genre the American director wanted to explore was already 'old-fashioned,' so he might have decided to give it a twist and make it fashionable again. A way of doing this, then, consisted of introducing as many swearwords as possible, which would impact tremendously on the audience.

2.1 Verbal Violence in Cinema

Quentin Tarantino is a defender of violence or, more specifically, extreme violence, at least in the cinematic realm. That is why extreme (verbal) violence is a central element of all his films, a facet for which he has frequently been criticised; Tarantino talks about the differentiation between violence in real life and on the cinema screen:

> Yeah, well I don't feel the need to justify myself. Violence is a form of cinematic entertainment. Asking me about violence is like going up to Vincent Minnelli and asking him to justify his musical sequences. It's just one of those cinematic things you can do, and it's one of the funniest things. I love it. It's fun (cited in Lathan 2003).

Quentin Tarantino, aesthetically educated through the influence of a series of pictures with violent content, has absorbed the brutality seen in these films through his lifetime and has transferred it into his own work (Corral 2005). Also, as far as the filmmaker is concerned, he is only embodying reality; when a human being is shot, his or her first reaction is to scream and swear while heavily bleeding, which is exactly what he is showing on screen: "If a guy gets shot in the stomach and he's bleeding like a stuck pig then that's what I want to see —not a man with a stomach ache and a little red dot on his belly" (cited in anonymous author, 2010: 1). For

Tarantino, physical and verbal violence merge; one rarely exists without the other.

2.2. Censorship, Self-Censorship and *Reservoir Dogs*

The translation of swearwords has always been influenced by various factors which depend on the period of time, political circumstances and the translator's ideology. In all three cases, translators have experienced either censorship or self-censorship. The former has been imposed by historical and political circumstances, which much depend on religion or the ideological issues of the time. The latter means that the translator, or the adaptor in cinema[2], is the one who decides what to censor and what to translate in tandem with the speed of the words.

Allan and Burridge (2006: 13) define the concept of censorship as "the suppression or prohibition of speech or writing that is condemned as subversive of the common good;" they distinguish different types of censorship all of which are applicable to Tarantino:

(1) censorship of incitement: physical violence to other individuals,
(2) censorship of profanity and blasphemy: moral harm, and
(3) censorship of pornography: moral harm and perhaps physical danger.

Charles Lyons (1996: 277) has addressed this matter applied to any mode of cultural expression (e.g. cinema) as follows:

> the word [censorship] has come to mean *any* kind of cultural repression that results from official or tacit pressure from either the political left or right. In the context of film production, distribution, and exhibition, the word *censorship* is certainly not monolithic. It refers to a set of practices by institutions or groups, either prior to or following a film's release, the result of which is the removal of a word, a scene, or an entire film from the marketplace.

Lyons (1996) also points out that censorship is carried out by the state, governments and by the self-regulation of the film industry itself which establishes its own limits. Together with this, the writer also announces a third level of censorship, which occurs as the consequence of demonstrators' or individuals' protests (1996: 277–278).

While censorship is a collective process, self-censorship is a solo task difficult to perceive because there are no established rules. Toledano suggests that self-censorship is a fact which is especially marked when dealing with obscenity: "Si la obscenidad, por insidiosa que sea, es aislable, es prescindible. Si no lo es, puede ser paliada a través de una manipulación más o menos traumática llevada a cabo por un traductor convertido en censor y dispuesto a adaptar el texto a las expectativas del nuevo sistema" (2002: 226)[3]. Hence, whether to use or not to use foul language in media/cinema is a matter that has been subject to debate for

decades. Arguments for and against swearing arose in the context of trying to reach an agreement about how many swearwords were to be permitted in different contexts.

Arguments for allowing foul language in cinema are based on the fact that the characters need to sound realistic and this is why they need to use the vocabulary attributed to their roles (e.g. in fiction or film noir, they tend to swear to sound authentic). Also, the presence of expletives is necessary to reflect how people talk in real situations, to make it real. As Edwin Battistella argues, "arguments for the tolerance of offensive language may focus on (…): the potential for realistic language in the arts to create authenticity" (2005: 76).

Arguments against the use of foul language, conversely, can be synthesised as follows: the need to have language suitable for any audience regardless of age or sex, and to avoid using impolite, immoral or dangerous language: the language of sex being the most immoral of all. Consequently, after analysing *Reservoir Dogs*, I can state that the film has suffered censorship and self-censorship. Regarding the former, *Reservoir Dogs* had to wait eighteen months to be released in cinemas and more than two years for video release in the UK due to the violence and the swearing featured in the picture. Finally, in June 1995, the film was given a certificate to be commercialised on video. As regards self-censorship, the translator/adaptor has decided to eliminate almost half of the insults in the Spanish version. The result is a more formal text that differs from the original; a likely cause of this is self-censorship.

3. (Un)Translating Sex-Related Insults: English-Spanish

The high number of swearwords in Tarantino's films makes their translation into Spanish an important and difficult task. Over the years, in Spain, sex has been translated in a rather conservative way, avoiding explicit expressions or simply subduing the text by changing or erasing 'compromising words.' The translation of sexual vocabulary depends on various factors including the translator's morality, the historical period and the publishing house's policy (Santaemilia 2008). Additionally, social, cultural and linguistic factors could help or damage the translation; thus, socio-cultural factors could also influence the decision of how to translate or not to translate insults. To this, we must add the fact that the text tends to be desexualised depending on the translator's perspective towards it at a specific time and place. As Santaemilia (2008: 172) states, references to sex- related matters or religion specifically are ignored or sweetened when the TL is Spanish.

Let us then examine the translation of the insults into Spanish as they appear in Tarantino's first film. As stated previously, there is a total of 190 sex-related insults in *Reservoir Dogs* amongst which the *f-word* and its morphological variants appear 190 times, this being the only sex-related

insult employed by the filmmaker throughout the film (Soler Pardo 2011). Tarantino uses this expletive constantly to denote anger, surprise, to make a point, to emphasise an expression, etc. Hence, in the 102 minutes that the film lasts, the *f-word* is repeated 190 times; 82 instances are not translated into Spanish. From all of these numerous examples, I have chosen a representative sample of 10 cases from the data to discuss in this section.

Reservoir Dogs	
§ 1. Oh, **fuck**, Toby's!	Ah, Toby! [RD-ex.# 2]
§ 2. What the **fuck** was her last name?	¿Cuál era su apellido? [RD-ex.# 3]
§ 3. I haven't heard that song since I was in the fifth **fuckin'** grade	No escuchaba esta canción desde que estaba en quinto. [RD-ex.# 5]
§ 4. That's **fucked up**! The waitresses are just one of the many groups the government (...)	Además, ¿por qué tanto lío? Las camareras no son las únicas a las que el gobierno (...). [RD-ex.# 7(1)]
§ 5. Learn to **fuckin'** type. 'Cause if you're expecting me to help you out with the rent, you're in for a big **fuckin'** surprise	Que aprenda a escribir a máquina. Si están esperando a que les pague el alquiler, que esperen sentadas. [RD-ex.# 7(2)]
§ 6. You're hurt. You're hurt really **fuckin'** bad, but you ain't dying.	Estás herido, estás gravemente herido, pero no vas a morir. [RD-ex.# 9]
§ 7. Was that a **fucking** set-up or what?	Alguien nos ha delatado, ¿o qué? [RD-ex.# 14]
§ 8. I was trying to get the **fuck outta** here	Lo primero es largarse. [RD-ex.# 17]
§ 9. I think we should have our **fuckin'** heads examined for waiting around here	Creo que quedarse aquí es una locura. [RD-ex.# 20]
§ 10. I swear to God I'm **fuckin'** jinxed	En serio, creo que estoy como gafado. [RD-ex.# 21]

Table 1. Translating the *F-word* into Spanish in *Reservoir Dogs*

In examples §1 and §2, *fuck* appears twice; it acts like an interjection the first time, and as an emphatic intensifier the second time. However, surprisingly, it has been translated into Spanish without any sign of foul language. A better rendition could be achieved by translating at least one of the two insults for *joder* and placing it either before *Toby* or at the end of the sentence as an appropriate substitution or equivalent. The following example (§3) sees *fucking* modifying a noun which could normally be translated as *puto/a* or another solution could be to add its variant *joder* either at the very beginning or at the end of the piece. The next instance

(§4) sees the phrasal verb *fuck up* acting like a general expletive to express, in this case, that what the men are discussing at that time is not as important and it is said with a swearword to emphasise their discontent at that moment. Nevertheless, the translation into Spanish not only does not reflect the swearword, but also confuses the reader with this misadaptation. A possible solution would be to translate it as *(eso es) una mierda*[4] or *y una polla*[5] in order to keep the swearing in place. Number §5 sees two examples of *fucking*, employed as emphatic intensifiers in both cases. The first time it appears it is modifying a verb, and in the second instance, it is modifying a noun. Hence, it is understandable that an exact translation of *fucking* here is difficult to achieve; however, the translator has decided to leave it untranslated and has not added any sign of bad language or emphasis to it. When *fucking* is modifying a verb, a solution could be to add *joder* after the verb it was modifying in English. That is to say: *Que aprenda a escribir, ¡joder!*[6] could work perfectly well in Spanish. In the next instance (§6), *fucking* is modifying an adjective which makes its translation into Spanish extremely complicated. In this case, the usual thing to do is to translate this emphatic intensifier using the adverb *jodidamente* to translate *fucking* when it modifies an adjective in Spanish, despite it sounding bizarre and alien. However, no translation has been used here as the translator has merely swapped the word *fucking* for a non insult: *gravemente*[7]. The best solution that has occurred to me would be to add *joder* after *herido* since I find *jodidamente* inappropriate in Spanish. Example §7 shows the adjective *fucking* functioning like an emphatic intensifier modifying a noun: *fucking set-up* which has been left untranslated. A possibility here would be to translate it for *puta* as the noun is in the feminine *emboscada* to maintain the sense of the original text. The following example §8 sees *fuck* acting as an emphatic intensifier in the middle of a phrasal verb *to get out*. When this happens, the translation into Spanish is much more complex since the language has no equivalent linguistic structure. Nevertheless, there are solutions that could be applied in order to maintain the original sense in the TL as well, which could be to nuance the sentence and add *echando/cagando hostias*[8] after saying *estoy intentando largarme echando/cagando hostias*[9]. Once more, example number §9 presents no sign of sexual language in the translated version. Here, *fucking* is modifying a noun and a swearword could then have been included without further ado. Hence, by rephrasing the sentence as follows: *hay que estar como una puta cabra para quedarse aquí*[10]*;* or simply by adding *joder* at the end of the sentence, the result would have been much more credible. The last example (§10) analysed in this article presents the expletive *fucking* preceding an adjective which implies that the sentence might need rephrasing. A possible resolution could have been to say *juro por Dios que soy un puto gafe*[11] but, again, these are only a few suggestions and finding the perfect translation is not as easy a task as it might seem.

After analysing this film, I have been able to demonstrate that the level of swearing in the Spanish translation of Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*

is less than in the original: 43.15% of the insults have been translated inaccurately and/or consciously censored (Soler Pardo 2011). The translator or, more precisely, the adaptor has decided to leave the vast majority of insults untranslated. This constitutes a restructuring of the text which results in a totally different final product. Could we thus consider this absence of swearwords in the Spanish translation as a form of censorship? There does not seem to have been any kind of explicit form of censorship in the 1990s when the translation into Spanish of *Reservoir Dogs* was carried out: that is to say, nothing was legally stipulated. In consequence, one could consider self-censorship as a more plausible and accurate description.

4. Conclusions

In summary, translating a text and, moreover, translating an audiovisual text is a difficult task that has no definite solutions, but different opinions or approaches. One of the difficulties that the translator usually finds is the introduction of cultural elements to the translating concept since it is in such situations when adaptation comes into play, and it is at these moments that the translator faces the predicament of trying to please the entire audience and distributors, a task not easy to achieve. And, although translation exists in order to transmit the original meaning of a text into a different language avoiding cultural prejudices (which may lead us to change the passage we are translating) it is undeniable that the translator's point of view may constitute a problem when translating a text since it is difficult to remain unbiased when using certain words or expressions. This is the case with swearwords or bad language in general and is one of the additional factors, but not the only one, in *Reservoir Dogs*.

The possible causes for this reduction in the number of insults in the Spanish version of *Reservoir Dogs* might be:

(1) Lack of space. Spanish requires longer sentences to say the same thing and therefore, when there is not much space, the adaptor decides to eliminate information that does not add any significant meaning to the sentence, which may include swearwords.
(2) The distribution company's desire to eliminate the maximum number of swearwords to obtain a higher certificate as described by Díaz Cintas (2001). Del Águila and Rodero Antón (2005) also state that, on several occasions, some adaptors are asked to eliminate a certain number of insults in order to get a certificate for a specific group (e.g. PG, 18) and they point out that, although it is not a regulation, the adaptor feels *obliged* to do as required. Again, this is not regulated and the adaptor can refuse to change the dialogue:

> En ocasiones existen clientes que solicitan al ajustador que se supriman, por ejemplo, los tacos para de este modo obtener la autorización para una determinada

> edad, por lo que el ajustador se ve limitado en su trabajo por una serie de condicionantes. En estas situaciones, suele aceptar las condiciones, aunque, dependiendo del cliente, tal vez pueda ofrecer su opinión y salvar una película (Del Águila and Rodero Antón 2005: 47)[12].

In summary, when dealing with foul language, a translator decides, based on the cultural and moral situation of the time, whether to rewrite the text, to soften it or to translate it as it is, and the words which are susceptible to being transformed in order to be morally acceptable or decent, are swearwords. Thus, Tarantino has been (self)censored for using verbal violence — inextricably linked with the physical violence in this films — and this (self)censorship might be based on the belief that if individuals watch those scenes and listen to those words, they will imitate them. However, in specific relation to Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, the consequence is a betrayal of the original text which, as a result, does not reflect the writer's intention or the characters' personalities, because eliminating or softening the swearwords in the film alters its original meaning significantly.

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Biography

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Notes

[1] In my experience, in English-speaking communities, explicit language, for example the *f-word,* can have connotations of lower class and lower economic standing. In Spain, however, it does not refer as much to the economic standing or lower classes but to being vulgar or having bad manners.
[2] The translator is in charge of the transfer of words from the source language to the target language. The adaptor is in charge of the adaptation of the script; he or she has to make the necessary changes in order to synchronise the lip movement as much as possible in both languages. The adaptor is the last person to see the text and, therefore, it is his or her final decision to omit words or rephrase the text.
[3] If obscenity, no matter how insidious it is, is isolable, it could be dispensable. If not, it can be mitigated through a more or less traumatic manipulation performed by a translator becoming a censor and willing to adapt the text to the expectations of the new system.
[4] That is shit, fuck!
[5] Cock!
[6] Learn to write, fuck!
[7] Seriously.
[8] Running and shitting at the same time.
[9] Same as above.
[10] You must be fucking crazy to stay here.
[11] I swear to God I am fucking jinxed.
[12] Sometimes clients ask the adaptor to delete, for example, bad language to obtain a higher certificate for the film; therefore, the adaptor is limited in his/her work by a number of factors. In these situations, the adaptor usually accepts the conditions, although, depending on the client, perhaps the adaptor can give his/her opinion and save the film.