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Subtitling Arabic Swear Words into English: A Tensity Model

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the subtitling of Jordanian Arabic swear words into English on two major streaming platforms, Netflix and Shahid, with a particular focus on how translators handle taboo and offensive language. A corpus of 125 Jordanian Arabic swear words was analyzed using Hughes' (1998) thematic categorization framework alongside the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) tensity model, which classifies swear words as strong, moderate, or mild based on their emotional and social impact. The analysis reveals that sexual swear words are the most frequent in both Arabic and English subtitles (29% and 37%, respectively), suggesting a shared global tendency toward sexual taboos in swearing. However, Jordanian Arabic displays a stronger inclination toward excrement-related (16% vs. 8%) and animal-based insults (20% vs. 6%), whereas English features a higher proportion of swearing associated with mental illness (29% vs. 17%). In terms of translation strategies, subtitlers generally preserve or intensify the intensity of the original Arabic swear words. Approximately 50% of cases maintain the same level of offensiveness, 10% heighten it, and 60% overall either match or exceed the source intensity. Only minimal use of omission or neutralization strategies (3% each) was observed. Furthermore, 21% of English swear words appear without Arabic equivalents, indicating adaptive creativity. These findings suggest that subtitlers tend to align their choices with more liberal Anglo-American norms while subtly challenging the traditional linguistic conventions of Arab culture. Ultimately, the study underscores how subtitling operates as a cultural negotiation between authenticity, audience sensitivity, and global streaming standards.

Keywords: Netflix; Subtitling Tensity; Thematic Categorization; Arabic; English

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1. Introduction

Audiovisual translation (AVT) has required continued evolution to cope with cultural and linguistic differences. Diaz Cintas ^[1] (p. 6) believes that “the way in which we interact has changed and is constantly changing still, the main move being that from the page to the screen as text carrier, and these changes in their turn create new communication needs”. Au ^[2] (p. vii) defines AVT as “a discipline that is much more than mere transfer of pictures, music, sounds, as other non-verbal elements are also involved in the process, making it a kind of multi-semiotic transfer”.

AVT encompasses various forms of media, such as movies, TV programs, video games, and social media platforms. Pérez-González ^[3] (p. 13) describes AVT as “a specialized branch of translation which deals with the transfer of multimodal and multimedia texts into another language and/or culture.” The most popular AVT modes include subtitling, dubbing, and voice-over or half-dubbing, intralingual subtitling for the hard-of-hearing and the deaf, audio description for the blind, live subtitling, and subtitling for the opera and the theatre.

Szarkowska ^[4] (p. 2) describes subtitling, the mode under study, as “supplying a translation of the spoken source language dialogue into the target language in the form of synchronized captions, usually at the bottom of the screen”. According to Ivarsson ^[5], the birth of the subtitling process idea started with the first usage in the 1903 silent intertitles. These intertitles were inserted between the film sequences to give the audience extra information or parts of the verbal dialogue. The next development was the invention of the sound film in 1927, which helped the audience hear the actors for the first time. In 1929, there was another significant milestone in the subtitling process with the production of the first attested film, *The Jazz Singer*, which was released in the United States of America with French subtitles.

Compared to other AVT modes, subtitling is economical, easy, and fast to produce. However, it may distract the audience from the picture, drawing attention away from the visual information. Additionally, some information may be lost as the original dialogue may not be entirely subtitled because of the restricted time and space. Still, subtitled materials have a noticeable role in pedagogy since the viewers can still hear the original dialogue. The viewer can listen to

the dialogue, read the subtitles, and learn something about other cultures.

2. Nature of Swear Words

Swearing is an umbrella term that covers many classifications of language that can be considered impolite, disrespectful, or objectionable in several social or professional situations. According to Allan ^[6] (p. 148), “Tabooed words are those considered offensive, shocking, or indecent when used in certain contexts”. The degree of disrespect and profanity these words might cause in a normal/polite conversation in any context depends on the sense of offense these words evoke in the audience’s mind. Allan and Burridge ^[7] describe these dirty words as a breach of etiquette.

Swear words usually focus on two levels of meaning: denotative and connotative. Baker ^[8] (p. 13) defines denotation as “the precise and literal meaning or the dictionary definition of the word”. Connotation, according to Lyons ^[9] (p. 176), describes “the emotive or affective component additional to the word’s denotative meaning”. The denotative meaning of swearing is often literal, offensive, and vulgar. In contrast, the connotative meaning is usually implied and needs the listener or reader to read between the lines to understand the message beyond the literal meaning.

Swear words are, therefore, relevant to context. Spears ^[10] states several factors that may determine whether interlocutors would use swear words or not, including social circumstances, speaker-audience relationship, objective/point of view, age, gender, and tone of voice. A familiar English example is the four-letter word *fuck*, whose use would be tolerated among close young friends, reflecting a feeling of comfort with them while joking around. However, its use would create anger and frustration and can be understood as an insult among strangers and older people, or in formal contexts in general. The same may apply to the use of the Arabic swear word عرس ‘jerk’, which may be flippantly interpreted among close young friends, but offensively among strangers or older people.

While scholarly listings and classifications of Arabic swear words are practically missing, there have been several studies about English taboo expressions. Jay ^[11] classifies swear words into ten categories in light of their use and intent. His classification includes: cursing, profanity, blasphemy, taboo, obscenity, vulgarity, slang, epithets, in-

sults and slurs, and scatology, despite the fact that there is noticeable semantic and functional overlap among these groups. According to Hughes ^[12], English swear words include references that relate to sex, excrement, names of animals, personal background, mental illness, religion, and racism. McEnery^[13] thematically categorizes bad language into swear words (e.g., *fuck*, *piss*), animal terms of abuse (e.g., *pig*, *cow*, *bitch*), sexist terms of abuse (e.g., *whore*, *slut*), intellect-based terms (e.g., *idiot*, *prat*, *imbecile*), racist terms of abuse (e.g., *Paki*, *nigger*), and homophobic terms of abuse (e.g., *queer*). For Ljung^[14], English swear words fall into two main categories: stand-alone swear words (e.g., *Shit!*; *Fuck you!*) and slot-filler swear words (Take your *shit* elsewhere! He's so *fucking* lucky!). These classifications, as can be observed, dwell on similar themes, and they largely overlap.

People may insert swear words to express specific meanings about their feelings or current situations. Both negative feelings, such as anger or disappointment (e.g. Damn it; Fuck off), and positive feelings, such as admiration (e.g., *Holy shit*, that was fun!; You're *fucking* smart!). Apart from their insulting nature, which may create friction among interactants, Jay^[15] explains that swear words may strengthen the power of what the speaker says, so jokes may seem funnier to some people, or the friendly teasing used with one's loved ones becomes more affectionate. They may also perform an emphatic function in current situations (e.g., The movie is *damn* funny!; This car is *fucking* nice!).

Bad language has become a sensitive issue with the significant growth in film and television production in recent years. Equally, the growth of online media adds to a continuous expansion of how stories are told, whether for communication or entertainment. The expansion of such media has an important impact on culture and society. Therefore, it is essential to apply rules of morality and ethics when guiding the viewer on what to watch.

The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) categorizes films and video content, including those streamed online, in terms of tensivity of swear words into strong, moderate, and mild (see also Jay ^[11]). It is tasked with guiding families and helping them select age-appropriate content for viewing, ranging between U (Universal: Suitable for audience aged years and over) and R18 (To be shown only in specially licensed cinemas, or supplied only in licensed sex shops, and to adults only). Before releasing a film to the

public, therefore, BBFC examines several issues regarding the content, such as bad language, dangerous behavior, discrimination, drugs, horror, nudity, sex, violence, and sexual violence.

3. Translating/Subtitling Swear Words

Delabastita ^[16] (p. 97) assumes that the “translation process in mass communication plays a very effective part in both the shaping of cultures and the relations between them”. In terms of translation strategies, Gambier ^[17] (p. 414) states “strategy is [...] a tool to tackle the possible problems that emerge during the translation process.” Consequently, the translator needs to have effective strategies when undertaking translation activity that traverses cultures.

AVT materials, as one form of mass communication, can influence cultures and the inter-relationships between them. Therefore, the challenges increase for the subtitler when handling culture-sensitive/bound expressions. In particular, swear words are culture-specific and essential to each linguistic culture, based on what is unacceptable or prohibited in that culture. For this reason, theorists have seen it essential that translation strategies be developed to examine and analyze rendering culture-bound terms, including swear words.

Talking about translation in general, Vinay and Darbelnet ^[18] suggest two translation strategies: direct translation and oblique translation. The former includes borrowing, calque, and literal procedures, while the latter covers transposition, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation procedures. Similarly, but using different terminologies, Newmark ^[19] refers to the following methods of translation: word-for-word translation, literal translation, faithful translation, semantic translation, adaptation, free translation, idiomatic translation, and communicative translation.

Gottlieb ^[20] examines television subtitling and categorizes translation strategies into expansion, paraphrase, dislocation, transcription, imitation, deletion, resignation, transfer, condensation, and decimation. To evaluate the quality of subtitling, he argues, conveying the verbal segment of a film from one language to another must be analyzed with reference to its stylistic and semantic values. Similarly, Baker ^[8] (pp. 26–42) offers a taxonomy of eight translation strategies: translation by a more general word,

translation by a more neutral word, translation by cultural substitution, translation using a loan word or loan word plus explanation, translation by paraphrase using a related word, translation by paraphrase using unrelated words, translation by omission, translation by illustration.

Following Baker ^[8], Aixelá ^[21] divides translation strategies of cultural elements into two major groups: conservation, which aims at introducing the ST culture to the TT audience, and substitution, which minimizes the foreignness of the target text. Conservation includes repetition, orthographic adaptation, linguistic translation, extratextual gloss, and intratextual gloss, whereas substitution consists of synonymy, limited universalization, absolute universalization, naturalization, deletion, and autonomous creation (for similar general classifications of translation/subtitling strategies (see Díaz-Cintas & Remael ^[22] and Pederson ^[23], among others).

More relevantly, Venäläinen ^[24] specifically analyzes the strategies for rendering English swear words in Finnish subtitles. Her findings show four strategies: preserving the same level of ST swear words, euphemizing the swear words into a toned-down level, omitting the swear words, and deleting the whole sentence which includes swear words. According to this study, omission was the most frequently used.

Venäläinen's ^[24] model investigates the translation of English swear words into Spanish in the film *Reservoir Dogs*. Four distinct subtitling strategies emerge: preserving the original swear word, toning down its intensity, neutralizing its impact, or entirely omitting it. The study reveals that the predominant use of softening and omission strategies undermines the intended effect of the swear words within the dialogue, detracting from their expressive function. Similarly, Khoshsaligheh and Ameri ^[25] address the strategies employed by Iranian subtitlers when translating taboo language from American crime movies into Persian. Their investigation reveals four primary strategies: retaining the original taboo by mirroring it in TL, omitting taboo words altogether, mitigating the impact of taboos by employing less offensive language, and substituting taboos with neutral equivalents.

When it comes to English into Arabic AVT, particularly the rendering of swear words, there have been several studies. Al-Adwan ^[26] addresses euphemistic strategies in

translating swear words into Arabic, emphasizing the importance of maintaining pragmatic function. Khoshsaligheh et al. ^[27] explore problems faced by subtitlers in rendering vernacular expressions, highlighting taboo issues with religious colloquialisms and loss of meaning. Al-Yasin and Rabab'ah ^[28] analyze taboo words in hip-hop movies, noting the use of euphemism and omission due to cultural constraints. Ben Slamia ^[29] stresses the need for appropriate translation strategies for taboo words, highlighting literal translation, partial translation, and inaccurate equivalence as common strategies. Almjirab ^[30] examines translation challenges from English to Arabic, observing the influence of cultural variations, particularly religion. Khalaf and Rashid ^[31] and Al-Jabri, Allawzi, and Abushmaes ^[32] investigate subtitling strategies in American dramas, with a focus on foreignization, domestication, and politeness levels. Abdelaal and Al-Sarhani ^[33] evaluate subtitling quality in the movie *Training Day*, mentioning euphemism and omission as common strategies. Finally, Al-zgoul and Alsalman ^[34] and Abu-Rayyash, Haidar, and Al-Adwan ^[35] look into swear word translation strategies, noting a prevalence of omission, euphemism, and slight changes in connotative meanings. By and large, these studies contribute to recognizing and dealing with the complexities of subtitling taboo language and understanding the diverse strategies employed by subtitlers in Arabic AVT materials.

Some studies have examined the translation of Arabic taboo language into English in AVT materials, although to a lesser extent compared with the translation from English into Arabic. Thawabteh ^[36] examines euphemism and dysphemism, revealing challenges related to culture-specific nuances and technical constraints. He shows that subtitlers commonly employ omission, preservation, or addition strategies in their translations to handle such challenges. Sabtan ^[37] investigates the rendering of swear words from Arabic into English, highlighting that subtitlers often tone down or omit the original language's swear words. Thus, some translated swear words are pragmatically equivalent, while others are not. Haidar, Saideen, and Hussein ^[38] discuss the translation strategies used in the Jordanian Arabic vernacular series *Jinn* into English, referring to various approaches to preserving taboo words and their connotative functions. Olmat et al. ^[39] deal with sensitive language in Arabic Netflix productions, categorizing taboo words related to

sex and emphasizing common translation strategies such as direct translation and cultural substitution. They warn against the use of generalization and omission, which can lead to ambiguity and loss of meaning in the English subtitles. These few studies collectively demonstrate overlap in translation strategies, despite differing terminology, and highlight the need for more research into contrasting swear words and handling them when rendered in AVT materials from a restrictive culture (Arabic) into a tolerant culture (English), a gap which this study seeks to fill in, employing British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) tensivity scale.

As can be observed from the above review of previous studies, translation/subtitling strategies of culture-bound expressions in general and of swear words in particular that have been proposed in classifications by different scholars overlap to a great extent. They basically feature maintaining such ST items in TT, toning them down, culturally substituting them, or omitting them altogether. However, none of them has examined subtitling Arabic swear words into English in terms of a tensivity scale that measures how offensive the swear word is (i.e., mild, moderate, or strong), which this study aims to provide using Hughes's ^[12] thematic categorization and BBFC tensivity scale.

This study, therefore, attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What strategies are used to subtitle Arabic swear words into English based on BBFC tensivity model?
2. Does Netflix as a non-Arab international streaming company differ from Shahid as an Arab international streaming company in terms of the subtitling strategy of Arabic swear words?
3. How appropriate/successful are the English subtitles?

4. Methodology

4.1. Why Netflix and Shahid as Data Sources

The choice of *Netflix* and *Shahid* as the source of flagrant Arabic swear words subtitled into English AVT materials is to a large extent constrained by the fact that they are the only streaming companies that have sponsored and screened such AVT filmed materials. In fact, the release of the Netflix movies *الجن (Jinn)* (2014) and *الحارة (The Alleys)* (2022) and the *Shahid* movie *بنات عبد الرحمن (Daughters of*

Abdulrahman) (2021) were frowned upon and rejected by general public for their socially-alien conduct and excessive use of Jordanian Arabic vulgar language. That is why they have been chosen as a source of strong swear words that would otherwise be missing in Jordanian as well as Arabic filmed materials. The purpose is to see what happens to the tensivity of such swear words when subtitled from a traditional culture (Arab/Muslim culture) into highly permissive cultures (Anglo-American cultures).

4.2. Corpus and Analysis Procedure

The corpus of this study consists of all the Arabic swear words occurring in the two *Netflix* movies (100) and the *Shahid* movie (25), making 125 swear words altogether. Using a combined quantitative and qualitative research methodology, swear words are firstly investigated based on Hughes's ^[12] thematic categorization to determine themes that fall under each of the three-level scales presented by the BBFC (Strong, Moderate, Mild). The frequency and percentage of each category of swear words for each individual theme in Arabic and English are provided along with an in-depth discussion of points of similarity and contrast between them. Secondly, the translation strategies employed in rendering Arabic swear words are quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed in terms of frequency and percentage. The translation strategy model adopted in this study is mainly based on the BBFC tensivity scale (strong, moderate, mild) alongside three other strategies, as follows:

1. Source Text (ST) swear words with the same tensivity in Target Text (TT).
2. ST swear words with higher tensivity in TT.
3. ST swear words with lower tensivity in TT.
4. ST swear words replaced with non-swear words in TT.
5. Omission of ST swear words in TT.
6. Swear words emerging in TT with no ST counterparts.

5. Data Analysis and Results

5.1. Tensivity of ST Swear Words and Thematic Categorization

BBFC is a globally accepted scale and provides

enough variation in the tone of language that can be used to classify the offensiveness of swear words into strong, moderate, or mild.

5.1.1. Strong Swear Words

The BBCF classification system categorizes language according to its potential to provoke harmful actions and behaviors that may adversely affect society. Such behaviors include discrimination, drug use, sexual violence, nudity, and other forms of criminally relevant violence. Drawing on Hughes's thematic classification, swear words related to sex, personal background, and racism are considered highly offensive. **Table 1** presents three examples of strong Arabic swear words from the corpus alongside their English subtitles, with Arabic swear words highlighted in **bold** and their English equivalents in *italics*.

5.1.2. Moderate Swear Words

The use of moderately bad language includes fewer offensive utterances. According to Hughes's thematic categorization, the moderate category includes swear words

related to excrement or names of animals, which are indicative of uncleanness and/or negative attributes. In this study, however, an additional subcategory of 'swear words related to negative personal attributes' will be included under this grouping to represent some Arabic swear words that share the same characteristics, such as terrible ethics and poor manners, and disgusting or impure topics (e.g., *toilets* or *shoes*). **Table 2** displays some examples representing the moderate category.

5.1.3. Mild Swear Words

Swear words related to mental illness, religion, or oaths represent the rest of Hughes' categorization. Such terms may cause mild offence because almost all age groups in society use them repeatedly, almost daily. They are used to refer to foolish reactions and silly practices in everyday life or to express the seriousness of one's statement without making a promise by invoking a divine witness. **Table 3** shows some examples of mild Arabic swear words. However, in conservative societies, some oaths, prayers, or cursing may be regarded as religiously offensive behavior.

Table 1. Examples of strong Arabic swear words.

Number	Source Text	Literal Translation	Target Text
1	كس أخت هالجزية!	Sister's <i>pussy</i> of this marriage.	Oh, <i>shit</i> !
2	لا مش انا وعمر. تلحس طيزي	No. Not me and Omar, <i>lick my ass</i> .	No, not with Omar, <i>smartass</i> . With Mira.
3	مبسوط يا شرموط؟	Are you happy, <i>prostitute</i> ?	Happy now <i>motherfucker</i> ?

Table 2. Examples of Moderate Arabic swear words.

Number	Source Text	Literal Translation	Target Text
4	كل الخرا اللي عم بصير فينا فجأة	All the <i>shit</i> happening to us suddenly.	Bro, all the <i>shit</i> that's happening to us.
5	يا ابن الكلب	Son of a dog	<i>Son of bitch</i> .
6	ولك انت بتسواش نعله كندرة	.You are not worth the sole of a shoe	You aren't worth the muddy sole of a <i>shoe</i> .

Table 3. Examples of mild Arabic swear words.

Number	Source Text	Literal Translation	Target text
7	ان شاء الله توقع وتتكسر رقبتك يا متخلف	God willing, you will fall down, and your neck breaks, you retard.	I hope you fall and break your neck, you <i>asshole</i>
8	يخرب بيتك هاي هي شغلتنك؟	Ruin your home, this is your job?	<i>Goddamn</i> , you is this what you
9	وعرض امي مشيت الخلطة زي ما بدك	On the honor of my mom, the mixture has gone as you wanted.	<i>On my mother's soul</i> , that hustle worked like a charm.

5.2. Swear Words Frequency and Percentages in Arabic and English

Table 4 displays the number of swear words in the

Arabic corpus as well as English subtitles. In addition, swear words emerging in the TT, with no taboo counterparts in the ST, are also noted. The BBFC Scale of Offence and Hughes' thematic categorization are used.

Table 4. Frequency and percentage of Arabic and English swear words based on BBFC Scale of Offence and Hughes' Thematic Categorization.

BBFC Scale of Offence + Hughes's Thematic Categorization		ST Swear Words		TT Swear Words			
				Subtitled		Emerging in TT	
Tensity	Themes	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Strong	sex	27	27%	34	36%	9	38%
	personal background	0	0	0	0	0	0
	racism	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	27	27%	34	36%	9	38%
Moderate	excrement	16	16%	7	8%	1	4%
	personal attributes	10	10%	9	10%	0	0
	names of animals	20	20%	6	6%	0	0
	Total	46	46%	22	24%	1	4%
Mild	mental illness	16	16%	26	27%	1	8%
	Religion or oaths	11	11%	12	13%	14	50%
	Total	27	27%	38	40%	15	58%
Total		100	100%	94	100%	25	100%

Despite the fact that the translation process is from a supposedly restrictive language into a tolerant one, few swear words have been omitted or neutralized. The number of subtitles in TT (94) is slightly less than the number in ST (100) because of the subtitling strategies adopted, viz. 6 ST swear words have been omitted or neutralized (e.g., the swear word in this sentence أكيد الحفلة خرا من دوني ('For sure, the party is shit without me') is neutralized and the sentence is subtitled into 'It must have been boring without me' and the following swear word in وين مخك يا حمار؟ ('Where's your brain, donkey') is omitted and the sentence is subtitled into 'Get your head out of the gutter'.

Table 4 illustrates that the most frequent BBFC category of offense in ST is the Moderate category (46%), which may indicate a tendency to take a middle-of-the-road position when deciding to invest in swear words in such Arabic movies (e.g., يا خرا ('You piece of *shit*') relates to excrement, and يا حمار ('You *donkey*') relates to animals). The Moderate category is far less used in the English subtitles, accounting for only 24% (e.g., 'You *scumbag*' relates to a negative personal attribute). Apparently, the significant difference is claimed by the 'mental illness' subcategory

within the Mild category, viz. 16% in ST vs. 27% in TT. (e.g., 'You're *stupid*!' and 'You *jerk*!'). This clear distinction may shed light on the issue that translating swear words from one language into another by changing the theme can keep the intended insulting impact, albeit of different tensity (e.g., *donkey* may be used in Arabic to describe a person as *stupid*). Thus, the Arabic animal metaphor swear word حمار ('donkey') has a higher degree of tensity than the 'semantic' ordinary swear word *stupid*.

Another interesting observation is that the category of sex/sex activities is frequently used in both ST and TT, 27% and 36% respectively. This indicates that when using swear words, sexuality is a common theme regardless of the fact that the ST belongs to a relatively restrictive culture compared with tolerant Anglo-American cultures. This also indicates that such swear words do not call for toning down when subtitling into a liberal culture.

The tendency to utter swear words related to the 'names of animals' subcategory under the Moderate category is frequent in ST (20%), which may indicate that this topic comes quickest to mind and produces an effective offensive result in Arabic. In contrast, the frequency of the

same topic amounts for less than one third in TT (6%). This suggests that subtitlers usually search for alternatives because the names of animals have comparatively less presence and impact for demeaning someone in English. The same applies to the ‘excrement’ subcategory. The number of swear words related to excrement in ST is double that in TT, 16% and 8% respectively. This significant difference found in these two sub-categories, ‘names of animals’ and ‘excrement’, is obviously replaced with swear words related to mental illness in the TT. The subtitlers are mindful that ‘mental illness’ is more commonly used in English than it is in Arabic. This emphasizes the fact that what is considered less insulting in one culture or region may be more severe in another.

However, the frequency of using swear words related to negative personal attributes in both ST and TT is the same, 10%. This similarity arises because swear words related to this topic in both languages express the same level of tensivity for negative attitudes and emotions.

Personal background and racism swear words are missing in the AV products investigated, so these two themes have zero instances in the TT as well. While instances of swearing that target a person’s distinct culture and history, place of origin, nationality, ethnicity, or social class may occur in Jordanian society, they are possibly too sensitive to voice in filmed materials because of the likely discord such language might cause in a society structured along tribal lines (e.g., عبد (‘nigger’) and بدوي (‘Bedouin’) are racial slurs which may be used to refer to black people and desert dwellers respectively).

Swear words that have emerged in TT suggest that subtitlers have attempted to escalate the level of offense in the TT. They significantly opted for the themes of ‘oath and religion’ and ‘sexuality’ for additional swear words, accounting for 50% and 38% respectively. This consequently ensures that these two themes are impactful and commonly used in English-speaking societies (e.g., *damn* and *hell* relate to oaths and religion, and *fuck* relates to sexuality).

6. Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal clear tendencies in how Arabic swear words are translated into English across Netflix and Shahid, reflecting both linguistic and cultural

dynamics. Overall, they show that subtitlers tend to maintain the pragmatic force of swear words, with more than half of the cases preserving the same level of tensivity (52%), and a substantial portion either heightening the intensity (10%) or introducing new swear words with no counterparts in the ST (20%). Taken together, these strategies account for the lion’s share of the data (82%), suggesting that subtitlers translating from Arabic into English experience little constraint in keeping or even increasing the tensivity of swear words. This finding is in line with Díaz-Cintas and Remael’s ^[40] observation that Anglo-American audiovisual culture tolerates high levels of vulgarity, especially when compared with subtitling into Arabic, where offensive language is usually toned down or censored ^[5].

When comparing the two platforms, Netflix shows a much higher tolerance for strong and even intensified swear words, as well as the inclusion of new ones (25%), revealing a domestication strategy in Venuti’s ^[41] terms, meant to render dialogue natural and authentic in the TL. In contrast, Shahid adopts a more conservative path, with the majority of items maintaining the same intensity (68%) or mitigating it (24%), and no instances of added swear words. This finding reflects the platform’s embeddedness in Arab cultural norms and aligns with Al-Khalifa and Garcia’s ^[42] assertion that regional broadcasters tend to select safer strategies to reflect local sociocultural sensitivities. The fact that Netflix chooses global subtitling norms, while Shahid conforms to regional ones, supports Pedersen’s ^[23] argument that subtitling norms are shaped by wider sociocultural contexts as much as by linguistic factors.

The instances where tensivity is reduced (14% overall) can be explained as thematically driven rather than the outcome of censorship. That is, Arabic often calls up animal metaphors in swear words, often teasing mental abilities, while English rarely does so. Rendering insults such as *himār* (‘donkey’) into ‘stupid’ involves a semantic shift that downplays the metaphor while preserving communicative force, a strategy aligning with House’s ^[43] functional equivalence and Jay’s ^[11] assertion that taboo areas are highly culture-bound. What is particularly striking is that omission and neutralization are minimal (6% combined), a result that questions previous claims that technical constraints of subtitling often make translators omit taboo language ^[22]. Instead, the low omission rate here supports Taylor’s ^[44]

assertion that global audiences prefer and expect linguistic and cultural realism in subtitles, especially on platforms like Netflix that promote themselves as culturally authentic.

In sum, the results indicate that subtitling offensive language is not merely a linguistic process but a cultural negotiation, as well. Netflix prefers strategies that reflect tolerant Anglo-American norms, increasing or maintaining the force of swear words to meet audience preferences and expectations, while Shahid chooses caution, aligning with the norms of Arab media culture. This asymmetry highlights the broader role of cultural context in managing subtitling practices, where translation decisions are informed not only by linguistic issues but also by the values and sensitivities of the target culture.

7. Conclusions

This study has investigated the translation strategies used to subtitle Arabic swear words into English on Netflix and Shahid, examining the influence of cultural norms, the BBFC tensivity scale, and the effectiveness of subtitling. The findings indicate that subtitling bad language is not merely a linguistic exercise but a complex process involving linguistic fidelity, cultural norms, and audience expectations.

The most frequently used strategy is the direct preservation of the tensivity of Arabic swear words in English (52%), complemented by instances of heightened intensity (10%) and the emergence of new swear words in the TT (20%). This shows that subtitlers are largely free to keep or even strengthen the semiotic force of offensive expressions, especially when rendering them from a culturally restrictive SL into a permissive TL. Examples of reduced tensivity (17%) generally include culturally specific metaphors, such as animal insults, that are adjusted to preserve communicative force in English. Minimal omission or neutralization (6% combined) suggests that subtitlers prioritize linguistic and cultural realism over technical constraints.

When comparing the two platforms, Netflix demonstrates a greater tendency toward domestication, intensifying or adding swear words to reflect Anglo-American norms and audience expectations. Shahid, in contrast, mostly preserves or mitigates swear words, suggesting adherence to Arab cultural sensitivities and more traditional media norms. These results highlight the role of cultural context in subtitling strategies, stressing how translation decisions are

motivated as much by social values and audience expectations as by linguistic parameters.

The study emphasizes that subtitlers maneuver within a cultural and linguistic negotiation space. International streaming companies like Netflix can exercise more permissive subtitling practices, indicating their global audience, while regional platforms like Shahid prefer cultural appropriateness and sensitivity to local norms. This asymmetry demonstrates the influence of target culture, platform orientation, and directionality in subtitling practices, implying that subtitling strategies cannot be fully perceived without considering broader sociocultural processes.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. First, the data is confined to a selection of films and series on Netflix and Shahid, which may not fully capture subtitling practices across all genres or platforms. Second, the study focuses only on Arabic-to-English subtitling; reversing the direction (English-to-Arabic) may reveal different strategies due to stricter cultural norms, as preliminary research indicates. Third, while the BBFC scale offers a useful framework for evaluating tensivity of swear words, it may not capture subtler pragmatic or emotional nuances of taboo expressions in context.

Future research could expand the data to feature a broader range of genres and more streaming platforms, allowing for more generalizable insights into subtitling practices. Comparative studies looking into subtitling in the reverse direction (English-to-Arabic) would illuminate the role of source and target culture constraints more comprehensively. Further, examining audience reception of subtitled swear words across different cultures could offer valuable insight into the effectiveness and sociocultural impact of subtitling strategies. Finally, integrating multimodal analysis, including visual and auditory cues, could enhance understanding of how subtitlers negotiate meaning, humor, and offensiveness in audiovisual discourse.

Overall, the study shows that subtitling swear words involves a delicate balance between maintaining linguistic impact and respecting cultural norms. Netflix and Shahid exemplify contrasting approaches shaped by their respective target audiences and cultural orientations. While subtitlers exercise considerable freedom when translating from Arabic to English, future research should keep exploring how subtitling practices mediate between language, culture, and social change, especially in regions undergoing evolving norms of linguistic and social liberalism.

Author Contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this study. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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