SUBTITLING MALAY TABOO LANGUAGE INTO ENGLISH: THE CASE OF *THE ASSISTANT* (2022)

(*Penyarikataan Elemen Tabu Bahasa Melayu dalam Bahasa Inggeris: Penelitian Filem The Assistant (2022)*)

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ABSTRACT

Taboo refers to social and behavioural proscriptions which may instigate discomfort in society, both in language use and psychical behaviour. In audiovisual translation, the emphasis on taboo is often placed on its relative audience reception and the enforcement of relevant laws and regulations. Akin to the nature of audiovisual products, subtitling taboo references also warrants multimodal consideration, especially in relation to both verbal and nonverbal elements. This study, in particular, aims to probe into the taboo language of subtitling from Malay into English. The film *The Assistant* (2022), which was released on the online streaming platform Netflix, is selected as the corpus. To this end, a parallel corpus was developed and subsequently analysed

using AntConc and AntPConc. Frequency, thematic and translation strategy patterns were mapped and descriptively analysed. In general terms, the analysis reveals that the taboo words in the source text are multifaceted, predominantly exclamatory, and markedly explicit. Many of the taboo loads are also found to be equally rendered into the target text, which corresponds to Netflix's no-censorship policy. The study also learns the omission of some references in the translation, which can be partly linked to the technical and structural constraints of subtitling.

Keywords: Taboo, swearword, corpus analysis, subtitling, Netflix.

ABSTRAK

Tabu merujuk satu bentuk pantang larang sosial yang berupaya mendatangkan ketidakselesaan dalam kelompok masyarakat tertentu. Unsur ini boleh hadir menerusi pengungkapan bahasa dan tindakan. Dalam bidang penterjemahan audiovisual, perbahasan mengenai terjemahan kata tabu sering kali dimuatkan dengan kerelatifan penerimaan masyarakat sasaran dan penguatkuasaan undang-undang tempatan. Sebagaimana pengamatan fitur produk audiovisual lain, penyarikataan unsur tabu juga memerlukan penelitian terhadap rangkaian elemen multimodaliti, khasnya elemen verbal dan bukan verbal. Makalah ini bertujuan menekuni penyarikataan kata tabu berbahasa Inggeris dalam filem Melayu. Filem The Assistant (2022) yang ditayangkan di platform penstriman dalam talian Netflix dipilih sebagai korpus kajian. Analisis dimulakan dengan pembinaan korpus selari yang kemudiannya dianalisis menggunakan perisian AntPConc dan AntPConc. Pola frekuensi, tema dan strategi terjemahan kata tabu dikenal pasti dan diperihalkan secara deskriptif. Secara keseluruhannya, analisis mendapati bahawa penyampaian kata tabu dalam teks sumber adalah rencam, berfitur seruan dan bersifat eksplisit. Majoriti kata tabu turut dipindahkan secara keseluruhan dalam teks sasaran selaras dengan dasar tanpa tapisan oleh Netflix. Kajian turut menemukan contoh kata tabu yang digugurkan dalam sari kata, yang berupaya dikaitkan dengan kekangan teknikal dan struktur penyarikataan.

Kata kunci: *Tabu, carutan, analisis korpus, penyarikataan, Netflix.*

INTRODUCTION

Since its discovery in the 18th century by Captain James Cook (see Allan, 2018), taboo has found its academic feet in an array of studies. It presently represents the umbrella term encompassing a cultural proscription of certain human experiences, language, or behaviours due to societal and/or religious traditions. While the term is relatively perceived, a public display of taboo may constitute a negative outcome (Jay, 2009). Allan and Burridge (2006, p. 1) break down five contexts of taboo, namely (i) bodies and their effluvia (sweat, snot, faeces, menstrual fluid, etc.); (ii) the organs and acts of sex, micturition, and defecation; (iii) diseases, death and killing (including hunting and fishing); (iv) naming, addressing, touching, and viewing persons and sacred beings; and (v) objects and places; food gathering, preparation and consumption.

The wide-ranging settings almost certainly bring about issues of cross-cultural and audiovisual translation (AVT). The use of offensive language, for instance, may be deemed normal in certain communities but sensitive in others. The character development in *Deadpool* provides a clear example (see Mohamad Zakuan Tuan Ibharim & Hasuria Che Omar, 2021). Although the main character uses profanity and sexually explicit jokes throughout, the film is positively received in the United States (see Lee, 2016), but not by the Chinese government (Loughrey, 2016) or a select group of Malaysian audiences (Mohamad Zakuan Tuan Ibharim & Hasuria Che Omar, 2018). Undoubtedly, in certain countries, the dynamics are subject to laws and public interests, which may result in the regulation of content screening, most notably through censorship and other forms of AVT modes, such as dubbing (see Seruya & Moniz, 2008).

With regards to AVT, the complexity of translating taboo is not only bound by the linguistic-cultural clash and audience reception; but also encompasses the technical and multimodal nature of AV products, such as the synchronisation of translated output with moving images; the rendition of music and sound effects; and projected visual elements, which may include facial expressions, body movements, and relevant props (Pérez-González, 2014). Diaz-Cintas and Remael (2014) posit that these may, in turn, lessen the quality and accuracy of the taboo and profanity in the translation. The reasoning behind the customary behaviour of Tahitian women not partaking in dining with men (see Cook, in Allan, 2018), for instance, may not be able to be included in

the AV translation due to spatial and technical constraints (versus the addition of footnotes in translated books, for example), which renders the scene incomprehensible for the audience.

Whilst taboo is deemed ostensible to modern AVT studies, the subject remains largely understudied in Malay film translation, partly due to the existing (domestic) laws and regulations which prohibit the public display of excessive language. Presently, however, the availability of online subscription-based streaming services, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, may alter the course of local media production and reception, as they are not bound by the laws and policies in place. The accessibility of the platform ultimately affects translation-making decisions. By foregrounding these premises, this study aims to analyse the translation (subtitling) of the taboo language of a Malay film, i.e., *The Assistant* (2022) into English. In order to achieve this, a parallel corpus is developed and subsequently analysed to record salient taboo translation patterns, if any, and whether the ease of access translates to a literal or free translation approach.

TABOO LANGUAGE

At base, there is a consensus on what constitutes taboo. Although the scholarly tradition widely defines it as the cultural proscription of certain behaviours (see Allan & Burridge, 2006; Luurs, 2022), Allan and Burridge (2006, p. 11) make use of the term 'specifiable' in characterising the pragmatic nature of the term: specifiable community, time, and contexts. It is important to note that 'behaviours' in this sense also connote linguistic conduct, including but not limited to the use of swearwords and offensive language (see Ávila-Cabrera, 2016). Hughes (2006), for instance, further distinguishes taboo language, swearing (including the varying contexts of formal and informal swearing), and profanity, while others use the term interchangeably (see Allan, 2018; Jay, 2009).

Another important trait of taboo language is asserted by Jay (2009) when he notes that there is a correlation between institutional and individual levels. For individuals, the expression of taboo words is internalised – what can or cannot be said depends on whether they are punishable by governing authorities (institutions), be they existing laws, religious leaders, or institutional superiors. Although the roles vary across communities, the institutional power fashions the framework of taboo for society, and grounds it as early as in the child-

care stage. Such is evident by the punishable offence of expressing offensive words of 'fuck' and 'cunt' in print in the past (Trudgill, 2000, p. 9).

Allan and Burridge (2006; see also Parini, 2013) state that the expression of taboo language may come via the three means of orthophemism, euphemism, and dysphemism. The first refers to the formal and generic nature of the taboo word. Euphemism denotes the replacement of taboo words with polite expressions, while dysphemism conversely substitutes inoffensive terms with explicit and impolite expressions. Here, Parini (2013, p. 150) opts for the English word 'prostitute' for orthophemism, and uses both 'lady of the evening' and 'bitch' as examples for euphemism and dysphemism respectively.

The extent of taboo in research is far-reaching and boundless. It is a common theme in linguistic and cultural studies and is associated with syntax, semantics, pragmatics and (im)politeness, translation, censorship, and others (Jay, 2009; Luurs, 2022). O'Driscol (2020) in this regard puts forth tables of lexemes in academic titles related to this field of study, which are dominated by 'swearing' and 'taboo'. Linguistically speaking, taboo delivery can be explicit and implicit too, such as through the use of figurative language and humour. Bucaria and Barra (2016), for example, compiles eighteen subthemes of taboo humour, namely tasteless, outrageous, gallows, abusive, gross, sick, cruel, edgy, transgressive, aggressive, dark, disturbing, rude, offensive, politically incorrect, quirky, offbeat, and explicit. This intricacy certainly frames the myriads of shapes and forms taboos may come in across languages and cultures.

The concept of taboo is also well-embedded in the Malay culture. Mohtar (1979, pp. 14–21) raises several important points of observation: (i) the Malays believe that defying a taboo brings misfortunes not only to the doer, but also to his or her family; (ii) the Malays will blame the taboos if their business or education plan fails; and (iii) some taboos may seem illogical, but they serve as an indirect approach of counsel in the Malay culture. For example, children are taught that rolling on their stomachs and kicking their legs in the air will result in the death of their mother (p. 15) and sticking out their tongue will result in it being cut off (Ani Omar, 2014). Whilst these claims may seem unfounded and unscientific, they essentially serve as a method for parents to tell off frowned-upon behaviours.

Parallel to Jay's (2009) account, the proscriptive behaviours are also emphasised from the child-rearing phase and passed down from one generation to another. The themes vary from the beliefs of yore, family relationships, child-rearing, birth, and confinement, building a new house, funerals, and others. It should also be noted that while the array of taboos mainly concerns physical actions and rituals, the beliefs also include linguistic behaviours, such as the prescribed (i) etiquette (*adab*) in conversing with spirits, neighbours, family members, sultan (*raja*) (see also Swettenham, 2016), and (ii) incantations, spells, and prayers in religious ceremonies and warding off evil spirits and demons. The remark on etiquette is to some extent comparable to contemporary Western tradition, although they mostly remain within the realms of sensitive issues such as age, sex, and education, and are therefore addressed using euphemisms and do not imply metaphysical repercussions if transgressed (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 237).

AUDIOVISUAL TABOO: TRANSLATION AND CENSORSHIP

Jay's (2009) remark on the link up between institutions and individuals in framing taboos can be juxtaposed with the concept of ideological turn in translation studies. Following Lefevere (in Munday et al., 2022), the literary system, which includes translational works, is regulated by both internal (professionals, including academics, reviewers, and translators) and external (patronage, including institutions, ideology, groups, and influential individuals) authorities. Akin to Jay's, the external control power may hold the last say in determining what is allowed and not allowed in translation (and writing), generally in three major aspects of ideology, economy, and status. As for the governing authority, laws, legal sanctions, and censorship are normally put in place to establish boundaries of taboo reference display (Allan, 2018; Trudgill, 2000).

Traces of 'ideological addendums' are thus reflected in taboo translations across the globe in print and AV products. As far as AVT is concerned, the display of taboo references is banned and censured altogether, although some are partly screened. One of the imposed strategies is the use of dubbing, as it replaces the original soundtrack with a locally produced target text. While this may true in most films, some are negatively perceived, such as in the dubbed sitcom of *Father Ted* in Italy, which centres on the taboo issue of Catholicism (Antonini et al., 2003). A similar observation is also found in the translation of

taboo references into Arabic, which are commonly filtered by political and religious authorities (Abu-Rayyash et al., 2023; Al-Jabri et al., 2021). As a result, a content filtering process is performed to monitor offensive, embarrassing, or shocking subjects before the release of the films for public viewing.

Language creativity also plays a pivotal role in conveying taboo references in translation. Allan and Burridge's (2006) range of X-phemism, for example, might be of use for translators, such as the rendition of toilet (orthophemism) into loo (euphemism) or shithouse (dysphemism) whenever necessary. Lefevere's euphemistic English translations (in Munday et al., 2022) for 'penis' as 'membrum virile', 'nose', 'leg', 'handle', 'life-line' and 'anything else', often with explanatory footnotes certainly underlines the craft of wordplay in expressing taboo references.

Another point worth considering is the candour of the taboo delivery. As opposed to the direct, exclamatory release, double-meaning references are also used in creative writing, including in films. One clear example is shown in *Deadpool's* (2016) "This shit's gonna have nuts in it" dialogue, which refers to both faecal reference and his revenge master plan. The Malay subtitling of the phrase would prove difficult since the dysphemistic (or even its orthophemistic counterpart) Malay term for 'shit' (*tahi*) does not correspond to similar meanings in both contexts, which left the taboo reference untranslated, as discussed by Mohamad Zakuan Tuan Ibharim and Hasuria Che Omar (2021). The phenomenon can be traced back to Díaz Cintas and Remael's (2021) notion that taboo references are often mitigated or omitted altogether in subtitling due to spatial and temporal constraints.

As far as the social status of language is concerned, the expression of taboo language in the form of swearing and expletives is regularly, if not always likened to the colloquial, non-standard variation (see Allan, 2018). The influence of authoritative institutions over individuals, as put by Jay (2009) can be seen in the examples of several apological remarks by BBC television presenters over taboo expressions by its guests and speakers. In countries that highly regard the authority of standard language such as Arabic, its value can be a central reason for determining diction and translation strategies for taboo words (Abdelaal & Al Sarhani, 2021). The modern standard Arabic (*fusha*) is seen as the unifying factor for all Arab countries; hence it should always be clean from impurities, polite, and spoken by intellectuals.

A less prestigious form of language is then dismissed in written form, including in subtitles.

Present empirical studies of AVT of taboo language are mostly comparative analyses of various AV modes. While several studies opted for manual comparison (Hanim Hafiza Mohd Hanif, 2013; Ho Chew Ngan & Hasuria Che Omar, 2010 among others), the use of corpus analysis is becoming a recent analysis procedure theme, and the findings are tabled in the form of taboo formation and translation strategy taxonomies. Wu (2021), for example, makes use of a parallel corpus (English-Chinese) in analysing the swearword translation in *Big Little Lies* and found the use of four translation strategies of pragmatic equivalence, softening, de-swearing, and omission. Abu-Rayyash et al. (2023) in their analysis of 1564 swearword translations into Arabic in Netflix films and TV series, found omission as the most frequently used subtitling strategy over taboo-to-taboo, taboo-to-non-taboo, and softening. Four taboo-related references are found in the two subtitled renditions of *How I Met Your Mother* (Al-Jabri et al., 2021), and five strategies of maintaining, deleting, mitigating, substituting, and amplifying are found in the translation of eight American films into Persian (Khoshsaligheh et al., 2018).

A study by Mohamad Zakuan Tuan Ibharim and Hasuria Che Omar (2021) found both internal (language, culture, type, and delivery) and external (censorship and law enforcement) elements as the governing factors in subtitling (taboo) humour in *Deadpool* (2016) into Malay. In the Malaysian context, both the Film Censorship Act 2002 (Act 620) and the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (Act 588) serve to benchmark and regulate the publication and broadcast of materials in cinemas, television and virtually. Act 620, for instance, has its roots in safeguarding morality and national security by preventing the spread of unwarranted content in films. The issuance of the 2010 Film Censorship Guidelines (Kementerian Dalam Negeri, 2010) and 2015 Circular of Film Censorship Board (LPF) (TV Station), among others, are guided by the grounds of (i) Security and public order; (ii) Religion; (iii) Socio-culture; and (iv) Decorum and morality. Act 588, on the other hand, regulates the display and distribution of online content.

Even though the permission to broadcast AV content is subject to local laws in principle, the same does not apply to non-domestic media

channels. International video streaming service providers, such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Hulu, and Disney+, among others, are therefore not subject to Malaysian laws. Netflix, for instance, has been a subject of criticism for its uncensored content that is deemed against the upheld local values (see G. Prakash, 2019; Radzi Razak, 2019). Ahmad Idham Ahmad Nadzri (in Radzi Razak, 2019) further notes that a display of unregulated content might affect the local children's mindset. In relation to this, the (then) Communication and Multimedia minister, Annuar Musa (2022) stated that the Malaysia government had no authority to censure the display of content on the platform, as Netflix is not locally registered and licensed; and suggested a sit-down for both sides to arise the local concerns on the stipulated issue.

CORPUS AND METHODOLOGY

The corpus is of Netflix's The Assistant (2022). The 123-minute action film is directed by Adrian Teh and tells the story of Zarik, a male protagonist seeking revenge for the death of his wife and son. The Assistant is starred by Iedil Dzuhrie Alaudin, Hairul Azreen, Henley Hii and Farali Khan and first premiered in local cinemas on May 19 2022 (Syafil Syazwan Jefri, 2022), and subsequently on Netflix. Besides English, Netflix also provides the Malay, Simplified Chinese, and Traditional Chinese subtitles of the film.

The corpus selection is of several reasons, such as:
  i.   The depiction of taboo language in dialogues, as per Netflix's 18+ ratings and offensive language label;
  ii. The no-censorship policy by Netflix, including in the display of subtitles (see Alsharhan, 2020);
  iii. The screening of film content in video-streaming platforms such as Netflix is not restricted to local laws (see KiniTV, 2022); and
  iv. The nomination of *The Assistant* to be screened at an international film festival, the 24th Far East Film Festival in Italy and its positive reception by international media (Serimah Mohd Sallehuddin, 2022).

A Malay-English parallel corpus is developed for data analysis purposes. The downloaded XML-format data is first transferred and analysed using Lauren Anthony's AntConc and AntPConc. The former is utilised to locate and identify the frequency distribution of taboo

language in both languages using the Word, KWIC and Collocate features; while the latter provides the concordance and text analysis information for comparative analysis. The findings are grouped into two aspects: the formation of taboo delivery and their translation strategies. The determination of taboo formation draws on Allan and Burridge's (2006) framework of the X-phemism rank (orthophemism, euphemism, and dysphemism); and the adopted swearword taxonomy by Abu-Rayyash et al. (2023, p. 6) is employed in the discussion of taboo translation strategies, as follows:

(1) Taboo-to-Taboo: Source-text taboo reference is equally rendered in the target text (similar degree and load of offensiveness);

(2) Taboo-to-non-taboo (neutralisation): Source-text taboo reference is neutralised and substituted with a non-taboo expression;

(3) Euphemising/softening: Source-text taboo reference is toned down using a target language euphemistic expression; and

(4) Omission: Source-text taboo reference is deleted in the target language.

FINDINGS

Taboo Delivery and Modalities

The analysis finds several important findings. First, the delivery of taboo language in the source language is largely attributed to dysphemistic, direct, and exclamatory fashion, mostly in the form of swearwords. The instances include "*blah*" (bugger off), "*sial*" (damn), and "*bangsat*" (bastard). Many of the swearwords are also delivered in other languages, such as English (fuck and shit) and localised swearwords in Hokkien ('*ji-bai*' – "*cibai*" and '*lan jiao*' – "lancau", vagina and penis) and Tamil ('*puṇṭai*' – "*pundek*", literally vagina), which reflected the multilingual state of the nation). Some references are also expressed in phrasal forms, such as "*tak ada telur*" (no balls), *pergi mampuslah!* (go to hell) and *kepala otak kau* (literally 'your brain-head').

Whilst a large chunk of the expletive remarks depends on the prosodic nature of the delivery, other taboo delivery rests on other modalities, specifically the visual mode. In a major fighting scene between

Feroz (Hairul Azreen) and Sofia (Farali Khan), a lineup of sexist and sexual references is delivered with the interplay of dynamic action and camera-shot arrangement. Among other things, the themes are communicated using Feroz's condescending tone when referring to Sofia as '*Kak Long*' (literally a respectful term for oldest sister), referring to himself as '*Boboi*' (nickname for youngest male child), the zooming in on Sofia's breast accompanied by a sexual remark ("*Pegang sikit*" – literally "(I just want to) touch (them) a little bit). These name-callings, however, are euphemistic in nature, as they do not in most cases convey, or are perceived negatively.

Apart from aforesaid themes, the taboo references also include religion (when Sam offers the Malay-Muslim Zikri alcoholic drinks), sexual organs ('*butuh*', '*lancau*' (penis); '*pantat*', '*cibai*' and '*pundek*' (vagina)), animal name-calling ('*babi*' (pig), '*dog*', '*ayam*' (chicken)), scatology ('*tahi*'), and verbal etiquette (*adab*) with the elderly (Zikri's repeated sarcastic remarks when speaking to Kuan). By drawing on Allan and Burridge's (2006) framework, the overall themes and their frequencies are presented as follows:

Table 1

Themes of Taboo Language in The Assistant (2022)

No.	Taboo language themes	Subthemes in corpus	Examples and frequencies
	Bodies and their effluvia	None	None
	Organs and acts of sex, micturition, defection	Sexual organs	*butuh* (1), *lancau* (1), *pantat* (1), *cibai* (2) and *pundek* (1)
		Scatology	*tahi* (2)
	Diseases, death and killing	Death wishes	*mati* (7), *mampus* (8), *bunuh* (25), *sembelih* (1)
	Naming, addressing, touching, and viewing persons and sacred beings	Swearwords and derogatory terms	*Sial* (8), *blah* (11), *gila* (9), *bodoh* (6), *barua* (3), *bangsat* (2)
		Animal name-calling	*babi* (3), *dog* (1), *ayam* (2)
		Sexist remarks	*Kak Long* (2), *Boboi* (1), *abang* (2), *sayang* (1)
		Etiquette tradition	No direct examples
	Objects and places; food gathering, preparation and consumption	None	None

Taboo Rendition in English

Taboo-to-Taboo

In general terms, most of the direct and explicit taboo references are rendered in Malay with varying levels of offensiveness. Following Abu-Rayyash et al.'s (2023) swearword taxonomy, the first translation strategy is taboo-to-taboo. Throughout the film, the strategy is commonly found in the translation of expletives, which are often expressed in exclamatory fashion. The analysis finds that one-word exclamatory remarks are normally rendered using a similar syntax structure – one-word, paired with exclamation marks for corresponding emotive and pragmatic tone. Therefore, the expressions of the swearwords in the sentence-final positions would be structured similarly in the subtitles. Some of the examples are as follows:

Table 2

Taboo-to-Taboo Strategy in The Assistant (2022)

No.	Source text (Malay)	Target text (English)	Timecode
	*Kau siapa, **sial**?*	Who are you, **asshole**?	{39919}{39964}
	*Aku dah nampak muka kaulah, **pantat**!*	I saw your face, **asshole**!	{60664}{60714}
	*Sam! Hei, **bangsat**!*	Sam. Hey, **bastard**!	{127799}{127852}
	*Dia orang anak dan isteri akulah, **sial**!*	They're my wife and son, **damn you**!	{61560}{61603}

Another salient feature of the taboo-to-taboo translation is its dysphemistic delivery, which signals a direct delivery of taboo references in the source text as well. Subtitling procedure-wise, several references are translated literally in both word and phrasal references, such as "*blah*" as "get lost", "*bodoh*" as "stupid", and "*kalau tak ada telur*" as "if you've got no balls". Some taboo language references, however, are translated pragmatically, although there is a tendency for the subtitler to confine the diction only to a limited number of English swearwords, although the loads remain similar and dysphemistic in the target language. In many cases, they are mainly restricted to "asshole", "bastard", "damn", and "damn you". Apart from the examples in Table 2, this is also evidenced in the translation of "*barua-barua*" (as bastards), "*lancau*" (as damn you), "*babi*" (as damn), and "*sial*" (damn you).

Nevertheless, albeit on a smaller scale, some taboo language references are still creatively rendered to display a link-up between the structural elements in the source text in the subtitles. Amid the fighting scene between Feroz and Sofia, Feroz interjected an animal name-calling to his opponent after he was hit, "*Sakitlah, ayam*", which literally translates to "(It) hurts, chicken". The English rendition maintains the bird reference as "That hurts, birdbrain", which is a derogatory slang meaning foolish or stupid. Another example is in the translation of the phrase "*Dia itu kaki skodeng, kau tahu tak?*" as "He's a Peeping Tom, you know?". The taboo reference in the source text is *kaki skodeng*, which is a non-standard Malay lingo for a voyeur, someone who frequents lurking and/or spying on others (normally ladies) without their consent. Its English equivalent, whilst has its historical traces in the account of Lady Godiva and Tom (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2024), creatively fits the contextual meaning of the source text.

Taboo-to-Non-Taboo

The second category is taboo-to-non-taboo. Here, the translator still opts to translate the taboo language but replaces it with more neutral, non-taboo terms (orthophemism). In the analysed subtitles, various examples are found in this category, such as the rendition of "*spender*" (literally underwear) in the dialogue of "*Apasal muka macam spender?*" into "Your face looks weird", which is not negative or taboo in essence. Following the aforementioned animal name-calling reference, Feroz continues it by remarking "*Wah, boleh tendang ya ayam ni.*", (literally 'Wow, this chicken can kick'). The animal reference, however, is replaced with a second-person pronoun 'you' in the translation ("You definitely can kick."), which is orthophemistic in principle.

Two examples of the derogatory term "*mat pet*" are also subtitled as the more neutral "drug addicts", which may or may not be constituted negatively, as opposed to the source reference in Malay – an informal term for junkies. In a similar light, and contrary to the more dysphemistic translation of "*blah*" in the first category (get lost), on a couple of occasions, the translator opts for "go away", which leaves a more neutral feel.

The use of generic pronouns is also utilised in substituting taboo references. In the early stage of the major fight between Feroz and

Sofia, the former begins by belittling the fact that his opponent is a woman. He then refers to Sofia as "Kak Long" – a respectful term for the oldest sister in Malay, whilst referring to himself as "Boboi" – a childish term for a young male. The depiction of the sexist remarks is also accompanied by several sexual references, especially when Feroz directs his gun at his crotch area and the zooming in on Sofia's chest. The sexist labels, however, are only substituted with generic pronouns of "you" and "I" in English.

While death wishes to others may in general be perceived as taboo altogether, some expressions are still deemed 'graver' than others. Towards the end of the film, Zafik is pictured in disbelief when he finds the truth of the psychological persona of Feroz, which repeatedly fills him with negative thoughts. Zafik then tries committing suicide to get rid of him, but the persona takes over his body and tries chocking him to death, and says "*Jom kita try tengok kau mampus. Apa kata kali ini kau mampus*?" (translated as "Let's see if you die or not. Why don't you die this time?") The Malay subtitles here, however, use the generic terminology (die), albeit the available options of other dysphemistic remarks, hence are placed in this translation category.

Euphemising/Softening

The third category is principally mitigation, where the translators lessen the taboo language loads with euphemistic, softer expressions. Only a handful of this strategy is observed in the Malay subtitles of the corpus. For instance, in the developing stage of the film, Feroz meets a lady who is having a fight over a phone call with his ex-boyfriend. After a few verbal exchanges, she ends the call and turns her attention to Feroz, by saying "*Cuba pergi tanya si ex-boyfriend babi aku itu!*" The taboo reference here is "*babi*" (pig), which was subtitled as "stupid" in the target language – a softer load as opposed to calling a person 'pig' in the Malaysian context, which is considered among the impurest *najs* for Muslims (Mufti of Federal Territory's Office, 2017).

Omission

The final translation strategy is omission, which posits a total non-inclusion of the taboo language expressions in the translation. The application of this strategy is of several contexts. For instance, some

exclamatory remarks are deliberately not rendered into English, such as the interjection of "Sial!" on several occasions {89165 to 89189; and 110278 to 110318}. Contextually, both the former and latter refer to chaotic incidents where multiple characters speak simultaneously.

The omission of other taboo references, both in lexical and phrasal forms, is also observed in the target text. The examples, among others, are tabled as the following:

Table 3

Omission Strategy in The Assistant (2022)

No.	Source text (Malay)	Target text (English)	Timecode
	Apa kau buat, **sial***?*	What are you doing?	{82729}{82759}
	Babak macam ini, sekarang siapa gila, **gila***?*	Now, who's crazy?	{163342}{163407}
	Butuhlah*, kerja dengan akulah.*	Just come and work with me.	{18644}{18707}
	Babilah*, Kuan, terkejut aku.*	Kuan, you scared me.	{87628}{87676}
	Kau faham tak? Kau ingat dalam **kepala otak** *kau ni.*	Do you understand me? Remember this.	{86625}{86668}

Overall, the examples from Table 3 put forth varying structural positioning of taboo expressions. The first two examples denote the use of name-calling at the sentence-final position; the third and fourth examples utilise the expressions, accompanied by the *-lah* particle indicating emphasis, at the beginning of the dialogues; the fifth refers to an idiomatic expression. Another salient feature is all but the first example of long dialogues in the source text structure-wise, which may indicate spatial constraints for the translator to retain original taboo expressions in the target language.

Following the earlier discussion on multilingual taboo expressions in the film, all English references in the source language are not retained in the subtitles. They are most commonly of "fuck" and "shit" interjections, and although they are repeatedly mentioned throughout the film, they are not accounted for in the analysis. This also includes a dialogue of "*Come, pick a poison*" by Sam (Henley Hii) to Zafik when

offering him his alcoholic beverage collection, which is nonetheless against Islamic principles.

Another point worth mentioning is a procedure of situational substitution, in which the subtitler opts to alter the direction of the conversation effect in the translation. This includes the amplification of the taboo degree (dysphemism) in the dialogue by Zafik to Sam, "*Sini kau*!" (literally '(You) come here!'), which is rendered expletively as "Damn you!". Another example is observed in the dialogue exchange between Feroz and Sofia when the male character is depicted wanting to touch Sofia's chest area. He utters "*Pegang sikit*" (literally "(I just want to) touch (them) a little bit), but is rendered as "Hold me" in English, which suggests Feroz as being the one asking Sofia to act out, as opposed to the original script in Malay.

DISCUSSION

At base, the findings set out a range of observations. As deliberated earlier, the taboo themes and their delivery vary extensively throughout the film, comprising all three of Allan and Burridge's (2006) means of orthophemism, euphemism, and dysphemism across three themes. Most of them point towards direct expressions, which complement the film's action-based genre, and draw an important image of the modern Malaysian society – multilingual. The (source) language is mainly colloquial and non-standard, which conforms to Allan's (2018) description. The spectrum of the themes also reflects the reception of the use of swearwords and expletives for a particular group of Malaysians, although a number of them go against the tradition and practice of the Muslim-majority society in the country (e.g. sexual, sexist, scatological, animal name-calling, alcoholic drinks, speaking etiquette references etc.) (see Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin, 2023; Rozita Che Rodi, 2022; Teo Kok Seong, 2019).

Following Abu-Rayyash et al.'s (2023) swearword taxonomy, the comparative analysis found all four strategies of taboo-to-taboo, taboo-to-non-taboo, euphemising/softening, and omission in the English translation. A large chunk of the references is dysphemistically rendered in the target language, which carries similar offensiveness loads, in both lexical and phrasal forms. Exclamatory remarks are often rendered in a similar prosodic nature, which goes hand in hand

with their short and precise load trajectory – hence deemed of import to be addressed in the translation using exclamation marks etc.

It matters to note, however, that many of these expressions are not as diverse in their translation, although the film is streamed on Netflix, which maintains a non-censorship policy and thus leaves the translator free to communicate the taboo references in the target text (see Alsharhan, 2020). As elucidated in all four translation strategies, the subtitler tends to opt for a limited set of vocabulary in English. Even though most of the references are retained in the subtitles, the dysphemistic translations are mostly reduced to "damn (you)", "bastard", and "asshole". Specific taboo themes are also not literally rendered, although they may function similarly in both Malay and English, as posited by the animal name-calling (e.g. pig) and sexual organs (e.g. *butuh'*, '*lancau')* (see Dalzell & Victor, 2008).

On many occasions, the sentences are shorter than the source text (see Tables 2 and 3). Whilst the thinking behind the decision is subjective, this can be confined to the technical aspects of subtitling – most notably the spatial and temporal constraints (see Gottlieb, 2001). According to Diaz-Cintas & Remael (2014), subtitled characters are normally shorter and more concise to help maintain a smooth flow and optimise the audience's viewing experience. In the context of taboo subtitling, however, this may hamper the quality and accuracy of the expressions in the target text.

Multimodality and creativity remain central in the formation and delivery of the taboo references, which are parallel to the studies on *Reservoir Dogs Deadpool*, and *Pulp Fiction* (see Ávila-Cabrera, 2014; Mohamad Zakuan Tuan Ibharim & Hasuria Che Omar, 2021; Parini, 2013 respectively). As for their translation, the subtitler's awareness of the four multimodal aspects of language, music, image, and sound holds relevance in producing a quality translation. The dynamic framing of the fighting scene between Feroz and Sofia, for example, features the interplay of dialogue exchanges, vibrant background music, a range of shot types, and dynamic character movements. These are continuously displayed to frame the character of Feroz as cynical, condescending, and belittling towards his opponent – a woman. Therefore, the non-inclusion of gender-based remarks of "*kak long*," "*boboi*," in the subtitles can certainly lead to incongruence, and ultimately, disrupt the target audience's comprehensive understanding of the scene.

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CONCLUSION

All things considered, this study sheds light on the complexities and challenges of subtitling Malay taboo language into English, particularly through the lens of the *The Assistant* (2022). The analysis highlights that the delivery of taboo language in the source text is multifaceted and predominantly explicit, often involving exclamatory expressions. The subtitling strategies observed include direct translations (taboo-to-taboo), neutralisation (taboo-to-non-taboo), euphemising, and omission. Each strategy reflects different degrees of fidelity to the original text, influenced by both linguistic and technical constraints of subtitling.

The findings reveal that Netflix's no-censorship policy allows for a relatively high retention of taboo expressions in the subtitles, maintaining the original's explicitness. However, the subtitler's choices also demonstrate a tendency to employ a limited set of English swearwords, potentially simplifying the diversity of expressions found in the source text. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of multimodal elements in conveying the full impact of taboo language, as the interplay of dialogue, visual cues, and sound effects can significantly affect the audience's reception and understanding.

This research contributes to the broader field of audiovisual translation by providing empirical data on the translation of taboo language in a specific cultural context. Future studies could expand on this work by exploring audience reception of such translations, investigating how different demographics perceive and respond to the subtitling of taboo language. Examining other films and genres could also offer a more comprehensive understanding of the strategies and challenges in subtitling taboo language across various contexts and platforms.

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