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## **A STUDY OF TRANSLATION STRATEGIES FOR TABOO WORDS IN THE SUBTITLES OF THE SERIES “THE BOYS”**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Abstract**— The rapid growth of cross-cultural media consumption has heightened the importance of subtitle translation, particularly regarding the delicate balance between original fidelity and cultural appropriateness when handling taboo words. This study investigates the translation strategies for taboo words in the Thai subtitles of the series *The Boys* (Season 1). The research objectives were to identify the frequency of the most common taboo words and analyze the specific strategies employed to render them from English to Thai. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from eight episodes streamed on Amazon Prime Video. The analysis utilized established taboo word translation frameworks and standardized offensive language lists to categorize the findings. Results indicate that "fucking" was the most prevalent taboo word, appearing 217 times (29.60% of total instances) across 31 distinct translation pairs. A total of 733 translation instances were documented and classified into four main strategies. Substitution emerged as the primary method (37.79%), followed by taboo-for-taboo translation (34.24%), censorship (19.24%), and the application of euphemisms (8.73%). The findings conclude that translators prioritize substitution to maintain the emotional weight of the source material while ensuring the content remains suitable for the target culture's linguistic norms. Future research should consider comparative studies between subtitling and dubbing to further explore these linguistic shifts.

**Keywords**— Subtitles, Taboo words, Translation strategies

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the current era of globalization, the consumption of international media has increased significantly, making subtitle translation an essential tool for cross-cultural communication. Subtitling involves more than just translating words from one language to another; it requires a deep understanding of cultural nuances and social norms. One of the most challenging aspects of this process is the translation of taboo words. These are terms related to profanity, sexual references, or offensive language that may be restricted or considered inappropriate in certain social contexts. In the Thai context, the translation of such words is particularly sensitive due to cultural values regarding politeness and social hierarchy.

The series *The Boys*, an American superhero television series, is known for its frequent use of strong language and taboo words to convey the emotions and personalities of its characters.

This presents a complex task for translators who must decide whether to retain the impact of the original dialogue or modify it to suit the expectations of the Thai audience. If a translator ignores the intensity of the source text, the emotional weight of the scene might be lost. Conversely, a direct translation that is too literal might be perceived as overly offensive or vulgar by Thai viewers.

This research focuses on analyzing how taboo words are handled in the Thai subtitles of the first season of *The Boys*. By identifying the most frequent taboo words and examining the strategies used to translate them, this study seeks to provide insights into the patterns of subtitle translation in modern streaming media. The findings aim to contribute to the field of translation studies by highlighting how linguistic choices are made to balance creative expression with cultural sensitivity.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH**

1. To identify the frequency of the most common taboo words used in the English audio and Thai subtitles of the series *The Boys* (Season 1).
2. To analyze and categorize the translation strategies employed by translators to render these taboo words from English into Thai.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research design for this study utilizes a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative data to identify frequencies and qualitative data to analyze translation strategies. The methodology is divided into the following key components:

### ***1.1. Data Sources and Sample***

The primary data consists of the English audio dialogue and the corresponding Thai subtitles from the first season of the series *The Boys*. This season includes eight episodes, with a total duration of approximately eight hours. The subtitles analyzed are those provided on the Amazon Prime Video streaming platform, which serves as the official source for the series.

### ***1.2. Research Instruments***

Several tools were utilized for data collection and analysis. The AntConc software was employed to conduct a corpus analysis of the English transcripts to identify the most frequent taboo words. Standard linguistic references, including the Cambridge Dictionary and Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, were used to verify the definitions and connotations of the identified terms. The classification of taboo words followed the guidelines established by the Ofcom (2016) research report on offensive language.

### ***1.3. Data Collection***

The data collection process involved watching all eight episodes of the first season while simultaneously recording the English taboo words and their Thai subtitle equivalents. Each

instance was documented in a structured table to facilitate the comparison between the source text and the target text. A total of 733 instances of taboo words were identified and recorded for analysis.

#### **1.4. Data Analysis**

The collected data were analyzed using the framework of translation strategies proposed by Davoodi (2009). The strategies were categorized into four main groups:

1. Substitution: Replacing a taboo word with a non-taboo word or a less offensive term.
2. Taboo-for-taboo: Translating a taboo word into an equivalent taboo word in the target language
3. Censorship: Completely removing the taboo word from the subtitles.
4. Applying euphemism: Using a mild or indirect expression to replace the harsh original term.

The frequency of each strategy was calculated and converted into percentages to determine the most common approach used by the translators.

## **RESULT**

The analysis of the first season of *The Boys* revealed a total of 733 instances of taboo words. The findings are categorized into two main parts: the frequency of specific taboo words and the distribution of the translation strategies employed.

#### **2.1 The Most Frequency of Taboo Words**

In the analysis of translation strategies for taboo words based on the framework proposed by Davoodi (2009), the examination of frequency within the Thai subtitles of the series *The Boys* (Season 1) revealed that the most prevalent taboo word was 'fucking.' This term appeared 217 times, accounting for 29.60 percent of the total identified instances. Regarding the translation of the aforementioned term, four distinct strategies were employed, as categorized and detailed in Table 1 below:

**Table 1 Summary of the most frequently employed translation strategies for taboo words**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Translation Strategy</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1	Substitution	93	42.86
2	Taboo for taboo	37	17.05
3	Censorship	85	39.17
4	Applying euphemism	2	0.92
<b>Total</b>		<b>217</b>	<b>100</b>

The translation of the word 'fucking' from English into Thai requires a careful consideration of various factors, including context, tone, emotion, and the level of linguistic politeness. Translators must possess a profound understanding of both languages to select the Thai equivalents that most accurately convey the original meaning and emotional intensity while maintaining contextual appropriateness. Based on the analysis of the Thai subtitles in *The Boys* (Season 1), it was found that 'fucking' appeared 217 times, featuring 31 distinct translation pairs. These findings can be summarized as follows:

**Table 2 Frequency of Translation Strategies and Thai Equivalents for the word “Fucking”**

No.	Thai Equivalents (Translation Pairs)	Translation Strategy	Frequency
1	Maeng, Maeng-ei (แม่ง, แม่งเอ๊ย)	Taboo-for-taboo	28
2	Ai + [Insult] (ไอ้...)	Substitution	19
3	Sud, Sud-sud (สุด, สุด ๆ)	Substitution	11
4	Wa, Wa (วะ, วะ)	Substitution	10
5	Khot, Khot-khot (โคตร, โคตร ๆ)	Substitution	10
6	Woy (โว้ย)	Substitution	10
7	Huay (ห่วย)	Substitution	8
8	Wen (เวร)	Substitution	6
9	Nang + [Insult] (นัง...)	Substitution	6
10	Heng-suay (เฮงซวย)	Substitution	5
11	Ying (ยิง)	Substitution	3
12	Ra-berd (ระเบิด)	Substitution	2
13	Hea (เหี้ย)	Taboo-for-taboo	1
14	Bo-rom (บรม)	Applying euphemism	1
15	Ueb (อึบ)	Taboo-for-taboo	1
16	Ha (ห่า)	Taboo-for-taboo	1
17	Hai-tai-si (ให้ตายสิ)	Substitution	1
18	Rok-chit (โรคจิต)	Substitution	1
19	Man (มัน)	Substitution	1
20	Lerk (เล็ก)	Substitution	1
21	Nao (เนา)	Substitution	1
22	Lai (ไล่)	Substitution	1
23	Huay (ห่วย)	Substitution	1
24	Khun-phra (คุณพระ)	Applying euphemism	1
25	Hub-pak (หุบปาก)	Substitution	1
26	Rad-rup (รักรูป)	Substitution	1
27	Pan-hua (ปั่นหัว)	Substitution	1
28	Jing-jing (จริง ๆ)	Substitution	1

No.	Thai Equivalents (Translation Pairs)	Translation Strategy	Frequency
29	See (เสี)	Substitution	1
30	Kha (ข่า)	Taboo-for-taboo	1
31	Thalok (ถลอก)	Substitution	1

The analysis demonstrates that the word "fucking" possesses a diverse range of Thai translation pairs. The most prevalent equivalent found is "Maeng" or "Maeng-ei" (แม่ง, แม่งเอ๊ย), which utilizes the **Taboo-for-taboo** translation strategy. The findings also reveal the application of other strategies, including **Substitution**, **Applying euphemism**, and **Censorship** (omission) in certain instances.

This variety of translation pairs reflects linguistic flexibility in subtitling. Translators must weigh multiple factors, such as sentence context, character emotion, and the spatial constraints of subtitles, while striving to maintain a balance between source text fidelity and target language naturalness. Furthermore, the study of these translation pairs highlights current trends in translating offensive language and serves as a potential guideline for translators to enhance the effectiveness of taboo word translation in the future.

## 2.2 Translation Strategies for Taboo Words

Based on the analysis of the Thai subtitles for the series *The Boys* (Season 1), the researcher applied the framework of taboo word translation strategies proposed by Davoodi (2009). The strategies were adapted to fit the specific context of this study and were classified into four primary categories: Substitution, Taboo-for-taboo, Censorship, and Applying euphemism. These strategies are ranked by frequency from highest to lowest, as presented in Table 3.

**Table 3** Frequency and Percentage of Taboo Word Translation Strategies

Rank	Translation Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Substitution	277	37.79
2	Taboo-for-taboo	251	34.24
3	Censorship	141	19.24
4	Applying euphemism	64	8.73
<b>Total</b>		<b>733</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Based on the data in Table 3, the research findings regarding translation strategies for taboo words can be summarized as follows: The most frequently employed strategy was **Substitution**, occurring 277 times (37.79%), followed by **Taboo-for-taboo** translation at 251 instances (34.24%). The third most common strategy was **Censorship**, appearing 141 times (19.24%), while the least utilized strategy was **Applying euphemism**, with only 64 instances (8.73%). Overall, a total of 733 instances were identified across the four primary categories.

### 2.2.1. Substitution

Substitution involves replacing a taboo word with a non-taboo word or phrase that serves a similar linguistic function within the context. This method preserves the emotional intent of the speaker while avoiding terms that may be culturally inappropriate in the target language.

(1) **Source Text:** You heard that **cunt** laughing at your girl.

- **Target Text:** ได้ยินไอ้ชั่วนั้นหัวเราะเยาะแฟนนายนี้

(2) **Source Text:** Two **twats** at every entrance, armed to holy hell.

- **Target Text:** ทุกทางเข้า มีไอ้จ๋องสองคนพกอาวุธเต็มอัตรา

In example (1), Butcher uses the highly offensive term “cunt” to provoke Hughie’s anger. The translator opted for “ไอ้ชั่ว” (Ai-chua), which carries a negative connotation of villainy but is less severe than the original, thus maintaining the character's provocative tone. Similarly, in example (2), “twats” is translated as “ไอ้จ๋อง” (Ai-ngang), substituting a vulgar insult with a term denoting stupidity, which retains the derogatory tone of the scene.

### 2.2.2. Taboo-for-taboo

This strategy involves translating a source-text taboo word into an equivalent taboo word in the target language. This is used when the translator aims to preserve the raw emotional impact or the vulgarity of the original dialogue.

(3) **Source Text:** Try not to **bugger** each other.

- **Target Text:** พยายามอย่าเอาตูดกันแล้วกัน

In example (3), the slang term “bugger” refers to anal intercourse. The translator used the Thai slang “เอาตูด” (Ao-tood), which holds a similar level of vulgarity and meaning. This choice effectively preserves the informal and playful nature of the banter between the characters, reflecting their close relationship.

### 2.2.3. Censorship

Censorship refers to the omission of taboo words from the translation. This is often applied when a term is difficult to render culturally or when its removal does not significantly alter the overall meaning of the conversation.

(4) **Source Text:** Now, you could take the **fucking** red pill, right?

- **Target Text:** ตอนนี้ นายอาจเลือกยาเม็ดสีแดงไข่มุกไหม

(5) **Source Text:** Look, do you want to know what the **fucking** job is or not?

- **Target Text:** ตกลงนายอยากรู้ไหมว่าเป็นงานอะไร

In examples (4) and (5), the emphatic taboo word “fucking” is omitted. While the removal softens the tone, the core message remains intact. In example (5), the translator compensates for

the omission by adding the word “ตกลง” (Tok-long) at the beginning, which helps convey Butcher’s frustration and urgency.

#### 2.2.4. Applying Euphemism

This strategy involves using a milder or more polite expression to replace a harsh source-text term. This reduces potential viewer discomfort but may slightly diminish the intensity of the character's personality.

**(6) Source Text:** Let the bed be undefiled, for God will judge the **sexually immoral**.

○ **Target Text:** ให้เตียงสมรสปราศจากมลทิน พระเจ้าจะพิพากษาคณล่วงประเวณี

In example (6), the phrase “sexually immoral” is translated as “ล่วงประเวณี” (Luang-pra-wanee). This Thai term is more formal and clinical, avoiding a direct or vulgar reference to sex while remaining consistent with the religious and moral context of the dialogue concerning divine judgment.

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of translation strategies for taboo words in the Thai subtitles of *The Boys* (Season 1) reveals significant insights into the intersection of linguistic fidelity and cultural mediation in audiovisual translation.

The high frequency of the word “fucking” (217 instances, 29.60%) corroborates the findings of Baker (2018), who identified this term as the most prevalent taboo word in English-language entertainment media. Its versatility as an intensifier, an interjection, or an epithet presents a recurring challenge for translators. The results underscore a consistent effort to balance source-text “flavor” with target-culture appropriateness. This strategic negotiation is best explained through Vermeer’s (1989) Skopos Theory, which posits that the translation process is primarily guided by its intended function and target audience. In the context of a gritty, adult-oriented series like *The Boys*, the “Skopos” or purpose is to maintain the raw, rebellious atmosphere of the original while ensuring the Thai subtitles remain readable and socially acceptable.

The predominance of Substitution (37.79%) as the primary strategy aligns with research by Pinmanee (2017) and Gottlieb (1992), suggesting that translators prefer replacing high-intensity taboo words with non-taboo terms that serve a similar emotional or functional role. This strategy effectively preserves the speaker's intent without breaching the cultural norms of Thai viewers. Furthermore, this emphasis on cultural adaptation is supported by Sukwises et al. (2024), whose study on culture-specific item translation highlights the necessity of bridging linguistic gaps through contextually appropriate techniques. Their research reinforces the idea that translating sensitive cultural elements, including taboo language, requires a deep understanding of the target audience’s sociolinguistic expectations.

Taboo-for-taboo translation (34.24%) emerged as the second most frequent strategy, reflecting a commitment to what Nida (1964) termed Equivalent Effect. By choosing Thai taboo equivalents, translators attempt to evoke the same visceral reaction in Thai viewers as the original dialogue did for English speakers. This is particularly crucial in scenes involving Butcher or Homelander, where the level of profanity is central to character development.

The usage of Censorship (19.24%) and Applying Euphemism (8.73%) represents the more conservative side of the translation spectrum. As noted by Chen (2004), censorship is often a pragmatic response to the spatial constraints of subtitling. However, the relatively low use of euphemisms suggests that the translators prioritized the series' "adult" identity over excessive politeness. As Thompson (2020) argued, over-sanitizing dialogue in adult media can lead to a loss of character depth and narrative "grit."

In summary, the selection of translation strategies in *The Boys* is a sophisticated process that balances the raw emotional power of the source text with the linguistic constraints and cultural sensitivities of the Thai audience.

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