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# Subtitling swearwords in reality TV series from English into Chinese: A corpus-based study of *The Family*

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**Abstract.** This study takes a corpus-based approach to analyse the subtitling of English swearwords into Chinese in eight episodes of *The Family*, an Australian reality TV series produced by Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) in 2011. The results reveal a disparity in the overall frequency of swearwords and in the number of semantic categories and functions represented by the swearwords in both languages. Furthermore, in order to investigate this disparity, we adopt a “reverse engineering” model of translation analysis. We argue that the force of swearing in the original is mildly toned down in the Chinese subtitles. However, notwithstanding this tendency, the subtitles, produced under medium-imposed constraints, still serve as an adequate bridge between the original program and the target audience.

**Keywords:** swearwords; subtitling; reverse engineering; translation analysis.

## 1. Introduction

Subtitling swearwords has been widely identified in the literature as having a tone-down tendency for at least four reasons (e.g. Chen, 2004; Fernández, 2009; Greenail, 2012; Hjort, 2009; Mattsson, 2006; Taivalkoski-Shilov, 2008).

Firstly, a swearword may have no equivalent in the target language as swearwords are often culture-specific, and literal translations of swearwords with no target language equivalents are perceived as unnatural by the target language audience.

Secondly, swearwords that function as fillers in communication tend to be omitted in the subtitles. This is partly because of the time and space constraints in subtitling, and is partly due to the fact that these fillers are not critical elements in developing the plot, for example *You're bloody stupid*.

Thirdly, words considered to be swearwords or taboo in the source language culture and society might be rendered as words that are not sacred or forbidden in the target language. For example, while the English expression *For God's sake!* may be seen as taking the Lord's name in vain (Exodus 20:7), the translation of which in a non-Judeo-Christian target language culture may carry no offence at all.

Fourthly, the change of mode from spoken into written language tends to make the presence of swearwords be perceived as more offensive and aggressive.

Many researchers point out that swearwords contribute to the artistic integrity of the original audiovisual programs and possess cultural peculiarities (e.g. Chen, 2004; Fernández, 2009). Therefore, toning down swearwords in subtitles would result in presenting the audience who speaks a different language an altered and unauthentic experience of a foreign language and culture through an audiovisual program.

Few studies have been done on the language pairs of English and Asian languages. This paper attempts to fill this gap by discussing the subtitling of English swearwords into Chinese by two steps. First, it will examine if a tone-down tendency can be identified in the Chinese subtitles of English swearwords. Second, it will use a “reverse engineering” model to determine if these subtitled renditions are adequate for conveying the message essence and are of optimal relevance requiring minimum processing efforts by the target language audience.

## **2. Peculiarities of subtitling**

Subtitling is a specialised translation. It involves not only the rendition of one language into another language, but also the matching of the written texts with the soundtrack and the visual images on the screen.

The unique characteristics of subtitling add technical constraints for subtitlers. For example, the display of a chunk of subtitles only allows a minimum of 1.5 to 2 seconds and a maximum of 6.5 to 7 seconds on the screen (Gottlieb, 1998: 1008). Essential visual information might be blocked if more than two lines and more than 34-37 characters per line are displayed on a screen (*ibid*: 1008). In addition, the onset of a subtitle needs to be aligned with the camera change as much as possible to create a synchronous viewing experience for the audience.

These technical constraints together with the linguistic constraints in the process of subtitling increase the translation challenges and require different translation strategies (Diaz Cintas & Anderman, 2009). The most important strategy of subtitling, as argued by many researchers (e.g. Diaz Cintas, 2009; Georgakopoulou, 2009; Pettit, 2009), is condensation. This strategy aims to convey the plot-carrying message by avoiding verbal redundancies, changing or even omitting such non-critical elements as fillers and exclamations and re-shaping the original linguistic structure.

## **3. Analysing subtitling through “reverse engineering”**

In translating a text, the starting point is the source language text. In analysing a translation, however, the starting point is the target language text. The analysis of translation is analogous to “reverse engineering”. Generally speaking, “reverse engineering is simply an effort to try and recreate the design of a product by examining the product itself.

Reverse engineering is the process of asking “how did they do that?” and then trying to do it yourself” (Bell, 2007: 4). Similarly, translation analysis asks the question: “How did the translator produce the target language text?” This concept serves as an analogy to analysing, reflecting and evaluating a translated text. Figure 1 summarises this process:

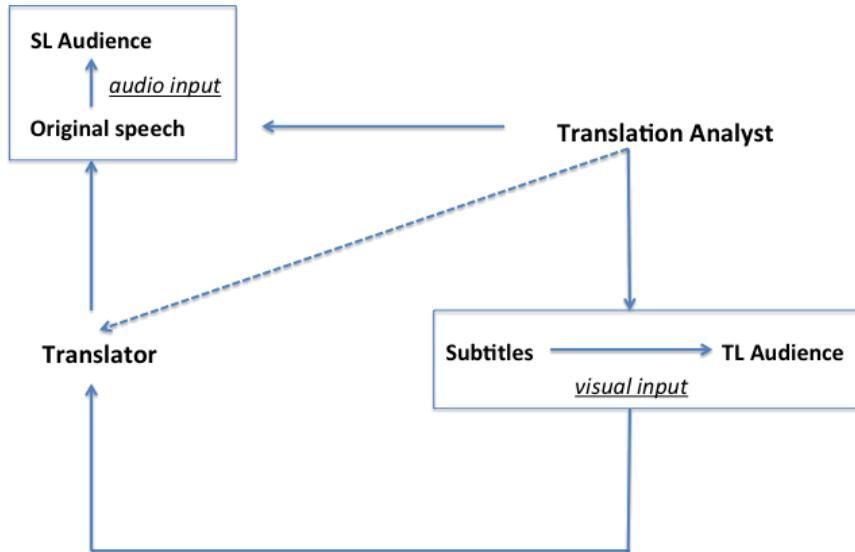


Figure 1. A “reverse engineering” model of translation analysis.

As shown in Figure 1, the translation analyst (e.g. evaluator, trainer, critic) analyses the form and content of the target language text, he or she speculates the factors that influenced the translator to generate their rendition as a conscious decision-making process, as well as their interpretation of the source language text. Finally, the analyst compares the source language text with the target language text for equivalence.

“Equivalence” is a highly controversial and debatable concept in translation studies. In order to avoid confusion, we adopt Eugene Nida’s “functional equivalence” in this paper. According to Nida, translators need to focus on conveying the message in a spirit and manner similar to that of the source text while tailoring it to meet the target readers’ linguistic needs and cultural expectations and elicit similar responses from them (Munday, 2012).

Nida’s Functional Equivalence introduces a target-reader oriented translation theory. This is crucial for subtitling. Subtitling, to a large extent, is driven by the audience’s need. However, Nida didn’t specify how to elicit responses and how to determine if the responses are equivalent between the source language and the target language audiences. What is missing in Nida’s framework is an explanation for the possible cognitive efforts that may be demanded of the target language audience by a translated message. This missing link may be compensated by Relevance Theory and its adaption to translation studies.

The Relevance Theory developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) proposes a cognitive view of communication. In their view, communication is an inferential process. A successful communication is a joint effort of both speaker and hearer in a cognitive environment. Relevance in this sense is a message being encoded in an utterance in such a way that a hearer is provided with sufficient contextual stimuli to make inferences in a given context without expending unnecessary processing efforts. The process is rewarding if it makes some kind of changes in the hearer’s cognitive environment. The context defined in this theory refers to a cognitive construct used by the hearer to interpret an utterance. It consists of the physical environment of the interlocutors and the encyclopaedic knowledge that the hearer can use to process the utterance.

Gutt (1990, 2010) applies this theory into translation. He focuses on translation as communication. In his argument, what a translator intends to communicate to the target language audience is the translator’s informative

intention. This is achieved by providing contextual clues that are sufficient enough for or adequately relevant to the audience to identify the translator's intention with ease or without unnecessary processing efforts. In this view, translation is an interpretive, not descriptive, use of language. A translator decides his way of interpretation of the original source language texts by evaluating the target language receiver's cognitive construct. A successful communication can be achieved if the translator's intention resembles the receiver's expectation. Thus in this view, the quality of translation is assessed in terms of its communicative effects and the way such effects are achieved.

Gutt also discusses two important concepts, namely, direct translation and indirect translation. Direct translation refers to a target language text which is processed by the target language receptor on the maximal interpretive assumptions, whereas indirect translation allows the receptor to use the minimal or the most accessible assumptions to generate an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. The nature of subtitling would make direct translation more difficult to achieve. Direct translation, in Gutt's sense, requires the receptor to have knowledge of the original language and culture. However, in cases involving translating between two culturally distant languages, the target audience or the receptor is unlikely to have such background knowledge of the source culture. To avoid misinterpretation, the translator needs to spot the differences between the source and target language and work around them in the translation, thus producing what Gutt terms "indirect translation".

In the context of subtitling, the intended audience is those who have limited or no knowledge of the original language and culture; they must rely on subtitles to decipher the program. If a subtitle requires a lot of processing efforts on the audience part, it makes the program more difficult to comprehend. Also, the spatial-temporal constraints in subtitling allow no footnotes or additional explanations in subtitles, thus preventing the introduction of any relevant source language background knowledge to the target audience. The audience is very good at disregarding unfamiliar concepts, poor translations or other difficulties in subtitles. But if these difficult subtitles take the audience away from the audiovisual experience and interrupt the flow of program watching, extra processing efforts would be required in order for the audience to decipher the intended meaning (Tuominen 2010). Taking these into consideration, indirect translation, which provides minimal but most accessible assumptions, would be more economical for and less likely to mislead the audience.

Additionally, more than simply written translation shown on the screen, subtitles are shown concurrently with other audio-visual inputs of the programs, contributing to the audience's global understanding of a program (Bairstow, 2011). The multimodal situation of a program, where subtitles are in integration with other audio-visual inputs, offers a better opportunity for inferences. For example, the implicature of "*Fuck!*" uttered by a person with a light smile and in a soft tone when he can't find his key to his house would be different from that of "*Fuck!*" exclaimed by another person who is involved in a brawl. Thus, audio-visual inputs in a program can provide additional contextual cues for the audience to generate inferences to understand the ongoing plot of a program. The contextual cues provided in adequate subtitles could confirm or facilitate the audience's inferential process to achieve the communicative goals of the original soundtracks, while inadequate subtitles may impede this inferential process and lead to confusion or misinterpretation.

The synergy of Functional Equivalence and Relevance Theory provides the theoretical foundation for the "reverse engineering" model of translation

analysis. In this model, the analysis process consists of the following three steps:

- 1) to determine if the subtitles of swearwords convey the essence of the original;
- 2) to determine if the communicative goal of the subtitles match that of the original;
- 3) to determine if subtitles of swearwords provide ease of comprehension.

#### **4. Research method: *The Family* corpus**

An Australian reality TV series *The Family* is chosen for this study. This program was produced by Special Broadcasting Services (SBS), Australia's multicultural and multilingual broadcaster, in 2011. It presents an eight-week intimate filming of the lives of an Australian family of Italian background living in Melbourne, Australia. The eight episodes of this program, aired on SBS TV and its website, were subtitled into simplified Chinese, Arabic and Italian.

This program is chosen for three reasons. First, the use of swearwords is pervasive in *The Family*. This program is rated "M" in Australia, recommended only for mature audiences and is remarked for containing coarse language. Second, the utterances produced in this reality TV series are spontaneous and non-scripted, thus rendering the speech data therein naturally occurring data. Third, the Chinese subtitles were done by accredited professional translators<sup>1</sup> who also received in-house training in subtitling at SBS. The subtitles were finally reviewed and edited by the SBS in-house subtitle editorial team. Having firstly undergone a quality assurance process, the quality of the Chinese subtitles was well controlled.

The English transcripts of the eight episodes and their Chinese subtitles form an English-Chinese parallel corpus for this study. AntConc 3.2.4 (Anthony, 2011)<sup>2</sup>, a corpus processing program, is used to search for and retrieve the English swearwords and their corresponding Chinese swearwords from the corpus. This program has a 'concordance' function, which allows for a search for an expression in a corpus, and then generates a list of lines of all instances in which the search expression occurs.

A four-stage procedure is conducted to analyse the Chinese rendition of the original English swearwords. First, the swearwords in the English transcripts of the soundtracks are identified. In a second step, their corresponding swearwords in Chinese subtitles are determined. In a third step, both the English and Chinese swearwords are classified and grouped in terms of their semantic categories and functions in the context. The fourth step is to identify the patterns of subtitling swearwords from English into Chinese.

#### **5. Data analysis**

A first comparative analysis between the swearwords in the English soundtracks and the Chinese subtitles show a significant difference in the choice of the semantic categories, as shown in Table 1.

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<sup>1</sup> In Australia, professional translators are those who have received translator's level-3 accreditation by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI).

<sup>2</sup> AntConc 3.2.4 is a freeware for corpus analysis and data-driven learning. It is available at <http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/software.html> (retrieved on 01/04/2012).

Table 1. Semantic categories of English and Chinese swearwords in *The Family*

	<b>English swearwords (Original)</b>	<b>Chinese swearwords (Subtitles)</b>
<b>Semantic categories</b>	Bodily function (e.g. <i>piss</i> )	Bodily function (e.g. 屁, <i>fart</i> )
	Body parts (e.g. <i>arse</i> )	Body parts (e.g. 闭嘴, <i>shut-up mouth</i> )
	Mother (e.g. <i>bastard</i> )	Mother (e.g. 他妈的, <i>his mother's</i> )
	Sex (e.g. <i>fuck</i> )	Sex (e.g. 摆, <i>fuck</i> )
	Animal (e.g. <i>bitch</i> )	Animal (e.g. 猪头, <i>pig-head</i> )
	Retardation (e.g. <i>idiot</i> )	Retardation (e.g. 白痴, <i>idiot</i> )
	Homosexual (e.g. <i>gay</i> )	Homosexual (e.g. 同性恋, <i>homosexual</i> )
	Monster (e.g. <i>freak</i> )	Monster (e.g. 女魔头, <i>female devil leader</i> )
	Death/Netherworld (e.g. <i>die</i> )	Death/Netherworld (e.g. 死人, <i>deadman</i> )
	Religion (e.g. <i>god</i> )	Immorality (e.g. 妓子, <i>whore</i> )
		Chaos (e.g. 混账, <i>mess-accounts</i> )
		Mutation (e.g. 变态, <i>mutant</i> )
		Waste (e.g. 垃圾, <i>rubbish</i> )
		Aversion (e.g. 讨厌, <i>hateful</i> )
		Diminutive (e.g. 玩意, <i>small and worthless things</i> )
		Separation (e.g. 滚, <i>roll away</i> )

As the table above shows, both English swearwords and their Chinese subtitles are drawn from a wide range of semantic categories. English swearwords are classified into ten semantic categories (Cf. Ljung, 2011: 35-44), whereas Chinese swearwords are grouped into sixteen categories (Cf. Zhou, 2005; Jiang, 2007).

The disparity suggests that a greater variety of Chinese swearwords are used to translate their English originals.

A calculation of the types and tokens of swearwords reveals another layer of difference between the swearwords in the English soundtracks and the Chinese subtitles. A summary table is given below.

Table 2. Comparison between types and tokens of English and Chinese swearwords in *The Family*

	<b>Swearwords in English original</b>	<b>Swearwords in Chinese subtitles</b>
<b>Categories</b>	10	16
<b>Types</b>	32	44
<b>Token</b>	526	378

This table shows that more types of swearwords are used in the Chinese subtitles. Interestingly, however, the overall number of swearword tokens is decreased by nearly one-third in the Chinese subtitles.

A calculation of swearwords in each episode, as shown in Table 3 below, echoes this disparity.

Table 3. Types and tokens of English and Chinese swearwords in each episode of *The Family*

	Ep1		Ep2		Ep3		Ep4		Ep5		Ep6		Ep7		Ep8	
	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C
Category	7	11	9	10	7	9	9	9	8	11	7	11	7	12	8	12
Type	19	18	16	13	18	12	18	16	16	23	13	17	18	22	18	21
Token	62	45	57	34	47	25	52	32	90	55	69	71	66	56	83	61

Clearly, there is a mismatch between swearwords in the English original soundtracks and their corresponding Chinese subtitles. This paper will report a detailed examination of episodes five and six to illustrate the reasons that account for such a mismatch. The reason for this choice is two-fold: first, as seen in Table 3, episode 5 has the largest number of swearwords in the English soundtrack across the eight episodes (i.e. 90 in total), whereas only 55 swearwords are found in its Chinese subtitles. Second, episode 6 is exceptional in that it possesses more tokens of swearwords in Chinese subtitles than those in the English soundtrack.

Two additional parameters of swearwords are also taken into analysis: the functions of swearwords and patterns of translation. The aim is to compare the intended implicature of the English swearwords and their Chinese translations in a given context and to examine the strategies used in subtitling swearwords into Chinese.

### 5.1 A functional analysis of swearwords in episodes 5 and 6

According to Ljung (2011: 29-35), swearwords have five major functions: they can be used as expletive interjections (e.g. *Fuck!*) to express emotions, or as oaths (e.g. *By God*), or to curse others (e.g. *Fuck you!*), or to insult others by name calling or derogatory descriptions (e.g. *You idiot!*), or to intensify the following adjectives or adverbs (e.g. *We are so fucking stupid!*).

Table 4 below summarises the functions of swearwords in the English soundtracks and their Chinese subtitles in episodes 5 and 6.

Table 4. Summary of functions of swearwords in English soundtracks and Chinese subtitles.

<b>Functions of Swearwords</b>	<b>Episode 5</b>		<b>Episode 6</b>	
	<b>English</b>	<b>Chinese</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Chinese</b>
<i>Expletive interjections</i>	9	10	9	8
<i>Oath</i>	0	0	0	0
<i>Curses/Insults</i>	7	4	8	6
<i>Name calling/Derogatory descriptions</i>	30	11	31	28
<i>Intensifier/Emphasis</i>	29	13	19	18

It can be observed that there is a significant mismatch in the number of functions in English and Chinese: fewer functions of the swearwords in the English soundtracks are converted into the Chinese subtitles. This suggests not only a tone-down tendency in subtitling but also a shift or loss of functions of swearwords in subtitling. In episode 5, the swearing force seems to be weakened in the Chinese subtitles as the number of swearwords used as

insults or intensifiers in particular are halved. Episode 6 displays a similar pattern.

Two interesting questions arise here: 1) to what extent have the functions of the swearwords been retained in the subtitles? 2) Would these shifts of functions achieve the same contextual effects of the original? Some examples are given in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Functions of swearing and their examples in *The Family*.

<b>Function</b>	<b>English soundtracks</b>	<b>Corresponding subtitles</b>	<b>Chinese subtitles</b>
<i>Expletive interjection</i>	(1) Oh, <i>shit!</i> Why is everything pink?	<u>糟糕!</u> 怎么都变成粉红色了? ( <u>Terrible!</u> Why does everything turn pink?)	
	(2) Oh, <i>god!</i> You did all that for nothing.	真糟糕, 白忙一场。 ( <u>That's terrible</u> , you did it for nothing.)	
<i>Oath</i>	N/A	N/A	
<i>Curse</i>	(3)- No, Stefan, your idea sucked! - <i>Fuck you!</i>	- 这是什么烂点子。 (This is a bad idea.) - 去你的！ (Get lost! [Gloss: go-away yours])	
	(4) – You did all that for nothing. - Oh, <i>fuck my life!</i>	- 白忙一场。 - 操！ (- You did it for nothing. - Fuck!)	
<i>Insult/derogatory description</i>	(5) Can't I do shit during the day, you <i>idiot</i> ?	我白天不能做事吗, 你这个蠢货? (Can't I do things during the day, you <u>fool</u> [Gloss: stupid goods]?)	
<i>Intensifier</i>	(6) You're <i>bloody</i> lazy!	你太懒了。 (You're <u>too</u> lazy.)	

In Ljung's view, expletive interjections, curses and insults are "swearing constructions that function as utterances of their own" (2011: 30). Interjectional swearing is cathartic and usually serves as exclamations of a speaker's emotion such as annoyance, surprise and frustration (as in examples (1) and (2)).

The word *shit* in example (1) tends to be regarded as vulgar as it refers to faecal matters, whereas *god* in example (2) is sacred in its literal sense. However, both expressions "*Oh, shit!*" and "*Oh, god!*" are formulaic expressions in English for speakers to express feelings. Both expressions are rendered as 糟糕 (*zāogāo*, "terrible") in the Chinese subtitles. This word itself is not a swearword in Chinese, but it is a common adjectival interjection. In examples (1) and (2), the use of this word 糟糕 (*zāogāo*) serves to express the speaker's negative evaluation of the situation that he encountered and as a vehicle of the speaker to convey his feelings of frustration and surprise.

Therefore, both English swearwords and their Chinese renditions convey similar implicatures in the context, but the force of swearing is downgraded in the Chinese subtitles, since they do not fully reflect the coarseness of the English original.

Although directing at others, curses identified in the episodes are "non-serious cursing" (Ljung 2011: 108) as they are not meant to bring misfortunes to others. They are expressed as unfriendly suggestions and indicate dislike or disapproval of somebody or something, as in example (3).

Here, Stefan and Adrian were discussing a Christmas present for their mother. The swearing expression ‘*Fuck you!*’ indicates contradiction of its preceding comment made by Adrian. Unlike its English original, which refers to sexual acts, the Chinese subtitle 去你的 (*qù nǐ de*, Go away yours) in example (3) invokes the theme of separation. However, it is a formulaic expression in Chinese commonly used to express the denial of its preceding utterance, and it sounds less rude and confronting than the *fuck [somebody]* construction in English.

Example (4) is a self curse, which literally calls upon punishment on the speaker himself. It is not a real suggestion, but an expletive interjection that conveys the speaker’s frustration and annoyance of being unable to fix the Christmas light bulbs. The challenge for subtitlers here is that self-curses are rare in Chinese. Thus, no corresponding idiomatic swearing expression can be found in Chinese. The literal translation “操我的生活” (*fuck my life*) is unacceptably unnatural in Chinese. In the subtitle, this multi-word swearing phrase has been rendered into a single-word swearing expression 操 (*cào*, fuck), a frequently used expletive interjection in Chinese. Similar to “*fuck my life*”, “操” is a swearing formula that serves to express a mixture of such feelings as irritation and frustration in its immediate context of the subtitle.

Ljung also points out that insults/derogatory descriptions are usually expressed as name-calling and are evaluative (ibid: 32-33). “*You idiot*” in example 5 is a typical example in English, indicating the addressee of the speaker has a low-level intelligence and thus cannot make proper judgments or decisions. Its corresponding Chinese expression “蠢货” (*chúnhuò*, stupid goods) is a common swearword which not only expresses a negative evaluation of the addressee but also literally downgrades her to non-human. Both the English original and its Chinese subtitle give vent to the speaker’s irritating and annoying feelings.

“*Bloody*” in example 6 is a slot-filler that serves to “make up longer strings” (ibid: 30). It does not contribute to the substantial meaning of the utterance where it occurs, but expresses a higher intensity of the following adjective “*lazy*”. In Australian English in particular, this swearword may also serve to intensify the negative tone of the speaker (Hong, 2008). In the subtitle, it has been translated as “太” (*tài*, very), which is a common intensifier of gradable adjectives in Chinese. However, the use of this non-swearword in the Chinese subtitle softens or decreases the negativity and the force of swearing as expressed in the English original.

The examples listed above suggest that despite a slight shift or loss of functions, the Chinese subtitles have largely retained the functions of English original swearwords. The comparison between English swearwords and Chinese swearwords suggests a slight tone-down tendency in some of the subtitles.

## 5.2 Subtitling strategies identified in episodes 5 and 6

The quantitative comparison of the categories and functions of swearwords in English and Chinese only serves to suggest a general tendency; it does not explain how English is subtitled into Chinese. Therefore, the strategies adopted in subtitling episodes five and six require a detailed analysis. Four major patterns of subtitling swearing in *The Family* from English into Chinese are identified: 1) category shift, 2) omission, 3) literal translation, and 4) de-swearing.

The first and most commonly used strategy, *Category Shift*, which accounts for 37%, refers to a change of semantic category (see Table 1.) when subtitling an English swearword into a Chinese swearword. Examples are given below.

Table 6. Examples of *Category Shift* found in the corpus

(1)	- Can you please be careful? They don't make them like that anymore. - Calm the <i>fuck</i> down.	- 小心点好吗？这个已经买不到了。 (Be careful, okay? This can't be bought anymore.) - 奶奶的，冷静点。 ( <u>Grandmother's</u> , calm down.)
(2)	- You <i> dickhead</i> . - Not good enough.	- 你这个 <u>猪头</u> 。 (You're such a <u>pig-head</u> .) - 不够好。 (Not good enough.)
(3)	- Get used to it, mate. Happy wife happy life. - Yeah, <i>ball-breaker</i> wife, <i>ball-breaker</i> life.	- 你要习惯。快乐的老婆，愉快的生活。 (You need to get used to it. Happy wife, happy life.) - 对呀， <u>魔鬼老婆</u> ， <u>炼狱生活</u> 。 (Right, <u>devil-like</u> wife, <u>hell-like</u> life.)
(4)	They don't give a <i>shit</i> . It's all about them.	他们才不 <u>鸟</u> 呢。 (They don't <i>fuck</i> [Gloss: bird] it). 他们只关心自己。 (They only care about themselves.)

Example (1) given above is a typical example where an English swearword from the semantic category of sex “*fuck*” is subtitled into a Chinese swearword from the semantic category of mother “奶奶的” (*náináide*, grandmother’s). There also involves a shift of functions: *fuck* in the English soundtrack is a slot-filler whereas 奶奶的 in Chinese is an expletive interjection. From relevance-theoretic perspective, however, this rendition is appropriate in making the subtitle as relevant to the Chinese audience as the corresponding English soundtrack is to its English audience.

Here, Stefan got irritated by Adrian who kept warning him of not breaking the bulbs. So he inserted “*the fuck*” between “*calm down*” to give vent to his feelings of annoyance and anger. When translating this utterance into Chinese, the Chinese subtitle would sound unnatural if its literal counterpart 操 is inserted between “冷静” (calm down). Consequently, this unnatural subtitle would require more unnecessary processing effort of the audience. However, the rendition into the mother-theme swearing interjection 奶奶的 (*náináide*, grandmother’s) would give rise to a strong implicature of irritation felt by Stefan towards Adrian, since it is a natural and typically vulgar way for Chinese speakers to express anger and annoyance. In other words, such a rendition matches the Chinese audience’s expectation of ways of expressing negative emotion, and at the same time the processing effort has been minimised.

The English swearword *fuck* and its variants, which account for 30% of the overall swearwords in the corpus of *The Family* original soundtracks, present an interesting case in this study. In the English soundtrack corpus, *fuck* is identified as used in various parts of speech. For example, it can be an interjection as in *Oh, fuck!*, or a verb as in *Fuck you!*, or a noun as in *I don't give a fuck anymore!* It has morphological variants like  *fucking*, as in *I'm just fucking annoyed!* It also appeared in a number of euphemistic variants such as *frigging* (as in *A frigging camp!*) and *fricking* (as in *You need to put it fricking up there*). It can also be followed by prepositions to form phrasal verbs such as *fuck up* and *fuck off*.

When subtitling these *fuck* variants, one-to-one equivalents in most cases could not be found in Chinese. The literal equivalent of *fuck* in Chinese is 操 (*cào*). However, this word in Chinese can only be used as a verb (e.g. 操你妈! > *Fuck your mother!*) or an interjection (e.g. 操! > *Fuck!*). Also, it has no morphological variants comparable to that of the English *fuck*.

Therefore, different types and forms of swearwords are required when subtitling English *fuck* into Chinese in order to compensate for the difference between English and Chinese.

Examples from other episodes are given below. The literal translation into English is provided for the Chinese subtitles as follows.

Table 7. Examples of variants of *fuck* found in the corpus

(5)	I wanna buy this house, <i>fuck you!</i> (in Episode 7)	我要买这套房子，你 <u>去死吧</u> ！ (I want to buy this house, you <u>go to die</u> .)
(6)	The food was <i> fucking horrible</i> . (in Episode 4)	食物太 <u>他妈的</u> 糟了。 (The food is <u>his mother's</u> bad.)
(7)	<i>Fuck!</i> (in Episode 3)	操! (Fuck!)
(8)	I did it... I've done it, like, <i>frigging</i> every day, I swear. (in Episode 7)	我做了...我已经做了。 我 <u>他奶奶的</u> 每天都做了，我发誓。 (I did it... I've done it. I did it <u>his grandmother's</u> everyday, I swear.)
(9)	<i>Fuck off!</i> (in Episode 5)	滚开! ( <u>Roll away!</u> )

According to McEnery's (2004: 30) scale of offence, *fuck* is ranked as a "strong" swearword. Here, *fuck* and its variants are translated into Chinese by using five different renditions from four different semantic categories: sex, death/netherworld, mother, and separation. All of these words carry a strong force of insult in Chinese (Jiang, 2007). In the Chinese culture, cursing someone to die is a strong taboo (as in (5)). The Chinese people place strong emphasis on honour in the filial relationship, thus derogatory references to one's mother (6) and grandmother (8) carry profound offence. In (9), to dismiss someone by telling them to "roll away", i.e. exiting in a humiliating manner, indicates disapproval and even hostility. Thus, the Chinese renditions here adequately convey the communicative effect of the English original.

Example (2) in Table 6 is interesting as the English soundtrack involves a conventional metaphorical expression where a sex organ is used to refer to a stupid and despicable man. Its literal counterpart in Chinese 龟头 (*guītóu*, turtle-head > "glans penis") can also be used to insult others, but does not have the similar associative meaning. Thus, it would not be able to provide the appropriate contextual clues for the Chinese audience to make the right inferences.

In the subtitle, the translator rendered "猪头" (*zhūtóu*, pig-head) as the substitute for "dickhead". This word is one of the conventionalised disparaging swearwords in Chinese, and it is used to ridicule a person as being foolish. In this way, the translator is successful in making the message in the English soundtrack relevant to the Chinese audience: the way the subtitle is expressed meets the Chinese audience's expectation, and the audience can achieve adequate contextual effects without expending an undue amount of effort in processing the subtitle.

Example (3) is the most challenging. Here, David used a metaphorical expression "ball-breaker" to contradict his father's suggestion. This expression is defined as "a demanding woman who destroys men's confidence" or "a job or situation that is demanding and arduous and punishing" (Princeton University "WordNet 3.0", 2012). Also, David's utterance is characterised by a specific stylistic feature where the word "wife" rhymes with the word "life". These two features make David's utterance come across as loaded with contempt and sarcasm. This can also be told from his facial expression that his lip corner is slightly raised on one side of

his face. The challenge for the subtitler was that “*ball-breaker*” has no direct equivalent in Chinese. To Chinese audience, its literal translation cannot be optimally relevant. Rather, it would require the audience to process it with greater efforts, as well as to lead them to generate inferences that are not intended by the original utterance. The closest Chinese expression in its literal sense is 蛋疼 (*dànténg*, ball-aching), which is a newly coined term by Chinese netizens. This term is used to describe someone who suffers from extreme boredom or who does irrational things out of extreme boredom<sup>3</sup>. Thus, its associate meaning differs from *ball-breaker*. Thus, the rendition into this term would fail to provide adequate relevance in subtitling to maintain a successful communication.

In the subtitle above, the first *ball-breaker* is translated as “魔鬼” (*móguǐ*, devil) and the second rendered as “炼狱” (*liànyù*, purgatory or hell). When someone is described as a devil and a situation as purgatory or hell in Chinese, the Chinese audience tend to infer that the person in question is wicked and evil and situation is unpleasant or even painful. Also, the Chinese subtitles retain the stylistic feature where 老婆 (*lǎopó*, wife) rhymes with 生活 (*shēnghuó*, life). Thus, the contradictory and sarcastic attitudes intended in the English soundtrack have been conveyed in its Chinese subtitle. In other words, the subtitle is relevant as the intended cognitive effect is produced by the subtitle which requires little cognitive processing effort.

Example (4) involves a shift of a swearword from the category of “bodily function” to a swearword of the “sex” category (i.e. 鸟 *niǎo*, bird). This word in Chinese is a phonologically and semantically euphemised form of the profane word 尿 (*diào*, dick). Since both “give a shit” and “鸟” are formulaic vulgar expressions used to give vent to contempt, irritation and disapproval, the Chinese subtitle has succeeded in achieving the interpretive resemblance of the utterance to its English original.

The second strategy *Omission*, which accounts for 31%, refers the deletion of swearwords when subtitling from English into Chinese. This subtitling strategy accounts for the decrease in the total number of swearwords in the Chinese subtitles.

Table 8. Examples of *Omission* found in the corpus

(10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Like those stubby holders where you put it as a glove on your fingers.</li> <li>- He doesn't use that shit. He just holds the cold bottle.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-那种像手套一样。 装罐装啤酒的套子。 (Like those gloves)</li> <li>-他才不会用那个咧。 他直接用手拿。 (He doesn't use that at all.) He holds it with his bare hand.)</li> </ul>
(11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We got her a book.</li> <li>- Oh, my god. I think that's the biggest insult.</li> <li>- “Merry Christmas, here is a fucking book.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-我们送她一本书。 (We give her a book)</li> <li>-天啊，我认为那是最大的侮辱。 “送你一本书，圣诞快乐！” (Oh heaven, I reckon that's the biggest insult) Give you a book as a present, Merry Christmas!)</li> </ul>

The two examples above are taken from a scenario where the three boys were discussing the Christmas presents for their parents. The swearwords

<sup>3</sup> Details of this term are available at <http://baike.baidu.com/view/1193524.htm>

“shit” and “fucking” express a strong sense of negativity, but they are omitted in the Chinese subtitles. In Example (10), a literal translation of “shit”, such as “大便” (*dàbiàn*, faeces), would make the Chinese subtitle unnatural. The rendition of “fucking” into the Chinese “他妈的” (*tāmāde*, his mother’s) in Example (11) would not be a natural sounding expression in Chinese either, thus the swearword was omitted entirely in the subtitle. The trade-off for maintaining idiomacity in these subtitles is that the original vulgar flavour and intended emphasis is lost.

The third strategy is termed *De-swearing*. It accounts for 19%, and refers to the translation of English swearwords into plain, non-swearwords in Chinese. It is another factor that contributes to the imbalance between English and Chinese swearwords. Consider the following examples.

Table 9. Examples of De-swearing found in the corpus

(12)	And then... Oh, no. Hang on. That <i>fucks up</i> .	然后...这样不行。 (Then...this <u>doesn't work</u> .)
(13)	- We're getting Mum a chocolate fountain. - No, that's <i>gay</i> .	-我们要送妈妈一个巧克力喷泉。 (We want to give mom a chocolate fountain.) - <u>太恶心了</u> 。 ( <u>Too disgusting</u> .)

Here, the terms “fuck up” and “gay” are offensive and inappropriate expressions, though they commonly occur in the speech of young people and teenagers (McEnery & Xiao, 2004: 241). It is noteworthy that “恶” (*è*) in Example 8 is a relatively new term in contemporary Chinese. It is a shortened form of “恶心” (*ěxīn*, revolting). But now it is a common colloquial term used by young Chinese to refer to something that is not decent or appropriately done. Obviously, the Chinese renditions in these examples convey the meaning of negativity in a less coarse way.

*Literal Translation*, which accounts for 13%, is the fourth strategy. It refers to the rendition of English swearwords into Chinese swearwords of the same semantic category. Examples are given below.

Table 10. Examples of *Literal Translation* found in the corpus

(14)	Ah, your phone's on, <i>you idiot</i> .	你电话响啦, <u>白痴</u> (Your phone is ringing, <u>idiot</u> .)
(15)	He's <i>such an idiot</i> . He has no idea what he's doing.	他 <u>笨死了</u> , 他不知道自己在干嘛。 (He is <u>deadly stupid</u> . He doesn't know what he's doing.)

Here, the English nominal swearword “*idiot*” is translated into a noun and an adjective respectively. The adjective might not read as a direct translation of its English counterpart. However, it is a combination of a free morpheme “stupid” and a degree affix “deadly”. Thus, it not only conveys the meaning of “stupidity”, but also the indication of emphasis expressed by the “such + noun” construction.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

A “reverse engineering” model of translation analysis of the Australian English reality TV series *The Family* shows that the swearing in the TV series is mildly toned down in the Chinese subtitles. The communicative functions of original swearwords are largely retained, and the original offensive and aggressive force is primarily conveyed by adopting the “category shift” (37%) and “literal translation” (13%) strategies. They provide sufficient contextual cues for audience to generate inferences consistent with the principle of relevance. Even in some of those subtitles where swearwords are omitted or replaced by less vulgar expressions, partial negative implications can still be recovered to allow the audience to use those accessible assumptions to generate a general interpretation of the original.

From a translation analyst’s point of view, there are at least seven reasons that might contribute to this tendency.

- Firstly, the linguistic differences between English and Chinese may prevent subtitlers from rendering one-to-one translation. In general, Chinese swearwords have far fewer formal variants compared to those in English.
- Secondly, working under the temporal-spatial constraints imposed by the subtitling medium compels subtitlers to be selective in deciding which information to retain, and to render concise translations.
- Thirdly, subtitling involves a shift in modality, from spoken input into written input. The modality shift *per se* causes a register elevation from the informal to the formal. Vulgarity is typically associated with informal colloquial speech, thus the conversion of it into formal written text would result in a decrease in the vulgarity.
- Fourthly, where a speaker swears emphatically in quick successions (e.g. the utterance *Fuck, fuck fuck!* in Episode 1), such repetitions often do not make it into the subtitles, only the first instance is retained.
- Fifthly, subtitlers may have to opt for more free translations in the presence of creative language practices such as *ball-breaking wife*, *ball-breaking life* to retain the original meaning and intention.
- Sixthly, the program was subtitled mainly for Chinese communities in Australia who have some familiarity with the Australian culture, and are not totally ignorant of the English language, and the social implicatures of swearwords (e.g. the young male in-group conversations in this program). Any significant loss or distortion of swearwords may confuse the audience or create doubts on the integrity of the subtitles.
- Seventhly, it is conceivable that subtitlers would face moral and social restraints when working with such cultural taboos as swearwords. They may adopt self-censorship consciously or unconsciously, causing them to omit some of the swearwords in their translations to meet the assumed expectation and degree of tolerance of the target audience.

Although the subtitlers face many challenges and constraints, the toned-down swearwords in Chinese subtitles of *The Family* do not significantly affect the communicative goals of the English utterances in which swearwords appear from the perspective of Relevance Theory. Also, the

retrieval of the communicative goal of the English original swearwords is not largely contingent on the faithful representation of the original language use in subtitles. Alternative words, expressions or structures can always be found to compensate for the loss of swearing force in the one-to-one translation.

Thus, the implication that this study tends to suggest is that the subtitling of swearwords should not focus on if the swearwords should be omitted in the subtitles, but on the strategies of how to render these words around tempo-spatial limitations and cultural constraints.

The present study is limited in scope, in that no objective measuring of audience's processing efforts and comprehension were undertaken. Further studies drawing on other disciplines such as psychology, linguistics and communication studies are suggested to investigate these aspects of subtitling.

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