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The reception of swearing in film dubbing: a cross-cultural case study

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ABSTRACT

Swear words express and arouse emotions and due to their taboo-contravening origin are charged with an offensive potential. By mirroring the functions they perform in real life, they contribute to the makeup of audiovisual language and intensify filmic speech. Although swearing has long attracted the attention of audiovisual translation research, little consideration has been paid to viewers' reactions. To address this gap, the present paper engages with the reception of swear words in film dubbing, while exploring the differences across two distinct linguacultures. Through a questionnaire-based methodology, it compares two groups of Italian and Spanish university students and their reactions to dubbed vis-à-vis domestic film clips. The results suggest that both Italian and Spanish groups' tolerance for swearing onscreen is quite high. The Spanish participants, however, appear to be more lenient towards this phenomenon and more permissive with the staging of potentially offensive language in home productions. By contrast, Italian participants show similar levels of acceptance when they react to swearing in dubbing and Italian filmic speech. The two groups' overall responses and their diverging orientations are discussed with reference to the cross-linguistic and intercultural dimensions of film viewing and distinctive preferences in audiovisual discourse.

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Swear words; reception; rating; dubbed and original film dialogues; Italian and Spanish linguacultures

1. Introduction

Swearing is used to vent anger, disappointment, frustration, surprise and even joy through words that have lost their denotative meaning to acquire a pragmatic value. It may also highlight portions of discourse, while marking interpersonal distance or proximity (Allan, 2018). Literally, swear words and expressions refer to taboo subjects, i.e. entities, experiences and actions that are unmentionable because they are either sacred or vile (Hughes, 2006, p. 15) and 'can cause discomfort, harm or injury' (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 1). Swearing can hence be defined as 'the use of taboo language with the purpose of expressing the speaker's emotional state and communicating that information to the listeners' (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008, p. 268). Talking of the overarching category swearing belongs to, McEnery describes bad language as 'any word or phrase which, when used in what one might call polite conversation, is likely to cause offence'

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(2006, p. 2). Due to its taboo-contravening origin, swearing is in fact charged with a disparaging and abusive potential (Allan, 2018), its degree of offensiveness being ultimately decided by the targets and witnesses of the linguistic behaviour (Toledano, 2002). These observations bring to the fore the relevance of receivers' reactions, and all contextual features in the discourse, including speaker-hearer relationship, speaker and hearer categories, as well as social and cultural expectations (Stapleton, 2020). Since in film receivers include characters and viewers, both original and target audiences are paramount when evaluating how offensive, or dysphemistic (Allan & Burridge, 2006), a given term may sound onscreen.

Because of their sociopragmatic implications, swear words and expressions have attracted the attention of many audiovisual translation (AVT) scholars (Ávila-Cabrera, 2015; Formentelli & Ghia, 2021; Martí Ferriol, 2005; Pavesi & Malinverno, 2000; Santaemilia, 2008; Valdeón, 2015, 2020; among many). Most research in the field, however, is descriptive in nature, whereas reception studies are still limited, notable exceptions being the perception study of dubbese expressions including two swear words (Bucaria, 2008) and the recent research on viewers' perceived strength of swearing expressions in subtitled versus dubbed films (Briechle & Duran Eppler, 2019). Given the strategic role of swearing in audiovisual dialogue, the paucity of investigations on target viewers' reactions is indeed surprising. To address this research blind spot, the present study explores the perceived offensiveness of taboo expressions in dubbing through a double focus. It examines the reception¹ of a set of frequent swear words in dubbed vis-à-vis domestic films, while exploring the differences across two distinct linguacultures as they emerge in the reactions of two groups of Italian and Spanish speakers.

The present article is organised as follows. Section 1 expounds the background of the investigation by framing swearing within and across linguacultures as well as in film language and film dubbing. Section 2 presents the empirical study and describes the survey-based methodology used. The section on results ensues, followed by the general discussion and suggestions for future research. In the last section we draw our conclusions.

1.1. Swearing in linguacultures

The major taboo areas that are typically codified in swearing tend to be shared across western cultures, mainly including themes of religion, sexual organs and practices, effluvia and the scatological theme. They extend to comprise ethnicity and race, homosexuality and minor subjects, such as family members, animals, death, disease and prostitution (Hughes, 1998; Ljung, 2011, pp. 41–43). Differences should also be noticed since cultures within the same language and across languages contrast in the selection of semantic fields hit by interdiction and the intensity of the specific tabooed lexical items (Chamizo Domínguez, 2018; Ljung, 2011). As for intralinguistic variation, different English-speaking geographical communities exhibit varying degrees of tolerance or anxiety towards the use of taboo language and favour distinctive expressions (Dewaele, 2015), as with *bloody*, rare in American English, but one top choice among British speakers of both sexes (McEnery, 2006, p. 35). By contrast, when addressing cross-linguistic variation in different cultures, Zamora (2020) found that comparable

groups of Italian and Spanish speakers judged sex-related and scatological foul expressions quite liberally, with both groups rating severe blasphemies highest in abusiveness. The Spanish respondents, however, were more lenient with insults when compared to the Italian participants.

Several factors contribute to the intensity of swearing within and across linguacultures. Levels of situational formality and familiarity between interlocutors, as well as their age and gender, social class and relative power have all been found to affect the degree of disagreeability attributed to swearing expressions across languages (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; among many). Moreover, reactions to swearing do not only vary as a function of personal and contextual factors but are also affected by time, with diachronic changes having been amply documented (e.g. Allan, 2018; Hughes, 1998). Owing to its variability, the strength of swearing may be a difficult dimension to access. However, scales of offensiveness have been developed as commissioned by media supervisory bodies to rate bad language with reference to various social and age groups of viewers of audiovisual products (McEnery, 2006).

Language proficiency and being a native or non-native speaker are also relevant factors accounting for the perceived strength of swearing expressions. Several empirical studies have shown that bilingual and multilingual speakers find swear words more intense and emotionally charged in their L1, while they may overestimate the offensiveness of L2 swearing depending on the type and degree of the experience they have had with the second language (Dewaele, 2018 for an overview). As appropriate use of swear-words requires considerable sociocultural and sociopragmatic knowledge in the language, L1 speakers often object to L2 speakers' use of taboo expressions. They may wonder whether the foreign speaker was aware of the pragmatic force of the expressions employed and 'may also feel that as an outsider, the [L2] user did not have the right to use these taboo words' (Dewaele, 2018, p. 220).

The variability of swearing across linguacultures impacts translation as well. Referents and conceptual images that swearing expressions evoke in the source language speakers may not coincide with those called to mind by lexically equivalent expressions in target language speakers. This is due to the different degrees of semantic dilution and pragmatization across phraseological units in the two languages (see Richard-Marset, 2012, p. 9; Zamora, 2015, pp. 324–325 and 329). Moreover, productive semantic areas for swearing in the source language may be absent or underrepresented in the target language. For example, whereas the tabooed expressions based on 'damnation' and 'hell' are frequently occurring in Germanic cultures, religious interdiction more often shifts to deities and other dysphemistic referents in Latin cultures (Ljung, 2011). Here reiterated literal translations of English curses often result in unusual expressions of dubbese (see Pavesi, 2018), as with the Italian dubbing routine *wh-word + diavolo* 'devil', e.g. *chi diavolo ...* from the English pattern *wh-word + the hell*, e.g. *who the hell ...* (Formentelli & Ghia, 2021).

1.2. Swearing and informalisation onscreen

As articulations of emotions, swear words typically belong to spontaneous spoken language – or to the language that fictively represents speech, as in film and television dialogue, where these expressions act as orality markers. Indeed, the link between

swearing and colloquiality or informality is so strong that the recent upsurge in the phenomenon has been associated with the growing informalisation in society at large, as already pointed out by Hughes (1998, p. 256), who noted that the ‘profusion of foul language and taboo words in modern times represents the ultimate triumph of informal language over formal’. Similarly, the greater use of swearing in films and TV series (Azzaro, 2018; Bednarek, 2019; Formentelli & Ghia, 2021) is consistent with the growing informalisation of audiovisual dialogue, which increasingly simulates conversational language (Zago, 2016). Overall swearing contributes significantly to the makeup of audiovisual language. Not only does it add authenticity to the representation of spontaneous speech and informality, but it also participates in the construction of setting, including register and characterisation (Bednarek, 2019). By mirroring the functions they perform in real life, swearing expressions intensify fictional speech, hence converging on its heightened emotionality.

1.3. Swear words in dubbing

Historically, research on the dubbing of films and TV series has shown that swearing is generally reduced when moving from the original productions to the target texts. Swear words and expressions are only partially rendered in translation, many of them being either omitted or toned down. This tendency is remarkable as it cuts across various language pairs, including English-Italian (e.g. Formentelli & Ghia, 2021; Formentelli & Monti, 2014; Pavesi & Malinverno, 2000), English-Spanish (e.g. Fuentes-Luque, 2015; Martí Ferriol, 2005; Santaemilia, 2008; Soler Pardo, 2013), English-German (Briechle & Duran Eppler, 2019), Italian-Spanish (Zamora, 2015, 2018). It should be noticed, however, that recent studies have suggested an opposite tendency for the English-Spanish pair (Valdeón, 2015, 2020), hence challenging what could be taken as a universal tendency in AVT. In particular, Valdeón (2020) puts forward the vulgarisation hypothesis, which posits a shift in dubbing norms in European Spanish dubbing, whereby swear words in TV products translated from English in the period 2006–2016 have increased with reference to the original Anglophone source texts.

The prevalent mitigation of swear words in dubbing has been explained as arising from several reasons, often interrelated. These words may be mitigated or omitted as a result of the lack of semantic-pragmatic corresponding expressions in the target language. Pavesi and Malinverno (2000, p. 79) discuss the example of *motherfucker*, one of the strongest swear words in American English (e.g. McEnery, 2006), which is typically rendered by milder expressions in Italian dubbing, since no semantic equivalent is allowed in the target culture. The multifunctionality of some source swear words at the syntactic-pragmatic interface also hinders their full translation in the target texts (Formentelli & Monti, 2014; Pavesi & Malinverno, 2000, p. 83). In addition, dubbing professionals are posited to comply with some forms of restrictions dictated by clients, production companies and contracting authorities (e.g. Zanotti, 2012), while self-censoring is also believed to be carried out by dubbing agents independently of external bodies as a way to preempt possible complaints (Santaemilia, 2008, pp. 222–226; Soler Pardo, 2013). According to Ranzato (2009, p. 46), translators abide by viewers’ ‘comfort factor’, thus avoiding excessively transgressive and ill-tolerated expressions that could offend the ultimate receivers.

2. The study

2.1. Rationale and research questions

Despite the frequent reference to audiences' tastes and expectations to justify the tendency in audiovisual translation to mitigate taboo language, very little research has been carried out to address target viewers' assessment of swear words and expressions. As such study requires a benchmark against which reception in dubbing can be evaluated, it will benefit from the comparison with original productions. Similarly, contrasting viewers belonging to different cultures is likely to bring to the surface specific factors involved in the acceptance or rejection of swearing, while highlighting distinctive orientations on the phenomenon cross-culturally. The prediction can be made that viewers who have greater familiarity with the sociopragmatic behaviour will be more tolerant in the reception of the same phenomenon in similar contexts both in original and dubbed productions. From this perspective, translation strategies for swear words and expressions from English into Spanish and Italian were compared in a recent descriptive study (Zamora & Pavesi, 2021). Relying on a parallel corpus of American films dubbed in the two target languages, the analysis showed that swearing is mitigated when moving from the same foreign productions to their dubbing translations in both Italian and Spanish. However, whereas the percentage of 'loss' is quite high in Italian, Spanish dubbed films align closely with the originals and reproduce a similar level of vulgarity in the translated dialogue. This disparity in behaviour possibly indexes two dissimilar approaches to the translation of swear words and expressions in the two cultures and is in line with Valdeón's (2015, 2020) vulgarisation hypothesis in European Spanish, arguing for an opposite, aggravation strategy in Spanish dubbing.

The question also arises about whether similar constraints and preferences that lead to varying frequency and strength of swearing in dubbed dialogue in different cultures apply to national products as well (see Valdeón, 2020). Starting from two comparable corpora of Italian and Spanish domestic films, Zamora (2020) has shown that Spanish audiovisual speech contains many more swear words than the Italian film dialogue, hence suggesting that non-translated, domestic productions exhibit the same cross-linguistic contrast as dubbed products. A recent investigation has further confirmed the polarisation that has been delineated between Italian and Spanish cinema by extending it to television productions. A comparison was carried out between Spanish and Italian TV-series based on the same format. The comparison revealed quite a dramatic drop in swearing in the Italian remakes of the original Spanish productions (Gualdo & Zamora, 2019). The differences that have emerged between the two telecinematic cultures may foreshadow similar differences in the reception of swearing in the two linguacultures, a hypothesis that clearly requires further ad-hoc empirical research. Drawing on the above premises, we presently address the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1 To what degree do Italian viewers accept or tolerate swear words and expressions in films? Do they accept swearing in dubbed products to a lesser extent than in domestic products?

RQ2 To what degree do Spanish viewers accept or tolerate swear words and expressions in films? Do they accept swearing in dubbed products to a lesser extent than in domestic products?

RQ3 How do the two language groups compare in their acceptance of swear words and expressions onscreen?

We will engage with the RQs above relying on the methodology explained in the following sections.

2.2. Methodology

2.2.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 110 participants took part in the survey, 55 for each language. They were all university students of Modern Languages and Translation. The Italian group was made up of 44 females and 11 males (mean age = 21 years and 6 months); the Spanish group comprised 47 females and 8 males (mean age = 20 years and 1 month). All students were attending the University of Murcia coming from various regions of their respective countries, the Italian students being on Erasmus programmes. As these are convenience samples, the two groups cannot be taken as representative of Italian and European Spanish speakers as a whole and hence what we present qualifies as a case study.

Two audiovisual surveys were created, each containing eight clips for each of the five swear words and expressions investigated – four dubbed instances and four original instances – for a total of 40 clips for each language. The survey required approximately 30 min to complete. Participants viewed the 40 clips, which alternated domestic and dubbed items, and were required to provide their assessment of a single swearing expression at a time. To measure the strength of each item, we asked participants to rate acceptability on a four-point Likert scale in which each option corresponded to an increasing degree of offensiveness and a decreasing degree of naturalness (Appendix 1). By combining offensiveness and naturalness we intended to capture contextual variability in the perception of swearing, which has been proved to be affected by several sociopragmatic factors.

2.2.2. Choice of swear words and expressions

The surveys tested the acceptance levels of five common strong swearing expressions for each language. The choice of lexemes and phraseological units fell on expressions that were interpreted as pragmatic equivalents in the two linguacultures based on the results of previous questionnaires administered to analogous groups of Italian and Spanish speakers (Zamora, 2015).² To guarantee the comparability between the items in dubbed and original scenes, we excluded dubbing routines (e.g. It. *fottuto* ‘fucking’, Sp. *puto* ‘fucking’, see Bucaria, 2008; Pavesi, 2018), which could have biased reactions in favour or against dubbing. The resulting list of words in Italian included *cazzo* ‘fuck’, *porca puttana* ‘for fuck’s sake’, (*non*) *rompere* (inf.) *i coglioni* ‘(not) to bust one’s balls’, *vaffanculo* ‘fuck off’, *stronzo* ‘asshole’; the analogous list of Spanish words comprised: *joder* ‘fuck’, *me cago en la puta* ‘for fuck’s sake’, (*no*) *tocar* (inf.) *los cojones* ‘(not) to bust one’s balls’, *vete a la mierda* ‘fuck off’, *gilipollas* ‘asshole’. The selected expressions covered sexual and scatological themes, two most productive areas for swearing in the two cultures. Out of the five corresponding expressions tested in each language, two are interjections (*cazzo* and *joder*; *porca puttana* and *me cago en la puta*); one is used with a descriptive sense ((*non*) *rompere i coglioni* and (*no*) *tocar los cojones*); one can be

either an interjection or a directive act (*vaffanculo* and *vete a la mierda*); the last expression can be either an insult or a negative descriptor (*stronzo* and *gilipollas*). Through this procedure, we believe to have created two lists of words with comparable sociopragmatic functions in the two linguacultures.

2.2.3. Survey design

The clips contained scenes in which vulgar items were clearly contextualised. Specific clues to the origin of clips included dubbese and foreign names, nonverbal contextualisation and other prompts, such as setting, dwellings, interior decorations, characters' physical appearances, dress code, gait and gesticulation. Foreign actors versus national actors were in themselves a clear indication of whether the film was domestic or foreign.

Previous research has shown that when situations of extreme tension are represented in films and whenever criminal, aggressive or violent characters are involved, the number of occurrences of taboo words is higher (Baines, 2015; Pavesi & Malinverno, 2000). Since scene and character types are also likely to affect the degree of acceptability of swearing by film audiences (Briechle & Duran Eppler, 2019), each survey contained a balanced number of each contextual constellations. That is, we included an equal number of (i) neutral scenes with ordinary and socially marked characters, (ii) conflictual scenes with ordinary and socially marked characters. Lastly, by relying on both authors' cross-linguistic and cross-cultural competence, we chose comparable scenes in the dubbed and original clips and in the two languages (Appendix 2).

As can be appreciated from the following example, the dialogue and the scene contained the information deemed as necessary to place the character in each situation and conjure up a clearly identifiable context.

(1)

Salir pitando (A. Fernández Armero 2006)

	Domestic Spanish dialogue	English translation
Driver 1:	¡Coño, dile que se mueva!	Shit! Ask him to move!
Driver 2:	Si es que no quiere.	It's just he doesn't want to.
Driver 1:	Venga, hombre, que tienes cara de pardillo.	Come on, man, you do look like a fool.
Driver 2:	Disculpe, caballero, el señor del coche que dice que tiene prisa.	Excuse me, sir, the man in the car says he's in a hurry.
Driver 3:	¿Y?	So?
Driver 2:	Pues si a lo mejor metiera usted el camión en ese hueco ...	Well, you might put the lorry in that gap ...
Driver 3:	Mira, tronco, cuanto más me toques los cojones , más despacio voy a ir ¿vale? Así que no me jodas que la tenemos.	Look, man, the more you bust my balls , the slower I'm going to go, okay? So stop pissing me off, don't stir up trouble.

The domestic clip above presents a typical conflictual situation and portrays ordinary people quarrelling in a busy city centre – easily identifiable as Madrid by Spanish viewers. It encapsulates one of the combinations of the variables that were controlled in the clips participants were shown during the survey.³

3. Results of the study

The internal reliability of the surveys was measured by using Cronbach Alpha, Omega and Composite Reliability, obtaining acceptable to excellent coefficients (Table 1). The estimates of the internal reliability hence confirm that the scales were well-developed and consistently measured the acceptability of the target swear words, with the reliability of the Italian questionnaire being good and that of the Spanish questionnaire very high.

Data from the four-point Likert scales were subsequently converted into values of increasing acceptability, ranging from 1 – lowest degree of acceptability – to 4 – highest degree of acceptability – and average scores were calculated. Different analyses were carried out employing both descriptive and inferential statistics. To answer the three RQs, the two language groups were first considered individually by examining general acceptance patterns and dialogue modality – domestic vs. dubbed. Subsequently, the two language groups were compared by observing the two modalities separately and by collapsing them together.

3.1. The Italian group

The Italian respondents showed quite a high degree of tolerance for swear words both in the dubbed dialogue and in the original clips (Table 2). Only 12.3% and 10.9% of assessments respectively are of straightforward rejection of swearing, in these cases considered very offensive and very unnatural (value 1). This contrasts with about two thirds of assessments ranking swearing in dubbed and original dialogues as either little offensive and quite natural or not offensive at all and very natural (values 3 and 4). The highest percentages of assessments by the Italian group is found in the category of unreserved acceptance of the investigated expressions, 37.3% and 32.9% for original and dubbed dialogues respectively. Comparing the two modalities by running the Wilcoxon signed rank test (a non-parametric test used in alternative to the dependent T-test for Likert scales) showed no significant difference between the two sets of assessments ($V = 143055$, p -value = $0.201 > 0.05$), meaning that overall the Italian respondents did not react differently to dubbed and domestic clips and accepted swearing to a similar extent in both modalities. It should be noticed, however, that there are more utmost rejections of these expressions in dubbed than in original clips and, conversely, more complete approvals of the phenomenon in original than in dubbed clips.

3.2. The Spanish group

The Spanish participants' overall assessment of swearing reveals a considerable tolerance for swear words, both in dubbed dialogue and in original, domestic clips (Table 3). Only 10% and 4.73% of reactions respectively are of utter rejections of swearing, as considered

Table 1. Questionnaires' internal reliability coefficients.

	Italian	Spanish	Italian and Spanish
Cronbach Alpha	0.85	0.918	0.876
Omega	0.839	0.917	0.835
Composite Reliability	0.795	0.912	0.835

Table 2. Italian participants' acceptability rating of swear words and expressions in dubbed and domestic clips.

	N. items	Mean	Median	% 1*	% 2*	% 3*	% 4*	Sd
Dubbed clips	1100	2.850909	3	12.3	23.3	31.5	32.9	1.015597
Domestic clips	1100	2.900000	3	10.9	25.5	26.4	37.3	1.026935

*1-4 stand for increasing degrees of acceptability, with 1 corresponding to lowest degree and 4 to highest degree.

Table 3. Spanish participants' acceptability rating of swear words and expressions in dubbed and domestic clips.

	N. items	Mean	Median	% 1*	% 2*	% 3*	% 4*	Sd
Dubbed clips	1100	2.800000	3	10	26.2	37.6	26.2	0.9404469
Domestic clips	1100	3.179091	3	4.73	17.4	33.2	44.7	0.8824026

*1-4 stand for increasing degrees of acceptability, with 1 corresponding to lowest degree and 4 to highest degree.

very offensive and unnatural (value 1). These responses contrast with about 64% of responses to dubbed films and about 78% of those to original films rating swearing as either little offensive and quite natural or not offensive at all and very natural (values 3 and 4). The category that was ticked most frequently when reacting to swearing in Spanish domestic productions is the most lenient one, with 44.7% assessments being of unreserved acceptance (value 4), whereas for dubbing the category of 'little offensive and quite natural' was selected 37.6% of times (value 3). As for the comparison of the two modalities, by running a Wilcoxon signed rank test with continuity correction, it was shown that there is a significant difference between the two sets of reactions ($V = 143055$, p -value = $2e-16 < 0.001$). Spanish respondents reacted differently to dubbed and domestic clips and were significantly more tolerant when responding to swearing in Spanish original films, whereas they considered swear words more offensive in the dubbed clips. They provided more assessments of utmost rejections of those expressions in dubbed than in original clips and, conversely, more complete approvals of swearing in original vis-à-vis dubbed clips.

3.3. Comparing the Italian and Spanish groups

The two language groups' reactions were compared by running Mann-Whitney U test, i.e. a non-parametric alternative to the independent T-test for Likert scales. At close analysis, there was no significant difference between the two groups in their response to swear words in dubbing (Table 4; $P = 0.1 > 0.05$ with Mann-Whitney U test). The young respondents from the two linguacultures accepted the investigated expressions to a similar extent when viewing translated clips. By contrast, the Spanish group appears to accept swearing more readily than the Italian group in domestic products (Table 5) as these respondents' reactions to swear words in Spanish films were significantly more tolerant than those by Italian speakers to similar items in Italian films (Mann-Whitney U test, $W = 692045$, P -value = $6.482e-10 < 0.001$).

Most importantly, when considering reactions to original and dubbed clips together in the two surveys (Table 6), the reception of swearing onscreen results to be significantly different in the two language groups (p -value = $0.001175 < 0.001$ with the U Mann-

Table 4. Italian and Spanish participants' acceptability rating of swear words and expressions in dubbed clips.

Dubbed clips	N. items	Mean	Median	% 1*	% 2*	% 3*	% 4*	Sd
Italian group	1100	2.850909	3	12.3	23.3	31.5	32.9	1.015597
Spanish group	1100	2.800000	3	10	26.2	37.6	26.2	0.9404469

*1-4 stand for increasing degrees of acceptability, with 1 corresponding to lowest degree and 4 to highest degree.

Table 5. Italian and Spanish participants' acceptability rating of swear words and expressions in domestic clips.

Domestic clips	N. items	Mean	Median	% 1*	% 2*	% 3*	% 4*	Sd
Italian group	1100	2.900000	3	10.9	25.5	26.4	37.3	1.026935
Spanish group	1100	3.179091	3	4.73	17.4	33.2	44.7	0.8824026

*1-4 stand for increasing degrees of acceptability, with 1 corresponding to lowest degree and 4 to highest degree.

Table 6. Italian and Spanish participants' acceptability rating of swear words and expressions in domestic clips and dubbed clips.

All clips	N. items	Mean	Median	% 1*	% 2*	% 3*	% 4*	Sd
Italian group	2200	2.875455	3	11.6	24.4	29.0	35.1	1.021344
Spanish group	2200	2.989545	3	7.36	21.8	35.4	35.5	0.9311837

*1-4 stand for increasing degrees of acceptability, with 1 corresponding to lowest degree and 4 to highest degree.

Whitney test) and the Spanish speakers accepted swear words more readily than the Italian respondents.

In sum, the overall grading frequencies suggest that both Italian and Spanish groups' tolerance for swearing is quite high in both dubbing and domestic productions. However, the Spanish participants are more lenient towards potentially offensive language than the Italian participants. The Spanish respondents admitted swear words in almost 71% of all clips whereas the Italian respondents accepted swearing about 64% of the times (values 3 and 4 in both cases, [Table 6](#)). In addition, the Italian and Spanish groups allow the phenomenon in dubbing to a similar extent and consider it little or no offensive at all as well as quite or very natural about 64% of the times. By contrast, the reception of potentially abusive expressions in the two domestic film languages appears to be significantly different (values 3 and 4 in both cases, [Table 5](#)), with Spanish speaking respondents being more permissive with the staging of swearing in home productions.

4. Discussion

Swearing is a highly relevant phenomenon to investigate in film and film translation since it contributes to characterisation, plot development and the realism of telecinematic speech. Hearing offensive expressions in films can also be greatly involving for viewers who enjoy watching verbal aggression from a distance or, vice versa, sympathise with the victims of verbal abuse. The current study has focused on the reception of swearing in dubbing. To achieve this general aim, we have investigated how two groups of Italian and Spanish university students react to a set of frequent and strong swear words across

dubbed and original film dialogues. Such cross-cultural comparison has drawn attention to the relationship between viewers' reactions to swearing in films and their experience as consumers of dubbed products.

From a descriptive point of view, earlier research has shown that current practices mostly favour the mitigation of swearing in dubbing as a result of censorial tendencies and syntactic and pragmatic contrasts across languages (Sections 1.3. and 2.1.), although there is evidence of the opposite tendency – i.e. aggravation – in contemporary European Spanish dubbed from English (Valdeón, 2015, 2020). The reception results in the present study show that overall respondents in both language groups are quite relaxed with swearing in dubbing. Acceptance, however, is by no means generalisable and a degree of disapproval or dislike for swear words and expressions in translated products is still evident in young viewers irrespective of their cultural origin. Viewers' reactions hence reveal an opening towards the use of emotionally loaded and taboo-infringing language on translated screens, while still partially mirroring the caution described for dubbing practices in the majority of studies on the topic. These results have interesting implications in that the two groups showed similar degrees of tolerance to swearing in dubbed clips, although the Italian students were presumably exposed to the same phenomenon onscreen to a lesser degree. This suggests that there is no straightforward relationship between translational choices and target viewers' responses to swearing.

The contrast between reception of swearing in dubbing versus original productions further illuminates audiences' attitudes towards the use of swear words in translation. The findings of the present study show that viewers in the two language groups perceive swearing in the two types of audiovisual texts as different to some degree. Although there was no significant difference in the Italian group between reactions to swearing in dubbing and domestic texts, across both groups more extreme rejections of swearing occurred with dubbed clips, whereas more utmost acceptance of the same phenomenon were observed with original clips. Lesser willingness to accept swear words in dubbing may relate to the intricacy of frames of references activated when watching foreign vis-à-vis domestic films (Guillot, 2012). When accessing dubbed audiovisual products, several multilingual and multicultural frames are prompted simultaneously through the complex semiotics of the visuals and the linguistic hybridisation of the translated dialogue. These include

frames of reference to foreign communicative practices activated by the nonverbal dimensions of film, frames of reference to viewers' own native linguistic and cultural practices, as well as those pertaining to their expectations about foreign practices as they are staged linguistically in dubbed films. (Pavesi & Formentelli, 2019, pp. 578–79)

This means that while they watch a dubbed film, viewers are likely to compute a complex cross-cultural and intercultural algorithm balancing their multiple responses to the foreign dialogue received in their L1 as a result of a translation process. AVT may in fact trigger and reinforce target viewers' stereotypes and prejudices about the foreign culture as shown by Pinto (2010) when she argued that English-language subtitles in Spanish films exacerbate American viewers' preconceptions of Spaniards' rudeness and vulgarity. Moreover, since we expect viewers to retain the awareness that they are watching foreign characters, we may hypothesise that they have similar intercultural expectations to those they experience when interacting with non-native speakers in their

mother tongue. Such expectations could be of lesser lenience towards swearing expressions when they are uttered by foreigners, ‘the use of taboo language by many [L2] users could be argued to be planned, that is, not spontaneous, which could explain the reaction of L1 users to language use that *does not sound natural and may not be appropriate*’ (Liyanag et al., 2015, p. 118, italics added; Section 1.1.).

The diverging acceptance patterns in the two dialogue modalities are much more evident among Spanish participants, whose assessments are overall significantly different – i.e. less tolerant – when responding to swearing in translated than in original products. The result may be surprising in view of the already observed frequent use of taboo expressions on Spanish screens, including those showing translated products. It may imply that Spanish consumers have more conservative attitudes towards what is permissible in dubbing than to what is allowed on national screens. Italian respondents’ reactions to swear words, on the other hand, suggest that a greater similarity between dubbed and original language is experienced, hence pointing to these viewers’ more readily acceptance of dubbing practices as complying with those of Italian filmic discourse.

In the present study attitudes to screen swearing were investigated by focussing globally on two different language backgrounds. As highlighted in recent research comparing various languages and cultures in audiovisual translation (Guillot & Pavese, 2019), such contrast brings to the surface translation tendencies within and across linguacultures and may unveil similarities and differences between cultural systems and translational traditions. As Valdeón (2015) argues when discussing results on the translation of taboo lexis from English into European Spanish,

[a]ttitudes towards the use of taboo items may have become more relaxed, *but languages and cultures have different conventions*. [...] In fact, European Spanish is certainly more tolerant of taboo words than British and American English in most contexts, including the media. (p. 381, italics added)

As for the present study, information on the diverging audiences’ experiences in the exposure to screen swearing in Italy and Spain served as the empirical backdrop to assess audiences’ reactions. Previous research on the dubbing behaviour vis-à-vis swearing in the two countries has indeed suggested that Spanish is more inclined than Italian to retain taboo words in translations from Anglophone productions (Zamora & Pavese, 2021). This is congruent with the higher rate of swearing reported for domestic Spanish films and television series than for comparable Italian telecinematic products (Gualdo & Zamora, 2019; Zamora, 2020; see Section 2.1.). According to the present results, if both groups in the case study have a reasonably tolerant attitude to swearing, their grading of swear words in film clips does not relay a homogeneous picture, and the results contrastively foreshadow peculiarities of the two individual linguacultures. On the basis of these initial findings, it may be hypothesised that Spanish speakers could be more lenient to swearing onscreen as a result of their being, overall, more accustomed to it, while distinguishing more markedly between the two types of domestic versus translated discourse. By contrast, Italian speakers may be generally less accommodating both in their use of and attitude towards these emotionally-charged expressions in audiovisual dialogue, while perceiving a stronger similarity between the use of language in dubbed and original products. The results of this case study have pointed to the relevance of

tacit norms rooted in the traditions of dubbing practices and telecinematic discourse in each country. Concurrently, however, they have hinted that aspects of production, attitudes and behaviours can be shared across cultural divides as both the Italian and Spanish groups have revealed quite a lenient stance toward swearing expressions irrespective of the mediated or original nature of screen dialogue.

4.1. Limitations of the study and perspectives for future research

The participants in the study make up homogeneous groups for age and occupation, which allows for the control of independent variables. The groups, however, were not differentiated enough to relay a full picture of audiences' reception of screen swearing, both domestic and translated. Future research will hence benefit from the investigation of different respondents in terms of age, occupation, socio-economic factors and cultural distance. Italians and Spaniards in fact both speak a Romance language, share a common religious – Catholic – background and have been socialised in a Southern European country. Reactions to swearing on domestic and dubbed screens might thus vary more considerably when comparing viewers coming from more distant cultures such as those of Northern European and African or Asian countries. Needless to say the small and non-representative samples employed for the present investigation call for broader investigations.

As for the data collection method, while the high number of chosen clips permitted a good comparability between the items proposed in the tests in the two languages and the two modalities, the number of tested words was limited to keep the survey to a reasonable length. It is advisable, therefore, that future investigations will be devised so as to include a larger battery of swear words and expressions. Also, viewers' reactions to swearing in whole films, series episodes or even complete series, rather than isolated clips, should be probed to peruse reception in situ and as part of a prolonged immersive experience.

5. Conclusions

In the present study we have investigated the reactions to a set of comparable swear words and expressions by two groups of Italian and Spanish young respondents watching a set of clips extracted from dubbed and domestic films. The findings have shown that, in general, tolerance is relatively high in the two groups. The Spanish respondents, however, show a greater leniency towards swearing expressions onscreen although they maintain a more censoring attitude to the phenomenon in dubbing than their Italian peers. The results are in line with previous research (Gualdo & Zamora, 2019; Zamora, 2020; Zamora & Pavesi, 2021) showing a greater frequency of swearing in Spanish than in Italian telecinematic productions, both dubbed and original.

The study of the reception of swearing in films fills a relevant gap as it helps us understand viewers' outlooks on a pervasive phenomenon in telecinematic language across cultures, at the same time ascertaining whether current practices in film representation and film dubbing reflect viewers' expectations. Since the results reveal a reasonable degree of tolerance for swear words in both domestic and dubbed productions by the two groups of Italian and Spanish viewers, they suggest that relatively permissive translational strategies can be enacted in dubbing in both linguacultures. Acceptance of swearing onscreen,

however, is not a generalised phenomenon, especially in the case of dubbing, a finding that supports the carefulness with which it is generally dealt in translation and confirms taboo language to be a sensitive area in transfer from one culture to another.

Notes

1. Following the common practice in AVT Studies, we use ‘reception’ as an umbrella term to subsume both reception *strictu sensu* and perception.
2. Participants in each language survey assessed 50 swear words according to offensiveness and frequency of use. The surveys were administered to 229 Italian and 304 Spanish speakers (encuestas.um.es).
3. The highlighted expression in the example corresponds to the tested expression in the questionnaire.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Sample item from one questionnaire. English translation from Italian

After having viewed and listened to the dialogue in each clip, select the response that better reflects your impressions on the degree of naturalness and offensiveness of the swear word/expression in the text.

Cazzo ‘Fuck’

- 1) (a) Very natural and not at all offensive (b) Quite natural and little offensive (c) Little natural and quite offensive (d) Not at all natural and very offensive

Appendix 2. Film sources for clips

Black Mass (S. Cooper 2015), *How To Be Single* (C. Ditter 2016), *Jackie Brown* (Q. Tarantino 1997), *Neighbors* (N. Stoller 2014), *No Strings Attached* (R. Reitman 2011), *Pulp Fiction* (Q. Tarantino 1994), *Sex Tape* (J. Kasdan 2014), *The Big Short* (A. MaKay 2015), *Trainwreck* (J. Apatow 2015).

A.C.A.B (S. Somilla 2012), *Caos calmo* (A. Grimaldi 2008), *Diaz, non pulire questo sangue* (D. Vicari 2012), *Ex* (F. Brizzi 2009), *Il mio miglior nemico* (C. Verdone 2006), *La vita facile* (L. Pellegrini 2011), *L'ultimo bacio* (G. Muccino 2001), *Manuale d'amore* (G. Veronesi 2005), *Manuale d'amore 2* (G. Genovesi 2007), *Maschi contro femmine* (F. Brizzi 2010), *Parlami d'amore* (S. Muccino 2008), *Passione sinistra* (M. Ponti 2013), *Posti in piedi in paradiso* (C. Verdone 2012), *Romanzo criminale* (M. Placido 2005), *Vallanzasca. Gli angeli del male* (M. Placido 2010).

Amigos (B. Manso & M. Cabotá 2011), *Café solo o con ellas* (A. Díaz Lorenzo 2007), *Dioses y perros* (D. Marqués & R. Montesinos 2014), *En fuera de juego* (D. Marqués 2011), *Gal* (M. Courtois 2006), *Grupo 7* (A. Rodríguez 2012), *No habrá paz para los malvados* (E. Urbizi 2011), *Ocho citas* (P. Romano & R. Sorogoyen 2008), *Perdiendo el norte* (N. G. Velilla 2015), *Primos* (D. Sánchez Arévalo 2011), *Tensión sexual no resuelta* (M.A Lamata 2010).