




## A descriptive study on sex-related language in the subtitling of *Succession* into Spanish

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**Abstract:** Sex can be considered a vulgar, forbidden or unwelcome topic in many contexts and this fact can add a challenge to subtitlers of audiovisual products depending on the cultures and languages involved (Ávila-Cabrera, 2024). Although some authors claim that sexual references tend to be altered, mitigated or omitted when dubbing (Ferrari, 2010; Scandura, 2021) and subtitling (Fuentes-Luque, 2020) from English into neutral Spanish, other researchers such as Villanueva-Jordán (2023) have demonstrated through a case study that neutral Spanish for the Latin American audience does retain sexual references in dubbing. This paper examines the subtitling of the four seasons of the TV series *Succession* (Armstrong, 2018–2023) from US English into Spanish (from Spain), as broadcast on Max (formerly HBO España). The primary objectives of the study are as follows: (1) to explore the extent to which sexual references from the source text are transferred to the target text. To achieve this, we will analyse the transfer through the lens of Descriptive Translation Studies (Toury, 2012). (2) To determine how sexual references are treated in the translated text, whether they are rendered using explicit sexual language or replaced with other taboo or offensive phrases. For this, we employ Ávila-Cabrera's (2023b) taxonomy of translation techniques to examine the handling of these references and assess whether the taboo load is preserved in the subtitles. (3) To identify the most recurrent translation techniques used. Among the expected findings, we aim to test our initial hypothesis that considers that sexual phrases tend to be transferred as closely as possible in the subtitles in this TV series. In summary, our intention is to contribute to the literature of the treatment of sexual language in interlingual subtitling through this paper.

**Keywords:** sexual language; interlingual subtitling; fidelity; translation techniques; *Succession* (TV series).

## I. Introduction

Taboo topics, often considered prohibited or unwelcome, exhibit significant variability depending on different. As Allan (2018, p. 1) posits, what is considered taboo involves “[...] the use of [...] words and language in certain contexts; in short, the taboo applies to instances of language behaviour”. Moreover, absolute taboos do not exist because “[...] nothing is taboo for all people under all circumstances for all time” (Allan, 2018, p. 14). This means that perceptions of taboo topics vary based on individual acceptance, age, and cultural background.

Hargraves (2023) examines the evolution of television from the early 2000s to the mid-2010s, highlighting how significant changes in aesthetics, form, genre, industry, and technology have trained audiences to transform unease into pleasure. Following this author, taboo words contribute to constructing a shared cultural imaginary or capital by finding ways to express ideas despite societal prohibitions. In other words, while television changes have helped people enjoy provocative or controversial content, taboo words can help us communicative restrictive ideas.

In Audiovisual Translation (AVT), addressing taboo phrases requires careful consideration of the source and target languages and their respective cultures. Translators must navigate complex cultural dynamics and balance fidelity to the original text with sensitivity to the target audience's cultural norms. Elements such as the audience's language, age, context, and cultural background play a critical role in shaping the translator's approach to transferring content from the source text (ST) to the target text (TT). In subtitling, the challenge lies in maintaining this balance while adhering to the spatio-temporal constraints of this AVT mode, which often necessitate condensing the TT by up to 30–40% (Roales Ruiz, 2017). This reduction, commonly referred to as technical manipulation (Díaz Cintas, 2012), is driven by medium constraints rather than censorship.

As Villanueva-Jordán (2024) aptly notes, cultural sensitivity plays a pivotal role in shaping the subtitling strategies for diverse Spanish-speaking audiences. Moreover, while television and streaming services have introduced darker narratives, taboo subjects, vulgarity and extreme behaviours (Hargraves, 2023), these elements appear to be widely accepted by audiences. There is notable terminological diversity in the description of strong, vulgar, or rude phrases. To avoid confusion, this paper adopts the distinction proposed by Ávila-Cabrera (2016b) between taboo and offensive language as follows:

Offensive language refers to those linguistic terms or expressions made up of swearwords, expletives, etc., which are normally considered derogatory and/or insulting. [...] Taboo language is related to terms that are not considered appropriate or acceptable with regard to the context, culture, language and/or medium where they are uttered (Ávila-Cabrera, 2016b, p. 28).

When dealing with sexual terms within the taboo category—such as those referring to sexual practices, organs, functions, or effluvia (Allan & Burridge, 2006)—the translator must pay particular attention to the target audience's cultural sensibilities. In subtitling, this often leads to the omission or modification of taboo phrases due to the constraints of the medium (Ávila-Cabrera, 2015; Díaz Cintas, 2001).

Over recent decades, research into taboo language has expanded significantly. Scholars have explored euphemisms and dysphemisms (Allan & Burridge, 1991), censorship and taboo language



(Allan & Burridge, 2006), and sexual language through metaphor (Crespo-Fernández, 2015). Comprehensive volumes like Allan's (2018), which examines taboo language through multidisciplinary approaches, and De Rosa (2024), which explores taboo topics such as sex and swearing in subtitling and dubbing, provide critical insights. Emerging research has also examined the role of swearing in conveying emotion (Allan, 2023) and the use of euphemisms in pornographic film titles (Crespo-Fernández, 2023). Cultural norms significantly influence how taboo topics are treated in translation. For instance, translations in Arabic-speaking countries often euphemise or censor religious and sexual content (Al-Adwan, 2015). In contrast, Latin American subtitles for neutral Spanish tend to employ euphemisms or omit explicit swearwords and sexual references (Ferrari, 2010; Fuentes-Luque, 2015; Scandura, 2021). However, for Spanish-speaking audiences in Spain, explicit swearwords and sexual references are often retained in subtitles, reflecting a higher level of fidelity to the load of the ST (Ávila-Cabrera, 2016a, 2023b). In this context, religious blasphemies are more likely to be replaced with other offensive terms than directly translated, such as "[...] Jesus [fucking] Christ" (Ávila-Cabrera, 2020, p. 128).

Studies on amateur subtitling (Ameri & Ghazizadeh, 2015; Beseghi, 2016; Bucaria, 2017; Forutan & Modarresi, 2018; Khoshsaligheh et al., 2018; Moura, 2020) show that fansubs often adopt bolder approaches compared to professional subtitles.

This paper investigates the treatment of sexual references in the subtitling of the TV series *Succession* (Armstrong, 2018–2023) (originally in US English) for audiences in Spain. The study explores the extent to which sexual phrases are faithfully transferred to the subtitles, given that the Spanish audience is accustomed to such language on screen (Valdeón, 2020, 2024). The manuscript is organised into several sections: this introduction outlines the scope and goals; the theoretical framework reviews literature on sexual language from a cultural perspective and its treatment in AVT and media accessibility; the methodology section introduces the initial hypothesis and research questions, the corpus, and translation techniques with a selection of analysed samples; the data analysis address the research questions and interpret findings in the discussion; and the conclusions discuss the paper's implications and limitations.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This section examines the cultural approach to sex to explore how perspectives on this topic vary across different cultures. Additionally, it discusses studies related to the representation of sex in AVT.

### 2.1 A cultural approach to sex

Sexuality is an intricate and multifaceted aspect of human life, profoundly shaped by cultural backgrounds. Cultural contexts wield substantial influence over how sex is perceived and the establishment of taboos surrounding it. Culture, understood as the embodiment of collective customs, practices, values, and beliefs that define a community (Tylor, 1871), fundamentally impacts individuals' beliefs and behaviours within its milieu (Geertz, 1973). When applied to sexuality, this concept reveals stark variations in attitudes toward sex across diverse societies.



The cultural approach to comprehending sexuality delves deeply into the complex interplay of societal norms, values, and traditions in shaping perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours regarding sex (Chapman, 2023). Religious doctrines, in particular, exert a considerable influence over cultural perceptions of sexuality (Rigo & Saroglou, 2018). The notion of “sexual morality” and the norms governing sexual conduct exhibit significant variation across temporal and cultural landscapes. Many religions impose moral codes and guidelines on sexual behaviour, which in turn shape societal norms. For instance, conservative interpretations of religions like Islam, Christianity, or Hinduism often stigmatise premarital or extramarital sex as taboo. In contrast, certain aspects of historical Hinduism embraced sexuality as a natural and sacred element of life, as evidenced by its rituals and art forms (Cleaveland et al., 1979).

Cultural attitudes toward sex are also deeply intertwined with prevailing gender norms and societal power structures. Patriarchal cultures, for instance, often impose strict limitations on female sexual autonomy, regulating women’s behaviour and expressions through stringent societal expectations (Phillips, 2010). These power structures influence not only individual behaviours but also collective taboos, shaping what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable within a specific culture (Ávila-Cabrera, 2023b).

In addition to religious and gendered dimensions, socioeconomic factors and technological advancements significantly influence cultural perceptions of sexuality. Urbanisation, globalisation, and exposure to diverse media sources contribute to cultural shifts and, in some cases, the erosion of traditional taboos (Laumann & Youm, 1999). Furthermore, advancements in reproductive technologies, such as intra-cytoplasmic sperm injection and in vitro fertilisation, have transformed sexual practices and norms, challenging long-standing beliefs in some societies (Greil et al., 2010).

The existence of cultural taboos surrounding sex has profound implications for individuals within a culture. These taboos can foster feelings of shame, guilt, or secrecy around sexual experiences, potentially impacting mental health and inhibiting healthy sexual expression (Gruskin et al., 2019). Conversely, cultures with more liberal views on sexuality often afford individuals greater freedom to explore sexual behaviours and identities. However, such freedom can also present challenges, particularly in navigating boundaries and societal expectations (Kehily, 2007).

The translation of obscenities is always a negotiation between cultural systems that define the boundaries of what can be presented (Toledano Buendía, 2003). This may suggest that, despite the potentially sensitive nature of the subject matter, Spanish-speaking audiences from Spain are accustomed to receiving sexual linguistic content in the form of subtitles. This observation aligns with Moura’s (2024) study, which highlights the participants’ acceptance of swear words in subtitles through a case study.

As Pizarro Pedraza (2019) argues, taboos can serve different linguistic functions: they may be referential, addressing specific aspects of reality, or non-referential, appearing in the form of insults or expletives. Spanish, for instance, exhibits a highly productive sexual lexicon. These “variants of a taboo concept”, as Pizarro Pedraza (2021, p. 583) notes, can be placed on a continuum of offensiveness, ranging from euphemistic avoidance strategies to dysphemistic offensive expressions.

Understanding the cultural dimensions of sexuality and taboos is pivotal in fostering inclusivity, respect, and effective communication in a diverse world. By acknowledging and appreciating the variety of cultural attitudes toward sex, society can cultivate a more nuanced and

empathetic approach to discussions surrounding sexuality, ensuring that these conversations promote understanding rather than alienation.

## 2.2 Sex and LGBTQ+ representation in audiovisual translation and media accessibility

The exploration of taboo content in AVT reveals diverse approaches to handling sensitive material across languages and cultures (Ávila-Cabrera, 2024). For example, Díaz Cintas (2001) analysed the subtitles of Pedro Almodóvar's (1995) *La flor de mi secreto* [The Flower of My Secret], comparing the English subtitles aired on Channel 4 to those in the VHS release. He observed that television subtitles employed bolder translation choices than those of the VHS version. Similarly, Ávila-Cabrera (2016a, 2023a, 2023b) examined offensive and taboo language in Spanish subtitles of popular Tarantino films, finding that sexual content is often faithfully transferred to the TT. This contrasts with English-Arabic (Al-Adwan, 2015; Alsharhan, 2020; Al-Yasin & Rabab'ah, 2019; Izwaini, 2017) and English-Turkish subtitling practices (Alan, 2011), where more conservative strategies, "euphemised and ideologically recontextualized" (Alan, 2024), are frequently employed.

Translation challenges are also evident in specific lexical cases. Wilkinson (2021) analysed the translation of the Spanish term *puta* [whore] in English subtitles for the first season of *Paquita Salas* (Ambrossi & Calvo, 2016–2019). The study revealed inconsistencies in maintaining the offensive load, with literal translation being the most common strategy. This often failed to capture cultural nuances. Similarly, Permpoon and Kaewkwan (2022) compared translation strategies in the subtitling of *Sex Education* (Nunn, 2019–2023) and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Taylor-Johnson, 2015). They observed significant differences in approaches due to audience demographics and external factors such as censorship and film distribution policies. De Laurentiis and Marra (2024) also examined *Sex Education*, contrasting Spanish and Italian subtitles. They found that Spanish subtitles leaned toward informal, colloquial language to reflect teenage naturalness, whereas Italian subtitles adopted more formal language, avoiding vulgarity.

In contemporary series, societal shifts have influenced translation practices. Ogea Pozo and Bujalance (2022) analysed *Sex Education*, finding that Spanish dubs tended to amplify the offensive load of sexual terms, while orthophemisms and dysphemisms were employed to adapt to cultural expectations. Their findings align with Ogea Pozo and Botella Tejera (2023), who compared teen series from the 1990s to modern productions, highlighting increased explicitness in contemporary dialogues.

Chiaro (2021) reviewed Italian dubbing strategies for *Sex and the City* (Star, 1998–2004), emphasising moderation rather than erasure of taboo content. The study underscored the influence of dubbing directors, whose decisions shape what audiences perceive as acceptable. Parini (2023) extended her research by analysing taboo language in *The Young Pope* (Sorrentino, 2016) and *The New Pope* (Sorrentino, 2020) in their Italian dubs, noting a shift toward retaining offensive language in recent years. In line with Chiaro (2021), Hjort's (2009) study analyses swearing in Finnish subtitles and the fact that even though not all of them can be subtitled, as acknowledged by audiovisual translators, audiences welcome swear words translated as faithfully as possible and do not expect their omission.

The study of LGBTQ+ representation in AVT has gained increasing attention due to its cultural and social significance. Several scholars have explored this topic, focusing on different cultural and linguistic contexts. Ranzato (2012) explored Italian dubbing strategies for translating gayspeak and gay themes. Through examples from dubbed films and TV programmes, the author highlighted how Italian translations sometimes altered gayspeak terms, reflecting slower societal acceptance compared to Anglo-Saxon cultures. Martínez Pleguezuelos (2018, 2021) analysed gender and LGBTQ+ representation, focusing on the Spanish dubbing of *Will & Grace* (Kohan & Mutchnick, 1998–2020). His study assessed whether the translated text preserved the same gay identity as portrayed in the ST. Similarly, Villanueva-Jordán (2024) investigated gay masculinity in the Latin American and European Spanish dubbing of *Looking* (Haigh, 2014–2015), revealing notable differences in translation strategies. He argued that the translation of homoeroticism in audiovisual products requires interpretative frameworks that address the expression of sexuality without normative assumptions. Furthermore, he emphasised the importance of recognising the affective dimension of audiovisual translation, where words create networks of meaning that influence how individuals construct and interpret the erotic meaning of audiovisual artifacts. González Cruz (2024) highlighted the increasing presence of LGBTQ+ characters in TV series, while emphasising the challenges that non-binarism poses challenges for translators. She argued that translators play an important role in ensuring the accurate portrayal of diverse identities across languages and cultures. Her study aligns with Martínez Pleguezuelo's (2022), which aims to look into how non-binary language is an element that constructs gender identity and how AVT can help to make it (in)visible.

Other studies from different media, such as that by Anshori et al. (2021), are worthy of mention. They investigated 446 sexual English expressions in YouTube sex toy advertisements, categorising them into orthophemistic, euphemistic, and dysphemistic expressions. They identified 13 translation techniques in Indonesian subtitles, noting challenges with dysphemistic expressions due to cultural taboos. Similar patterns are seen in Latin American subtitling, where euphemisms or neutral terms are preferred (Fuentes-Luque, 2015, 2020). Last but not least, although sex as a taboo element in media accessibility has not been addressed as much as in the case of AVT, there are some studies in this regard. Sanz-Moreno (2017, 2018, 2020) has explored audio descriptions (AD) of sex scenes for blind and partially sighted audiences. Her studies have revealed user preferences for explicit yet objective descriptions, challenging traditional assumptions of censorship in AD. In addition, Villela (2017) discusses the challenges of the AD process of two erotic and sensual scenes of the film *Praia do Futuro* (Ainouz, 2014). This study therefore focuses on the integration of sexual and erotic scenes in the AD script. In line with this, Villanueva-Jordán (in press) explores the complexities of the AD narrative in telefiction with porn and sexual content. With regard to AD reception, Rojo López et al. (2021) conducted a study, opening a new research avenue, on how AD can enable similar experiences for visually impaired and sighted participants that are exposed to porn reception.

### 3. Methodology

The methodology used for the analysis of the subtitling of *Succession* into Spanish is rooted in the DTS paradigm, as proposed by Toury (2012). Guided by this approach, the aim here is to





elucidate and describe how sexual phrases were handled during the subtitling process to assess the fidelity of the TT to the ST while maintaining a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach to translation practices. Fidelity here, associated with faithfulness (Munday et al., 2022), must be understood as being able to transfer the ST taboo load to the TT as closely as possible. Thus, the focus is on the meaning rather than on the words.

### 3.1 Initial hypothesis and research questions

Our initial hypothesis posits that sexual phrases in Spain are typically rendered in a faithful manner in the TT (Ávila-Cabrera, 2015), whether through sexual language or the use of other taboo or offensive terms. To examine and validate this hypothesis, we have framed 3 research questions that delineate the objectives of our study:

- RQ1. Were sex-related phrases transferred to the TT? This question aims to gauge the degree of fidelity in the subtitling of sex-related phrases into Spanish in relation to the ST.
- RQ2. In the cases of transfer, were sex-related phrases subtitled using sexual language or any other taboo or offensive terminology? The quantitative data will shed light on whether sexual phrases were subtitled using similar language from the same semantic field or, conversely, whether they employed different taboo or offensive connotations, as already elucidated by Ávila-Cabrera (2015). This will provide insights into the treatment of sexual content in subtitling for Spanish-speaking audiences.
- RQ3. What were the most and least recurrent translation techniques employed? This question aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the prevailing and less common translation techniques, which collectively define the approach to transferring sexual terms in this specific case study.

The findings derived from these questions will offer a nuanced perspective on the subtitling strategies employed in *Succession*, particularly regarding the treatment of sexual content for Spanish-speaking audiences.

### 3.2 The corpus

The corpus analysed in this study comprises the four complete seasons of the TV series *Succession*, created by Jesse Armstrong (2018–2023), that tells the story of Logan Roy, founder and CEO of global media conglomerate Waystar Royco, and his daughter and two of his three sons who will battle for controlling the company. The original audio of the series is in US English, while the subtitles under study are in Spanish (from Spain). The series was originally aired on HBO España (currently Max), primarily targeting Spanish-speaking viewers. The professional subtitling for the four seasons was carried out by Marina Rodríguez García, Javier Sánchez Camacho and María Romero Soronellas from Iyuno.

The decision to analyse this series was based on the number of instances of sexual language that it contains and the variety of such expressions. In order to collect the necessary, the four



seasons of the series were meticulously reviewed by watching them on the screen. The instances in which the ST contained language related to sexuality were identified and annotated on an Excel spreadsheet, previously tagged with the translation techniques (discussed in the next subsection), along with the TT in the form of subtitles. However, swear phrases not directly related to sexual content were excluded, such as *fuck off*, *what the fuck*, *shut the fuck*, etc., as well as insults like *cunt*, *cocksucker*, *ratfucker*, etc. These expressions were excluded because their primary function is not to address sexuality but to perform “face-threatening acts” (Bruti, 2009, p. 7) intended to offend the addressee.

The focus of the analysis was carried out from the ST to the TT, examining how these instances of sexual content or expressions were transferred or not into the subtitles. This study aims to strengthen the fact that taboo topics, in this case dealing with sexual content, tend to be subtitled into Spanish—for the audience in Spain—with fidelity (Ávila-Cabrera, 2017). In addition, given that the four seasons of *Succession* (containing 39 episodes) have been scrutinised, this case study can serve as an evidence that enriches this research field.

### 3.3 Translation techniques

The translation techniques employed in this study for data analysis were adapted from Ávila-Cabrera’s (2023b) framework, which was specifically designed to address the transfer of offensive and taboo terms in AVT. These techniques aim to assess the extent to which the offensive or taboo load of the original terms in the ST has been preserved, mitigated, or altered in the TT. A detailed explanation of these techniques follows.

Table 1: Taxonomy of translation techniques

Translation techniques	
Transfer	Load toned up
	Load maintained
	Load toned down
Non-transfer	Load neutralised
	Load omitted

Source: Ávila-Cabrera (2023b, p. 78)

As shown in Table 1, two main categories of techniques are discernible: the “transfer” technique, which enables the translation of offensive or taboo terms into the TT, and the “non-transfer” technique, which fails to retain the full or partial weight of the ST in the TT. Within the subset of techniques that successfully transfer the taboo load, 3 distinct cases can be identified. A set of examples from the corpus, accompanied by individual discussions, is presented below.

- Load toned up. This refers to instances where the load in the TT becomes stronger than in the ST phrase(s), as demonstrated in Example 1:





Example 1 – SE02 EP02	Transfer – Load toned up
ST	TT
-Is that all you've got. - <b>Fuck you. Fuck you</b> , man.	¿Y ya está? - <b>Que te den por culo</b> , tío. [And that is? - <b>Get fucked in the ass</b> , man.]

The ST reads: “Fuck you. Fuck you”, which was subtitled as *Que te den por culo* [Get fucked in the ass]. The vulgar phrase “Fuck you” is repeated in the ST to intensify its impact, but in subtitling there is no room for including such a repetition and seems to have been taken a single phrase. Thus, the phrase has been toned up in the subtitle by adopting another dysphemism that is more explicit: *Que te den por culo* [Get fucked in the ass]. The TT therefore intensifies the sexual load of the phrase, making it more vivid and explicit.

- Load maintained. In this case, the ST and the TT are balanced in terms of the taboo load conveyed. Examples 2, 3 and 4 illustrate this technique:

Example 2 – SE03 EP07	Transfer – Load maintained
ST	TT
He loves fucking me, and he just doesn't wanna fuck you anymore.	Le encanta follarme y ya no quiere follarte a ti. [He loves to fuck me and doesn't want to fuck you anymore.]

Example 2 reads: “He loves fucking me”, which was subtitled as *Le encanta follarme* [He loves to fuck me...]. As can be inferred, the taboo load in both the ST and the TT is balanced, as both employ coarse and vulgar language to describe the act of sexual intercourse, constituting a dysphemism. Consequently, the taboo load has been maintained in the TT.

Example 3 – SE04 EP10	Transfer – Load maintained
ST	TT
Fuck you.	Me cago en ti. [I'm shitting on you.]

The case presented in Example 3 corresponds to instances where the ST includes a sexual phrase such as “Fuck you”, which, when subtitled, retains an offensive tone but is no longer related to sexuality. In this case, the transfer has been achieved by using a different offensive expression instead. This case would account for the instances of RQ2, that is, a sexual phrase subtitled using other offensive/taboo terminology rather than sexual.

Example 4 – SE02 EP05	Transfer – Load maintained
ST	TT
Yeah, but <b>you shouldn't be turned on</b> because <b>dead women aren't wet</b> .	no tienes que excitarte [you must not get hot]  porque <b>las muertas no se mojan</b> . [because <b>dead women do not get wet</b> .]



The ST shown in Example 4 depicts Roman Roy’s unconventional sexual behaviour, which crosses boundaries. He asks his girlfriend to pretend she is dead because it excites him more, to which she responds as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Snapshot of subtitle (SE02 EP05)



Source: Armstrong (2018-2023)

The ST has been transferred through two subtitles, both of which preserve the taboo load of the ST. The original line reads “you shouldn’t be turned on because dead women aren’t wet.”, and has been subtitled as *no tienes que excitarte* [you must not get hot] and *las muertas no se mojan*. [dead women do not get wet.]. Thus, in both cases, the transfer maintains the original load. The snapshot in Figure 1 highlights Roman Roy’s dominant position over her, which helps viewers to understand the intensity transmitted by the audio and visual channels (Chaume, 2004).

- Load toned down. In this case, the translation in the TT reduces the intensity of the ST, although the translator makes an effort to retain some of the taboo load in the subtitle, as shown in Example 5.

Example 5 – SE02 EP03	Transfer – Load maintained
ST	TT
We’re actually quite relentless in that regard. Just <b>Fuck City</b> .	Somos incansables en ese aspecto. Vivimos en <b>una ciudad de polvos</b> . [We are tireless in that regard. We live in <b>a city of shagging</b> .]

The fact that not every expression in a source language (SL) has a close equivalent in the target language (TL) is illustrated in Example 5 above. The ST includes the phrase “Fuck City”, which

is euphemised as *una ciudad de polvos* [a city of shagging]. The transfer has been made, although the tone has been toned down with the chosen solution.

When the non-transfer technique is employed, two scenarios can be identified:

- Load neutralised. The chosen solution in the TT nullifies the load of the ST, as its effect lacks offensive or taboo connotations. This can be observed in Example 6.

Example 6 – SE03 EP06	Non-transfer – Load neutralised
ST	TT
You just wanna give him a blowjob, so stop projecting.	¿Lo dices por experiencia? [Are you speaking from experience?]

The ST in Example 4 reads: “You just wanna give him a blowjob, so stop projecting”, which was subtitled as *¿Lo dices por experiencia?* [Are you speaking from experience?]. It is evident that the sex-related term “blow-job” is entirely absent in the TT. Instead, the TT employs a question that avoids any sexual or offensive language. Consequently, the approach taken in the TT effectively neutralises the load of the ST.

- Load omitted. This scenario is common in subtitling, often due to the need to condense the text. Offensive or taboo phrases are omitted in the TT for reasons such as brevity or character limitations, among others. Example 7 illustrates this case.

Example 7 – SE03 EP08	Non-transfer – Load omitted
ST	TT
He’s fucking a 20-year-old and he’s planning for babies in jars.	Quiere tener hijos con una veinteañera. [He wants to have kids with a female 20-year-old.]

The ST reads: “He’s fucking a 20-year-old”, which was subtitled as *Quiere tener hijos con una veinteañera* [He wants to have kids with a female 20-year-old.]. The subtitler seems to have condensed the ST by placing greater emphasis on the second part of the script, “he’s planning”... As a result, the sex-related phrase “He’s fucking”... has been omitted in the TT. Omission cases are particularly common in subtitling due to technical constraints as space and time limitations (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2021).

4. Data analysis and results

The results derived from the data analysis are now presented in order to address the research questions. Thus, a total of 792 instances of sex-related language have been identified in all the 4 seasons. The following are the 3 research questions, enabling us to delve into each one.

## 4.1 Research questions

- RQ1. Were sex-related phrases transferred to the TT? In order to answer RQ1, we turn our attention to Table 2, which provides quantitative data related to the transfer of sex-related phrases.

Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5 will show the cases transferred and not transferred.

Table 2: Analysis of season 1

SE01 EP01-10	Transfer			Non-transfer		
	Examples from each episode	Toned up	Maintained	Toned down	Neutralised	Omitted
	19	1	17	0	0	1
	14	1	11	0	0	2
	8	1	7	0	0	0
	25	0	20	4	0	1
	18	1	15	1	0	1
	24	1	18	1	3	1
	17	1	15	1	0	0
	43	5	30	6	0	2
23	2	21	0	0	0	
21	1	19	1	0	0	
Grand total						
212	14	173	14	3	8	
100%	6.60	81.62	6.60	1.41	3.77	
Transferred	94.82	Not transferred			5.18	

Source: Authors (2025)

Table 3: Analysis of season 2

SE02 EP01-10	Transfer			Non-transfer		
	Examples from each episode	Toned up	Maintained	Toned down	Neutralised	Omitted
17	1	11	3	1	1	
27	2	17	5	2	1	
20	0	15	4	0	1	
25	1	22	2	0	0	
23	0	22	1	0	0	
26	1	17	4	1	3	
31	2	24	3	0	2	
29	0	22	5	2	0	
33	2	25	3	2	1	
20	0	17	1	2	0	
Grand total						
251	9	192	31	10	9	
100%	3.58	76.51	12.35	3.98	3.58	
Transferred	92.44	Not transferred			7.56	

Source: Authors (2025)



Table 4: Analysis of season 3

SE03 EP01-09	Transfer			Non-transfer	
	Toned up	Maintained	Toned down	Neutralised	Omitted
Examples from each episode					
7	1	6	0	0	0
10	0	10	0	0	0
13	0	8	3	1	1
10	0	9	1	0	0
13	2	10	0	1	0
12	0	8	3	1	0
28	0	25	3	0	0
30	0	26	3	1	0
20	0	17	2	0	1
Grand total					
143	3	119	15	4	2
100%	2.09	83.25	10.48	2.79	1.39
Transferred	95.82			Not transferred	4.18

Source: Authors (2025)

Table 5: Analysis of season 4

SE04 EP01-10	Transfer			Non-transfer	
	Toned up	Maintained	Toned down	Neutralised	Omitted
Examples from each episode					
33	0	28	5	0	0
16	4	10	2	0	0
7	0	7	0	0	0
18	2	16	0	0	0
11	0	10	0	0	1
17	1	13	1	2	0
20	0	15	2	2	1
17	1	6	5	4	1
20	0	13	7	0	0
27	1	15	4	6	1
Grand total					
186	9	133	26	14	4
100%	4.83	71.53	13.97	7.52	2.15
Transferred	90.33			Not transferred	9.67

Source: Authors (2025)

The data in Tables 2-5 reveal that transfer cases have surpassed non-transfer ones, with results exceeding 90%. It is evident that the subtitling of sex-related language has demonstrated an exceptional level of fidelity to the taboo load of the ST. Therefore, RQ1 can be answered affirmatively: the majority of sex-related language cases have been closely transferred to the Spanish subtitles.



- RQ2. In the cases of transfer, were sex-related phrases subtitled using sexual language or any other taboo or offensive terminology?

Following an in-depth analysis of whether sex-related phrases were transferred to the TT using sexual terms or other taboo or offensive expressions, Table 6 clarifies this by showing the instances where of sex-related phrases were transferred using offensive or taboo expressions instead of equivalent sexual terms.

Table 6: Not-sex-related transfers in the TT

Not sexually-related transfers	Toned up	Maintained	Toned down	Total	Percentages
SE01	14	173	14	201	9 not-sexual (4.5%)
SE02	9	192	31	232	14 not-sexual (6%)
SE03	3	119	15	137	0 not-sexual
SE04	9	133	26	168	14 not-sexual (6.5%)

Source: Authors (2025)

The data presented in Table 6 reveal that only a minority of cases were transferred not using sex-related language but instead conveyed a certain degree of taboo or offensive tone in the subtitling, as described in Ávila-Cabrera's (2023b) taxonomy of offensive and taboo language. This can be attributed to technical restrictions, such as rapid exchanges between speakers, the need for text condensation inherent to this AVT mode, and the use of idiomatic expressions easily comprehensible to the target audience, as advocated by Ávila-Cabrera (2023b). The subtitling was predominantly carried out using sexual phrases, as shown by the quantitative data: 95.5% in season 1, 94% in season 2, 100% in season 3, and 93.5% in season 4.

- RQ3. What were the most and least recurrent translation techniques employed?

Table 7 examines the translation techniques applied during the subtitling of the 4 seasons.

Table 7. Sex-related cases not transferred under this category

Grand total		Transfer		Non-transfer	
Examples	Toned up	Maintained	Toned down	Neutralised	Omitted
212	14	173	14	3	8
251	9	192	31	10	9
143	3	119	15	4	2
186	9	133	26	14	4
792	35	617	86	31	23
100%	4.41	77.90	10.85	3.91	2.90
Transfer	93.18			Non-transfer	6.81

Source: Authors (2025)

Table 7 provides a comprehensive examination of the frequency of translation techniques used throughout the subtitling process. Among the transfer cases, the predominant technique is “maintaining”, which accounts for 77.90% and preserves the sexual load of the phrases in the TT.





This is followed by toning down (10.85%), which reduces the impact of the phrases, and toning up (4.41%), which amplifies it. Notably, these 3 categories significantly surpass the percentages observed in non-transfer cases, where neutralised cases account for only 3.91% and omitted instances for 2.90%. These findings align with the quantitative data from Tables 2-5, further corroborated by the translation techniques highlighted in Table 7.

## 4.2 Discussion

From a DTS approach and focusing on the quantitative analysis of the corpus, our initial hypothesis has been confirmed through the analysis of data presented in the previous section. For European-Spanish-speaking audiences, sex-related phrases tend to be translated with fidelity to the ST (Ávila-Cabrera, 2015; De Laurentiis & Marra, 2024; Ogea Pozo & Botella Tejera, 2023; Valdeón, 2020, 2024) whether using explicit sexual language or resorting to other taboo or offensive expressions, as shown by the results of RQ1 and RQ2. The findings for RQ1 and RQ2 indicate a strong tendency to retain the essence of these terms as closely as possible to the original in the TT. Regarding RQ2, less than 10% of the transferred cases were translated using alternative phrases with taboo or offensive connotations. This low percentage highlights the contrast with the high proportion of cases subtitled using sex-related language. These results reinforce the notion that subtitlers across all seasons aimed to convey sexual language as faithfully as possible. When direct sexual phrases could not be transferred, vulgar or offensive expressions were used in the subtitles in an effort to maintain the intended tone. For example, “-Fuck you!” subtitled as *-Vete a la mierda*. [Fuck off!] (SE01 EP02), a vulgar phrase; “Fuck you” as *Joder* [Fuck.] (SE01 EP03), an expletive; “Well, fuck me.” as *Me cago en todo* [I shit on everything.] (SE02 EP06), a vulgar expression; “-But I don't like being fucked.” as *-Pero no me gusta que me puteen* [But I don't like to be fucking bugged.] (SE02EP07), an offensive phrase; “Who the hell calls us The Incredible Fuck Brother Bandwagon?” as *¿Quién hostias nos llama eso?* [Who fucking calls us like that?] (SE04EP10), a religious-related taboo phrase. Other studies have shown how swearing and taboo language are prone of undergoing semantic changes, such as those by Pujol, (2006), Santaemilia, (2008), Moura (2022), or Xavier (2024), among others.

These results align with the study conducted by Ogea Pozo and Botella Tejera (2023), which highlights the fidelity in transferring sex-related language from English into Spanish dubbing. While dubbing and subtitling are different AVT modes, the outcomes here open new research avenues to compare the fidelity of translating sex-related language into European Spanish across multiple AVT modes of the same audiovisual product. On the other hand, the results found in this case study do not coincide with Valdeón's (2020, 2024) vulgarisation hypothesis, taking into account that the toned up cases have been much lower than those in which the offensive/taboo load was maintained, this technique being the most recurrent in all 4 seasons (see Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5).

Regarding RQ3, the findings suggest that the most frequently employed translation techniques include toning up, maintaining or toning down the taboo load of the ST in the TT. The cultural background of the target audience appears to have been a consideration by the subtitlers of the series, as European-Spanish-speaking viewers are used to being exposed to sex-related language in audiovisual content without requiring significant censorship (Ávila-Cabrera, 2015, 2017; Ogea



Pozo & Botella Tejera, 2023; Ogea Pozo & Bujalance, 2022). However, the lack of a reception study represents a limitation of this research. There are thorough reception studies with other target languages that bring to the fore the fact that audiences consume audiovisual content with swear words, offensive, sexual language, etc. and especially younger viewers welcome them, such as those in Finnish (Hjort, 2009), German (Briechle & Eppler, 2019), Portuguese (Moura, 2024) and Chinese (Jiang & Doherty, 2024) for example.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has analysed the subtitling of sex-related language in the TV series *Succession*, characterised by frequent use of swear words, open discussions about sex, and references to other taboo subjects. The primary focus has been on how these sexual expressions were transferred to the Spanish subtitles intended for audiences in Spain, as broadcast by Max.

Our initial hypothesis, confirmed through the quantitative analysis addressing the research questions, sheds light on the treatment of sexual phrases in the Spanish subtitles of this TV series. We have confirmed that these subtitles have been faithfully transferred to the TT, with a majority of cases employing sex-related language; similarly, Ávila-Cabrera (2015) reported similar results on the subtitling of offensive and taboo language into Spanish of some of Tarantino's films, with sex-related language under scrutiny.

In summary, with regard to RQ1, it was proved that sex-related phrases were mostly transferred to the TT in more than 90% of the 4 seasons (see Tables 2-5); as for RQ2 it was revealed that in the most of the seasons sex-related content was subtitled by employing the same type of language (in SE01 in 95.5%; in SE02 in 94%; in SE03 in 100%; in SE04 in 93.5%) (see Table 6); regarding RQ3, the most recurrent translation techniques were those that transfer the sex load to the subtitles, that is, maintained (77.90%), toned down (10.85%), and toned up (4.41%), while the non-transfer techniques accounted for 6.81% (see Table 7). However, this trend is not universal. Another study conducted by Rodríguez-Arancón and Ávila-Cabrera (2024) on the subtitling of religious expressions into Spanish of the same TV series, *Succession*, showed that subtitling for Spanish-speaking audiences in Spain often avoids direct insults to religious references. Instead, subtitlers opt for expletives or swear words from different taboo areas to maintain the intensity of strong language in the subtitles. This reflects cultural sensitivities, as audiences might find direct insults to figures like "God" or "Jesus Christ" offensive.

It is important to underline that Spanish audiences differ significantly from their Latin American counterparts, who often receives foreign audiovisual products toned down or stripped of their taboo load entirely, as observed by Fuentes-Luque (2015, 2020). By contrast, Moura's (2024) research on audience reception in the case of Brazilian Portuguese revealed that in certain audiovisual genres the audience expects the use of (more) swear words in the narrative, which also lines up with Valdeón's (2020) vulgarisation hypothesis.

One limitation of this study is its focus on Spanish spoken in Spain; further research could contrast the subtitling of this TV series with the neutral Spanish commonly used in Latin America. Another limitation is the lack of qualitative data from the subtitlers themselves because being able to interview them would allow us to triangulate the quantitate data in the form of the analysis



conducted with qualitative data from the subtitlers' views on their subtitling of sexual-related language, and also if the subtitlers worked with templates. Nonetheless, this study is expected to offer a valuable contribution to the literature on taboos in subtitling, specifically concerning the translation of sexual references for Spanish-speaking audiences. Further studies could explore audience reactions to corroborate or challenge the findings presented here.

In conclusion, this study underscores the faithful treatment in the subtitling of sex-related language in the subtitling of all seasons of *Succession* into Spanish, providing significant insights into how this taboo topic has been addressed in subtitling.

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## Notes

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The data from this research, which are not included in this work, may be made available by the author upon request.



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