

HUMAN AND AI TRANSLATION OF DYSPHEMISMS FROM ENGLISH INTO ROMANIAN: A CASE STUDY BASED ON THE SHORT SERIES *ADOLESCENCE*

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Abstract: *This study provides a qualitative analysis of dysphemisms, which represent harsh or offensive expressions used to reflect the way the speaker perceives the ideational reality, as well as the relationship between speaker and listener. Thus the ideational metafunction and interpersonal metafunction intertwine within these linguistic phenomena. Being a complex linguistic phenomenon, it becomes even more intricate when it comes to its translation. The translation solution should cover cultural and social expectations in expressing a certain reality by means of dysphemisms, as what is considered normal or mildly offensive in one language and culture could be inappropriate, weird or highly offensive in another language. The human translator is bound to sense the cultural, social and personal nuances in order to find a proper transfer strategy which would have the same impact on the target audience as it has of the source audience. This is particularly important in regard to the translations of movies and series, as it shapes the way the cinematographic work is perceived worldwide, its authenticity and intended emotional impact.*

*The article highlights the main categories and functions of dysphemisms as well as the techniques used in professional human translation versus AI translation tools, providing comments on the naturalness and illocutionary force of the translated utterances. The examples which were analysed were selected from the award-winning British series *Adolescence*. The study proves that professional human translation, in most cases, is more nuanced and versatile in comparison with AI translation, which tends to be repetitive, or even flawed when it fails to detect the intended meaning and illocutionary force of the source dysphemism in context.*

Keywords: *dysphemism, illocutionary force, functions of dysphemisms, human translation, AI translation, subtitling, pragmatic equivalence, omission, denotative equivalence*

Introduction

Language is the semiotic system which enables us to interface with the non-linguistic world. According to M. Halliday, language helps people make sense, by “construing” human experience, it “provides a theory of human experience” (Halliday, 2013: 30). On the other hand, “while construing, language is always also enacting: enacting our personal and social relationships with the other people around us” (Halliday, 2013: 30).

The linguists categorise these aspects of language into two key metafunctions that intertwine: the ideational metafunction, which refers to the ideas conveyed in an utterance, and the interpersonal metafunction, which reflects the relationship between the speaker and the listener expressed through language.

Related to interpersonal function, the ideas of A. Keith and K. Burridge are particularly relevant as they conceptualise the language either as a shield or weapon “for its users, both to embrace friends and to destroy enemies” (apud Laili, 2017:110).

The linguistic tools which are used to manage how we want our audience to feel about what we say are called x-phemisms. A. Keith and K. Burridge create this umbrella term to cover euphemisms (softening or polite expressions) dysphemisms (harsh or offensive expressions) and orthophemisms (neutral, direct expressions) (Keith & Burridge, 1991: 64)

Our article focuses on the peculiarities of translating dysphemisms from English into Romanian, taking into account the techniques involved and the illocutionary force that the target expression may or may not preserve. It also compares translation solutions provided by professional human translators and an AI-based translation platform, in order to assess the relevance of human expertise in this context.

Dysphemisms – Definition, Types and Functions

Words have always been used to build closer connections or to highlight differences between speakers, however the conceptualisation of these sociolinguistic and pragmatic instruments were thoroughly researched by the linguists Keith Allan and Kate Burridge. The authors provided a wide range of examples and nuances when it comes to these linguistic phenomena (see their co-authored book *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language Used as Shield and Weapon* (1991). According to Keith and Burridge, a euphemism is “an alternative for expressions speaker would simply prefer not to use in executing a particular communicative intention on a given occasion or set of occasions” (Keith & Burridge, 1991: 28). Thus, the euphemisms may be used to replace a taboo term, a word with too many negative connotations or words that create fear or distaste in the specific communicative situation, because once a word’s denotatum is perceived by the society as a “tained” one, the word becomes contaminated itself. (Keith & Burridge, 1991: 29) So, in order to protect the audience from emotional discomfort or embarrassment caused by the use of a word related to a “tained” or stigmatised referent, softer variants are created and used. For example, the verb *to die* is often replaced by euphemistic expressions such as *pass away* or *pass on*, which serve to soften the emotional impact and avoid the directness of the term *die* (*Cambridge Dictionary*)

On the other hand, dysphemisms are linguistic expressions “with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum or to the audience, or both...” (Keith & Burridge, 1991: 40). Keith and Burridge explain that it is “an invective based on the hyperbolisation of a negative attribute or replacement of a positive evaluative sign to a negative one” (apud. Rabiyeva, 2022: 128). By using dysphemisms, the designation of a referent is replaced with a ruder one. A. Allahverdiyeva et al. similarly define the dysphemisms as “the deliberate use of a taboo linguistic form or words of a reduced style, as well as neutral vocabulary carrying a negative assessment that does not correspond to the given situation of speech” (Allahverdiyeva, 2021: 745). For example, the sensitive subject of death is often referred to dysphemistically through slang and informal lexical items such as *to croak*, *sniff it*, or *kick the bucket*. Similarly, a person who cheats or betrays

may be labeled as a *rat*, while someone with a monotonous office job is dysphemistically described as a *pencil pusher* or *paper pusher* (Oxford Dictionary).

It is worth mentioning that some dysphemisms have a negative connotation or are offensive per se as they break some cultural norms, expectations or taboos. According to S. Sulpizio, the semantic domains of dysphemisms are classified into five main categories: insults (derogatory terms aimed at individuals' intelligence, appearance, behavior, or personality traits), slurs (offensive words related to race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, religion), sexual references (terms related to sexual acts, organs, or behaviors, often used provocatively), scatological reference (language related to human waste from body in an unpleasant way), blasphemy and profanity (irreverent language targeting religious figures, rituals, or sacred concepts) (Sulpizio, 2024: 3801-3804). On the other hand, words may become dysphemistic depending on the communicative situation and context. Keith and BurrIDGE provide the example of the demonym *Asian*, which is perceived as dysphemistic in the Australian context when referring to individuals from Asian countries. In such cases, people tend to prefer national demonyms that specify their country of origin, for instance, *Chinese*, *Indian*, and so on (Keith & BurrIDGE, 1991:41). Moreover, while a part of dysphemistic expressions may be subject to legal sanctions when used infelicitously, others acquire the dysphemistic tone in the specific utterance and context.

M. Gómez highlights the complex nature of dysphemisms arguing that they represent cognitive mechanisms through which speakers name a reality by employing alternative signifiers, often shaped by conceptual categories and pragmatic intentions. So, the reality is somewhat reframed based on the speaker's intention (Gomez, 2012: 45-47). Accordingly, the functions of dysphemistic lexical units differ, depending on pragmatic factors.

The most common function of dysphemisms is the *offensive one*, as by their use a certain reality/referent is downgraded. However, depending on the communicative situation, the effect or motivation of a dysphemism may be different. In this respect, Ch. Keny explains how a dysphemism may be perceived as an *expression of endearment* when used within a relationship characterised by familiarity. In this case „the hearer overlooks the intellectual value of the word and he perceives the intensity of the emotional tone before its specific quality or direction, and is also guided by the speaker's intonation and gesture” (apud Gomez, 2012: 50).

Keith and BurrIDGE add to the functions of dysphemisms the *cathartic one*, that of releasing emotional charge. Hence, by using words which break some sociocultural norms or taboos, the speaker may obtain a certain relief of stress, frustration or anger (Keith & BurrIDGE, 1991: 116). Moreover, depending on the communicative situation and the relation between speakers, dysphemisms may also be used as an “*in-group identity marker*” (Keith & BurrIDGE, 1991: 41-45). E. Laili provides the example of the word *dead* which in certain communities is not perceived dysphemistically, but as a sign that shows intimacy or is used for humour effects (Laili, 2017: 115).

Thus, dysphemisms are a multifaceted language resource that do not function uniformly across discourse. Some of them are explicitly offensive or discriminatory, some carry a strong emotional weight, while others have a milder effect being perceived as informal, humorous or inappropriate language to a formal context. It is worth mentioning that some categories of taboo language are targeted by law.

When it comes to translating the dysphemistic language, the process may become quite intricate as the pragmatic effect of a dysphemism in the source language rarely equals

with the correspondent lexical unit in the target language. The contextual factors, such as culture, social norms as well as the medium of communication will definitely impact the way we decipher, perceive and, if it is the case, translate a dysphemism.

Peculiarities of Interlingual Subtitling of Dysphemistic Language

Many human values are shared across cultures, giving rise to common social norms and widely recognised cultural taboos. However, the consequences of violating these norms or taboos can vary significantly from one cultural context to another. S. Pinker describes the impact of religious swearing in English-speaking societies as “barely raising an eyebrow”, (Pinker, 2007) attributing this reaction to increasing secularisation. In contrast, the central and eastern-European countries have a quite high level of religiosity, due to historical, cultural, and political experiences (Tomka, 2010: 5). So, religion-related dysphemisms have a different illocutionary intensity if compared to more secularised cultures. This is just one example of how societal and cultural perception of using dysphemisms would be perceived differently by the target audiences.

Another challenge that comes within the translation of dysphemisms arises when the task involves subtitling, rather than conventional written translation. V. Shiryayeva V. and G. L. Badea note that, apart from time and space constraints, subtitling differs from written translation as “the textual part of any film is not the main bearer of the information, but only a compliment to the given image and sound. Consequently, the translation of the textual part should be realised only with a close consideration of the non-verbal element and their relation to the words” (Shiryayeva & Badea, 2014: 884-885). Yves Gambier also underlines the multimodality of subtitling, as compared to written translation. The researcher states that while both translation and subtitling deal with signs, subtitling, aside from the verbal layer involves a rich mix of visuals and sound (apud Grădinaru, 2020:432). Consequently, the translators must balance fidelity with audience acceptability of the dysphemistic language, also taking into account the visual and audio information, and the dynamics of the characters, since all these elements influence how the message is meant to be interpreted by the audience.

Corpus of Research

For our qualitative research we have compiled a set of examples retrieved from the British series *Adolescence* (*Adolescență coruptă*) created and written by Owen Cooper and Stephen Graham and launched in 2025. We analysed the professional translation provided by the platform Netflix, as it involves professional human expertise, and the translation provided by a free AI-driven translation tool—DeepL.

Our choice of the series is determined by the complex, raw realities that are presented, the intense relations between characters and the portrayal of radical subcultures affecting teenagers. All these elements most often require quite harsh and abrasive language to be expressed. We classified our extracted examples according to the semantic domains proposed by Sulpizion et al, meaning sexual reference, blasphemy (religion), scatological words, slurs and insults.

Translation of Dysphemisms with Sexual Reference

One of the most versatile dysphemisms is the noun *fuck* and its derivatives which can have different functions in the discourse, starting from a simple intensifier to an

expletive (taboo word). Some other sexual dysphemisms which were spotted in the movie have mainly lost their literal meaning, but kept their offensive force, therefore the pragmatic factors are really essential when it comes to their translation. By analysing the human and AI translation of these lexical units, we have observed three main techniques: cultural pragmatic equivalence, omission and denotative equivalence. In the table below we compare and contrast human translation solutions and those provided by DeepL.

Table 1. Sexual Dysphemisms translated through Cultural-pragmatic equivalents

English example	Episode no/time stamp	Professional human translation (PHT)	DeepL translation	Comment
You fucking bastard! fucking... fucking freak!	Ep2/15.32	Ticălosule! Ce naiba! Ciudatule!	Nenorocitul! La naiba! Nenorocit de ciudat!	Pragmatic equivalence is used in both translations. AI translation sounds less natural.
You don't know what the fuck I've been through.	Ep4/27.47	Tu nu ştii prin ce naiba am trecut!	N-ai habar prin ce naiba am trecut!	The informal phrase <i>n-ai habar</i> used in AI translation is not pragmatically appropriate in the intense scene of the movie.
I don't want to fucking sit down.	Ep3/19.19	Nu vreau să stau naibii jos.	Nu am chef să stau jos.	The equivalent in AI translation is less intense and less appropriate for the scene.
What the fuck was that?	Ep3/33.40	Ce dracu a fost asta?	Ce naiba a fost asta?	The illocutionary force of human translation is higher and more appropriate for the scene.
You shut up, you dickhead!	Ep4/29.28	Taci naibii, dobitocule!	Taci din gură, idiotule!	The equivalent suggested by the PHT has a higher illocutionary force.
That Fidget was a wanker!	Ep3/43.01	Fidget era cretîn!	Fidget ăla era un nemernic!	Human and AI translation use different pragmatic equivalents, highlighting different semantic nuances.
Little twats!	Ep4/06.12	Ce fraieri!	Mici nemernici!	AI translation sounds unnatural as the adjective <i>mici</i> has a positive connotation.

Everyone was calling her slag.	Ep3/42.40	Toată lumea îi spunea parașută.	Toată lumea o numea târfă.	PHT uses slang which is a better pragmatic equivalent than the semantic equivalent provided by DeepL which feels too offensive for the given context.
Do you know what time is it? Knob.	Ep1/00.21	Ai văzut cât e ora? Căcănarule!	Știi cât e ceasul? Târâncopule!	The AI translation is a false literal translation; it is nonsensical for the context.

Another technique, when it comes to sexual dysphemisms, is the omission. This technique is applied due to the semantic bleaching of many dysphemisms, or due to the socio-pragmatic factors taken into account by the translators (relations between characters, intent of the communicator).

Table 2. Sexual Dysphemisms translated through omission

English example	Episode number/ time stamp	Professional human translation	DeepL translation	Comment
Don't you go fucking telling them what I did!	Ep 3/ 47.58	Nu cumva să le spui ce am făcut!	Să nu îndrăznești să le spui ce am făcut!	Both translations use omission of the intensifier.
Fucking disgusting, vile	Ep1	Dezgustător. Oribil.	Al naibii de dezgustător, josnic.	AI translation keeps the intensifier, the translation being too offensive for the scene.
It just looks like a fucking holding pen.	Ep 2/ 35.22	Parcă ar fi ținută în grajduri.	Arată de parcă ar fi un afurisit de țarc.	PHT omits the intensifier and modulates the whole phrase, AI translation is applying a literal translation.
Get that in that fucking little head of yours	Ep.3/ 19.30	Bagă asta în capul ăla mic.	Bagă-ți asta bine în capul ăla mic de-al tău.	The intensifier is omitted in both translations, but the PHT is more concise.
It's a fucking trap in here.	Ep3/ 33.21	Mi-ai întins o capcană.	E o capcană nenorocită aici.	AI translation is applying a literal translation, PHT is more natural.

There are cases when due to the intensity of the movie scene, the translation in Romanian is done through a denotative equivalence which preserves the pragmatic function of the dysphemism. These are the extracted examples:

Table 3. Sexual Dysphemisms Translated through Denotative Equivalence

English example	Episode number/ time stamp	Professional human translation	DeepL translation	Comment
Fuck, fuck, fuck	Ep 3/ 34.21	Futu-il!	La naiba!	AI translation fails to render the intensity of the scene.
Fuck!	Ep2/ 38.57	Futu-il!	La naiba!	

So, when it comes to sexual dysphemisms some of the most common techniques used in human translation are: the use of a pragmatic equivalents, which implies the change of the semantic domain, omissions, or denotative equivalence. From our observation, AI translations also involve these techniques, however the translation solutions are less varied and less creative. One clear advantage of the human translation is that the illocutionary force of translation solutions renders the visual and verbal intensity of the source message.

Translation of Scatological Dysphemisms

Scatological dysphemisms are also quite common in everyday or offensive discourses, having as their main function to express strong feeling, to intensify the message or to offend. The most frequent technique applied the translation of these dysphemisms is the pragmatic equivalence, by change of the semantic domain.

Table 4. Translation of Scatological Dysphemisms

English example	Episode number/ time stamp	Professional human translation (PHT)	DeepL translation	Comment
Now you are talking shit.	Ep3/09.05	Acum doar bați câmpii.	Acum vorbești prostii.	PHT uses a fixed expression which adds colour to the discourse.
Shit. Dad, have you seen the van?	Ep4/04.01	Drace! Tată, ai văzut dubița?	La naiba! Tată, ai văzut dubița?	The equivalent in PHT is more intense and appropriate for the scene.
I took him to footy, didn't I? 'Cause I thought it'd toughen him up. No, but he was crap.	Ep4/45.36	Dar nu se pricepea.	Nu, dar a jucat groaznic.	Omission is used in both translations, however PHT is less direct than AI one, being in accordance with the visual message of the scene.

In the case of scatological dysphemisms, the semantic domain is not preserved, the translations being done through pragmatic equivalence or omission, and softening of the message. From our observations, PHT solutions are more precise and natural in comparison to AI solutions.

Translation of Religion Dysphemisms

The religion related dysphemisms are less frequent in the series, being used just to express some mild emotions like amazement or sarcasm. The examples we extracted show the use of a pragmatic equivalent in human translation and the preservation of the semantic domain in AI translation.

Table 5. Translation Examples of Religion Dysphemisms

English example	Episode number/ time stamp	Professional human translation	DeepL translation	Comment on the technique in human and AI translation
Jesus. I've not heard that one before.	Ep.3/ 06.54	Măi să fie, n-am mai auzit până acum.	Doamne! N-am mai auzit asta până acum.	PHT applies the change of semantic domain, while AI keeps it.
God, you are really posh.	Ep 3/ 07.00	Doamne, ce distinsă ești!	Doamne, ce elegantă ești!	Both translations keep the semantic domain

Translation of Slurs and Insults

Dysphemisms which are slurs and insults are built on the mechanism of metaphors and semantic shifts. The main function of these dysphemisms is to offend and criticise someone's physical or personality traits. The main techniques used in translation are pragmatic equivalence (by change of the semantic domain), omission or denotative equivalence. These are the extracted examples:

Table 6. Translation of Slurs and Insults

English example	Episode no/ time stamp	Human translation	DeepL translation	Author's Comment
You just got banged by a girl, you sausage!	Ep2/16.11	Te-a caftit o fată, fraierule!	Tocmai ai fost pus la punct de o fată, cârnațule!	The PHT uses a pragmatic equivalence, while AI translation uses a false denotative equivalence, which makes the translation unnatural.
Fuck off, then, you nosy old cow.	Ep4 /11.30	Atunci valea, vacă bătrână și băgăcioasă!	Atunci du-te dracului, vacă bătrână și băgăcioasă.	Both translations use denotative equivalence
All right, nonce!	Ep4/11.40	Salutare pedo!	Bine, nebunule!	AI translation is a mistranslation as <i>nonce</i> is a derogatory name for a sex offender.

Conclusions

The comparative analysis of the translation solutions produced by professional human translation versus AI translation shows that human translation is much more versatile and natural, as it uses more strategies which are in accordance with the visual and psychological intensity of the scenes in the series. Moreover, the professional human translation manages to capture the function of each dysphemism in the context and to render it appropriately by such strategies as pragmatic equivalence (which implies semantic changes), omission or, in some cases, denotative equivalence.

When it comes to AI translation, the solutions rendered tend to be repetitive, which affects the whole discourse, making it less vivid and natural. Also, the AI tool has generated examples of mistranslations or unnatural translations, which negatively affect the quality of the translated discourse.

Overall, the human factor is still relevant in the realm of translation, especially when it comes to deeply rooted sociocultural linguistic phenomena such as dysphemisms, and the over-reliance on AI translation tools is not a feasible solution at present time.

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