

Article

The Subtitling of Swearing: A Pilot Reception Study

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Abstract: Reception studies in audiovisual translation seek to explore how translation choices affect the audience's comprehension, emotional engagement, enjoyment, and overall viewing experience of audiovisual materials. This study focuses on the subtitling product and analyzes the acceptability of swear words translated through different stimuli: subtitles with softened, maintained, and intensified swearing, along with standard Netflix subtitles (control). Employing a multi-method approach, the study collected data through a survey, using questionnaires with a Likert scale and interviews, following the user-centered translation model to understand how participants receive and perceive swear words in subtitling. The results indicate that the control group had the highest acceptability of the participants, while the group with softened swear words presented the lowest acceptability rate. The analysis shows that participants across all groups reported that discomfort does not arise from reading the swear word in the subtitle but from perceiving a deliberate change in its offensive load—usually softened. The findings demonstrate that this change can lead to a breach of the contract of illusion in subtitling, as participants are exposed to the original dialogue and the translated subtitle simultaneously. In conclusion, when perceived, the change in the offensive load can redirect the viewer's focus from the video to the subtitles, negatively affecting the enjoyment of the audiovisual experience.

Keywords: audiovisual translation; taboo language; offensive language; audience reception; Netflix



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“There is no such thing as an absolute taboo that holds for all worlds, times, and contexts”.
(Allan and Burridge 2006).

1. Introduction

Audiovisual translation (AVT) is a growing field of research and practice in translation studies, which plays a crucial role in making audiovisual content accessible and comprehensible to diverse audiences around the globe (Baños Piñero and Díaz-Cintas 2015). Among other modes of media accessibility, from the subtitling of films and series (Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2020) to dubbing (Chaume 2012), voice-over (Franco et al. 2010), and audio description (Taylor and Perego 2022), AVT encompasses a wide range of techniques and strategies to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps.

This pilot study focuses on the reception of swearing in interlingual subtitling. Regarding subtitling, Orrego-Carmona (2013, 2023) explains that it is a mode of AVT that adds a graphic textual code to the audiovisual material, and interlingual subtitling is usually, but not always, the translation of an oral source language into a written target language. This written text, called subtitle, must not contradict what the characters do on-screen, as the translated message must coincide with the visual content¹ (Gottlieb 1994; Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2020). As a consequence, the subtitling process faces constraints due to the necessity of synchronizing the written target text with visual images, audio soundtrack, and reading speed (De Linde and Kay 1999). This often leads to a reduction in subtitle text through condensation or omission (Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007, 2020). It is commonly assumed that fewer characters in a subtitle enhance readability for the viewer (Chaume 2004), thereby contributing to a more enjoyable cinematic experience.

Within the scope of AVT, the process of translating content from one language and culture to another goes beyond linguistic communication. It involves specific constraints due to film language, which comprises a series of signifying codes that complement linguistic meaning (Chaume 2004). These constraints can be glimpsed according to what Díaz-Cintas (2012) explains about technical manipulation and ideological manipulation. The first concerns the necessary changes in AVT due to technical constraints, such as condensing dialogue to fit in the subtitle; in turn, the second involves censorship, omissions, and neutralizations that cannot be justified by the technical requirements of AVT but are often used as a reason to soften or to delete sensitive elements present in the original dialogue, such as swear words and sexual references (Díaz-Cintas 2012).

In this sense, reception studies emerge as an essential research field seeking to unravel the complexities of how these choices influence the audience's comprehension, emotional engagement, enjoyment, and overall viewing experience (Di Giovanni and Gambier 2018). Reception studies in AVT stand at the forefront of understanding how audiences engage with and interpret audiovisual content in its various translated forms (Gambier 2018; Di Giovanni 2020). This field acknowledges that the impact and effectiveness of audiovisual translation extend beyond the technical aspects of language transfer, delving into the intricate dynamics of how viewers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds receive, perceive, and interact with audiovisual translations (Di Giovanni and Gambier 2018).

Bearing all this in mind, this paper aims to investigate the acceptability of swear words translated in subtitles with different levels of offensiveness. In the context of cultural elements in subtitling, linguistic taboos and swear words are often not translated because they are not essential or necessary for understanding a dialogue (Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007). Besides omission, softening is another translation strategy commonly used when it comes to swear words in subtitling (Chaume 2004; Trupej 2019; Moura 2022; Ávila-Cabrera 2023). Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2007, p. 195) explain that "taboo words, swear words and expletive interjections are often toned down in subtitles or even deleted if space is limited". The assumption is that swear words are considered "disposable" in subtitles, and historically, there has been a stigma that reading swear words, taboo words, and offensive words is much more impactful than hearing them (Reid 1978; Arango 1991; Luyken et al. 1991; Díaz-Cintas 2001; Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007; Ávila-Cabrera 2015b; Briechle and Eppler 2019).

In this regard, Díaz-Cintas (2020) states that the fact that swear words and linguistic taboos are considered a form of emotionally charged language makes them sensitive to changes from oral to written form, and therefore they are usually eliminated from subtitling. However, softening, neutralizing, and omission are not always the most appropriate strategies for subtitling taboo words due to the strength of the scene, the dialogue being translated, and the role that this kind of language plays in the characterization and interaction between some characters, and their sexualities (Díaz-Cintas 2001; Scandura 2004; Hjort 2009; Filmer 2014; Ávila-Cabrera 2015a; Villanueva-Jordán 2024; Xavier 2024).

In this context, some descriptive studies have analyzed how swear words, taboo words, and offensive language are rendered in subtitling. Using a corpus composed of three films directed by Quentin Tarantino, Ávila-Cabrera (2015a) analyzed the subtitling of offensive and taboo language from English to European Spanish. The descriptive analysis showed that the offensive and taboo load was maintained in 61.2% of cases in the first film, in 58.1% of cases in the second film, and in 89% of cases in the third film. Regarding the non-translation of offensive and taboo language, the author found that in the first film, 8.7% of cases could be justified through technical constraints, compared to 21.3% in the second film and 3.9% in the third film. Ávila-Cabrera (2015a) further identified that 30.1% of offensive and taboo terms not rendered in the first film, 20.6% in the second film, and 7.1% in the third film could not be justified based on technical restrictions. Based on these data, the results showed a significant difference in the way this kind of language was translated over time, considering the decrease in the loss of offensive and taboo load in the

Spanish subtitling of the first two films from the early 1990s, compared to the third film analyzed, which dated from 2009.

In turn, [Trupej \(2019\)](#) explored the translation of offensive language in 50 films of different genres subtitled from English to Slovenian. The results indicated a tendency to avoid translating this kind of language since 46.8% of all offensive language terms and expressions contained in the dialogues were not maintained in the Slovenian subtitles. Of this total, the non-translation of only 17.5% of the corpus could be justified for technical reasons. Trupej believes that the remaining 82.5% were not translated due to censorship or self-censorship by those involved in the films' subtitling and distribution process.

Similarly, [Moura \(2022\)](#) investigated the AVT of somatic taboo words—taboo words and expressions related to parts of the body—from European Spanish to Brazilian Portuguese in a film directed by Pedro Almodóvar. The analysis revealed that among the 24 somatic taboos present in the Spanish film, 50% were softened in the DVD subtitles, 29% were maintained, 17% were omitted, and 4% were neutralized. In contrast, in the DVD dubbing, 29% of somatic taboos were softened, 46% were maintained, 13% were omitted, and 12% were neutralized. Moura's case study results appear to affirm the belief that reading a swear word is more shocking than hearing it.

[Chen \(2022\)](#) examined subtitling strategies and techniques used for translating taboo language in non-professional subtitling settings and how viewers react to the renderings. The study was based on a parallel corpus consisting of taboo language and its translations, from English to Chinese, from 18 of the most viewed and commented-upon subtitled videos on the platform Bilibili.com. In addition to the parallel corpus, the author also collected *danmu* comments and general comments related to the translations of the taboo language for data triangulation. The results showed that the taboo load was reduced in more than 67% of cases, and 17.2% of taboo language was unexpectedly added to the target text, intensifying the effects of the taboo language. Regarding the general and *danmu* comments, [Chen \(2022\)](#) noted that when a subtitler makes a mistake, some viewers identify the subtitler's mistakes through the comments. Given this, the Bilibili.com platform provides a collaborative environment that allows the identification and correction of possible translation problems, which could be demonstrated in some comments that provided more creative and less conservative versions of the taboo language without criticizing the quality of the video translation.

In addition to descriptive studies, in this pilot study, it is important to understand the viewers' perspectives on how swear words are translated in interlingual subtitles. In this sense, few scholars have been exploring audience reception and the audiovisual translator's perception of swearing and their translations². For example, [Scandura \(2004\)](#) carried out a study in Argentina, investigating viewers' preferences for dubbing or subtitling and exploring audience perceptions regarding the softening of taboo words and swear words in audiovisual translation. The qualitative findings from this empirical study revealed that the primary reasons for such linguistic adjustments included targeting a child audience, showing respect to viewers, and adhering to relevant legislation on the matter. Additionally, some participants expressed the belief that Latin Americans hold puritanical views, while others, without specific knowledge of the reasons, felt that softening was unnecessary and altered the essence of the audiovisual material.

In Finland, the research performed by [Hjort \(2009\)](#) with translators and viewers revealed that translators tend to follow instructions from contracting companies. These instructions often emphasize that swear word translations should be softer or advocate that subtitles should have fewer swear words. On the one hand, translators reported that the rationale presented for this decision by the company is based on the assumption that written swear words are stronger than spoken ones. On the other hand, the reception survey indicated that the viewers were dissatisfied with the softening of swear words in Finnish subtitling. A significant 66% of participants expressed the opinion that translated swear words should retain the same intensity as those in the source language. In contrast,

23% agreed to the softening of swear words in subtitling, while a mere 2% suggested that swear words should be intensified.

Corroborating the results of Hjort's research, [Briechele and Eppler \(2019\)](#) conducted a reception study in Germany on the strength of written and spoken swear words. They examined how participants rated the perceived force of swear words in both dubbed and subtitled versions of the same audiovisual material. The data analysis revealed that participants did not perceive swear words as stronger in subtitles compared to dubbing, thus not supporting the assumption that reading swear words is much more impactful than hearing them. According to the authors, their research findings suggest that pre-established conventions regarding the omission and softening of swear words should be reconsidered and removed from both subtitling guidelines and textbooks.

The findings of the few reception studies on the topic have shown that the audience's opinions and perceptions differ from the descriptive studies presented in this section. Viewers are more tolerant of swearing than has traditionally been stipulated by AVT guidelines and company instructions. That is why further empirical reception studies are necessary to investigate audience acceptability regarding swearing in subtitling. These empirical studies can serve to test how these findings can be applied to the AVT in today's technological society, specifically in the context of subtitling for streaming platforms ([Campos and Azevedo 2020](#)) and cloud-based subtitling systems ([Bolaños-García-Escribano and Díaz-Cintas 2020](#)) across various languages and cultures around the globe. In this sense, this paper aims to investigate whether the viewers' acceptability of swear words in interlingual subtitles may vary according to different offensive loads (see Section 2.3). To this end, I present the results of a pilot study conducted to test a reception study that forms part of my Ph.D. research project in Translation Studies in Brazil.

2. Methodology

This is an empirical-experimental pilot study focused on the product of subtitling, more specifically on the analysis of the acceptability of swearing in interlingual subtitles translated from English (EN) into Brazilian Portuguese (PT-BR). To investigate the reception of AVT, it is necessary to explore how audience reception occurs during authentic viewing experiences, with viewers consuming translated audiovisual materials ([Tuominen 2018](#)). [Orrego-Carmona \(2019\)](#) and [Di Giovanni \(2020\)](#) suggest the use of mixed methods in research focusing on the reception of AVT from an empirical perspective. In this regard, this pilot study adopted a multi-method approach ([Tuominen 2018](#)) based on the user-centered translation model ([Suojanen et al. 2015](#)).

In translation studies, methods such as questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups are used to examine audience attitudes and preferences in empirical research with a focus on user experience ([Suojanen et al. 2015](#)). In turn, multi-method research in reception studies combines several methods to offer a more comprehensive perspective on acceptability ([Tuominen 2018](#)). In this study, a survey was utilized to gather data to analyze the acceptability and reception of swearing in interlingual subtitling. The survey included a questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale and a semi-structured interview.

2.1. Swearing and Swear Words

According to [Tuominen \(2018\)](#), AVT can rely on many strategies to deliver humorous or culturally specific content, which can be received by viewers in different ways. Based on this principle, I argue that the translation of swearing can be situated within the scope of culturally specific items. As outlined in Section 1, swearing remains a controversial topic in subtitling, with divergent perspectives concerning audience reception, company guidelines, and censorship. For that reason, it deserves special attention in reception studies.

Among the studies within the scope of linguistic taboos, I chose the terms *swearing* ([Beers Fägersten 2012](#); [Mohr 2013](#); [Stapleton et al. 2022](#)) and *swear words* ([Arango 1991](#); [Dewaele 2004](#); [Güvendir 2015](#); [Lu 2024](#)) to use in this pilot study. Like [Hjort \(2017, p. 164\)](#), I assume that "swear word and swearing are typically defined along the same lines". Accord-

ing to Stapleton et al. (2022) and Beers Fägersten et al. (2024), swearing involves the use of particular, negatively charged, and often emotionally loaded terms that are considered taboo in a specific language or culture. Swearing is typically confined to colloquial styles (Allan 2023), and swear words have the potential to be offensive, inappropriate, or unacceptable (Beers Fägersten 2012) for individuals in a given communicative situation—such as a conversation, reading a book, or watching a film— (Valdeón 2020), as it may violate standards of good taste and manners (Allan 2023).

With this in mind, I consider that *swearing* and *swear words* encompass other terms within the semantic field of taboo, such as “expletive” (De Klerk 1991; Wajnryb 2005), “linguistic taboo” (Guérios 1979; Calvo Shadid 2011; Pizarro Pedraza 2018; Moura 2020), “offensive language” (Trupej 2019; Ávila-Cabrera 2023), “taboo language” (Allan and Burridge 2006; Ávila-Cabrera 2015a; Khoshsaligheh et al. 2018; Alsharhan 2020; Pizarro Pedraza et al. 2024), “taboo word” (De Klerk 1992; Dewaele 2004; Jay 2009; Burridge 2014), among others. Despite their specific meanings in analytical contexts, these terms share features that have allowed me to categorize them under the headings *swearing* and *swear words*: the acceptability of these words may vary depending on factors such as the viewer’s culture, gender, age, social class, and swearing habits.

2.2. Material

The object of study in this research was a cold open from an episode of the Netflix original series *F is for Family*. The animated series, created by Bill Burr and Michael Price, is not rated for children under 16 years old in Brazil. *F is for Family* had five seasons, premiering in 2015 and concluding with the season finale in 2021. The rationale for selecting this material was as follows: i. it should have a high incidence of swearing in the original audio; ii. it should last between two and six minutes; iii. it should present narrativity; and iv. it should be available for download on the internet with the original audio and without subtitles.

Considering these criteria, it appeared suitable to explore a cold open (Borowiecki 2021; Pollick 2021), as it is a short audiovisual genre with narrativity—an essential element for shaping the audience’s comprehension of the audiovisual text (Vandaele 2019). A cold open, or teaser sequence, is a brief introductory scene preceding the opening credits of TV series episodes. Integral to the opening sequence, it recaps past events or prepares viewers for the current episode (Borowiecki 2021; Pollick 2021). The cold open used in this study serves as an introduction to the ongoing episode. In an effort to keep the survey short³, the video spans a duration of 3 min and 51 s. Regarding the incidence of swearing in the video, it is observed that there is a regularity and that they are distributed throughout the scene.

2.3. Experimental Design

The *F is for Family* cold open was used in both the control and experimental groups. The subtitled video available on Netflix served as the control group⁴. The video, available without subtitles on the internet, was downloaded and subtitled according to the three different conditions, forming the experimental groups. The manipulation of the experimental groups was based on the descriptive proposals of Ávila-Cabrera (2015b) and Valdeón (2020) regarding the AVT of taboo language and swearing.

The three conditions included in the experiment were as follows: i. softening swearing in the PT-BR subtitles; ii. maintaining swearing in the PT-BR subtitles as closely as possible to that presented in the EN dialogues; and iii. intensifying swearing in the PT-BR subtitles. These manipulations allowed for analyzing audience reception through different stimuli: translated subtitles with softened, maintained, and intensified swearing, along with standard Netflix subtitles. Thus, the groups were labeled as follows: G1 (softening); G2 (maintaining); G3 (intensifying); and G4 (Netflix). Some examples of the swear words manipulated in the subtitles are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of swear words manipulated in subtitling.

English	Softening	Maintaining	Intensifying	Netflix
-Fuck you!	-Vai se ferrar!	-Vai se foder!	-Vai tomar no cu!	-Vai se foder!
-Fuck you!	-Vai se ferrar!	-Vai se foder!	-Vai tomar no cu!	-Vai se foder!
-I don't give a shit!	-Não dou a mínima!	-Grande bosta!	-Estou pouco me fodendo!	-Não estou nem aí!

The subtitling process for the experimental groups began with the manual transcription of the intralingual subtitles (EN) available on Netflix. Next, the same procedure was carried out to transcribe the interlingual subtitles (PT-BR) provided by the streaming platform. Only the swearing present in the English subtitles were manipulated. The subtitles without swearing were not altered; in these cases, the interlingual translation provided by Netflix was used. The experimental videos were subtitled using the software Subtitle Edit (version 3.6.2). The subtitles were burned into the videos using the software HandBrake (version 1.3.3).

2.4. Data Collection

The pilot data collection involved randomizing the control and experimental groups based on the variable *gender of the participant*, which was divided into two categories: *men* and *women*⁵. Participants were randomized by using the “Custom Sort” feature within a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Initially, the recruited participants signed an informed consent statement to participate in the research. Then, they filled out a questionnaire with multiple questions to provide their profile. The survey contained questions about age, gender, education, and English proficiency, as well as questions regarding the use and reception of swear words and other taboo words in both everyday life and films and TV series. The questionnaire directed the participants to watch the randomly assigned video. After watching the video, participants filled out a brief questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale to express their comprehension of the scene, their subtitling perception of swearing, and their discomfort with swear words in the EN audio and in the PT-BR subtitles. Finally, a brief interview was audio-recorded to question the participants about the answers they had provided on the Likert scale and their perception of the subtitling of swearing based on the content they usually consume. Subsequently, this interview was transcribed and relevant information was used for the data analysis.

2.5. Participants

This pilot study involved a sample composed of 16 participants, evenly divided between eight men and eight women. After data collection, the participants' names were anonymized by replacing them with labels according to the following standard: *PP* for the *Pilot Participant*; *G1*, *G2*, *G3*, and *G4* for the respective groups; *M* and *W* for gender; and the final number indicating the participant's sequence within each group. For instance, *PPG1M01* denotes the first man participant in Group 1's pilot, while *PPG3W02* represents the second woman participant in Group 3's pilot.

Regarding the swearing habits of the sample, just over half of the participants ($n = 9$) reported that they use swear words *reasonably* in their daily lives. In turn, some participants ($n = 5$) said they made *very little* use of this kind of language, compared to a small fraction ($n = 2$) who reported *frequently* using swear words (Figure 1). These data provide insights into the diverse usage patterns of swearing among the participants, shedding light on the variability in their language choices.

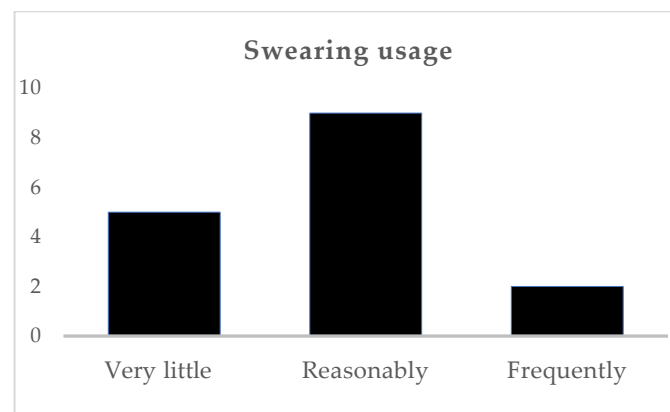


Figure 1. Swearing usage in daily life.

Participants were also asked about their feelings when watching a film or TV series with a lot of swearing. Half of the sample ($n = 8$) indicated that they did *not feel discomfort*. In turn, another portion of participants ($n = 6$) said they felt *slightly uncomfortable* when watching this type of content, while a small number of participants ($n = 2$) reported feeling *reasonably uncomfortable* (Figure 2). In summary, participants exhibit varying degrees of discomfort when exposed to swearing in films or TV series. A significant portion does not feel discomfort, another group feels slight discomfort, and a smaller percentage feels reasonably uncomfortable.

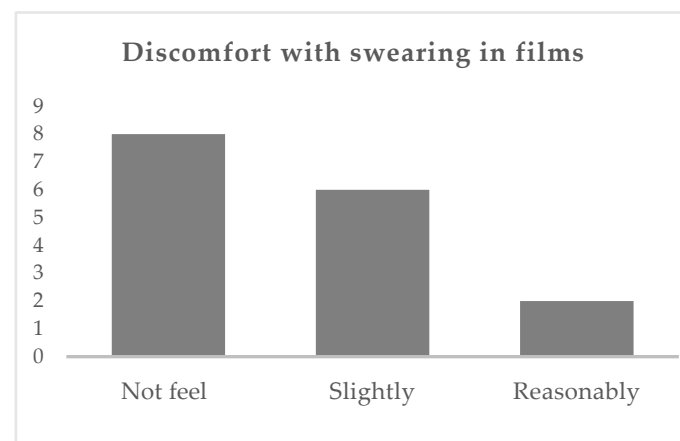


Figure 2. Discomfort watching films and series with a lot of swearing.

3. Results

In this section, I present the findings based on the data collected from participants' responses to two statements in the questionnaire, rated on a 5-point Likert scale: i. the swear words in the subtitles are appropriate to the context of the scene; ii. reading the swear words in the subtitles made me uncomfortable. The points on the Likert scale corresponded to (1) "Strongly Disagree", (2) "Disagree", (3) "Neutral", (4) "Agree", and (5) "Strongly Agree".

3.1. Appropriateness of Swear Words in Subtitles

Regarding participants' perception of the appropriateness of swearing in PT-BR subtitles, the pilot study findings seem to indicate greater acceptability for subtitles in the control group, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The swear words in the subtitles are appropriate to the context of the scene.

Group	Pilot Participant	Appropriateness of Swearing in Subtitling
G1	PPG1M01	Neutral
G1	PPG1M02	Neutral
G1	PPG1W01	Agree
G1	PPG1W02	Neutral
G2	PPG2M01	Strongly Agree
G2	PPG2M02	Agree
G2	PPG2W01	Strongly Agree
G2	PPG2W02	Strongly Agree
G3	PPG3M01	Strongly Disagree
G3	PPG3M02	Agree
G3	PPG3W01	Agree
G3	PPG3W02	Agree
G4	PPG4M01	Strongly Agree
G4	PPG4M02	Strongly Agree
G4	PPG4W01	Strongly Agree
G4	PPG4W02	Strongly Agree

Specifically, all the participants of G4 ($n = 4$) strongly agreed (5) on the Likert scale with the adequacy of the subtitled swear words to the context of the scene. G2 (maintaining) was the next group with the highest acceptability of swearing in subtitles: the majority of participants in this group ($n = 3$) strongly agreed (5) that swear words were appropriate in subtitles, while the remainder ($n = 1$) just agreed (4) with their appropriateness to the scene. Acceptability continues with G3, where the majority of participants ($n = 3$) agreed (4) with the appropriateness of the intensified swear words in subtitling, while the remainder ($n = 1$) strongly disagreed (1). The group with the lowest acceptability was G1 (softening), in which the majority of participants ($n = 3$) were neutral (3) regarding the adequacy of swearing in the subtitles, and the remaining portion ($n = 1$) agreed (4) that the subtitled swear words were appropriate to the context of the scene.

These results show varying levels of acceptability among participants regarding swearing in PT-BR subtitles. The subtitles provided by Netflix showed a unanimous agreement on the appropriateness of swearing in the scene. In general, the maintaining group and the intensifying group demonstrated good acceptability of the subtitles. In contrast, the subtitles with softening swearing exhibited the lowest acceptability rate in the sample. It is important to mention that, despite Netflix's no-censorship policy on swearing in subtitling (Netflix 2024), the subtitles used in the control group involve a combination of maintaining, softening, and intensifying the offensive load of swear words.

3.2. Discomfort with Swear Words in Subtitles

The discomfort associated with reading swear words in PT-BR subtitles yields similar results to those presented in Section 3.1, as can be seen in Table 3.

The results indicate less discomfort when reading swear words for G4 participants (control), as the majority ($n = 3$) strongly disagreed (1) with the statement, while the remainder ($n = 1$) remained neutral (3). Next comes G3 (intensifying), where the majority of participants ($n = 3$) disagreed (2) that reading the swear words in the subtitles made them uncomfortable, and the remainder ($n = 1$) strongly disagreed (1). Half of the G2 participants ($n = 2$) classified their discomfort with reading swear words in the PT-BR as neutral (3), while the other half strongly disagreed (1). In turn, the findings presented in G1 are somewhat different: one participant strongly disagreed (1) that reading the swear words made him uncomfortable; another participant disagreed (2) with the statement; an additional participant remained neutral (3) regarding discomfort when reading swearing; and the remaining participant agreed (4) that she felt uncomfortable reading the swear words in the subtitles. It is important to emphasize that none of the participants ($n = 0$) strongly agreed (5) that reading the swear words in the subtitles made them uncomfortable.

Table 3. Reading the swear words in the subtitles made me uncomfortable.

Group	Pilot Participant	Discomfort with Reading Swearing in Subtitling
G1	PPG1M01	Neutral
G1	PPG1M02	Strongly Disagree
G1	PPG1W01	Agree
G1	PPG1W02	Disagree
G2	PPG2M01	Neutral
G2	PPG2M02	Neutral
G2	PPG2W01	Strongly Disagree
G2	PPG2W02	Strongly Disagree
G3	PPG3M01	Disagree
G3	PPG3M02	Disagree
G3	PPG3W01	Disagree
G3	PPG3W02	Strongly Disagree
G4	PPG4M01	Strongly Disagree
G4	PPG4M02	Strongly Disagree
G4	PPG4W01	Neutral
G4	PPG4W02	Strongly Disagree

These findings indicate that the participants' discomfort with reading swear words in subtitles can also vary depending on the offensive load used in the subtitling of swearing. The control group and the intensifying group demonstrated lower levels of discomfort, while the maintaining group showed mixed responses. In a particular way, the softening group displayed diverse reactions.

4. Discussion

The discussion is grounded in empirical data collected through the questionnaire and interviews with participants. Throughout the analysis, I used italics for interview responses. Furthermore, I have included relevant studies conducted within the realm of swearing, swear words, and/or AVT in this section.

4.1. Acceptability of Softened Swear Words in Subtitling

The data presented by G1 participants indicate the lowest acceptability rate in this pilot study, as three out of the four participants evaluated the subtitled swear words as "neutral" in terms of appropriateness to the scene (see Table 2). In turn, responses from the interviews with G1 participants reveal a negative perception regarding the offensive load of the softened swear words in the subtitles of the experimental video. This result aligns with the findings of Hjort (2009), where Finnish viewers said they felt dissatisfied with the softening of swear words in subtitles. In this context, G1 participants cited examples of poorly translated swearing and expressed dissatisfaction with the omission and softening of swear words in the subtitles.

PPG1W02 expressed discomfort with the softened translation and omissions of the word *fuck* in the video, stating, *"It bothered me a little when the word fuck appeared in the dialogue and was softened or deleted from the subtitle. Even what I would not even consider a swear word has been softened; for example, foda-se essa merda [fuck this shit] has been translated as dane-se essa merda [screw this shit]. This changes everything!"*. These results are similar to what Hjort (2017) found regarding TV audiences being rather critical of the use of milder language or the omission of swear words in subtitles. According to the author, such solutions might pose a risk in terms of audience satisfaction.

Shared a similar point of view, PPG1M01 declared: *"In the video I watched, there were many omissions. Many swear words were omitted, and there was a lot of softening, like a much stronger insult that became babaca [jerk]. And these are words that we don't even use in Portuguese to aggressively offend someone. It's far from reality"*. As outlined in Section 1, the omission is a necessary strategy in subtitling to condense the written text (Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007, 2020). However, it is possible to analyze the statements of PPG1W02 and PPG1M01 based

on what [Díaz-Cintas \(2012\)](#) discusses about ideological manipulation in AVT, that is, when technical restrictions, such as omissions, are used as a reason to delete or soften sensitive content like swearing. The responses from participants in G1 suggest that the audience's reception does not agree with the ideological manipulation in subtitling. Furthermore, as expressed by PPG1M01, depending on the choice of words, the subtitles may be far from reality.

Regarding the appropriateness of translated swear words for the context of the scene, PPG1M01 supports subtitling swear words based on the rating system of the target audience intended to be reached. This viewpoint aligns with the findings of [Scandura \(2004\)](#), where participants also believed that the softening of swear words was performed to target a child audience.

“Films and series use rating systems that should be clearly communicated to viewers, indicating the target audience. Therefore, if there are swear words, such as fuck, [...] they should be translated in accordance with the age rating system. I support softening if the intention is to reach a younger audience, but I oppose such softening—commonly seen in series—if the age range is clear. [...] In the video, I felt uncomfortable because fuck you is not the same as dane-se [screw it]. That is my point: if there is already a defined age range for the series, the translation should be foda-se [fuck it]. [...] So, I was indeed uncomfortable, but it was due to the softening” (PPG1M01).

In this case, PPG1M01 expresses that their discomfort is linked to the non-adequacy of the subtitling of swearing with the age rating system for the series target audience, considering that *F is for Family* is an adult animated series (see Section 2.2). This helps to explain the varied results regarding discomfort with reading swear words in G1 subtitles, which may be related to the swearing habits of this cohort.

PPG1M02 indicated frequent usage of swearing in his daily life (Figure 1) and expressed no discomfort when watching films and series with a lot of swear words (Figure 2). While this participant did not feel uncomfortable with reading the swear words in the experimental subtitles (Table 3), he reported in the interview feeling uncomfortable with the use of euphemisms in the subtitling of taboos related to drugs and addictions.

“It bothered me because I noted a certain softening of the swear words; for example, the subtitles use euphemisms for some elements like drugs. In the dialogue, it was something related to pó [powder], but in the subtitle, it was translated as droga [drug], that is, a euphemism for cocaine” (PPG1M02).

[Allan and Burrige \(2006, p. 32\)](#) define euphemisms as words or phrases used as alternatives to taboo expressions—those that are not usually considered appropriate or desired. Euphemisms “avoid possible loss of face by the speaker or also the hearer or some third party”. In this context, PPG1M02's discomfort contradicts assumptions about using euphemisms to deal with swear words. These data suggest that for this interviewee, in subtitling, the use of swearing is desired and appropriate, as highlighted by PPG1M02, unlike euphemisms, which may alter the offensive load of the swear word in the context of the scene and, therefore, are deemed undesirable. For clarification, I understand that the word *drug* itself is not a euphemism but rather an orthophemism. However, in the context mentioned by the participant, it is considered a euphemism when compared to *cocaine* and the slang *Bolivian Agreement Powder* used for *cocaine* in the scene. This is because the use of the generic word *drug* softens the offensive and taboo load contained in the scene where one character is literally blackmailing the other to do something by offering him cocaine.

In the same direction, PPG1W02, who indicated in the questionnaire that she uses very few swear words in her daily life (Figure 1) and does not feel uncomfortable when watching films and series with a lot of swearing (Figure 2), reported the following:

“It doesn't really bother me to see a swear word in the subtitle or hear a swear word in the film, but I find it a bit odd when there is a difference between the spoken swear word and the translated one. That is, when what is being said is distorted. For example, when a swear word is offensive, and in the translation, it is softened. I think when there is a

softening, it bothers me more because it seems like the offense decreases, and the meaning in the subtitle changes” (PPG1W02).

For PPG1W02, the concern lies in perceiving a discrepancy in the offensive load between spoken swear words and subtitled ones. This may explain why this participant “disagreed” on the Likert scale regarding discomfort in reading swear words in the subtitles (Table 3). This response suggests a potential link between the softening of swear words in subtitles and the breaking of the contract of illusion in subtitling. As Pedersen (2010) posits, the contract of illusion refers to the viewer’s expectation that translated subtitles strictly reproduce the original dialogue, assuming that what is read exactly mirrors the character’s spoken words. Therefore, if reading softened swearing draws the viewer’s attention to the subtitles rather than the film, it disrupts the contract of illusion, hindering the enjoyment of the audiovisual content.

PPG1W01 also reported discomfort with the softening of swear words and emphasized the importance of translating swear words in the same way as other elements in subtitling. This participant was the one who indicated the greatest discomfort with reading the swear words in the G1 subtitles (Table 3) and expressed feeling reasonably uncomfortable when watching films and series with a lot of swearing (Figure 2).

“In general, I’m bothered by swear words; it’s a personal issue. However, in that specific video, it seems to me that they tried to soften the swear words, not putting as much strength on the meaning and transforming it into something lighter. And that bothers me. [...] I think the discomfort lies more in this: while I don’t identify with materials that contain a lot of swearing, I understand that it is important to translate them in the same way as we would translate other issues” (PPG1W01).

In general, based on the analysis of data from G1, it appears that the acceptability of softened swear words in subtitling is lower compared to the other groups studied in this pilot research. In Lu’s (2024) study, it is presented that various elements of cinematic language, beyond verbal cues, play a role in comprehending scenes where swear words are omitted or softened. These elements include body language, tone, and volume of speech, as well as character behavior, among others. For the author, the analysis of the swearing in subtitling should shift its focus away from what is lost in the target text and instead consider the contributions of various elements across different modes and their intermodal relations (Lu 2024). However, in this reception study, the empirical data allow me to state that discomfort with reading subtitles arises when participants realize that the swear word has been softened in the subtitle and its offensive load has significantly distanced itself from the context of the scene and the English dialogue. Consequently, the intensity of the translated swear word strays from the elements of cinematic language, which does not align with Lu’s (2024) analytical proposal. In turn, it can result in a breach of the contract of illusion in subtitling. Therefore, the discomfort does not stem from the strength of the swear words written in the subtitles but from the perception of softening the offensive load.

4.2. Acceptability of Maintained Swear Words in Subtitling

Overall, the acceptability of swear words in G2 subtitles is favorable. Three out of four participants strongly agreed that the swear words were appropriate to the context of the scene, and one participant agreed with this appropriateness (Table 2). In terms of discomfort with reading the swear words in the subtitles, both men indicated neutrality, while both women reported no discomfort (see Table 3).

The reasons for the discomfort were discussed during the interview. PPG2M01 mentioned feeling a bit uncomfortable reading the word *xoxota* [pussy] in the subtitle:

“Two swear words made me a little uncomfortable because I found them very different. One is when the character says xoxota [pussy], and the other I don’t remember now, but I thought: ‘Guys! Anyone uses this?!’. I was very shocked by this subtitle. Not really shocked, but I thought ‘Wow! It is not something we usually see’. [...] We don’t say that word all the time; [...] they could have said, for example, buceta [cunt]. We use this

swear word all the time. Xoxota [pussy] seems to even set a humorous tone, and that makes sense for the series” (PPG2M01).

The discomfort reported by the participant is noted to stem not from the offensive load of the swear word but rather from the unfamiliarity with the term. PPG2M01’s response is similar to PPG1M01’s response (see Section 4.1) concerning the usage of certain swear words that are not part of their daily vernacular, deviating from the reality of PT-BR. In this sense, PPG2M01 expresses a preference for reading swear words considered more vulgar and offensive, such as *buceta [cunt]*, as he understands that this swearing is much more used in PT-BR than *xoxota [pussy]*. As in the study by [Chen \(2022\)](#), some translations and comments analyzed provided more creative and less conservative versions of the taboo language without criticizing the quality of the video translation.

The appropriateness of the swear words with maintained offensive loads used in G2’s subtitles became evident in the responses of some participants. This adequacy is discernible in terms of satisfaction with the subtitles, the literalness of translation, and good translation, as articulated in the assessment provided by PPG2M02:

“Overall, the subtitles were highly consistent and explanatory. I believe the subtitles effectively translated the metaphors from English to Portuguese, because transferring this issue from one language to another is always challenging. In certain instances a more literal approach is necessary due to the specificity of the source language. So, I think the strategies used by the subtitler were very successful, and the subtitles were very good” (PPG2M02).

Confirming this perception, PPG2W01 expresses: *“I wasn’t bothered by the swear words in the subtitles, because that is what the video presented”*. She acknowledges the necessity of translating swear words but notes that, in Brazilian subtitling overall, there are frequent softening, neutralization, and omission practices.

“I believe swear words should be translated because that is what the video, film, or series is presenting to us. I’ve noticed that it is a common practice in Brazilian subtitling to frequently soften, omit, or replace swearing with alternatives that are not considered offensive. Therefore, I think these expressions should be rendered” (PPG2W01).

It is noteworthy that PPG2W01 disagrees with the censorship of swearing in subtitling, expressing a stance against the ideological manipulation of this type of language ([Díaz-Cintas 2012](#)). PPG2W01’s perception that Brazilian subtitling tends to soften and omit swear words aligns with the findings of [Moura’s \(2022\)](#) descriptive study, where the offensive nature of a specific type of taboo word was toned down in Brazilian subtitling. In this regard, PPG2W02 also advocates for a translation closer to the original language:

“I strongly support a translation that remains as faithful as possible to the original language. I believe the goal should be to strive, whenever feasible, for the closest linguistic match in the translated text. Reading swear words doesn’t make me uncomfortable; what does bother me is when they are, in some way, altered. This alteration changes the meaning of the translation and the visual text. As I understand English, if I see a translated swear word that does not correspond to what is being said, it makes me uncomfortable. It feels like an attempt to control the meaning of the original content” (PPG2W02).

Much like the sentiments expressed by G1 participants (see Section 4.1), PPG2W02 also brings up in her response the discomfort she feels when she realizes the softening of the offensive load of a swear word in comparison to the source text in English. She perceives this alteration in offensive load as a form of censorship, characterizing it as a form to control the meaning of what is being said. This perspective aligns with the results from [Trupej’s \(2019\)](#) research, where it was suggested that 82.5% of offensive language in the analyzed corpus was not translated due to censorship or self-censorship by those involved in the film’s subtitling and distribution process.

The discussion of the G2 results suggests that participants were not disturbed by the swear words in the subtitles due to the maintenance of the offensive load—the manipula-

tion implemented for this group. Similar to G1, participants reported that discomfort arises when reading swear words less frequently used in PT-BR or when they perceive a deliberate alteration in the offensive load of the swearing in the subtitles. As revealed in the interview responses, participants prefer a more literal translation—understood in this study as maintaining the offensive load between the source language and the target language—especially concerning the intensity of swear words in subtitling. In this context, I observed similarities with the findings of Hjort (2009), where 66% of participants expressed the opinion that translated swear words should preserve the same intensity as those in the source language. This same perception was also evident in the results of Jiang (2023), where participants similarly expected a more authentic translation of swear words in the subtitles that reflected the real use of the language.

This preference for equivalence and literal translation reinforces the findings of the reception study undertaken by Szarkowska et al. (2021). In their research, viewers expressed a preference for subtitles that closely mirrored the original dialogue, even if this resulted in more text on the screen. Furthermore, the study showed that participants with greater proficiency in the source language tended to prefer more literal subtitles. Like the reception study by Szarkowska et al. (2021), the findings of this pilot study also challenge some conventions and research on quality in subtitling. As I explained previously, in general, swear words are often not necessary elements for understanding dialogue and can be omitted from subtitles due to space-time constraints. However, the notion of fidelity and literalness, which has been deconstructed within the scope of translation studies for a long time, remains ingrained in the minds of many viewers, and this can explain a lot about their preferences.

4.3. Acceptability of Intensified Swear Words in Subtitling

The acceptability of G3 appears positive among pilot participants. Three out of four participants agreed that the intensified swear words were appropriate for the scene, while one participant strongly disagreed (Table 2). In terms of discomfort with reading subtitled swear words in the video, three participants expressed disagreement, while one participant strongly disagreed (see Table 3). These findings align with the conclusions drawn by Briechele and Eppler (2019), suggesting that participants did not perceive swear words as stronger in subtitles. Additionally, these results contribute to deconstructing the assumption that reading a swear word is inherently more impactful than hearing it (Reid 1978; Arango 1991; Luyken et al. 1991; Díaz-Cintas 2001; Ávila-Cabrera 2015b).

Participants mentioned that reading the swear words in the subtitles does not bother them. However, similar to the responses from G1 and G2 (see Sections 4.1 and 4.2), discomfort arises when they realize that the offensive load was not translated as they expected.

“The translation of swear words doesn’t bother me so much, but it does bother me a little when they are not rendered correctly, according to what I consider basic. What also bothers me are certain excesses, but that is more related to the actor’s interpretation of the content. For instance, if it involves something excessively violent or vulgar, it bothers me too. However, when it comes to subtitles, I don’t mind” (PPG3M02).

PPG3M02’s remarks highlight the discomfort associated with consuming content featuring aggressive and violent themes, underscoring the perception that swear words constitute emotionally charged language (Díaz-Cintas 2020). Notably, all G3 participants expressed a similar perspective: while swear words in subtitles do not bother them, these participants generally avoid watching films and series with violence or dark humor, such as *South Park*, as mentioned by PPG3W01 and PPG3W02. In essence, participants expect stronger swear words in the subtitles of films and series with these themes:

“I wasn’t bothered because, from the beginning, I grasped the nature of the animated series. Thus, it is evident that this isn’t intended for children. In this video, as well as in another well-known animation, South Park, many swear words are very appropriate. In this

regard, reading the swear words did not bother me. Although it isn't the type of material I like to watch, it didn't bother me because I expected to hear certain swear words in this type of programs" (PPG3W02).

This is also highlighted in PPG3W01's statement, where, despite noticing the increase in the strength of swear words in G3's subtitles, she says that reading stronger swear words does not bother her:

"I wouldn't say I was bothered, but there were instances where they did the opposite of softening it; let's say they 'made the swear word worse'. At one point in the video, someone says shit—merda in Portuguese—and the subtitle translates it as something stronger. It is very rare for us to see this in subtitles. I believe it is more common to see softening rather than intensification. However, it doesn't really bother me. Personally, I'm not a fan of this type of content, like South Park. Not because of the swear words, but due to the content itself, as it sometimes includes prejudice and dark humor" (PPG3W01).

For these participants, the swear words in the subtitles do not bother them; rather, it is the nature of the content, the aggressiveness of the scenes, and the portrayal of more violent characters that do. In essence, to gain a deeper understanding of the AVT process for films and series with taboo themes, it is crucial to consider the reception of the audience consuming this type of content. Swearing, in such contexts, serves specific functions, influenced by the intensity of scenes, dialogues, and the role that this kind of language plays in characterizations and interactions among certain characters and their sexualities (Díaz-Cintas 2001; Scandura 2004; Hjort 2009; Filmer 2014; Ávila-Cabrera 2015a; Villanueva-Jordán 2024; Xavier 2024).

PPG3M01 illustrates this with the description of a passage of the cold open used in the experiment:

"When the character goes to the record store, he blackmails another character by offering cocaine. In other words, taboo topics also find their way into this kind of entertainment, accompanied by massive amounts of swear words. For instance, the characters express anger and start swearing, employing the word fuck for everything. It appears that they endorse this use of language" (PPG3M01).

PPG3M01's opinion is that the excessive use of swear words in the scene's dialogue reinforces social stereotypes. This viewpoint diverges from that reported by participants in Jiang's (2023) study, who suggested that swear words helped them understand characters' emotions and feelings. It is important to note that PPG3M01 was the participant who strongly disagreed that the swear words in the subtitles were appropriate to the context of the scene (Table 2). His responses in the interview provide insights into the reason behind this assessment:

"I was very impressed by the amount of swearing from the beginning of the video to the end. It seemed a little disproportionate to me. I found it very strong and I wonder how much of it is just entertainment. [...] I believe these scenes have a symbolism. For me, they represent some lifestyle. It's a bit of a demarcation, for example, they want to inform: 'we are in this social class, this is our lifestyle'. So, swear words end up having the role of affirming/reaffirming, demarcating this lifestyle, and I think this is very limited. [...] Maybe because I'm a Brazilian from Porto Alegre, it is not my culture that is being represented" (PPG3M01).

It is possible to interpret that PPG3M01's assessment of the appropriateness of swear words in subtitling was based on his consumption of audiovisual products with taboo themes and language. The participant highlights that *"the language is so strong that the scene itself was what impressed me most"*. Once again, we can address the fact that swear words constitute a form of emotionally charged language (Díaz-Cintas 2020), which ultimately influences the reception of a particular audiovisual product. Furthermore, the fact that the participant does not see his culture represented through this language style reinforces the pragmatic perspective of swearing because, as Jay and Janschewitz (2008, p. 267) write,

“the emotional impact of swearing depends on one’s experience with a culture and its language conventions”.

In summary, the analysis of G3 results also deconstructs the paradigm that reading a swear word is more impactful than hearing it. Participants in this group were exposed to swearing translated with an intensified offensive load and reported that reading the swear words themselves did not cause discomfort. The empirical data collected in this group allowed me to observe a direct relationship between the acceptability of subtitling swear words and the audience’s reception of audiovisual materials with violent or taboo content and language. Preferences and consumption habits of this type of product can influence the intensity of subtitling the offensive load of swear words, as consumers of violent or dark humor products expect this language to be present throughout the audiovisual narrative.

4.4. Acceptability of Swear Words in Netflix Subtitling

As I presented in Section 3, G4 emerged as the group with the highest acceptability rate of swear words in the subtitles. All participants strongly agreed that the swear words were appropriate to the context of the scene (Table 2). Three participants entirely disagreed that reading the swear words in the subtitles caused discomfort, while one remained neutral on this statement (Table 3). These positive results are justifiable, as all participants also indicated that they did not feel uncomfortable when watching films and series with a lot of swearing (Figure 2), an opinion reinforced by some interviewees.

For instance, PPG4M01 states: *“I didn’t feel uncomfortable with the swear words. I found the translation very faithful, and, as I said, these things do not make me uncomfortable”*. In PPG4M01’s perception, swear words were translated “faithfully” in the subtitles. What PPG4M01 refers to as “fidelity”, PPG4W02 called “literal translation”: *“In this fragment, you can see that, in English, swear words are repeated. But the translation into Portuguese was very literal”*. Regardless, I understand that both “fidelity” in the first case and “literal translation” in the second refer to the level of offensiveness rendered in the translation, i.e., its offensive load.

On this matter, PPG4M02 expresses their viewpoint on the translation of swear words in subtitling:

“As swear words are inherent in everyone’s daily language and used in different contexts, I believe that the subtitling of swear words is necessary and should mirror the intensity of the source language. [...] I think the subtitler’s role is to translate ideas, and if an idea is expressed aggressively, using a swear word, for instance, that idea should be transferred to the target language in the same way” (PPG4M02).

On the one hand, PPG4M02 emphasizes the importance of maintaining the offensive load in the translation of swear words, referencing the initial offensiveness of the swear word in the source language. This viewpoint is also presented in PPG4W01’s response: *“I think the swear words should be fully translated. Perhaps there is some censorship, but I believe that the translation should occur integrally”* (PPG4W01). These opinions are in line with the findings of Hjort (2009), where over half of the participants expressed that the subtitling of swear words should maintain the same intensity as the original.

On the other hand, some participants reported a certain indifference towards swear words in films and series. PPG4M01 comments: *“I think it is necessary, just like any other part of the translation. I don’t care about swear words, at least in TV series. This is very natural for me”*. PPG4W01 also conveyed indifference regarding the translation of swear words:

“For me, it is something that does not really make any difference, but I see people complaining, saying things like: ‘That is not what he said, he said something like that’. It is not something that bothers me in general, and it did not bother me in this video” (PPG4W01).

It is intriguing to observe the variability in audience reception based on viewers’ demands and expectations. Some pilot participants exhibit a higher level of scrutiny concerning the contexts of language use, while others are more lenient. Therefore, the

development of reception studies in audiovisual translation becomes crucial to explore how audiences from diverse cultures and with different linguistic perceptions engage, comprehend, and accept the translation of audiovisual content (Di Giovanni and Gambier 2018). In any case, none of the G4 participants reported any issues regarding the subtitling of swearing or any swear words that did not meet their expectations:

“I confess that nothing bothered me. As I told you, I strongly believe that subtitles should be rendered with the same idea and intensity as the source language or at least a similar intensity. So, in the case of this specific video, this purpose was fulfilled. There was nothing that surprised me” (PPG4M02).

PPG4M02 also reports: *“I think there is a lot of softening of swear words in some audiovisual content companies and on streaming platforms as well”*. Despite this comment, it appears that this was not the case with the subtitles in the control group, as she stated: *“I confess that nothing bothered me”*. The softening of swear words and other taboo issues, when not justified by the technical requirements of AVT, can be seen as a form of ideological manipulation (Díaz-Cintas 2012). There is no doubt that censorship and ideological manipulation have persisted in AVT for a long time, as shown by the results of various studies presented in Section 1 (Scandura 2004; Díaz-Cintas 2012; Ávila-Cabrera 2015a; Trupej 2019; Chen 2022; Moura 2022).

However, Campos and Azevedo (2020) highlight that streaming is one of today’s most prominent and recent technological advancements. Streaming platforms have an intrinsic connection with subtitling, influencing the creation and distribution of audiovisual content. In this sense, concerning the translating of swear words, Netflix’s subtitling guidelines for PT-BR explicitly state that “dialogue must never be censored. Expletives should be rendered as faithfully as possible” (Netflix 2024). Alsharhan (2020) refers to this as Netflix’s non-censorship policy regarding taboo language and observes that, gradually, this “new approach” to translating taboo language has been gaining traction in cultures traditionally strict on these themes, such as Arabic.

This recommendation from Netflix (2024) contradicts traditionally pre-established conventions for subtitling swear words. As Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2007) explain, because linguistic taboos and swear words are not considered essential elements for understanding the dialogue, they are usually omitted from subtitling. This observation validated the accounts of subtitlers who participated in Hjort’s (2009) research. Subtitlers tend to follow instructions from contracting companies, which generally highlight that swearing should be milder or that subtitles should contain less swearing (Hjort 2009). The rationale behind this omission or softening of swear words is the belief that written swear words are stronger than spoken ones (Hjort 2009). However, this assumption lacks empirical support, as evidenced by Briechle and Eppler (2019), and is also not confirmed by the results of this pilot reception study.

Therefore, the favorable acceptability results in G4 indicate that the Netflix guidelines and their consequent application in PT-BR subtitling are changing traditionally pre-established standards on how to translate swear words. Considering the insights gathered from participants’ responses, I contend that these traditional conventions should be reconsidered to align with the preferences of the contemporary audience, which seems to be more permissive regarding the use and reading of swear words in subtitling. However, viewers often cling to the notion of fidelity and literalness in subtitling, thereby expecting more verbatim subtitles. This preference for verbatim subtitles undermines the golden rule of subtitling, which is condensation. This trend may be attributed to the expansion of streaming platforms such as Netflix, where audiences have the ability to control the playback of the audiovisual content, allowing them to move the film forward and backward, pause, watch, and re-watch at any time they want.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, I presented the results of a pilot reception study that aimed to investigate the acceptability of swear words in subtitling with different offensive loads. Overall, the

results identified allow me to observe the positive acceptability of swear words written in subtitles, contradicting traditional assumptions that advocate for the elimination of swear words from subtitling due to the discomfort caused when they are read.

In all groups, participants reported that discomfort does not arise from reading the swear word in the subtitle but from perceiving a deliberate change in its offensive load—generally softened. This shift in the offensive load can lead to a breach of the contract of illusion in subtitling, as participants are exposed to the original dialogue and the translated subtitle simultaneously. When this contract is broken, the viewer's attention may shift from the video to the subtitles, thereby negatively affecting the enjoyment of the audiovisual experience.

In this context, G1 (softening) presented the lowest acceptability rate in the sample compared to the other groups due to the softening of the offensive load of swear words. Acceptability in G2 (maintaining) achieved positive results, with participants expressing a preference for more “literal” translations in terms of the intensity of the swear word. This was confirmed in this pilot study, where the “literalness” mentioned by participants is understood to be the maintenance of the offensive load between the source language and the target language. Reading the swear words in the G3 subtitles (intensifying) did not cause discomfort for the participants, once again challenging the assumption that reading a swear word is more impactful than hearing it. Viewer preferences for audiovisual content featuring violence, aggressiveness, or dark humor are factors that can influence the intensity of subtitling the offensive load of swear words. The audience for this type of content expects swearing, offensive, and taboo language to be present throughout the audiovisual narrative. In contrast to traditional conventions, Netflix guidelines suggest greater visibility for swear words in subtitling by not censoring this type of language. This approach appears to be well-received by the audience, as G4 (control) had the highest acceptability rate in the sample.

Studying the reception of AVT is a way of understanding how the contemporary audience is receiving audiovisual products today, as audiovisual media continues to permeate our daily lives. As empirically demonstrated in this study, participants accept swear words in subtitles differently than traditionally stipulated. This leads me to reflect on the importance of developing more reception studies, as “reception is a social experience where meanings are constructed together with other audience members and on the basis of previous interactions. The translation alone does not produce the reception experience” (Tuominen 2018, p. 69).

In this paper, I presented data from the pilot reception study, which is being conducted with a larger number of participants. Therefore, I suggest that more studies on the reception of swear words be experimentally developed in AVT. These studies can be conducted by replicating or adapting this experimental design, analyzing the acceptability of swearing and other taboo topics in different linguistic combinations and cultures. Other topics to be studied within reception include the relationship between Netflix, convergence, and preferences for verbatim and literal subtitles. Audience reception studies using eye tracking are a path yet to be explored. Identifying whether the gender of the participants interferes with the acceptability of swear words in subtitling can serve to validate the results of research previously developed with swearing in other fields of language studies. Furthermore, there is a lack of research to investigate audience reception in other modes of AVT and media accessibility, such as audio description and subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing. Additionally, it remains unexplored whether there is a difference in the reception of swear words in the subtitling of documentaries, reality shows, and fiction.

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Notes

- ¹ Historically, subtitling has been viewed as diagonal translation (Gottlieb 1994). This is because, when translating oral dialogues into written subtitles, the translator must consider not only the linguistic aspects but also the semiotic codes of film language (Chaume 2004). This dual consideration is essential for achieving a good result in AVT.
- ² In this paper, we present studies that focus on the reception of swearing in subtitling, as well as studies comparing the reception in subtitling to that in dubbing. For more information on the reception of swearing in dubbing, see Pavesi and Zamora (2022).
- ³ It was based on the duration of the experiment conducted by Briechele and Eppler (2019), which followed the recommendation of Revilla and Ochoa (2017) for web surveys. The ideal survey length is a median of ten minutes. The maximum survey length is 20 min so that participants do not feel fatigued and provide more accurate answers (Revilla and Ochoa 2017).
- ⁴ In this study, the control group is defined as the group in which the researcher did not manipulate any variables or conditions (Bryman and Bell 2019).
- ⁵ In this study, *man* and *woman* are considered two among the various existing gender categories. Gender is understood as an identity associated with social roles and constructions that may not always align with the expectations linked to the biological sex assigned at birth (Garofalo and Garvin 2020; Nash 2023).

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