The International Journal for Translation & Interpreting Research
trans-int.org

Linguistic *werk* in streamed drag: A translational and translanguaging analysis

Iván Villanueva-Jordán
Peruvian University of Applied Sciences
ivan.villanueva@upc.pe

DOI: 10.12807/ti.117202.2025.a12

Abstract: In this article, I analyze the inter- and intralingual relationships of two international editions of the Drag Race franchise, *Drag Race España* and *Drag Race México*. This study aims to discover how drag is indexicalized through translation and translanguaging strategies and how these strategies reconfigure the representation of local drag culture, subjectivities, and communities in relationship to globally owned formats distributed through streaming. The study follows a qualitative approach. Six episodes of each show were selected following non-probabilistic or purposive criteria. These criteria included (a) having episodes with different structures and (b) gathering dialogues from varied situations and most drag contestants. All the dialogues from the selected episodes were analyzed using a comparative approach. The rationale for this methodology is that contrasting mediatized transnational gendered representations can lead to a better understanding of how symbolic and cultural capital is inserted in television formats to favor their consumption through different distribution technologies, translation, and translanguaging strategies.

Keywords: drag, queer, reality television, RuPaul, translation

1. Introduction: Drag through the translational glass

Drag, generally understood as a form of non-normative performance or cultural tradition, has been the object of theoretical and empirical translation studies. The specific action of cross-dressing has led to deconstructive reflections about the binary oppositions of source text/target text or literal/free translation (Epstein & Gillett, 2017; St. André, 2014, 2018). According to St. André (2018), drag as a cross-identity performance offers "a non-essentialist, post-positivist way of understanding translation and captures a variety of practices" (p. 86). Epstein & Gillett (2017) also highlight that "drag artists from the beginning have called into question the legitimacy of the allegedly authentic and thus became the prototype for queer" and that queer translation like cross-dressing "is able to point up, and to a certain extent shrilly parody, the constitutive incoherence of the totalitarian thinking through which a dominant ideology asserts itself" (p. 3). Other empirical studies have explored drag in different media and textual traditions—for example, adult animation shows (Bustamante et al., 2022), documentaries (Villanueva-Jordán & Martínez Pleguezuelos, 2022), and ethnographic texts (Villanueva-Jordán & Ramírez-Colombier, 2023). *RuPaul's Drag Race* (*RPDR*) has been the preferred case for analyzing the linguistic dimension of drag, notably the verbal realization of camp. Most studies of *RPDR* in translation address the innovative and

transgressive use of English to represent non-conforming gender practices. These studies have used contrastive methods in *ad hoc* corpora of interlingual subtitles in Portuguese (Cândido Moura & Iost Vinhas, 2023; Lucas Tavares & de Oliveira Branco, 2021; Sarfati & dos Santos, 2022), voice-over dialogues in Peninsular Spanish (Passa, 2021), and paratextual sources to explore the translatability of *RPDR* "terminology" into Macedonian (Ilieva, 2022). Other studies have focused on the Latin American fansubbers of *RPDR* and their affective practice of translating, as well as the influence of their subtitled products in promoting the use and adaptation of camp talk in Spanish through social networks (Villanueva-Jordán, 2019b, 2019a). However, besides the relevant knowledge achieved through the contrastive analysis of microtextual features, a question that remains is how the representation of drag—which includes discursive, generic, and textual strata—changes in the different editions of Drag Race now that the format has been exported to more than 15 different cultural environments ranging from the United Kingdom to Canada through Belgium and more recently Brazil.

In this article, I analyze the interlingual relationships in the reality television franchise Drag Race, specifically in the international editions of *Drag Race España* (Corrales & Pérez Vega, 2021) and *Drag Race México* (Bailey et al., 2023), two cases that share the same language but are produced in cultural environments marked by nation-state boundaries. These international shows of the Drag Race franchise are examples of cultural and commercial technologies (re)created to amplify the success of an original format in new television environments (Moran, 2014). A "culture-based comparative approach" (Esser, 2010, p. 273) is relevant to reality television franchises because they contribute to the construction of glocal and translational imaginaries (Darling-Wolf, 2014). In other words, contrasting mediatized transnational gendered representations —such as drag through Drag Race—can lead to a better understanding of how local values are inserted in television formats or transformed into (symbolic, cultural, and erotic) capital to favor their distribution and consumption. In this study, the purpose is to discover how drag is indexicalized through translation and translanguaging strategies and how these strategies reconfigure the representation of local drag culture, subjectivities, and communities in relationship to globally owned and distributed formats. These research questions or objectives are based on the theoretical supposition that communicative practices that integrate diverse linguistic and semiotic resources can be transformative and contribute to transcending monolingual ideologies (Blackledge & Creese, 2017), but, in particular contexts such as the entertainment industry, these practices can also support language ideologies or other types of normativities through which media and gender technologies converge.

In the next section, I elaborate on the "linguistic *werk*" concept regarding the analysis of telecinematic discourse, particularly the linguistic representations used in contemporary streamed reality programs such as Drag Race. Section 3 delineates the method design, including the sampling criteria and the analytical approach deployed for analyzing the episodes of *Drag Race México* and *Drag Race España*. Sections 4 and 5 include the results organized according to the main themes from the coding phases: the textual function of catchphrases and their translation and the translanguaging dimension of Drag Race as an effective means to expand the franchise and its diverse cultural assets.

2. Linguistic work as a form of queer labor in Drag Race

Reality television productions have become a field of critical inquiry because of the common assumption that unscripted entertainment deals with authenticity and "the real"—generally understood not as fiction or representation but as non-actors reacting spontaneously to everyday situations (Niedzwiecki & Morris, 2017). However, while the general aim of reality shows is to (re)present everyday life, their underlying narratives—even traceable to popular common sense, such as fundamental mythical structures found in fairy tales (Nunes, 2018)—mobilize ideologically charged notions that can totalize the material and symbolic dimensions of the self (Bignell, 2014; Palmer, 2010). In the case of reality competitions, media researchers argue that the set of rules function as instruments for a mediated social authority (the host, the expert, the judges) through which the audience vicariously assesses how contestants behave or play the game while assimilating the criteria or values to criticize ordinary people like themselves (Couldry, 2010). This "pedagogic authority" can be found in shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Bailey et al., 2009), where the discourse of passion becomes a norm to reduce failure not because of systematic homophobia but because of a lack of determination on the part of the queer individual (Lovelock, 2019). These labor politics promote the most developed practices of neoliberalism, such as not paying workers (the contestants), making them believe that the ultimate beneficiaries of work are themselves ("entrepreneurs of the self"), maximizing profit not from material goods, but from symbolic capital and skills related to the "soft" exploitation of the body (Couldry, 2008; Ouellette, 2020).

The work carried out by the contestants in Drag Race can be explained using the general arguments related to the "quintessential neoliberal media form" that is reality TV (Lovelock, 2019, p. 160). Drag Race functions according to the industrial model of extracting value from the workers, but, in this case, the drag queens perform without a regular compensation plan in the American or international versions of the franchise (Ferreira, 2021; Martín, 2022). For instance, Mehran (2022) has analyzed Drag Race's "televisual exploitation" by identifying the technical and textual strategies through which material and cultural labor is invisibilized and edited to favor or disadvantage some drag queens during the competition and even outside the reality show. Also, the extraction of value depends on the physical effort of the drag queens, as well as their using their knowledge or set of skills or mobilizing other types of embodied capital achieved through lived experiences. One of the dimensions of labor in Drag Race is linguistic work (Anthony, 2014; La Fountain-Stokes, 2021) —for example, being fierce or fabulous by using camp talk or "reading" other contestants—as a demonstration of speaking back to hegemonic formations (or simply acting as if). This dimension of queer labor or *werk* integrates excess, style, and performance (Moore, 2012, 2018) in opposition to the supposed authenticity of the reality show and is a critical component of the internationalization and success of Drag Race as a franchise.

The representational practices of *RuPaul's Drag Race* have exaggerated and essentialized certain aspects of drag. For instance, the high fashion worn by contestants has created a material and visual culture that raises the financial expectations for non-*Drag Race* performers to meet their audiences' demands (Collins, 2017). Additionally, the drag communicative practices among the cast (contestants and judges)—reading, snapping, *throwing shade* (Johnson, 1995)—are almost a compulsory component of every season (e.g., the reading mini challenge) and even every episode (the judges' comments during the

runway). Unlike early queer labor where camp was subtly integrated into cinema (Tinkcom, 2002), *Drag Race* openly uses camp through verbalization, or "camp talk" (Harvey, 2000). RuPaul's catchphrases, originating from his early music and media appearances, shape the show's macrostructure, adding coherence to episodes and the overall narrative of becoming the next drag superstar. Contestants, in turn, are expected to contribute to this linguistic culture, or *werk*, which adds to the show's symbolic and cultural capital. As (re)presenting authenticity is the main currency of reality TV, this linguistic *werk* serves as an indexicalized resource of the fabulousness of drag queens and queer subjects that is fixed and threaded into the television format to be consumed. In this manner, Drag Race is a successful and profitable reality franchise because, for more than fifteen years, it has mediated access to cultural practices through a television format that has solidified a specific construct of drag based on queer labor, particularly the *werk* of drag queens.

3. Designing a method to explore *Drag Race España* and *Drag Race México*

To use Yin's (2014, p. 53) terminology, this paper is based on a "multiple embedded case study" of the first seasons of *Drag Race España* and *Drag Race México*. These shows were selected for their contrastive value, essential for the translational and translanguaging models used in this study, ensuring both internal and external validity. Examining two cases allows for the application of the same methodological sequences (replication) to either support or challenge propositions based on the results. In other words, the results from each show can be compared for analytical generalization of the theoretical models used (Saldanha & O'Brien, 2013, p. 38). The study is embedded, as it involves multiple levels of analysis, including lexical representations, phrasal and thematic structures, and discourses, all of which will be analyzed using descriptive and thematic coding strategies outlined below.

Table 1: Episodes selected for analysis

Drag Race España (Season 1, 2021)	Drag Race México (Season 1, 2023)	Criteria
"Welcome Queens" (Episode 1, 69 minutes)	"My Land" (Episode 1, 60 minutes)	(a, b) introduction of all contestants
"Snatch game - Spain" (Episode 4, 69 minutes)	"Dragapulco Shore: The Rusical" (Episode 4, 60 minutes)	(a, b) reading challenge
"The Art of Drag" (Episode 5, 65 minutes)	"Mexican *Telenovela*" (Episode 7, 60 minutes)	(a) acting challenge (a) sewing challenge
"Drags of comedy" (Episode 5, 72 minutes)	"Spicy Roast" (Episode 9, 60 minutes)	(a) comedy challenge
"The Reunion" (Episode 8, 50 minutes)	"The Reunion" (Episode 11, 56 minutes)	(a, b) all contestants participate
"Grand Finale" (Episode 9, 63 minutes)		(a) winner's coronation

Based on the qualitative approach to these cases, six episodes of each show were selected following non-probabilistic or purposive criteria (see Table 1 above). These criteria included (a) having episodes with different structures and (b) gathering dialogues from varied situations and most drag contestants. All the dialogues from the selected episodes were analyzed using an inductive approach in two coding cycles (Saldaña, 2021). The first coding cycle followed

a descriptive strategy to identify the basic topic of the dialogues or other microtextual structures. All the codes that resulted from this cycle were categorized into more complex topics (themes) to organize recurring ideas or concurring codes.

Table 2 consolidates the categories (cohesion, massness, identity, sexuality) and their respective subcategories derived from the coding process. These categories emerged from the themes identified within the episodes. Additionally, the textual, ideational, and interpersonal metafunctions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) were necessary to comprehend how the textual elements contributed to the structure and discourse of both programs. Due to the length of the article, Sections 4 and 5 exclusively focus on presenting results associated with the cohesion and massness categories.

Table 2: Functions and categories

Metafunction	Categories	Subcategories	Textual realization
Textual	Cohesion		Catchphrases
Ideational	Massness		Catchphrases
			Song interpolations
			Intertextuality
	Identity	Gender	
		Sexual Identity	
	Sexuality	Body	
		Sex/sexual position	
Interpersonal	*Mariconeo*		Feminization/*mujereo*

4. The textual and translational function of catchphrases

In Drag Race, catchphrases serve as cohesive elements, linking scenes and marking key moments within episodes and across a season. They signal the competition's stages, and because the Drag Race franchise follows a standardized structure, these catchphrases—originally in English—are essential in the target languages of international editions. The catchphrases in Table 3 correspond to various points in a typical *Drag Race* episode, such as the recap, challenge introduction, mini challenge, strategy, main challenge, catwalk, judging, elimination, and farewell. For instance, phrase (a) is used when contestants receive the challenge clue, while phrases (b) and (c) mark the start of the main challenge and announce the results, respectively.

In *RuPaul's Drag Race*, these phrases are spoken by RuPaul as the host. In *Drag Race España*, Supremme de Luxe, and in *Drag Race México*, Lolita Banana and Valentina, fulfill the same role, guiding the contestants through each episode's segments and challenges. However, beyond this functional role, the international hosts must balance their status as drag stars with the authoritative role of hosting *Drag Race*, a dynamic Dyer (1998, p. 155) describes as the "stars and authors" relationship. Supremme Deluxe, Lolita Banana, and Valentina need to become a vehicle for Drag Race's rules and occupy RuPaul's authority position while asserting their drag star status. It is crucial for them (and for the relevance of the international editions) to negotiate this balance without losing their unique identities in the process of emulation. In this sense, the translation and creative adaptation of these catchphrases into Spanish (see Table 3) complicate the notion of originality and highlight the

innovation and cultural diversity embraced by the international editions of *Drag Race*.

Table 3: Common catchphrases in English and Spanish of a Drag Race episode

	RuPaul's Drag Race	*Drag Race España*	*Drag Race México*
a	You've got she-mail. / She done already done had herses.	*Agárrate las bragas, marichocho*.	Replaced by a siren sound effect
b	Gentlemen/racers, start your engines! And may the best woman/drag queen win.	*Mamarrachas*/racers, *arranquen motores y que gane la mejor* drag queen.	*Señoritas/racers, enciendan sus motores y que la mejor drag queen gane.*
c	Condragulations, you're a winner baby.	*Felicidragues, cariño. Eres la ganadora*.	*Felicidragues, eres la ganadora de esta semana. / Felicidragues, mi amor.*
d	And remember, if you can't love yourself, how in the hell are you going to love somebody else? Can I get an amen? […] Let the music play.	*A quién le importa lo que yo haga, a quién le importa lo que yo diga. Yo soy así, así seguiré y nunca cambiaré. Que suene la música.*	*Y recuerden si no te amas a ti misme, cómo chingados vas a amar a alguien más. Que suene la música.*

The first group of phrases (a) is used during the first minutes of the episodes to give the contestants a clue to the challenges. The first phrase was used until the sixth season of *RPDR*; the production changed it because of the pun on she-mail and "e-mail" referencing the offensive and transphobic word "shemale." The alternative phrase from Season 7 onwards is not a reference to an incoming message but rather a random non-standard English phrase that RuPaul had heard years before. The relevance of the phrase lies in its suprasegmental features: RuPaul's delivery resembling a whine. In *Drag Race México*, the phrase was replaced by a siren sound, alerting the arrival of a video message from the hosts. Conversely, *Drag Race España* introduced the phrase in their pre-show promotional material. In a comedy spot (Atresplayer, 2021), RuPaul talks on the phone to Paca La Piraña (a Spanish vedette known for her role in the series *La Veneno*) because of his concern over translating the phrase into Spanish. Ironically, without further deliberation, they both agree that Paca's improvised expression "Agárrate las bragas, marichocho" [Hold on to your panties, *marichocho*—slang word for woman] will suit the Spanish program perfectly. This illustrates Laurena Bernabo's (2017) perspective on the role of localized promotional material. This comedy sketch was meant to influence prospective viewers' expectations regarding how *Drag Race España* would negotiate and translate crucial elements from the original format. The contingency of the chosen phrase in Spanish suggested already that *Drag Race España* would negotiate the local and the foreign, emphasizing that direct or literal translation was not the primary approach.

The second group of phrases (b) shows a more literal translation strategy, maintaining the references to car racing. The catchphrase in English included the ironic opposition of addressing men ("gentlemen") at the beginning of the phrase while finishing with the idea that the winner will be a woman or a drag queen. This phrase also changed in English in Season 13, being the words "racers" and "drag queen" more gender-inclusive alternatives. In the case of *Drag Race España*, Supreme De Luxe uses the word "racers" in most episodes of *Drag Race España* with no apparent ironic intention. Lolita Banana and Valentina switch between "racers" and *señoritas* during the first season of *Drag*

Race México. The word *señoritas* [misses] as a form of address can also be interpreted as an irony related to the inversion (feminization) strategy in terms of camp talk (Harvey, 2000).

Phrase (c) shows other strategies, such as neology and optional translation shifts. In both international shows, the neologism *felicidragues* (based on *felicidades*) is used as an equivalent for "condragulations." This and other neologisms were used as translation solutions for the specific "drag lingo" of the franchise in English. These can be considered *ad hoc* solutions as they were not standardized across the subtitles in Spanish used in the different networks and streaming services where *RuPaul's Drag Race* was available during the 2010s. For instance, in the case of Netflix, the phrases in Spanish changed from episode to episode, particularly the subtitles for Latin America. Also, there is the influence of amateur subtitlers who distributed their translations on social media (Villanueva-Jordán, 2019a). The standardization of this kind of phrases suggests that the representation of mediatized drag culture is reaching a potential closure, specifically in contrast to the coexistence of different terms and proposed equivalents during a decade. Some textual equivalents have been forgotten, and others have become "recognized" through the production and circulation of audiovisual translation products. As mentioned before, the contingency of languages as a means of representation depends on different technologies and the dynamics of production/consumption. In this case, the standardization of translation solutions may be understood as a sign of disciplining drag as a mediatized gender performance, at least regarding its Anglophone means of representation.

The last group of phrases (d) in *RPDR* is central to understanding self-love discourses, which serve as a bridge between reality TV, social spaces, and drag culture, drawing parallels with heterosexual experiences. Promoting self-love frames the show's themes, challenges, and personal issues as universal struggles with being different (Daggett, 2017). Overcoming challenges and embracing one's gender and sexual identity are key aspects of *RPDR*'s narrative. The English catchphrase includes a religious reference when RuPaul asks, "Can I get an amen?" and the remaining drag queens respond in unison, "amen!" Scholars like Johnson (1998) and McCune Jr. (2004) have explored the relationship between religion and secular practices in queer black culture, showing how queer individuals disidentify from homophobic religious discourses and repurpose religious symbols to create spiritual experiences in spaces like clubs and drag performances, turning them into new collective "churches." *RPDR* uses all these references, even recalling the link between gospel music and queer subjectivity ("Let the music play!"), to wrap up each episode.

In *Drag Race España*, the catchphrase also promotes self-acceptance and self-love but integrates references to post-Francoist Spain. It translates to "Who cares what I do? Who cares what I say? I am the way I am. I'll keep on being that. I will never change," lyrics from the song "¿A quién le importa?" by the Spanish rock-pop band Alaska y Dinarama (1986). This song is emblematic of the *movida madrileña* and the camp aesthetics embodied by the singer Alaska (Wheeler, 2016). The farewell phrase used in *Drag Race México* is almost a literal translation from English. However, it includes two salient features: the Mexicanism *chingados* used as an exclamative expression and the non-binary pronoun *misme*. The word *chingado/a* has a critical and historical account found in Octavio Paz's (1993) essay "Los hijos de la Malinche," where he suggests that the dichotomy of *lo chingado* [the fucked] and *el chingón* or *el macho* [the male fucker] is based on a colonial violent relationship, determined by the

passivity, the openness, and impotence of the former, and the aggressiveness of the latter (Paz, 1993, p. 85). Regarding the function of self-affirmation of the catchphrase in English, the use of the word *chingados* as part of the textual equivalence constructed around the farewell catchphrase indexes not only Mexicanness but also a potential queer deconstruction of the shame of anality and the expulsion of the *pasivo* as the abject of the Mexican national imaginary (Cervantes-Gómez, 2020). The use of the pronoun *misme* that integrates the neomorpheme *-e* (as in *nosotres* [we]) is an instance of direct non-binary language, as classified by López (2022), and indicates a critical stance concerning the normativity of Spanish and the alignment of the Academias de la Lengua Española against the activist dimension of non-binary and inclusive language.

As observed, parts of the repertoire of catchphrases in *RPDR* predate the actual production of the show, having been ingeniously created by RuPaul. In the case of *Drag Race España*, there is clear evidence of careful pre-production work that highlighted the linguistic dimension of the product to pave the way for its reception. Similarly, in *Drag Race México*, the deliberate selection of cohesive and organizational markers indicates prior planning and scripting. In both cases, actual spontaneity can be ruled out, as the phrases are not improvised in the moment. Thus, this analysis broadens the understanding of linguistic *werk* and points to the capitalization of language as part of the show's cultural value. This means that the linguistic aspect of the show is not merely informative or referential but critical enough to warrant dedicated production structures that ensure its visibility. The Drag Race franchise creates references and self-references to convince the audience of its cultural value—a phenomenon referred to as "massness effect," which was also identified as part of the examples in the next section.

Catchphrases serve a dual purpose of humor and entertainment, driven by repetition, recognition, and anticipation. Besides this entertainment role, they act as markers to identify performers across a mass globalized audience (Darlington, 2014). As shown in Table 3, not all catchphrases are translated literally into Spanish; some feature translation shifts (e.g., non-binary pronouns in *Drag Race México*), discursive creations (e.g., phrases a and c in *Drag Race España*), or omissions. These textual strategies highlight the significance of catchphrases not just as cohesive elements of the shows but as part of the *Drag Race* brand. This could be due to the need for the Mexican and Spanish hosts to echo the American show's conventions—already rich in meaning—not only as direct references to the franchise or homages to RuPaul but also as a critique of the source monolingualism through creative translations.

The translated catchphrases both point to the original text (primary intertextual references, source texts) and blur the material contours of the source signifiers to propose creative or (un)original repetitions in the receiving cultural systems (Vidal Claramonte, 2023). Uttering these catchphrases in Spanish mirrors drag lip-syncing—a precise act that copies the style, tone, and gestures of the original, but with a new voice and body. These textual equivalences emerge through their use in the Spanish shows and the "generative intercorporeality" (Bird, 2020, p. 47) of hosts embodying RuPaul's phrases while bridging the gap between source and target languages. This is part of a sophisticated adaptation process where language is just one of many translational elements. As explored in the next section, adapting TV formats for global audiences with access to multiple editions involves complex semiotic and communicative strategies, such as translanguaging.

5. Intermedial/interlingual intertextuality

As Vesey points out (2017), "RuPaul's music was always integral to Drag Race. Each season required finalists to perform in a video for RuPaul's latest single, whose release was always coordinated with Drag Race's broadcast schedule" (p. 596). This relationship between music and the reality show has been very productive since it helped keep RuPaul's music relevant while many other Drag Race alums launched their post-show recording careers. Drag Race benefited from these ventures into the music industry because they served to keep the promises of becoming the next drag superstar, with fame and success like those of pop stardom (Vesey, 2017). RuPaul's music also appears in *Drag Race México* and *Drag Race España*; his songs play as interpolations in different moments of all the episodes. Two key moments are when the hosts and the competing drag queens walk the runway. The song accompanying the hosts is always "Cover Girl" (RuPaul, 2009) ("Cover girl / Put the bass in your walk / Head to toe let your whole body talk / Walk, now walk, walk now walk / And what?"). The song for the contestants' walk can vary, but most of the times, the song playing is "Sissy that Walk" (RuPaul, 2014).

The runway sequences are essential for contestants to showcase the results of their "passionate labor," their *werk* "to forge and refine a marketable drag persona with the potential to circulate lucratively in mainstream popular culture" (Lovelock, 2019, p. 161). The runway scenes are semiotically dense and nearly identical across *RPDR*, *Drag Race España*, and *Drag Race México*, featuring consistent editing and composition techniques across the different versions. Contestants' physical presence embodies different forms of cultural capital (such as walking, posing, and makeup skills), erotic capital (emphasizing certain body features), and fashion-related technologies. The judges' evaluations often include puns, wordplay, and intertextual references, serving a metalinguistic function. The montage of these scenes also incorporates voice-overs and cuts to individual testimonies, where contestants describe their runway performances. These visuals are framed by a RuPaul song, with its intensity adjusted depending on other voices. In *Drag Race España*, the songs are subtitled in Spanish (see Table 4), adding another layer of meaning and highlighting the importance of the lyrics. The careful editing of images, dialogue, and music reinforces the contestants' self-affirmation while emphasizing the show's message: failure is due not to systemic homophobia but to a lack of individual determination (Lovelock, 2019). The inclusion of both Spanish and English voices in these key moments reflects the show's mission to embrace diversity within the global franchise.

Table 4: Subtitles in Spanish for the song "Sissy that Walk"

And if I fly, or if I fall […]	*Y si vuelo o si caigo*
I'm on my way, I'm on my way […]	*Estoy en camino, estoy en camino*
I'm a femme queen	*Soy una reina femenina*
mother of a house of no shame	*Madre de una casa sin vergüenza*
My pussy is on fire	*Mi panocha está en llamas*
now kiss the flame […]	*Ahora besa la llama*
Fly, fly, fly, fly, uh oh, uh oh	*Vuela, vuela, vuela, vuela*
Now sissy that walk	*Ahora camina con actitud*

In addition to music, Drag Race draws upon other cultural references such as cinema, encompassing both classic Hollywood stars and pivotal films within the queer popular. One of the distinctive mini challenges featured in this reality show is called "Reading is fundamental," which was introduced for the first

time in the second season of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. In the second season, the mini challenge was introduced with a brief context and a definition of what reading entails:

> RuPaul: As drag queens, we shrug off a lot of insults. So, when we get our chance to throw an insult, we turn it into a high art form. We call it 'reading' or 'throwing shade'. And it's part of our culture (Season 2, Episode 7, 00:04:31).

It was in the third season that RuPaul established the direct link between this mini challenge and the film of the New Queer Cinema movement *Paris Is Burning* (Livingston, 1990):

> RuPaul: A drag superstar needs to develop a pretty thick skin. So, in the great tradition of *Paris Is Burning*, break out your library cards. Because reading is what? Fundamental (Season 3, Episode 8, 00:03:21).

In subsequent seasons, the mini challenge was not defined or explained again, although the reference to *Paris Is Burning* remained, as did the puns related to the double meaning of reading (the library, wearing reading glasses, having reader's card).

The Reading mini challenge was also included in *Drag Race España* and *Drag Race México*. It was introduced in both shows using different editing and montage strategies, as well as contextualizing phrases in Spanish. The transcriptions of these scenes appear in Tables 5 and 6. In both shows the concept of reading is introduced using colloquial phrases (*ponerse verde*, *leer la cartilla*) or words (*barrer*) that have some semantic components of reading (mainly to criticize). However, the verb in Spanish *leer* acquires a new meaning through the literal translation from the English word. The resemantization of the verb *leer* happens while the English word *reading* is also used as reference to the *RuPaul's Drag Race* mini-challenge ("Reading is fundamental") and not *Paris Is Burning.* However, in the case of *Drag Race España*, when the contestant Arantxa Castilla-La Mancha explains what reading is, they almost paraphrase the explanation given by the drag queen Dorian Corey in one key scene of *Paris Is Burning*—where she also explains the act of reading.

Table 5: Reading challenge introduction in *Drag Race España* (Episode 4, 00:04:48-00:05:19)

[At the *werk* room]	
Supreme de Luxe: […] *El mini reto de hoy trata de poneros todas verdes. ¡A la cara! Aquí y ahora, vais a leeros la cartilla las unas a las otras. Reinas, la biblioteca queda oficialmente abierta, porque...*	Today's mini challenge is about roasting each other. In your face. Here and now, you are going to roast each other. Queens, the library is officially open, because
[Cut to individual scene]	
Arantxa Castilla-La Mancha: *Leer es fundamental.*	Reading is fundamental.
[Back to *werk* room]	
Supreme de Luxe: Reading is… [in English]	Reading is...
All contestants: Fundamental!	Fundamental!
[Cut to individual scene]	
Arantxa Castilla-La Mancha: *Leer en el mundo drag significa dar un cumplido a tu compañera, que de la vuelta y de repente se convierte en un insulto, pero que sea tan sutil, tan bueno, que a ella la haga reír.*	Reading in the drag world means to compliment your fellow queen, then the compliment turns around and becomes an insult. But the insult is so subtle, it makes her laugh.

Table 6: Reading challenge introduction in *Drag Race México* (Episode 4, 00:05:02-00:06:00)

[At the *werk* room] **Lolita Banana:** *Para ser una superestrella del drag, lo primero que se aprende es a barrer. Aunque sabemos que no se puede barrer sin antes aprender a leer.* […] *Porque leer es ¡¿qué?!*	To be a drag superstar, the first thing you learn is to look down [*barrer*]. But we know that we can't look down if we can't read first. […] Because reading is what?!
All contestants: *Fundamental!* [English pronunciation]	Fundamental!
Valentina: *Así que la biblioteca está...*	So the library is…
All contestants: *¡Abierta!* […]	Open!
[Cut to individual scene] **Lady Quero:** *Ya sabemos qué es, a criticar se ha dicho.*	We know what it is. It is time to criticize.

The international editions of Drag Race use the main languages corresponding to the territories and countries they are supposed to represent. For example, French is the main language of the France and Belgium shows. In the case of English, it is the main language of the American, Canadian, British, and New Zealand/Australian editions but also of the Filipino show. In all the international shows, the cast will use at some point English words or phrases related to the Drag Race lore or the globalized notions of the American gay culture. On some occasions, the editing of the episodes will suggest that the drag contestants respond critically to the language policies of the show—for example, a few Quebecoise and Puerto Rican contestants have subtly criticized how diglossia permeates the Canadian and American shows, respectively. *Drag Race España* visibilized a similar critique when some concepts of the American show were first mentioned and needed explanation (Table 7).

Table 7: Pit crew introduction in *Drag Race España* (Episode 1, 00:15:55-00:16:10)

[At the *werk* room] **Supremme de Luxe:** Chicas, ¡os presento al *pit crew*!	Girls, let me introduce you to the pit crew!
[Cut to individual scene] **Carmen Farala:** ¿La *pit crew*? ¿Eso qué coño es?	Pit crew? What the hell is that?
[Cut to a full shot of a muscular man wearing a golden thong and riding a mechanical bull] **Carmen Farala:** Ah, los chulazos. Chica, pero esto qué. ¿Podemos hablar en español? Estamos en España. *It's Spain*.	Oh, the *chulazos*. Girl, what's this? Can we please speak in Spanish? We are in Spain. It's Spain.

In this example, Carmen Farala, a contestant of *Drag Race España*, does not understand the meaning of the phrase "pit crew" ("*¿Eso qué coño es*?" [What the hell is that?]). Denotatively, a pit crew is the people who replace tires or refuel a car during a race. In Drag Race, the pit crew members are male models who appear in different segments of the show wearing only underwear. In general, the pit crew models' appearance and gender performance follow

what Levine (1998) defined as the "presentational styles of the gay clone," which he divided into two cluster traits: the butch rhetoric and the hot rhetoric. The models are butch: they are not camp; at first, they show a stereotypically traditional masculinity. They are hot: they possess macho sign-vehicles (musculature, facial hair, short haircuts); they exhibit erotic capability (Levine, 1998, p. 59). Of course, there is a temporal distance between the emergence of the gay clone as an embodied/engendered position and the current Drag Race productions exploiting normative male bodies. However, the cultural impact of the gay clone persists in mainstream media even when these forms constructing physical and erotic attractiveness imply homonormative, colonial, and racial discourses (Sonnekus, 2009).

After her initial confusion and the full shot of one of the pit crew members, Carmen Farala uses the word *chulazos* while also criticizing the (unnecessary) use of English (*¿Podemos hablar en español? Estamos en España* [Can we speak in Spanish? We are in Spain]). Her use of *chulazo* also reveals how she interpreted the models' bodies according to Spanish repertoires of gender performance and masculinity. *Chulo*(*-azo*) is a Spanish gay slang term to describe an attractive gay man who is sexually available or with whom someone has a non-committal relationship (sometimes based on economic retribution) (Rodríguez, 2008). In *Drag Race México*, the phrase "pit crew" was also kept in English, and the hosts and contestants used it regularly. During the season, the models were introduced with the persistent use of full shots or shots tracking their muscular bodies. The models wore regional clothes or props (*ranchero* in Episode 5 or masked professional wrestlers in Episode 8). When the pit crew appeared on the scene, the hosts and contestants usually referred to their attractiveness but also to the "ironic" possibility that, despite their manliness, the models could also "bottom" (be the receptive partner during anal sex). Thus, the strategies to domesticate the pit crew in *Drag Race México* did not include a culturally relevant equivalent (*los chulazos*) as in the Spanish program. Still, the models were integrated into the narrative of the program, using them as erotic capital as the basis for more localized interpretations of class, race, and sexuality: *el rancherito* [countryman], *el güerito* [fair-skinned man], *el chacal* ["rough trade" as understood in gay slang], *ser activo/pasivo* [being a top or a bottom].

A productive tension arises when analyzing how these intertextual references were adapted using Spanish as the primary language system, challenging the *a priori* interlingual supposition of equivalence. This helps to understand, in turn, that the multilingualism of the franchise is not only about code-switching and direct translation but about shaping knowledge and experience about drag, popular culture, and sexual diversity through production techniques and complex linguistic strategies. In this sense, the use of translation as well as innovative cultural adaptations underscores not only the quantitative side of multilingualism (the use of two, three, or more languages) but also how languages can be integrated to create a "massness" effect. This effect refers to the Drag Race franchise's efficacy in overcoming audience fragmentation in the streaming era by delivering (plenty of hours of television) content that resonates with both local and international audiences (Griffin, 2014). The relevance of this content extends to its linguistic dimension, particularly the extraction of the contestants' linguistic *werk*.

6. Final remarks

Drag Race is now undeniably a multilingual franchise, with its linguistic dynamism becoming evident through international editions. The examples discussed earlier highlight the importance of post-monolingual and post-monomodal approaches to fully understand the semiotic richness in these adaptations. The interaction of language systems with other semiotic resources—including music, editing techniques, participants' voices, and their body images—contributes to the internationalization of the program. The multilingual strategies used (codeswitching, music interpolations, or translation, as seen before) maintain its coherence as a brand and promote its global relevance. These strategies are based on the cultural and symbolic assets that the franchise has accumulated over fifteen years, the cultural goods produced by RuPaul's multifaceted career as well as the references that the shows gather from Anglophone queer popular culture and the cultural environments to which the format is adapted. In the case of *Drag Race España* and *Drag Race México*, these shows are characterized by their dynamic editing that foregrounds their language hybridity and the contestants' and hosts' linguistic repertoires. However, while both international editions of Drag Race display different bilingual or multilingual communicative acts, these strategies also function at varying levels of sociocultural meaning that lead to broader discourses of what drag is, including complex representations of sexual and gender identity.

I began writing the first draft of this paper while the first season of *Drag Race México* was airing. As I write this final paragraph, the second season has just concluded. Reflecting on the most recent season and comparing it to the first, my initial observation is that the groundwork for showcasing the linguistic components of the Mexican edition had already been established. This allowed the second season to emphasize the cast's spontaneous verbal contributions throughout the episodes. There were more puns, an increased use of Mexican queer slang, and even some creative translations of *RPDR* concepts—such as translating "work room" as *chamba cuarto*, a literal and perhaps ungrammatical rendition, but one that resonated with the audience on social media. Additionally, this season featured several references to *Drag Race España*, with catchphrases from that show being repeated in exaggerated Spanish accents. I mention this to highlight potential new avenues of study, as the franchise continues to evolve in its linguistic dimension. Drag Race can be now studied through cross and multilingual lenses. Some methodological components of this paper could be applied to the France and Belgian editions, or even to *Drag Race Philippines* where the hosts, judges, and the contestants use English and Filipino/Tagalog interchangeably—but probably also with the aid of some scripting and editing work to make both languages work fluently. After all, in Drag Race lore, it's not just about charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent, but also about linguistic *werk*!

References

Alaska y Dinarama. (1986). "¿A quién le importa?" (Song). On *No es pecado* (Album). EMI Music.

Anthony, L. (2014). Dragging with an accent: Linguistic stereotypes, language barriers and translingualism. In J. Daems (Ed.), *The makeup of Rupaul's Drag Race. Essays on the queen of reality shows* (pp. 49–66). McFarland.

Atresplayer. [@atresplayer]. (2021, March 19). “Agárrate las bragas marichocho” [Video attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/atresplayer/status/1372864425275785219?s=20

Bailey, F., Barbato, R., Campbell, T., RuPaul, Corfe, S., Salansang, M., & McKim, C. (Executive Producers). (2009–present). *RuPaul’s Drag Race* [TV series]. World of Wonder.

Bailey, F., Barbato, R., Campbell, T., Smothers, T., RuPaul, & Barragán, A. (Executive Producers). (2023–present). Drag Race México [TV series]. World of Wonder.

Bernabo, L. E. (2017). Glee-talia: Adapting *Glee* for an Italian audience. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *34*(2), 168–176. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2017.1292040

Bignell, J. (2014). Realism and reality formats. In L. Ouellette (Ed.), *A Companion to reality television: theory and evidence* (pp. 97–115). Wiley Blackwell.

Bird, J. M. (2020). Haptic aurality: On touching the voice in drag lip-sync performance. *Sound Studies*, *6*(1), 45–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/20551940.2019.1640512

Blackledge, A., & Creese, A. (2017). Translanguaging and the body. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, *14*(3), 250–268. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2017.1315809

Bustamante, T., Villanueva-Jordán, I., & Cotrina, D. (2022). Pintosas, bafônicas!/¡Fabulosos, reinas!/¡Fabulosas, divinas! Representaciones sexo-diversas en el doblaje de *Super Drags*. *CLINA*, *8*(1), 57–75. https://doi.org/10.14201/clina2022815775

Cândido Moura, W. H., & Iost Vinhas, L. (2023). “But, bitch, I’m still serving it”. La subtitulación de un verbo del lenguaje drag en *RuPaul’s Drag Race* al portugués brasileño: nuevos significados, viejas palabras. *Mutatis Mutandis*, *16*(1), 182–203. https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.mut/v16n1a11

Cervantes-Gómez, X. V. (2020). Paz’s Pasivo: Thinking Mexicanness from the Bottom. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, *29*(3), 333–347. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2019.1675146

Collins, C. G. (2017). Drag race to the bottom? *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *4*(1), 128–134. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3711589

Corrales, I., & Pérez Vega, J. (Executive Producers). (2021–present). *Drag Race España* [TV series]. Atresmedia Televisión; Buendía Estudios; World of Wonder.

Couldry, N. (2008). Reality TV, or the secret theater of neoliberalism. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, *30*(1), 3–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714410701821255

Couldry, N. (2010). Making populations appear. In M. M. Kraidy & K. Sender (Eds.), *The politics of reality television. Global perspectives* (pp. 208–220). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203843567-20

Daggett, C. (2017). “If you can’t love yourself, how in the hell you gonna love somebody else?” Drag TV and self-love discourse. In N. Brennan & D. Gudelunas (Eds.), *RuPaul’s Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture* (pp. 271–285). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-50618-0_18

Darling-Wolf, F. (2014). *Imagining the global: Transnational media and popular culture beyond East and West*. University of Michigan Press. https://doi.org/10.3998/nmw.12748915.0001.001

Darlington, J. (2014). Catchphrases: a semiotic, genealogical and cultural materialist study of the form. *Comedy Studies*, *5*(2), 123–136. https://doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2014.969075

Dyer, R. (1998). *Stars*. British Film Institute Publishing.

Epstein, B. J., & Gillett, R. (2017). Introduction. In B. J. Epstein & R. Gillett (Eds.), *Queer in translation* (pp. 1–7). Routledge.

Esser, A. (2010). Television formats: Primetime staple, global market. *Popular Communication*, *8*(4), 273–292. https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2010.514176

Ferreira, L. (2021, July 13). “RuPaul’s Drag Race”: Everything we know about how contestants are paid. the things. https://www.thethings.com/rupauls-drag-race-everything-we-know-about-how-contestants-are-paid/#the-contestants-need-to-invest-money

Griffin, H. (2014). Manufacturing "massness." Aesthetic form and industry practice in the reality television contest. In L. Ouellette (Ed.), *A companion to reality television* (pp. 155–170). Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118599594.ch9

Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2014). *Halliday's introduction to functional grammar* (4th ed.). Routledge.

Harvey, K. (2000). Describing camp talk: Language/pragmatics/politics. *Language and Literature*, *9*(3), 240–260. https://doi.org/10.1177/096394700000900303

Ilieva, A. (2022). The translatability of the drag terminology in *Rupaul's Drag Race*. *Journal of Contemporary Philology*, *5*(1), 101–120. https://doi.org/10.37834/JCP2251101i

Johnson, E. P. (1995). Snap! Culture: A different kind of "reading." *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *15*(2), 122–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/10462939509366110

Johnson, E. P. (1998). Feeling the spirit in the dark: Expanding notions of the sacred in the African-American gay community. *Callaloo*, *21*(2), 399–416.

La Fountain-Stokes, L. (2021). *Translocas. The politics of Puerto Rican drag and trans performance.* University of Michigan Press. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11314788

Levine, M. P. (1998). *Gay macho. The life and death of the homosexual clone*. New York University Press.

Livingston, J. (Director). (1990). *Paris is burning*. Academy Entertainment and Off White Productions.

López, Á. (2022). Trans(de)letion: Audiovisual translations of gender identities for mainstream audiences. *Journal of Language and Sexuality*, *11*(2), 217–239. https://doi.org/10.1075/jls.20023.lop

Lovelock, M. (2019). *Reality TV and queer identities. Sexuality, authenticity, celebrity*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14215-5

Lucas Tavares, J., & de Oliveira Branco, S. (2021). A tradução da linguagem drag em RuPaul's Drag Race: Um estudo sobre representação através de legendas. *Revista Letras Raras*, *10*(1), 210–235. http://dx.doi.org/10.35572/rlr.v1i1.1890

Martín, J. P. (2022, March 27). Fama, éxito, precariedad y explotación: Pros y contras de "Drag Race" (también en España). *El Confidencial*. https://www.elconfidencial.com/television/programas-tv/2022-03-27/drag-race-espana-analisis-revolucion-exito-precaridad_3396877/

McCune, J. Q. (2004). Transformance. Reading the Gospel in drag. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *46*(3–4), 151–167. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v46n03_09

Mehran, M. R. (2022). It is a drag: The televisual exploitation of labor in rupaul's drag race. In B. Niall & D. Gudelunas (Eds.), *Drag in the Global Digital Public Sphere* (pp. 113–125). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003263555-10

Moore, M. (2012). Tina theory: Notes on fierceness. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, *24*(1), 71–86. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-1598.2011.01317.x

Moore, M. (2018). *Fabulous. The rise of the beautiful eccentric*. Yale University Press.

Moran, A. (2014). Program format franchising in the age of reality television. In L. Ouellette (Ed.), *A companion to reality television: Theory and evidence* (pp. 74–93). Wiley Blackwell.

Niedzwiecki, C. K., & Morris, P. L. (2017). Reality television. In M. Allen (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of communication research methods*. SAGE.

Nunes, V. (2018). Reality television. In P. Greenhill, J. T. Rudy, N. Hamer, & L. Bosc (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to media and fairy-tale cultures* (pp. 590–597). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315670997-66

Ouellette, L. (2020). America's next top model. Neoliberal labor. In E. Thompson & J. Mittel (Eds.), *How to watch television* (2nd ed., pp. 174–183). New York University Press.

Palmer, G. (2010). Governing bodies. In M. M. Kraidy & K. Sender (Eds.), *The politics of reality television* (pp. 79–91). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203843567-12

Passa, D. (2021). “Reinas unidas jamás serán vencidas”: Drag queens en las voces superpuestas en español peninsular de RuPaul’s Drag Race. *Trans*, *25*, 349–371. https://doi.org/10.24310/TRANS.2021.v1i25.11450

Paz, O. (1993). Los hijos de la Malinche. In *El laberinto de la soledad / Postdata / Vuelta al laberinto de la soledad*. Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Rodríguez, F. (2008). *Diccionario gay-lésbico. Vocabulario general y argot de la homosexualidad*. Gredos.

Rupaul. (1992). *Supermodel (You Betta Work!)* [Song]. On *Supermodel of the World* [Album]. Tommy Boy.

RuPaul. (2009). *Cover Girl* [Song]. On *Champion* [Album]. RuCo Inc.

RuPaul. (2014). *Sissy that Walk* (Song). On *Born Naked* (Slbum). RuCo Inc.

Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. SAGE Publications.

Saldanha, G., & O’Brien, S. (2013). *Research methodologies in translation studies*. Routledge.

Sarfati, J., & dos Santos, I. (2022). do you speak drag? an analysis of Rupaul’s drag race jargon translated and subtitled by Brazilian fans. In N. Brennan & D. Gudelunas (Eds.), *Drag in the global digital public sphere* (pp. 168–185). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003263555-15

Sonnekus, T. (2009). Macho men and the queer imaginary: A critique of selected gay ‘colonial’ representations of homomasculinity. *De Arte*, *44*(80), 37–53. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00043389.2009.11877113

St. André, J. (2014). Translation as cross-identity performance. In J. St. André (Ed.), *Thinking through translation with metaphor*s (pp. 275–294). Routledge.

St. André, J. (2018). In all his finery. Frederick Marryat’s the pacha of many tales as drag. In B. Baer & K. Kaindl (Eds.), *Queering translation, translating the queer. Theory, practice, activism* (pp. 84–95). Routledge.

Tinkcom, M. (2002). *Working like a homosexual. Camp, capital, cinema*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822383772

Vesey, A. (2017). “A way to sell your records”: Pop stardom and the politics of drag professionalization on Rupaul’s drag race. *Television & New Media*, *18*(7). https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476416680889

Vidal Claramonte, M. C. Á. (2023). *Translation and repetition. Rewriting (un)original literature*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003391890

Villanueva-Jordán, I. (2019a). Dragqueenismo y traducción: El papel del RuPaul’s Drag Race en la circulación del habla camp en español. In J. F. Carrero Martín, B. Cerezo Merchán, J. J. Martínez Sierra, & G. Zaragoza Ninet (Eds.), *La traducción audiovisual. Aproximaciones desde la academia y la industria* (pp. 45–64). Comares.

Villanueva-Jordán, I. (2019b). “You better werk”. Rasgos del camp talk en la subtitulación al español de Rupaul’s Drag Race. *Cadernos de Tradução*, *39*(2), 156–188. http://dx.doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2019v39n3p156

Villanueva-Jordán, I., & Martínez Pleguezuelos, A. J. (2022). Trans* representations and translations: Two pictures, two spaces, two moments. In F. Carrero & L. Mejías (Eds.), *New perspectives in audiovisual translation towards future research trends* (pp. 73–95). Universitat de Valencia.

Villanueva-Jordán, I., & Ramírez-Colombier, M. (2023). Mother camp has arrived: An analysis of the Spanish translation of Esther Newton’s ethnographic text on drag queens in America. *The Translator*, *29*(2), 247–263. https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2023.2196747

Wheeler, D. (2016). All her friends call her Alaska: The cultural politics of locating Olvido Gara in and beyond Madrid’s Movida . *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, *17*(4), 361–383. https://doi.org/10.1080/14636204.2016.1240436

Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research and application. Design and methods*. Sage Publications.