

LGBTQ SLANG AND ITS EVOLUTION OVER TIME. A CENSORED OUTCAST IN SUBTITLING?

La jerga LGBTQ y su evolución a lo largo del tiempo. ¿Un marginado censurado en la subtitulación?

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ABSTRACT: Lavender lexicon is not a widely concept in the academic world. In order to contribute to this, the present work analyses gay jargon as a specialized language due to its secrecy and purpose. Having its roots in Polari, we have illustrated the development of the gay language by considering popular series from the 90s until 2018: *Sex and the city*, *Queer as folk*, *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Pose*. Most modern series' subtitles showed as few cases of censorship as in Austin Powers' trilogy, where the heterosexual slang prevails. However, it did not happen the same the previous years. It has also been exaggerated in some cases, something that affects the LGBTQ community negatively. Apart from offering a view of the concept of subtitling, we also defined the translation techniques needed when dealing with taboo and swear words and how the offensive load can be transferred.

Keywords: gay; slang; audio-visual; subtitling; censorship; Polari.

1. COMING OUT THE CLOSET: GAY SLANG

Nowadays, gay slang or language of the closet seems to be one of the greatest outcasts in the academic world, particularly in disciplines as Philology or Translation Studies. Rodríguez González (2010, 3) remarked that “lots of publications addressed the gay issue from different fields as Psychology, Sociology, Literature, Religion... Nevertheless, there is not any detailed study/register about its lexicon”. Because of that, in next section, we will trace the historical line of this curious language, from its origin to what is known today as *gayspeak*, with its characteristics and purpose.

1.1 *From Polari Language to Gayspeak – Brief Historical Overview*

Polari was the language widely used by the gay community from 1900s until 1970. It developed from an earlier form of Parlyaree and is defined as a mix of Romance, Romani, London slang, sailor and thieves' slang, it also included words from the 60s' drug subculture, American air force slang, rhyming and *back slang*. It was mainly used in pubs around the London dock area and it was soon used by merchant marine, something that helped to its spread. It was also spoken by people of the circus and the theatre. The purpose of this language was the survival of gay people when it was considered a psychological disease, even a crime (until 1967), being homosexual was illegal in England and Wales. Authors as Cameron and Kulic (2003, 74-79) discovered that an article in *Current Psychology and Psychoanalysis* (1936) contained the observation that “there was a widespread use of a strange slang among these human misfits”. In 1941, a two-volume medical study of homosexuality was published (together with an examination of the morphology of the homosexual genitalia). The section devoted to language listed 329 words from which 139 were marked as exclusive to homosexuals and considered depraved (Legman 1941, 1154). Polari helped them to communicate secretly in front of straight people and contributed to

the feeling of belonging to a community (it is even often compared with jargons *lunfardo*, *germanía* or *gibberish*).

Unfortunately, Polari began to decline at the end of the 60s, since the radio show *Round the Horne* became popular and ripped away the veil of secrecy of the language. Featured by two homosexual characters, Jules and Sand, Polari was freely used and ceased to be an unknown. Nevertheless, the essence of Polari evolved to what we know as gayspeak or gay slang, which is incredibly present in media nowadays. This is the reason why this work and others such as Martínez Pleguezuelos' (2018) and Mesonero's (2018) have been carried out with the analysis of subtitles in series that left their mark in the audio-visual world. Before reviewing our data collection, it is important to set a theoretical base for the concept of subtitling, for the techniques to deal with offensive language and the definition of censorship.

2. SUBTITTLING AS CONCEPT

Globalization and advances in technologies gave birth to important developments in the audio-visual world: cinema, television, videogames etc. We will overview a theoretical background of the audio-visual translation (AVT), subtitling concretely.

2.1 *Subtitling: Authors and Classification*

When classifying subtitling, we took two significant classifications from Chaume (2013b, 107-115) and from Díaz Cintas y Remael (2007):

CHAUME:

- a. *Subtitling*: consists of incorporating a written text in the target language on the screen where an original version film is shown.
- b. *Surtitling*: The subtitles are usually projected on a screen placed above the stage in the proscenium so the audience sitting in the boxes can follow the play or opera, and at the same time, read the subtitles or surtitles with a translation or transcription of the dialogues.
- c. *Respeaking or live/ simultaneous subtitling*: The interpreter hears the characters' dialogues and re-reads them in his or her own words.
- d. *Subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing/ closed caption*: it is intralingual translation that reproduces the characters' dialogues so that the subtitles appear on the screen at the same time as they are spoken.
- e. *Fansubbing*: home-made subtitles for series or cartoons that have not yet been released in the target language country [...] usually made by fans.

DÍAZ CINTAS Y REMAEL:

- a. *Interlinguistic subtitles*: in which it translates from an OT to a TT.
- b. *Intralinguistic subtitles*: in which the original spoken text is partially or totally transcribed, normally with educational and accessibility purposes for deaf people.
- c. *Bilingual subtitling*: in which the OT is subtitled in two different languages, which are usually used in situations where the product is viewed by people with different languages, such as at film festivals.

2.2 *Reading Between the Lines: Connecting Cultures Through Subtitling*

Molina & Albir (2002) define translation techniques as “procedures to analyse and classify how translation equivalence works”. Strategies help to find a suitable solution for a translation unit by choosing a technique. Between these two strategies, according to Venutti (1995, 20), translators can tend to a reduction of the foreign text features enhancing the cultural linguistic features of the target language (what is defined as domestication) or to register the cultural difference between the source and the target language otherwise (what is defined as foreignization). Díaz Cintas y Remael (2007, 185) affirmed “the best subtitle is the one the viewer reads unknowingly”. Other authors as Camacho Roldán (2014) and Marleau (1982) disagreed in this aspect as they considered subtitles are irretrievably read and distract from the film. When dealing with the issue of getting close to the source or the target language in a translation, Camacho Roldán (2014) insisted on the need of the foreignization of the text concretely in film festivals to fully understand and enjoy the experience of watching a foreign film. We cannot help thinking the opposite when it comes to translate gay slang. Burgess (1949, 234) affirmed “homosexual world has its own language, incomprehensible to outsiders”. Most of the viewers of the popular series *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009) or *Pose* (2018) concur when saying the series was sometimes a headache to understand due to the way characters/contestants spoke. An analysis of the former made by Mesonero (2018) showed that most of Netflix’s translators opted to domesticate the text but it was also hard for straight people to understand what was being said (imagine if the text was translated literally).

Saussure (1916, 8-16) stated “speech always implies both an established system and an evolution [...] a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas”. Therefore, the linguistic system of both English and Spanish gay slang was proved to be absolutely different and there is no comparison to straight slang. It is hard to say whether or not there is a pivot language, concept by Díaz Cintas [in Camacho Roldán (2014)], between gay and straight language. Nevertheless, the challenge lies in discovering what is being said in a (sub) culture/ group the translator does not belong with, even if he or she shares the same language. Then, finding an established equivalent could be more or less easy, but in order to do it, it is important to gut the source expression, as we see in Table 1. Even more interesting is to discuss if the translator should opt for the real meaning of the expression rather than the established equivalent maintaining its secrecy.

GAY SLANG	MEANING	SPANISH ESTABLISHED EQUIVALENT
He is a friend of Dorothy	Él es gay	Ese chico entiende

Table 1: A comparison of gay slang in English and Spanish.

In words by Toury (1995, 1), being a translator cannot be reduced to the mere generation of utterances which would be considered “translations” [...] translation activities should rather be regarded as having cultural significance to play a social role. Nida (2001, 82) advises “biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism, since words only have meanings in terms of the cultures in which they function”.

At this point, we must include offensive language in the analysis, as a concept and in the techniques used for its translation, since it is part of the cultural dimension of the language.

3. CUSSING: TABOO AND SWEAR WORDS, TECHNIQUES AND OFFENSIVE TRANSFER

The concept of politically correct originates in the United States in the 80’s within the journalistic field, where censorship suppresses harmful stereotypes and the abolition of social stigmas. Regarding the register, slang is considered used in informal contexts due to the inclusion of offensive language.

Ferklová (2014, 21) justifies that taboo expressions and swearwords are considered as being included in the diaphasic variation because of their connotative or emotional meaning that comes primarily from the attitude and intentions of the speaker. To illustrate how to deal with taboo and swear words, we take the techniques proposed by Ávila Cabrera (2014) and Fuentes-Luque (2014) in Table 2:

Ávila Cabrera (2014)	Fuentes-Luque (2014)
Literal translation	1) Censure / camouflage
Calques	A) Omission
Borrowing	B) Substitution
Explicitation	i. Symbols for subtitles (#@*!\$)
Substitution	ii. Cover with a whistle for dubbing
Lexical recreation	C) Softening
Transposition	D) Neutralisation
Compensation	E) Use of a euphemism
Omission	F) Complete change in the sentence's sense
Reformulation	2) Calque

Table 2: Translation techniques when dealing with taboo and swearwords.

Taboo and swear words are different for every culture, even if both share the same language. When analysing gay language, we see that it is not a language you would use in formal contexts since, without the aim of perpetuation of a stigma, it is undeniable that gay slang is full of offensive language. One of the points included in the data collection and analysis was if gay language was more or less censored than straight slang, or even exaggerated. But before reviewing that section, it is important to see how Ávila-Cabrera (2014) classified the methods for the transfer of offensive language in the subtitles:

- a. It is smoothed.
- b. It is maintained.
- c. It intensified.
- d. It is neutralized.
- e. It is omitted.

In addition to all said before, we must stress the difficult issue of censorship and euphemism when we are dealing with offensive language.

3.1 SHUT UP!: (Self-) censorship and euphemisms

First, it is of vital importance to clarify two different concepts, (1) censorship and (2) self-censorship. There is a subtle difference that serves to exculpate guilt but that does not redeem us from the attack on freedom of expression. Marcé (2018) defined self-censorship as “the foretaste of a unique way of thinking, whether by connivance, fear, prevention or by the subtle reception of conveniently intermediated messages”. While censorship will always focus in cases typified in the penal code, self-censorship instead creates the conditions so that the interpretation of these limits is subjective. He also added “some of the recent cases of limitation of freedom of expression are of particular gravity because beyond the content, culture is directly attacked”.

Regarding the concept of *euphemism*, it is defined as a politically accepted word which replaces another word of bad taste. It can be considered as a form of censorship in subtitling since there is a loss of information from the source text. Although offensive, there is a lack of meaning and a disconnection with the original form. Bastenier (2015) affirmed that “a more or less latent form of self-censorship is the euphemism, the substitution of the direct way of saying things for a light version”. Mabel Richart (2015) pointed out that “the translation proposal not only manipulates the source text, but also provokes

a false image of reality. It would not be unreasonable to refer to it in terms of censorship”. She added that “a text has to absorb the other and modify it taking into account political, cultural, social, and ideological reasons, among many others altering the meaning”. It is impossible to know if there are cases of censorship or self-censorship in the series we analysed, but there are several cases of euphemisms, something that we see in the data collection and analysis section.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In this study, there was a selection of popular series to see the progression of gay slang on media. Chronologically we studied *Sex and the city* (1998), *Queer as folk* (2000), *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009) and *Pose* (2018). Then we answered the following hypotheses:

- a. Has the presence of this slang increased from 1990s?

After watching several chapters of each series, we can affirm that there is a noticeable increase of the use of gay slang in the scripts given that there are more series in which gay characters are the main characters. Particularly, *RuPaul Drag Race* (2009) shows a remarkable presence of this jargon since it is a reality show and language is spontaneous. This fact favours that even the youngest generations learn this jargon and spread its use.

- b. Is there any case of censorship?

We obtained some language samples that could be considered as cases of censorship as we see in Table 3:

<i>Sex and the city</i> (1998)				
CHAPTER	SAMPLE	TRANSLATION	TECHNIQUE	SUGGESTED TRANSLATION
03x06	Where whores were whores, where men were women,	Donde las putas eran putas y más.	Complete omission	Donde las putas eran putas y los hombres eran mujeres.
03x18	Pop-my ass players.	Despertadores de por el culo.	Euphemism /softening Almost literal translation Censorship.	Porculeros.
03x18	Long Day’s Journey up.	Un largo viaje.	Euphemism /softening Almost literal translation Censorship.	Hacer un griego.
03x18	Sister.	Mona.	Euphemism /softening. Censorship.	Hermana. (The protagonist wanted treat a transsexual boy to girl, as a girl as a means of inclusion rather than talking about the appearance).

<i>RuPaul's Drag Race</i> (2009)				
CHAPTER	SAMPLE	TRANSLATION	TECHNIQUE	SUGGESTED TRANSLATION
07x03	Hootchie	Promiscua	Euphemism / softening.	Chocho.
09x08	Bitch	Pava		Putas/ Zorrón.
09x11	Fuck you up	Dar por saco	Censorship	Que te jodan.
<i>Queer as folk</i> (2000)				
CHAPTER	SAMPLE	TRANSLATION	TECHNIQUE	SUGGESTED TRANSLATION
4x06	If I wasn't already a <u>dyke</u> , he'd have sent e diving for the nearest muff	Si no estuviera <u>casada</u> , me habría liado con la primera mujer que pasara	Complete omission/ change of meaning.	Si no fuera bollera ya, me habría liado con la primera mujer que pasara
<i>Pose</i> (2018)				
CHAPTER	SAMPLE	TRANSLATION	TECHNIQUE	SUGGESTED TRANSLATION
01x01	Then get your broke ass up off this curb	No te quedas plantada en la acera	Softening. Censorship.	Levanta ese culo pelado de ese bordillo.
	We are fussing like this	Estamos montando esto	Euphemism. Softening. Censorship.	Estamos montando este jaleo.

Table 3: Possible cases of censorship samples of the series analysed in this work.

c. Has it been exaggerated? Can this lead to a perpetuation of a stereotype that negatively affects the gay community?

There are cases of exaggeration in *Queer as Folk* as Martinez Pleguezuelos (2018) illustrated and also in *Pose* (2018) as we see in Table 4. This is absolutely important as it can perpetuate a negative stereotype gay community is trying to avoid.

CHAPTER	SAMPLE	TRANSLATION
01X20 in <i>Queer as Folk</i> .	If he is so sick, what is he doing in the men's room?	¿Qué hace <u>merodeando</u> en el servicio de caballeros?
01X01 in <i>Pose</i> .	Let us have it	Venga, <u>muñeca</u> , dánselo todo

Table 4: Possible cases of exaggeration samples of the series analysed in this work.

5. COMPARING TO STRAIGHT SLANG: THE CASE OF AUSTIN POWERS' TRILOGY (1997-2002)

In order to compare the treatment of gay jargon with that of homosexual's, we analysed the films which contained the best samples of straight slang in the scripts. We undoubtedly chose Austin Powers' trilogy (1997-2002) where we can see the great labour of the translator. In Table 5, we find just a few of the vast number of samples we can find in the films of the famous international spy:

Austin Powers' Quotes.	
LANGUAGE SAMPLE	TRANSLATION
Make you Randy.	Te pongo cachonda.
You might be a cunning linguist but I am a master debate.	Te manejas bien con la lengua y eso me mola.
Why don't we go in the back and shag?	Por qué no lo celebramos con un casquete.
Wedding tackle	Caña de pescar (Referring to male genitalia)
I never forget a pussy... cat.	Nunca olvido un conejo... ¡un gato!
Fast bastard.	Gordo cabrón
We are sexy bitches.	Somos los putos amos.

Table 5: Straight slang samples from Austin Powers' trilogy, 1997-2002.

We could see that heterosexual jargon does not suffer much censorship although being a trilogy from 1997-2002. When comparing to *Sex and the city* (1998), we realised that there was a larger quantity of heterosexual slang rather than gay, maybe due to the reduced number of homosexual characters. This scenario changes with the arrival of series as *Queer as Folk* (2000) where we see more gay characters and, as a result, more samples of gay slang. In that same space and time, gay language suffered more censorship than heterosexual slang. We do not want to justify that this due to homophobic reasons but rather a matter of style. We do not even believe that it is a matter of audience, since both audio-visual products are focused on a not exactly young audience. Nevertheless, this situation has changed currently. In *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2018) we discovered hundreds of samples from gay slang and only three were close to censorship.

6. CONCLUSIONS

First, we observed that gay slang has its origins in the Polari and evolved to what we know as gay slang thanks to the growing number of gay characters in the series from the 90s up until now. Then, due to this presence in the audiovisual world, we saw it suffered from what can be considered censorship and even from an exaggerated translation, which contributes to the already bad reputation the language of the queers. Paradoxically, it suffered more cases of censorship than heterosexual jargon some years ago, compared to when considering samples from Austin Powers' trilogy. Fortunately, it has changed nowadays, as attested in modern series. Although this jargon finds a better translation today, there are still cases in which translators find handicaps when they are dealing with this linguistic variation. With all this, we are strongly convinced it deserves the recognition in the academic world because of its high content of idioms, expressions and dictionaries including a great amount of neologisms.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my tutor in the undergraduate dissertation, Ana Ibáñez, who encouraged me to continue investigating. I cannot forget my teachers Noa Talaván and Jose Javier Ávila-Cabrera who never hesitated to help students during the university years. Special mention to Antonio Jesús Martínez Pleguezuelos for being truly inspiring and for his great contribution to the academic world. And finally, my words are for the LGBTQ community, to keep on rocking.

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