

Euphemism of taboo translation in the *Big Little Lies* Series

Eufemisme penerjemahan kata tabu dalam serial “Big Little Lies”

Rita Lestari^{1,*} & Adi Sutrisno²

^{1,2}Jl. Sosiohumaniora Gadjah Mada

^{1,2}Jl. Sosiohumaniora Bulaksumur, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

^{1,*}Email: rita.lestari@mail.ugm.ac.id; Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5116-2198>

²Email: adisutrisno@ugm.ac.id; Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9419-6643>

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Abstract

To maintain cultural conformity and moral standards and ensure the target language can receive the message. Translators often use translation strategies that replace or disguise taboo words with more neutral and polite expressions to express the same message. Therefore, this study attempts to identify translation strategies and the implications of using those strategies. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method with the data source "Big Little Lies series", taken from the HBO website and translated by Dhani as a free translator. The data is taken only for taboo words that have euphemism meanings in the target language. From the 145 data collected, Mona Baker's 5 strategies were found, namely (1) Omission translation strategy with many as 50 data, (2) Less expressive translation strategy with many as 38 data, (3) Paraphrase translation strategy with related words with many as 29 data, (4) There 23 data are borrowing translation strategies, and (5) 14 data that uses translation strategies using more common words. Using those strategies has implications for reducing the emotional value of the source language, saving the esteem of the viewer, and smoothing the use of taboo words so that their usage can be accepted in the target language's culture.

Abstrak

Dalam upaya menjaga kesesuaian budaya dan standar moralitas, serta memastikan pesan yang disampaikan dapat diterima oleh penonton, penerjemah sering menerapkan penggunaan strategi penerjemahan yang melibatkan penggantian atau penyamaran kata tabu dengan ekspresi yang lebih netral dan sopan untuk menyampaikan pesan yang sama. Oleh sebab itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi strategi penerjemahan dan implikasi penggunaannya dalam takarir. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan sumber data berupa series *Big Little Lies* yang diambil dari website HBO dan diterjemahkan oleh penerjemah bebas dengan akun blogspot dhani. Data diambil hanya berupa kata-kata tabu yang memiliki eufemisme makna dalam bahasa sasaran. Dari 145 data yang dikumpulkan, ditemukan 5 strategi milik Mona Baker, yakni (1) Strategi penghilangan, sebanyak 50 data, (2) Strategi penerjemahan kurang ekspresif sebanyak 38 data, (3) Strategi penerjemahan paraphrase kata terkait sebanyak 29 data, (4) Strategi penerjemahan meminjam kata sebanyak 23 data, dan (5) Strategi penerjemahan dengan menggunakan kata lebih umum sebanyak 14 data ditemukan. Penggunaan strategi tersebut berimplikasi pada pengurangan nilai emotive dari bahasa sumber, yang bertujuan untuk menyelamatkan muka (harga diri) penonton, dan menghaluskan penggunaan kata tabu agar dapat diterima penggunaannya dalam nilai budaya bahasa sasaran.

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A. Introduction

The television industry's development worldwide has played a significant role in the process of globalization. As there is an increasing demand for access to watch foreign films and TV series, the demand for subtitles in the viewers' native language has grown to enjoy a greater variety of productions from different cultures. Subtitling is one of the new modes of translation known as audio-visual translation (AVT). It has been introduced in movies and television series with the aim of overcoming language barriers and facilitating the dissemination of information and entertainment across countries. Today, the field of AVT has seen tremendous advancements in translation studies (Munday, 2009).

AVT, particularly subtitling, involves the transfer of language and culture from one language to another using verbal elements in audio-visual form, along with multimodal and multimedia texts (Baker & Saldanha, 2011; Matkivska, 2014). Subtitling differs from other forms of translation due to its unique characteristics, such as conventions related to place, time, quantity, and format. Subtitlers, the translators working in subtitling, are required to have specific competencies in AVT/subtitling software, as well as expertise in aspects such as line breaks, on-screen positioning, time and space constraints, and the use of italics (Furgani, 2016; Skuggevigk, 2009). Moreover, they need skills similar to text translators, including text analysis, context awareness, and translation quality, along with a deep understanding of language and cultural differences (Al-adwan, 2015; Baker, 2018; Baker & Saldanha, 2011; Cintas & Anderman, 2008; Furgani, 2016).

Cultural constraints primarily stem from the distinct ways of life and their manifestations within specific communities that use language as a tool for expression (Newmark, 1988). Language and culture are interrelated, resulting in each language and culture having its own set of specific terms and expressions, and even the use of taboo words (Cabrera & Javier, 2015). The translation process inherently involves and negotiates these interrelated entities (Arrasyid, et., al, 2022; Sihotang, et al., 2020). Therefore, when translating taboo words, cultural considerations become crucial. The challenge intensifies when two languages or cultures have significantly different norms, as seen between Western and Eastern cultures. The latter prioritizes politeness and imposes restrictions on the use of taboo words (Cabrera, 2015). Thus, translators must consider the norms and conventions relevant to Eastern cultures when translating from Western languages.

Taboo language exists in most cultures, but its reception and linguistic characteristics vary depending on societal norms, cultural beliefs, and other factors. It is often used to convey offensive, insulting, shocking, and profane content and is usually intended to express disapproval of specific behaviors. When translating from source language (SL) to target language (TL), the taboo words are commonly censored in situations where the use of taboos is prohibited (Cabrera, 2015; Wardaugh, 2022). There are several classifications of taboo words. Jay(2009) classifies them as sexual references, animal names, ethnic, racial, and gender slurs, deviations from psychological, physical, or social norms, traditional tropes, substandard vulgar terms, and offensive slang. Gao (2013)) categorizes taboos into words referring to body excretions, death and illness, and personal matters such as age or income, while Ningjue (2010) categorizes them as related to religious terms, swearing, and threats of disaster towards others. The following example illustrates the cultural constraints in audio-visual translation of taboo words:

Jane: **BSu**: Why does **fucking shit** keep happening to me?
BSa: *Kenapa hal buruk terus terjadi padaku?* **BLL 00:14:16 --> 00:14:19**
BSa: Why does **bad thing** keep happening to me?

In the provided subtitle translation example, the phrase “fucking shit” is a taboo word related to bodily excretion as the word “fucking” intensifies the word “shit”. However, in the translation into TL, a non-taboo word is used. According to the merriam-webster.com, “shit” can be used to describe ‘a bad, unpleasant, or dangerous situation or condition’. In this particular expression, a translator may opt to replace “shit” with the phrase “*hal buruk*” ‘bad thing’ in TL. Although “*hal buruk*” is not considered taboo in Indonesian culture and language, it can effectively convey the character Jane’s sentiment. This phenomenon shows that a translator may substitute the taboo word from SL for a culturally acceptable alternative in TL.

One reflection of culture in language is the use of euphemisms which involve replacing specific words or expressions prohibited in public by individuals, communities, or religions (Allan & Burridge, 1991). Euphemism is a linguistic process aimed at maintaining politeness by replacing words that cannot be directly expressed with socially acceptable words (Allan & Burridge, 1991; Kridalaksana, 2008). Its use is important due to normative differences in the use of taboo language. Euphemism requires the use of lexical replacements to reduce the sense of taboo or offensiveness.

Several studies related to taboo words and euphemisms have been carried out. Istiasih (2016) examined the formation of euphemisms in English that replace taboo words related to health, sex, excretion, limbs, religion, politics, death, and swearing. Furthermore, Prasetyo (2014) identified 16 methods for forming euphemisms, including figurative expression, flippancy, remodeling, circumlocution, acronym, abbreviation, omission, one-for-one substitution, general to specific, part to whole, hyperbole, understatement, jargon, colloquialisms, borrowing, and rhyming slang. His research revealed the importance of euphemism in communication, as even taboo words in a joke can be highly offensive in certain cultures. Additionally, euphemistic expressions replace taboo language to avoid vulgar speech (Rabab’ah & Al-Qarni, 2012).

Several studies have also focused on translation (Abdelaal & Al Sarhani, 2021; Ediani & Sajarwa, 2023; Sutrisno & Ibnu, 2021; Thawabteh et al., 2022). However, the research conducted by Ediani & Sajarwa (2023) focused solely on the translation of cultural words, while the other studies specifically examined taboo language in subtitles. Furthermore, Thawabteh et al. (Thawabteh et al., 2022) explored changes in taboo language in translation. Cultural considerations are essential in determining the appropriate translation strategies for effectively conveying taboo expressions to other cultures. They found that an inappropriate strategy can distort the original dialogue. Sutrisno & Ibnu (2021) argued that translation has a role to preserve aesthetic values in dialogues, even when offensive words are used. However, translators are obligated to adhere to government regulations prohibiting the use of vulgar, offensive, and racist language due to their potential to incite social unrest.

Reviewing previous research is an important step in conducting new research as it helps identify research gaps. It is evident that there is a significant number of studies on euphemisms from a social perspective and on techniques or strategies for translating taboo words in AVT. However, there is a lack of research specifically addressing the euphemisms in the translation of taboo words and their translation strategies. This study aims to identify: (1) translation strategies used to give euphemistic meanings to taboo words in the target

language in the TV series *Big Little Lies*, and (2) the implications of the translation strategies applied in translating taboo words on the viewer's response.

B. Research Method

This research applies a qualitative descriptive method to examine the strategies employed in translating taboo words for euphemistic meanings in the target language in the TV series *Big Little Lies*. The data consists of English taboo words or phrases and their translations in Indonesian. The data source for this study is the transcripts/subtitles of the popular TV series *Big Little Lies* which was created by David E. and aired on HBO in 2017. The Indonesian translation of the original subtitles was done by a freelance translator, Dhani. This six-episode series, each with a duration of 45-55 minutes, has also been translated into other languages and has a novel version of the same title. This series was chosen as the data source for its exploration of themes such as bullying, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and murder. It has been given a rating of 20+ due to its explicit content, and throughout the series, there is a consistent depiction of scenes with vulgar language and offensive taboo words.

The data collection began by watching the series along with its Indonesian subtitles to grasp the context of the dialogue. The next step involved collecting taboo words from the English subtitles and finding their equivalents in the Indonesian translation. To identify taboo words, the categorizations by Jay (2009), Ningjue (2010), and Gao (2013) were applied. The data pairs showing euphemistic translations were then sorted by comparing the meanings in English and Indonesian using the Oxford Learner's Dictionaries (oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com) for English data and the kbbi.kemdikbud.go.id for Indonesian data. The data were also categorized based on Baker's translation strategies (Baker, 2018) with eight categories: (1) translation with more general words (superordinate); (2) translation with more neutral/less expressive words; (3) translation with cultural substitution; (4) translation with borrowed words or loan words with explanatory sentences; (5) translation with paraphrases using related words; (6) translation by paraphrasing using unrelated words; (7) translation by omission; and (8) translation by illustration. Then, the categorized data were presented in a table to show the strategies used in translating taboo words with euphemistic meanings in the TV series *Big Little Lies*. Content analysis techniques were applied to analyze the euphemism in taboo word translation. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the previous discussion.

C. Results and Discussion

In the analysis of the strategies used to translate taboo words with euphemistic meanings in the target language, five out of the eight strategies proposed by Baker (2018) were identified. These strategies are translation by omission, translation with more neutral/less expressive words, translation with paraphrases using related words, translation using loan words or loan words with explanatory, and translation by more general words. The percentage of each translation strategy is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Percentage of the Use of Translation Strategy

No	Translation Strategies	Data	Percentage (%)
1	Translation with omission	50	32,47
2	Translation with more neutral/less expressive words	38	24,68
3	Translation with paraphrases using words that are related	29	18,83
4	Translations using a loan words or loan words	23	14,94
5	Translations with more general words	14	9,09

1. Translation with Omission

Omission is the most commonly used approach in translating taboo expressions in Big Little Lies. Although omitting the translation of certain words or expressions may be considered extreme, if the meaning of a word expressed is not essential in the target language, it could distract the target language viewers' focus. Due to differences in language usage and cultural norms, translators may choose to ignore certain words or expressions to bridge the cultural gap (Chaer, 2013). While this strategy may result in the loss of the exact nuance or meaning of the word, it helps ensure better audience comprehension. In this study, 50 data were identified where this strategy was applied. The following example illustrates the implementation of this strategy:

- (1) Nathan: **TSu:** What the **fuck**? You're selling your virginity
TSa: *Apa-apaan ini? Kamu menjual dirimu?* 00:31:25 --> 00:31:27
TSa: What is this? You sell yourself?
 Abigail: **TSu:** Yeah, I thought you'd be proud of me.
TSa: *Yeah, Kurasa ayah akan bangga padaku.* 00:31:30 --> 00:31:32
TSu: Yeah, I think daddy would be proud of me.

In datum (1), the word "fuck" is omitted in the target text. This omission strategy is applied because "fuck" does not have a specific equivalent meaning in TL and its usage varies. In the context of the dialogue, Nathan expresses shock and disappointment towards his daughter, Abigail, who prostitutes herself through social media. The word "fuck" then functions as an intensifier. The cultural differences and varying perspectives regarding the usage of "fuck" play a significant role in this datum. In the TL's culture, emphasis in speech is often conveyed through facial expressions and intonation (Ekawati, 2018). On the other hand, in the SL's culture, "fuck" as an intensifier is largely used in everyday communication, as seen in the phrases "fucking kidding me," "fucking leave you," "fucking brilliant," and "fucking break." Omitting taboo words without any replacement is a form of euphemism in conversation (Allan & Burridge, 1991). In the translation example, the omission of "fuck" and its replacement with "*apa-apaan ini*" 'what is this' still maintains the intended meaning for the target language audience. However, the emphasis conveyed in the source language may not be fully captured in the target language. This supports Molina & Albir's (2002). Statement that omission may diminish the emotive value of the sentence.

2. Translation with More Neutral/Less Expressive Words

This translation strategy is generally used to translate words that have no equivalent in the target language. Translators opt for more neutral terms to convey the intended

meaning (Baker, 2018). However, this approach can result in a loss of expressive meaning. Due to the absence of equivalent cultural concepts or differences in prevailing norms, translators have to select neutral words even if they may not fully capture the emotional nuances of the source language. In total, 47 data were identified where this strategy was used, as seen in datum (2).

- (2) Gordon: **BSu: God damn it.** Will you stop yelling at me?
BSa: Astaga. *Aku mau kau berhenti berteriak padaku?* 00:10:16 --> 00:10:18
BSa: Gee! Will you stop yelling me

In datum (2), the phrase “god damn” is used as a swear word to express anger or annoyance. In both cultures, using references to God as a curse or interjection to express emotions towards oneself or others is considered inappropriate. This prohibition is mentioned in Leviticus 24 in the Bible, “Uttering insults against God, He must die” (Allan & Burrige, 2006).). In this particular case, the translator chose to translate “god damn” from source text (ST) into “*astaga*” in target text (TT). According to the kbbi.kemdikbud.go.id, “*astaga*” is a fragment from “*astaghfirullah*”, an Arabic phrase that means ‘may Allah forgive me’. It is commonly used as an exclamation of wonder or sadness. There is a noticeable difference in the expressive meaning between “god damn” and its translation. In this datum, “god damn” emphasizes Gordon’s anger towards Renata and his request for her to stop screaming at him. This expressive meaning could not get transferred in the target text with “*astaga*”, and this translation changes and reduces or tones down the original meaning (Allan & Burrige, 1991). This strategy of translation called understatement. Despite the loss of expressive meaning, the translation can still be understood by the viewers because “*astaga*” in Indonesian language is often used as an exclamation when someone is surprised (Arif, 2019).

3. Translation with Paraphrases Using Related Words

This strategy is employed when words or terms from the source language are translated literally in the target language in a different form while still conveying the same concept (Baker, 2018). Paraphrases using related words provide a more subtle interpretation of taboo words from SL in the target language. In this study, 36 data with this strategy were identified. An example illustrating the application of this strategy can be found in the following datum (3).

- (3) Jane: **BSu: That Ziggy wasn't a product of consensual, loving sex**
BSa: Kalau Ziggy bukanlah anak yang lahir dari kasih sayang
00:27:43 --> 00:27:45
BSa: If Ziggy was not a child born of love

In datum (3), the phrase “consensual, loving sex” is translated into “*kasih sayang*”. The TL phrase is a taboo expression for its references to sexual activities. In the context of the dialogue, Jane is discussing her daughter, Ziggy, with her teacher. She reveals that she conceived Ziggy after a one-night stand with a man in the bar. Due to the indecent nature of discussing sexual relations with others, the phrase “consensual, loving sex” is replaced with “*kasih sayang*”. The phrase “consensual, loving sex” based on the context of the story is a

sexual relationship that is agreed upon with each other and is full of passion. The translator chooses to use a more refined and acceptable phrase in the target culture. However, this translation choice eliminates the explicit meaning of an intimate relationship found in the SL. “*Kasih sayang*” as a substitution for “consensual, loving sex” is a form of figurative expression, which is one way of employing euphemisms (Allan & Burridge, 1991). Although the TL phrase does not have the same form as the source text, they carry similar connotations. This translation approach is an attempt to avoid the risk of violating government regulations regarding the prohibition of using vulgar words. Furthermore, paraphrasing with related words is more extreme when only two words are present in the TL, as demonstrated in the following datum (4).

- (4) Gordon: **BSu:** Gordon: I wanna **fuck** her right here and right now
BSu: *Aku ingin **ML** dengannya disini dan sekarang juga.* 00:23:34 --> 00:23:37
BSu: I want to **making love** with him here and now

In datum (4), the word “fuck”, which a taboo word associated with sexual relations, is translated into “ML”. According to the oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com, “fuck” is ‘to have sex with someone’. Meanwhile, “ML” in TT is an acronym for the English phrase “making love.” By replacing the word, the literal meaning of “fuck” is removed. Acronym serves as a form of euphemism to replace taboo language (Allan & Burridge, 1991). The implementation of this strategy aims to soften the language used in the dialogue. Acronyms also provide a shorter and easier-to-pronounce alternative (Wijana & Rohmadi, 2017). One of the challenges in AVT is the limited time for displaying the translated text (Matkivska, 2014). To accommodate the time constraints, the translator opts to use an acronym in the target language, as the word appears briefly for only three seconds. The audience can still comprehend the translation through visual cues in the scene. Furthermore, even though acronyms may not be familiar to everyone, in this case, “ML” is a slang term often used and familiar to Indonesian young people. In datum (4), the translator does not fully transfer the SL meaning into TL, but it still conveys the intended meaning to some extent. It is essential to visually depict people, objects, and actions in a scene using appropriate language or message that is easy to understand (Matkivska, 2014). Additionally, there are other examples of data with paraphrase strategy using related words, as seen in datum (5).

- (5) Madeline: **BSu:** Don't worry about him, honey. He's gonna be fine. I promise. (*klakson berbunyi*) Get laid, **bitch**.
Bsa: *Jangan khawatir tentang dia, sayang. Dia akan baik-baik saja. Aku janji. (klakson berbunyi) Cepat, **jala*g**.* 00:07:58 --> 00:08:00
Bsa: Don't worry about him, baby. He's gonna be fine. I promise. Hurry up **bit*h**

In datum (5), the word “bitch” in the dialogue is translated into “*jala*g*” by removing one phoneme and using an asterisk to replace the missing letter. In written language, taboo expressions can be replaced by semi-omissions using non-lexical symbols such as hyphens (-) and asterisks (*) (Allan & Burridge, 1991). The asterisk in this datum tones down the intensity of the word or utterance of Madeline. “Bitch” itself is a taboo word referring to the derogatory labeling of a woman. This alteration at the word level still allows for comprehension as it uses related meanings of the taboo word. The use of asterisks in

Indonesian language, especially among young people and social media users, is commonly used to soften inappropriate expressions (Mualafina, 2017).

4. Translations Using a Loan Words

This strategy is applied to translate terms with culturally specific connotations, thus borrowing of acceptable words or phrases is necessary. In such cases, the translator may borrow words from SL, use alternative terms with related meanings, or incorporate additional explanatory sentences in the target text. In this study, there are 20 data where this strategy is applied, as demonstrated in datum (6).

- (6) Edd: **Bsu:** To **shatter a urethra**
Bsa: *Menyebabkan **broken urethra*** 00:25:54 --> 00:25:58
BSa: Cause the **broken urethra**

In datum (6), the phrase “shatter a urethra” is a taboo expression referring to sexually transmitted diseases. It is translated into “broken urethra” in TT. While the ST conveys the literal meaning of genital damage, the translated phrase refers to a medical condition involving nerve damage or lack of blood supply to the genitals and infection. Individuals with this condition typically experience difficulty urinating (Barros et al., 2020). Datum (6) shows a strategy where the translator borrows medical terms from TL to replace the taboo expression. Based on the context of the dialogue, Edd is discussing his colleague Perry’s illness. By borrowing language related to health, the translator aims to protect the face (esteem) of the audience. In communication, maintaining the self-esteem of speakers and interlocutors is very important as one of politeness aspects (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Borrowing words from foreign language to replace taboo words will give a smoother and more acceptable utterance (Allan & Burridge, 1991). However, this strategy may also lead to a loss of understanding for some viewers in the target language who are unfamiliar with the borrowed terms.

5. Translations with more general words

This strategy is used when dealing with many words with no equivalent, especially in propositional meaning, due to differences in a hierarchical structure in semantics (Baker, 2018). Translators often opt for more general or common words in the target language as the specific SL terms may not have direct equivalents.

- (7) Joseph: **BSu:** What, you want to **fuck** me again?
Bsa: *Apa kau mau **bercinta** denganku lagi* 00:05:06 --> 00:05:07
BSa: Are you want to **make love** with me?

In datum (7), the dialogue illustrates the use of a common or superordinate word to translate a taboo word. The word “fuck” is translated into “*bercinta*” in TL. According to the oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com, “fuck” means ‘to have sex with somebody’. On the other hand, the word “*bercinta*” in TL has two meanings: (1) ‘feeling in love’ and (2) ‘copulating’. In the context of the scene, where Joseph misinterprets Madeline’s good news and utters an obscene word, the word “fuck” carries the meaning of ‘copulating’. To address this taboo

word translation, the translator replaces it with a more general and non-taboo word to create a smoother dialogue exchange. Substituting specific words for more general ones is a form of euphemism (Allan & Burridge, 1991). The changes in meaning after applying this strategy are generally acceptable and understood by the audience. In general, translators neutralize or eliminate taboo words to align with their own beliefs, values, and social behavior (Slamia, 2020).

D. Conclusion

Based on the analysis results, according to Mona Baker's strategies, 5 strategies were found to translate taboo words with modification in their meaning from the source language into the target language. From the 145 data collected, Mona Baker's five strategies were found, namely (1) Translation by Omission 50 data or a percentage 32.4% (2) translation with more neutral/less expressive words 38 data or a percentage 24.6%, (3) Translation with paraphrases using words that are related 29 data or a percentage 18.8%, (4) Translations using a loan word or loan words 23 data or a percentage 14.9%, and (5) Translations by more general words, 14 data or a percentage 9% found in the Big Little Lies series.

Based on the implementation of the five strategies applied to translate the taboo words in Big Little Lies from English to Indonesian, there are several implications: a reduction in emotional value to produce more neutral or less provocative text, aiming for acceptance in TL's culture; a loss of cultural nuances presents in SL; and face-saving strategy for audience's self-esteem by avoiding vulgar words. However, it is important to note that changing taboo words can result in the loss of certain information of the SL.

In this phenomenon, the meaning change in taboo language observed can also be applied by language learners, particularly students in translation studies, when using the appropriate strategy to translate cultural items. Some key considerations for learners include acquiring a deeper understanding of the source and target languages and cultures, comprehending the connotative meaning of taboo words in diverse cultural contexts, demonstrating the ability to accurately describe emotions, and understanding the intended narrative.

This research is limited to the translation of taboo words with subtle meanings in the TV series Big Little Lies. Further research can explore changes in the meaning of taboo words, including the use of dysphemism in translation. Additionally, using different materials, such as other series or films, would provide a broader perspective on this topic. The findings of this study can also be used as a comparison to determine the most appropriate translation strategies for taboo words with euphemistic meanings.

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