



## **“600+ F-bombs Per Season”**

**An appraisal analysis of various fucks in *The Wire* and their translations**

**Markus Kide**

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**Title:** “600 F-bombs per season”: An appraisal analysis of various fucks in *The Wire* and their translations

**Author:** Markus Kide

**Supervisor:** Peter Sandblom

**Examiner:** Åke Persson

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**Abstract:**

This thesis examines how clauses containing variants of *fuck* are translated to Swedish subtitles in HBO’s *The Wire*. The aim is to explore what words are used in the translations, as well as to discern whether or not any discrepancies occur between the source language and target language clauses. The main tool to discern the differences between the original and translated clauses is Appraisal Theory, with a focus on the subsystems *Attitude* and *Graduation*. Appraisal Theory aids in this case to discern in what way the discrepancies between the source language clause, and the target language clause, manifest themselves. To deepen the examination of the discrepancies, *offensiveness* is also considered in the analysis since *fuck* is a swear word. The analysis shows that most discrepancies occur when *fuck* is used figuratively either as a verb or an adjective. The clearest discrepancy of the two is shown in clauses containing the adjective *fucking*, due to the number of cases when the target language clause did not feature an adjective, and thus, did not feature a corresponding swear word. Aspects of either *attitude*, *graduation* or *offensiveness* are at times sacrificed to maintain semantics, as well as to stay within the logistical limitations of audiovisual translation.

**Keywords:**

*The Wire*, Swearing, Appraisal Theory, Translation, Translating swear words, Subtitles

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

If you were to translate the word *fuck* on its own, into a language of your choice, what would you end up translating it to? Is there an encompassing enough translation to cover all the various aspects of the word, both in the literal and figurative sense? Are there cases where a use of the English word itself would be more organic than its target language counterpart? Is there even one single word in each word class that can cover the meaning that the lexeme creates in that word class? While *fuck* carries an obvious literal meaning as a verb, it could also be used in a figurative sense such as the expression *fuck around*. Could the same word that is the literal translation in your language be used similarly? These are the types of questions that led to this exploration of how a translator can work around translating such language- and culture specific expressions.

Swearing is language- and culture specific. Due to this nature, the swear words in a target language of translation (henceforth referred to as TL) might not themselves carry equivalent translations from the SL (henceforth referred to as SL). However, the expressed intention of the clauses could instead prove a lighter challenge to translate in the TL. This is why not only the words themselves, but also the clauses in which the words occur, are treated in the analysis. Even though *fuck* technically is a swear word, a corresponding swear word in the TL-clause is not necessary for the analysis to take place. This is partly due to *fuck*'s ability to function as a figurative verb, and the before mentioned language- and culture specificity of swear words. It is not always the case that the TL contains a word that is both a swear word and functions as a figurative verb in a way that would translate from *fuck*. In this case, there is not only a matter of translating the clauses, but also a logistical aspect when it comes to displaying the subtitles in the TV-series as well which must be considered when selecting clauses for analysis.

## 1.2 Aim and research questions

The general aim of this study is to explore translations of language- and culture specific phenomena in Audiovisual entertainment, and how or if the translations differ from the original utterances. The category of phenomena in this case is profanity, due to it being easier to sort out material that contains a lot of it, in contrast to idioms or cultural references that do not carry equivalent translations into Swedish. The study is specified further by choosing a single body of work to use as material, namely HBO's *The Wire*. In the show, profanity is frequently used by many different characters belonging to a wide array of different social groups.

To further focus the study, I have chosen to limit myself to a few key lexemes together with its various derivational morphemes. Consequently, my analysis primarily centers on variants of the word *fuck* in a few select word classes, namely verbs, adjectives and adverbs.

The questions I aim to answer with this study are as follows:

- How are clauses that contain variants of the root morpheme *fuck* translated into Swedish subtitles in HBO: s *The Wire*?
  - What discrepancies concerning the attitude or graduation between the source language clauses and their target language counterparts are there?
  - What words are used to mirror the language- specific swear word?
  - What discrepancies concerning the offensiveness of the variants and their translations are there?
  - What, if any, visible strategies are used to circumvent the possible discrepancies?

While I will indeed explore if discrepancies happen when swear words are translated into subtitles of the target language, it is not in my interest to in any way criticize a person's or company's work of translation. Therefore, any discrepancies mentioned are discussing the words themselves and are not intended as critique of the choices of those very words. It is instead merely a comparison between the word *fuck* with its versatility and the words that will have to make do in a Swedish translation, since Swedish is lacking a word that carries complete equivalence to *fuck*.

## 2. Previous research

### 2.1 Pardo's Swearing and Translation: A study of the insults in the films of Quentin Tarantino (2011).

In her Phd Thesis, Pardo (2011) analyzes translations of insults in seven of Quentin Tarantino's movies, that were made before 2011. She gathered 1526 insults in order of appearance in the movies, and compared the insults in the SL and versions that were dubbed to the TL which in this case was Spanish. While insults and swear words are not synonymous, Pardo (2011) categorizes insults in similar categories as discussed later in section 3.1, albeit several additional categories that do not contain any swear words such as animal themed insults or insults related to physiological function. Almost 44% of the insults were sexually themed, and she found that an overwhelming majority of those, namely 88%, contained the word *fuck*. Hence, she paid special attention to the word *fuck* with its morphological derivatives as the primary target of her analysis, granting it its own section in her analysis, while the other categories shared a section between them.

Her hypothesis was that the TL clauses would tend to be softened in comparison to their SL counterparts. Through her analysis she concluded that this was indeed the case. Where in some instances, the sexual themed insults were softened. There were also a significant number of times that the swear word was removed from the TL clause. In the case of *fuck* and its derivatives, almost 49% went untranslated in the Spanish-dubbed versions. She argues that the complete omittance of the swear words is a betrayal of the SL clause and in turn, the writer of said clause (2011, 123)

### 2.2 Ilmari Koponen's Fuckin' a, man: Translating swear words in *The Big Lebowski* (2018)

Ilmari Koponen's (2018) MA Thesis explores various swear words and their translations in the 1998 movie *The Big Lebowski*. Koponen relies on a proprietary framework of own

making, where questionnaires concerning both Finnish and English swear words and their strength were created. The forms were then handed out online to native speakers of the respective language. Lastly, the answers to the forms aided Koponen in categorizing, and grading the words. This was not, however, a graduation in terms of Appraisal Theory, as explained in section 3, but instead a general graduation of the strength of the different swear words. This graduation follows the pattern that is discussed in section 3.4 concerning Beers Fägersten's study, namely that sexual swear words tend to be rated as more taboo than excretory swear words, and even more so than religious swear words. Venäläinen (1992, as cited in Koponen, 2018, 46) observed five strategies of translating swear words that Koponen modifies and considers when performing the analysis. The strategies Koponen suggests are as follows:

- 1) Toning down the swear word in the TL clause
- 2) Translating to a stronger swear word
- 3) Matching the strength of the SL swear word
- 4) Omitting the swear word from the TL clause
- 5) Omitting the entire SL clause from the subtitles

The graduation, categories and the modified strategies were then considered when analyzing three different Finnish subtitles, as well as English subtitles to *The Big Lebowski*. Koponen's hypothesis was that the translators would adhere to either strategy 1, 4 or 5 from Venäläinen (1992, as cited in Koponen, 2018, 46) strategies. The most frequently used strategy in the Finnish subtitles was to strategy 4, where the subtitle includes the clause uttered on screen, but the swear word was omitted from the TL clause. Koponen explains this by referring to the language specificity of swear words, and that it would not necessarily be idiomatic to retain the swear word in the Finnish clauses (Koponen, 2018, 75). The second most common strategy used was to replace the swear word with a less intense Finnish correspondent, where Koponen argues, with the help of previous research, that a written swear word could be considered stronger than a spoken one. He continues with that omittance of either a lone swear word, or an entire clause, could be the result of time and logistics, where words deemed unnecessary are left out of the clause to maintain readability, since the subtitles have a finite amount of time on screen to be effective.

### 3. Theory

#### 3.1 Appraisal theory

This section is drawn upon a single website dedicated to explaining and expanding upon appraisal theory, namely Grammatics.com (2020). While there are multiple books and other academic sources at hand that explain Appraisal Theory, the website sorts and discusses the framework while taking all the previous research into account. Behind the page is Dr. Peter R.R. White, a professor at the university of Sidney, who is one of the architects of the framework itself, making the website a reliable support in the following description of Appraisal Theory. However, the information in the following paragraph which explains the origins of Appraisal theory, is not gathered from the website. Instead, it is gathered from material from a workshop at Uppsala University (White, n.d).

Appraisal theory is, in short, a system used to distinguish the values, attitudes and ideological positions of a producer of language. It is divided into three sub-systems, *attitude*, *engagement* and *graduation*, that all contribute to expose underlying values and ideologies through an analysis of the choice of words and grammar. These subsystems have been added and created by various other researchers belonging to different linguistic research fields. *Attitude* came into existence through research on language within media and art criticism, and was originally applied in historical discourse (Coffin, 2006, Martin & Wodak, 2003). White developed *Engagement* based on earlier works of heteroglossia (White, 2003). *Graduation* was shaped from Henrike Korner's (2000) work on discourse within legal judgement, as well as Susan Hood (2010) on academic discourse. These three subsystems are themselves divided into various sub-subsystems that aid in further deepening the analysis taking place.

Attitude is divided into the subsystems *affect*, *appreciation* and *judgement*. The word choices in an utterance could reveal a both emotions connected to the statement (*affect*), as well as judgements of people (*judgement*) or objects (*appreciation*) that reveal underlying values. All three of these values are done in either positive or negative categories, and in these categories, one can find a scaling of intensity, where different words are either more or less positive or negative. In *affect* a concise positive scaling would be *like* or *love*, where the latter carries a



more intense positive emotion connected to it than the former, but still refer to the same emotional response, and the same could be said about the negative scaling of *dislike* or *hate*. Thus, *affect* tends to reveal itself through what verbs are used, or nominals created through verbs such as “the love of his life”. It can also be shown through predicative adjectives that refer to emotions as in “I am scared”, or through intensifiers or adverbials in a sentence such as “Where the hell are you?”, implying annoyance.

In *judgement* or *appreciation*, the individuals’ or objects’ moral, social, and legal acceptability or overall status are assessed by looking at the choice of words in an utterance. *Judgement* and *appreciation* are as most obvious through the usage of adverbs or adjectives such as “he said, cleverly” or “that disgusting pig”. However, using the word *saint*, to describe a person in your vicinity as a saint or calling a building an eyesore, are perhaps more subtle examples of when *judgement* or *appreciation* are respectively made. The choice of verb could also indicate *judgement* or *appreciation*. While synonymous, *to back out* and *to chicken out* still differ in terms of *judgement*, but not necessarily in intensity.

Graduation concerns the various scalings of a statement and is divided into the two subsystems *force*, where the intensity of an utterance analyzed, and *focus*, where how the choice of lexemes portray specificity or generality is analyzed. Both tend to be most obvious through the use of adverbs, adjectives or intensifiers. For example, the sentence “I was on fire today” as a boast of one’s achievement, would be analyzed in terms of *force*, where *on fire* would be regarded as intense, in contrast to say, the word *okay*. Words that orient the subject or object in relative time and space, such as *close*, *soon* and their respective antonyms are also analyzed in terms of *force*. If the sentence instead would say “I was literally on fire today”, *Focus* would instead be applied in the analysis of the sentence, and a closer look would be taken at the word *literally* which adds a specificity to the sentence and showing that the expression is not figurative. One could replace the word *literally* with other lexemes that narrow or broaden the specificity of the statement, such as *sort of*, *perhaps* or *solely*.

The subsystem engagement is concerned with how a producer of language positions themselves regarding possible opposition towards one’s statement, either through acknowledging or

ignoring said opposition. In practice, it is seen in phrases like *perhaps*, *surely*, *it seems* and so on. Due to the nature of swear words and their function within clauses, *engagement* will not feature as prominent as *attitude* or *graduation* and will therefore not be discussed in depth here.

While these systems do not necessarily take offensiveness into account, the lexemes themselves are still suitable for analysis regardless of offensiveness. The offensiveness could be attributed to *force* in some instances, but it might equally well fit into categories of *judgement*, *appreciation* or *affect*. One could indeed argue that there is a difference in *force* between expressing that someone is *fucking stupid* and *very stupid*. The sentence “move that *fucking chair*” instead has *fucking* expressing an anger at the presence of the chair, and *fucking* would instead be attributed to *affect*. However, there is not necessarily anything preventing a word from belonging to multiple subsystems at once, and offensiveness can be analyzed alongside the various subsystems.

### 3.2 About translations and subtitles

Formal translations as a practice date can be traced back to the bronze age, with evidence dating as far back as ancient Assyria (Nida, 1964). The praxis of the craft has been a known matter of discussion and debate since Ancient Rome, where Marcus Tullius Cicero stated that utterance should not be translated word-for-word, but rather translated to reflect the intrinsic meaning of the utterance (Pardo, 2011, 147). In 1790, Alexander Fraser Tyler adds to this discussion by publishing *Essay on the principles of translation*, where he defines a good translation as:

*‘That, in which the merit of the original work is so completely transfused into another language, as to be as distinctly apprehended, and as strongly felt, by a native of the country to which that language belongs, as it is by those who speak the language of the original work.’*  
(1790, 9)

Tyler continues with suggesting a set of three laws that constitutes a good translation, namely that:

- 1) The translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work

- 2) The style and manner of writing should be of the same character with that of the original
- 3) The translation should have all the ease of original composition

Both Cicero and Tyler make similar points concerning translating sentences from a SL to a TL. The discussion of whether to translate the individual words in order or to translate the intrinsic meaning of the clause or sentence as its own unit is still relevant in modern times (Robinson, 1997. Pardo, 2011). In this essay, the focus will lie on the latter side of the dilemma, since a word for word translation is rendered rather useless in subtitling the audiovisual (Pardo, 2011, 165).

Due to the respective nature of spoken and written language, there are bound to be discrepancies between some spoken lines in an audiovisual medium, and the subtitles that correspond with the spoken lines. This is true even if both the spoken and written lines are in the same language, where a rapid dialogue might not fit suitably onto the screen to fully cover every utterance in the dialogue or remain on-screen long enough to be readable if every lexeme would be written out in the subtitle.

There is an aspect worthy of mentioning when discussing audiovisual translation in an analysis such as this, which is that the viewer does not only have the spoken utterance together with the subtitle when receiving the language spoken in the series. Body language, gestures, facial expressions, and intonation all contribute to expressing the intended emotion or attitude within a scene or an utterance (Pardo, 2011, 189).

### 3.3 Defining swear words

Since swearing is an action on its own, it is perhaps easier to define than the words used to execute a successful swearing. Beers Fägersten (2012 p.3) defines swearing as the usage of language that has the potential to be offensive, inappropriate, objectionable or unacceptable in any given social context. What words deemed to incorporate those criteria, however, are subjective at heart. Thus, a solid definition of what words should be considered swear words is nonexistent. Beers Fägersten (2012, p.4) argues that since categories of swear words remain

endless, and swearing instead is a type of language which itself must be defined, the subjectivity of what constitutes swear words makes a concrete definition problematic.

To successfully achieve an appraisal analysis of swear words in a SL and their translations in subtitles to a TL, one should therefore consider that what constitutes swearing is culture specific, meaning that words that are viewed as profane, might not be viewed as such, nor carry the same connotations when uttered in another cultural context (Pardo, 2011).

### 3.4 Offensiveness of swear words

Deepening the understanding of swear words as something context sensitive, Beers Fägersten (2007) conducted a study where she explored the offensiveness of various swear words. The 60 participants of the study were asked to rate various swear words on a scale of 1 to 10. First, they were asked to do this without any context to the words, where many of the participants interpreted the words as if they were used in a name-calling scenario, or as interjections. Later, they were asked to rate the same words but when used in excerpts of dialogues. The graduation of most of the words was significantly lessened when perceived in their different contexts. When the word *fuck* was approached without context, the participants rated the word an average of 5,0, while when looked at in conversation the average rating among the participants fell to a 3,4. This arguably shows that the connotations of swear words are not only culture- and language specific. They are also sensitive to contexts. The relative offensiveness to each other remained similar enough when the lexemes were given context for this analysis to hold. However, when used as an adjective or adverbial, the variant *fucking* showed a significant drop in rating to the point where it was not considered offensive (Beers Fägersten, 2007, 29).

Due to the lack of a similar framework that treats the Swedish swear words, I have constructed a rough estimate of Swedish swear words' offensiveness based on Beers Fägerstens' (2007) framework. Culturally, the Swedish swear words fit into the same categories that Beers Fägersten (2007 p. 14-15) puts forth, where sexually charged words such as *fuck* or *cunt* tend to rate higher, in terms of offensiveness, than excretory terms such as *shit*

or *piss*. The lowest ratings are held by the words with religious meanings, such as *damn* or *hell*. If the scale of the words' offensiveness would be true in Swedish as well, sexual Swedish profanities like *knulla* or *fitta* would rate higher than excretory profanities such as *skit* and *piss*, and religious profanities like *fan*, *jävlar* and *helvete* would be at the bottom of the scale in terms of offensiveness. For the purpose of this essay, this will be assumed to be true, and the following appraisal analysis will therefore rest upon this makeshift framework when it comes to analyzing the Swedish swear words.

However, this framework will only be relevant when analyzing words without any provided context. Thus, it is up to the recipient to interpret the word, and since the graduation of the swear words is also sensitive to context, the framework can only furnish a general overview, rather than a set of immutable criteria of the offensiveness of swear words.

Category	SL-words	TL-words
Sexual	Fuck, Cunt, Cock,	Knulla, Fitta, Kuk.
Excretory	Shit, Piss	Skit, Piss
Religious	Damn, Hell	Fan, Jävlar, helvete

Figure 1: Beers Fägersten's (2012) categories of English swear words sorted by most offensive at the top, and least offensive at the bottom. Makeshift Swedish translation in the right-most column.

While the categories in Swedish mirror the English ones, the offensiveness of the individual lexemes might not necessarily reflect similarly. The semantics of the literal sexual and excretory words are identical in both languages. The words in the religious category are not thoroughly lexical translations however, since *damn* is a verb, while *fan* and *jävlar* are nouns. As already discussed, the offensiveness of swear words are subjective, which in turn means that the graduation as discussed in relation to Figure 1.1 is fully open to disagreements that due to the subjective nature carry as much legitimacy as the graduation itself.

## 4. Material

Since the general aim of this study is broad, a general exploration of translations would be too expansive for the format of a rather scant study such as this. Thus, an exploration of a single category of language-specific phenomena better suits this format. In this case, profanity is analyzed due to it being easier to sort out material that contains a lot of it, in contrast to idioms or cultural references that might not either carry equivalent translations into Swedish.

The first criterion to be deemed a suitable item for analysis in this essay, was that the series contained enough profanity and more specifically, variants of *fuck*. While there are multiple animated comedies like *South Park* or *Family Guy* that contain an abundance of profanity, the comedic or satirical intentions behind the series excluded them from the selection of material. Since the aim of this essay is to explore translations of a language-specific phenomenon, it is beneficial to choose a material that attempts a portrayal of realistic language, rather than a material where language is used for comedic purposes. This led to the primary material in question becoming HBO's *The Wire*. *The Wire* is a crime-drama set in Baltimore that ran from 2002 to 2008, where the viewer gets to follow a narcotics police task force as well as members of the drug scene that the task force is investigating. In the periphery, the viewer also meet drug addicts, politicians and various other people in Baltimore that are involved in or affected by the drug trade. This made *The Wire* tick the other necessary boxes to be suitable for this essay, namely that it contained swearing from a diverse group of sociolects, as well as the series trying to portray real characters somewhat honestly. *The Wire* is also material that I am familiar with, having watched the series in its entirety a couple of times.

Internet movie database (n.d) points out that the *The Wire* “drops about 600+ f bombs per season” and further states that the highest frequency is found in seasons one through three. The chosen episodes are therefore the first two episodes of season one, which provided enough material to begin an analysis. The same website ranks the highest rated tv-shows of all time where *The Wire* is among the top ten which speaks for its cultural relevance.

The original production company in charge of *The Wire* is HBO, and it is also through their official streaming service, HBO Max, that the episodes were watched and the clauses together with their subtitles were extracted. In correspondence with HBO's customer service, I was told that they have outsourced the subtitling to an external party which they would not reveal. Thus, the same company that produces the show is not responsible for the resulting subtitles.

## 5. Method

The method is divided into two main parts, where the first part describes the gathering and concretization of the material, and the second part shows the process of the analysis.

When the material had been chosen, the next step in the process was to extract clauses that were suitable for analysis. The clauses were chosen based on the single criteria that if they contain a variant of the word *fuck* in the SL utterance, no matter how, or if it was translated in the subtitles, they would be included in the potential material. Whenever such a clause was encountered, the SL clause, the subtitle and the timestamp were noted down. The clauses were then sorted in a spreadsheet by variant and grammatical phrase, and the relevant subtitles, character name of the speaker and timestamp were added as comments together with the timestamp and character. To not make the material overly sated, no more than twelve clauses per word class were selected for analysis. However, this was only the case when the total number of clauses was too extensive to benefit the analysis. The selected clauses were those which either contained an interesting discrepancy or a surprising lack of discrepancy in either *attitude*, *graduation* or *offensiveness*. They could also be included if they represented a noticeable pattern in SL to TL clause relations.

When clauses had been selected, charts were created which the SL and TL clauses were fed into in section 6. The SL and TL clauses were then set in relation to Appraisal theory, with a focus on the subsystems *Attitude* and *Graduation* and Beers Fägersten's study, and the discrepancies found were discussed. The main reason Appraisal Theory was used was to not only discern discrepancies, but to also gain a clearer insight in to how the discrepancies

manifest. To further illuminate the discrepancies in some clauses, a translation from the TL, back to the SL was included. This was made using an artificial intelligence (OpenAI, 2023) and/or a translation tool (Google, 2023) to circumvent subjectivity in the translation.

In some cases, the analysis required the audiovisual components mentioned in section 2.1 to justly compare the SL and the TL clauses, in which cases a short contextual description is given to aid in delivering a clear picture to the reader.

## 6. Results

### 6.1 The verb *fuck*

Looking at instances in *The Wire* where *fuck* is used in or as a verb phrase in different clauses, a selection of notable TL clauses is presented in the figure below.

Entry	Season, episode and timestamp.	SL clause (Spoken)	TL clause (Subtitles)
1	S1E1 16:43	<b>Fuck</b> the paperwork!	<b>Skit</b> i pappersarbetet
2	S1E1 44:56	Why are you <b>fucking</b> with me?	Varför bråkar du med mig?
3	S1E1 47:28	And <b>fuck</b> some people up!	Och buntar ihop dem!
4	S1E1 48:27	If she's <b>fucking</b> you on visitations	Om hon sabbar umgänget.
5	S1E1 49:23	He will <b>fuck</b> this Barksdale thing up	Han kommer sump Barksdaleutredningen
6	S1E1 49:30	You already <b>fucked</b> it up Jim!	Du har redan torsk! !
7	S1E2 04:20	Who do you gotta <b>fuck</b> in this town to get a real office	Vem ska man <b>knulla</b> med för att få ett ordentligt rum?
8	S1E2 19:46	I can't help that Prez is <b>fucking</b> the guy's daughter	Jag rår inte för att Prez <b>pippar</b> hans dotter.



9	S1E2 26:44	<b>Fuck</b> the working man! <b>Fuck</b> his kids! That shit don't count.	<b>Skit</b> i ungarna, sånt räknas inte.
10	S1E2 37:45	<b>Fuck</b> a man like that up for a couple of dollars	Kvadda någon för ett par dollar...
11	S1E2 43:09	Who are you gonna <b>eye-fuck</b> now huh?	Vem ska du blänga på nu?
12	S1E2 49:32	You <b>fuck</b> the bullshit up when you talk to internal...	Klantar du dig när du talar med internutredarna.

Figure 2: SL clauses containing *fuck* as a verb together with TL clauses.

The figure above shows examples of *fuck* used as both a literal and a figurative verb. Entries seven and eight are the two only examples of when it is used in its literal sense. While the literal verb has the Swedish counterpart *knulla* which is both considered offensive and could be argued to carry similar connotations regarding how the act itself is performed, in comparison to other verb phrases describing a sex act such as *Make love* and its Swedish equivalent *Älska*. Interestingly, the literal verb has been translated into two different Swedish words in the different entries. In entry seven, the word *knulla* is used and in entry eight, *fuck* is translated to *pippa*. In their respective context, this could be argued to mirror the *attitude* in both SL-clauses, even though there are two different TL-words that correspond with *fuck*. In entry seven, the context is that detective Greggs is displeased with the office she was assigned to, and while offensive, the subject of the utterance is referring to herself. The rough language could then possibly be deemed less offensive than if the subject were any other than herself. In entry eight, the object of the matter is a daughter of a higher-up in the police force. While this is subjective speculation at work, *fucking* is a rough enough verb on its own and the Swedish word *knulla* could arguably be considered more offensive than *fuck*. As such, *knulla* could reveal a different *appreciation* of the act itself when it collocates with *dotter*, in comparison to entry seven where the subject of the clause is the one doing said *fucking*. Therefore, the change to a less offensive verb, could therefore mirror the *appreciation* in the SL expression more justly.

In examples one and nine, the usage of *fuck* suggests that the receiver of the communication should ignore or discard the objective of the clause. This is then translated to the Swedish

word *skit*, which is indeed can be used in similar manners in Swedish, in comparison to literal translations of *fuck*. To clarify: It would not be idiomatic in Swedish to use or inflect the word *knulla* to express any figurative meaning, while *skit* indeed carries figurative qualities in many similar manners as *fuck* does. Leaning on the framework mentioned in section 2, together with the lower rating that *fuck* was dealt when context was supplied, it is in accordance with the framework that the TL word could be found lower down on the scale than its SL counterpart. However, since *fuck* was deemed less offensive when provided with context in Beers Fägersten's (2007) study, an excretory term would likely be deemed less offensive in contexts as well. One could therefore argue that there remains a difference in *judgement* between the two, even though the lack of a similar Swedish study makes a concrete statement regarding the difference problematic.

Continuing along the lines of differences in *judgement* and looking at entries 4,5,6 and 12. These four show variants of *fuck* as a figurative verb meaning to sabotage or hinder. The four TL-clauses each contain a different synonym, namely *sabbar*, *sumpa*, *torskat* and *klanta*. The usage of four different synonyms highlights an area where no Swedish swear word carries equivalence in regard to *fuck*. While *sabba* and *sumpa* carry enough similarity to be considered completely synonymous in Swedish and with little to no difference in *judgement*, there is a clearer contrast in *judgement* between these two and the words *torska* and *klanta* respectively. In this case, there is a matter of who is sabotaging whom, where *torska* and *klanta* would be to sabotage oneself, rather than meddling in the affairs of another person. There is further semantic difference between the terms, where *torska* indicates that something is completely lost, and *klanta* is more along the lines of sabotaging through carelessness, rather than through any insidious intent. Not only does no single Swedish word carry translatable equivalence to *fuck* as a figurative verb, but it also encompasses a variety of semantic differences that all express different *attitudes*, making at least three different Swedish words necessary to make the TL clause do the SL clause justice.

## 6.2 The attributive adjective *fucking*

In the material reviewed for this study, a total of 29 clauses contained *fucking* as an attributive adjective. Only two of the TL clauses featured a corresponding swear word in which both

instances were *jävla*, as presented in Figure 3. The figure also contains selected examples of instances where a corresponding swear word was left out of the TL clause. Not all 29 examples are necessary for the analysis since many examples share similar discrepancies. To avoid repetition, only eight additional examples were required to satiate the material.

Entry	Season, Episode and Timestamp	SL clause	TL clause
1	S1E1 04:20	No <b>fucking</b> way!	Sällan
2	S1E1 08:54	No <b>fucking</b> way!	Sluta!
3	S1E1 10:55	Stay in the <b>fucking</b> car!	Sitt kvar!
4	S1E1 34:30	Rawls had a <b>fucking</b> phonebook	Rawls hade en telefonkatalog
5	S1E1 42:13	Pretty <b>fucking</b> great huh?	Bra, va?
6	S1E1 47:16	We don't even have a <b>fucking</b> photo of the guy	Inte ens ett foto!
7	S1E2, 30:50	How many <b>fucking</b> times do I gotta tell you people the same <b>fucking</b> thing	Hur ofta ska jag behöva tjata om det här?
9	S1E2, 45:49	Move that <b>fucking</b> desk out of my unit	Ta bort det där <b>jävla</b> skrivbordet
10	S1E2, 47:24	The <b>fucking</b> project niggas	De där <b>jävla</b> slumtyperna

Figure 3: Clauses containing *fuck* as an attributive adjective in the SL clause.

As discussed in section 3.1, multiple aspects of appraisal analysis in an utterance often lie within adjectives, intensifiers, or adverbs. It is therefore safe to say that a significant difference in either *graduation* or *attitude* occurs when not only a swear word, but a corresponding adjective as a whole, is left out of the TL subtitles. In the second entry of figure 3, the adjective *fucking* appears twice within the same utterance, and both are left out in the subtitles. If translated back to English using both Google Translate and ChatGPT (2023), the TL clause word-for-word would be ‘How often do I have to nag about this?’ Side by side, the SL clause, and the back-and-forth translated clause look like this:

How many <b>fucking</b> times do I gotta tell you people the same <b>fucking</b> thing	How often do I have to nag about this?
--	--

Figure 4: On the left: Entry 7 SL clause, On the right: The corresponding TL clause translated back to English through OpenAI(2023) and Google Translate (2023)

Keeping in mind that as an attributive adjective, *fucking* rated low enough not to be considered offensive in Beers Fägersten (2007), the offensiveness as well as the *judgement* in the two clauses could be argued to be on the same level. However, the *affect* in the back-and-forth translated clause differs. Even though *affect* tends to reveal itself through verbs, in this case, the emotion (in this case: fatigue or tiredness) connected to the statement manifests through adjectives. While both express an unwillingness or fatigue concerning to repeat oneself, the SL clause, as spoken in the series, also has an anger connected to it, that the back-and-forth translation lacks due to the missing swear words. While “how many times” and “how often” are similar in intensity on their own, aspects of *affect* from the speaker are lost when the intensifier is removed, and a clear discrepancy between the SL clause and the TL clause reveals itself.

As mentioned, only two of the 29 clauses containing *fucking* as an adjective had a corresponding swear word in the TL-clause. Once again considering section 2.3, and that *fucking* as an intensifier rated low enough to not necessarily be considered swearing, the complete lack of a corresponding swear word in the TL-clause might not necessarily cause a discrepancy in the offensiveness of the inherent clausal meaning, nor in the offensiveness of the two clauses. However, when *affect* is shown through the use of adjectives or adverbs, as in all examples in Figure 4, there is a matter of how protruding the emotion in the clause is without the adjectives.

### 6.3 The predicative adjective *fucked*

In contrast to the attributive adjective *fucking* in the previous section, whenever SL clauses containing *fucked* as a predicative adjective, the TL clauses always contained a corresponding adjective, which is reasonable due to the predicative adjective being key to the inherent meaning of the clause.

Entry	Season, episode and timestamp	SL-clause	TL-clause
1	S1E1 29:29	You're seriously <b>fucked</b>	Nu sitter du i <b>skiten</b>
2	S1E1 29:32	Speaking of <b>fucked</b>	På tal om det
3	S1E1 32:15	This is <b>fucked</b> up	<b>Fy fan...</b>
4	S1E1 49:45	I am <b>fucked</b> , <b>fucked</b> is me	Jag är körd, körd är jag
5	S1E2 27:26	It's <b>fucked</b> up	Det är för <b>jävligt</b>

Figure 5: Clauses containing the predicative adjective *fucked* in the source language.

Entry 1 and 2, being only three seconds apart, both occur within the same conversation, and the clause in entry 2 is a direct response to entry one. Like the verb *fuck*, the adjective *fucked* does not carry figurative qualities if directly translated into Swedish. Due to the nature of the different languages, a slight modification to the structure, and grammatical components of the clause is necessary to maintain idiomaticity. This has resulted in the TL clause not containing an adjective, but it contains a swear word in an adverbial phrase, nonetheless. While not graduated alike in Beers Fägersten's (2007) framework, it could still be argued that the TL clause mirrors the *judgement* of the SL clause to an extent, while simultaneously retaining a degree of offensiveness. However, in the second entry, there is no swear word to be found, and instead the pronoun *det* refers to the previous statement. This creates a discrepancy in *force* between the SL and TL clauses since the TL clause does not emphasize the adjective through a repetition that the SL clause uses.

Continuing with the same semantic meaning, namely, to use *fucked* as a way to describe someone's demise or to express that one is in trouble, there is no change in the grammatical structure between the SL and TL clauses in entry 4. Instead, the adjective is translated to the slang word *körd*. Compared to the other entries in this section, this one is the only one not containing, or referring back to, a swear word in the SL clauses. Due to the poetic nature of the SL clause, a grammatical restructuring of the TL clause would lose said poetry and therefore create another discrepancy in lieu of a discrepancy with swear words.

Entries 3 and 5 both use *fucked up* as a way of describing a ruinous situation, and the only grammatical difference is whether or not the pronoun is demonstrative. The TL clauses differ though, but they do so very much in line with the contexts of the respective scenes. As discussed in section 4, it is not only the lines of dialogue that convey emotion or attitude within a scene. In this case, entry 3 is translated with the interjection *fy fan*. While this might seem discrepant, the SL clause is uttered in the same manner as an interjection would be, not necessarily spoken directly at or to someone, but rather as an acknowledgment of something disturbing or chaotic. The grammatical difference between the two clauses does not necessarily create any discrepancy concerning either *judgement* or *affect*. One could argue that there is a difference in offensiveness, since even though the predicative adjective was not part of Beers Fägersten's (2007) study, variants of fuck tended to rate significantly higher than religious swear words. Since *fy fan* is religious in its etymology, the interjection would therefore be considered less offensive than its SL clause.

#### 6.4 Adverbial variants of *fuck*

A brief overview of figure 6 shows that out of the categories analyzed in this study, adverbials are the ones that contain the highest amounts of corresponding swear words in their TL-clauses. The TL clause is, in this case, often a grammatical mirroring of the SL clause where *fan* takes *the fuck's* place, while *helvete* is used twice. Figure 6 shows examples of adverbials where some show *affect* and others show *judgement*, even though they make use of the very same adverbial, translated into the same Swedish word. This is however not clearly visible in text alone, and a brief context for some of the utterances is necessary to be able to specify whether one should attribute the swear word to *affect* or *judgement* or both.

Entry	Season, episode and timestamp	SL-Clause	TL-Clause
1	S1E1 18:44	Who the <b>fuck</b> is Avon Barksdale?	Vem <b>fan</b> är Avon Barksdale?

2	S1E1 19:57	Where the <b>fuck</b> have you been all day?	Vad <b>fan</b> har du gjort hela dagen?
3	S1E1 20:37	Sit the <b>fuck</b> down, detective	Sätt dig ner, för <b>fan</b> .
4	S1E1 21:12	What the <b>fuck</b> ’ you doing over at the court house anyway?	Vad i <b>helvete</b> gjorde du i rätten?
5	S1E1 23:58	Sitting there, I ain’t know what the <b>fuck</b> was gonna happen	Jag oroade mig som <b>fan</b> .
6	S1E1 45:20	I’m <b>fucking</b> sorry, I <b>fucked</b> up man	Förlåt, det var fel av mig.
7	S1E2 17:50	If not, shut the <b>fuck</b> up	Håll käften annars
8	S1E2 26:15	You sorry for him? You <b>fucking</b> killed the man!	Beklagar? Du dödade honom!
9	S1E2 30:08	The <b>fuck</b> is that?	Vad <b>fan</b> är det där?
10	S1E2 45:38	I <b>fucking</b> know where he’s detailed, I <b>fucking</b> already know that!	Det vet jag redan, <b>För helvete!</b>

Figure 6: Clauses containing *fuck* as an adverbial in the SL.

Entries 1, 2, 4 and 9 are all spoken by different members of the police force, asking either their colleague, subordinate or a superior a question. Entry 1, 2 and 9 translate the adverbial phrase *the fuck* to *fan* while 4 instead translates to *i helvete*. In this case, all four instances of *the fuck* are a matter of *judgement* rather than *affect*. The adverbials are not used as an intensifier to express any particular emotion, but rather to convey an attitude of *judgement* towards the object in question. The speaker of an utterance has, in all three instances taken a stance against the object. Said stance is in this case created through the adverbial, which is mirrored by the Swedish swear word. Even though the reading of the TL clause becomes more open to interpretation than the SL clause that comes with audiovisual imagery, the clause itself would function to convey the same *judgement* as the SL clauses. When *the fuck* is translated to *fan*, there is no considerable difference in *judgement* between the SL and TL clauses as a result of the translations. If any, it is instead a case of missing audiovisual input together with the clauses, which can be said of both the SL- and the TL-clause. When *the fuck* is translated to *i helvete*, one could argue that there is a slight difference in scaling of the *judgement*. In this case, the TL clause shows a higher level of *judgement* in relation to the object of the clause.

Entries 3 and 10 are both spoken by the same character, Major Rawls. In contrast to many of the clauses in this analysis, nearly all instances of *fuck*-variants spoken by Rawls throughout the episodes are in some manner translated to a corresponding swear word in the TL clause. In the cases of entries 3 and 10, both *the fucks* are attributed *affect* rather than *judgement*, due to an audible and visual anger in the audiovisual versions of the clauses. Both TL clauses contain a swear word, but rather than remaining adverbials, they instead function as interjection phrases after the main clause is spoken. In entry 3, *the fuck* is translated to *för fan*, which both reveal *affect* in terms of anger or annoyance. There is little to no discrepancy between the two clauses concerning the scaling of said anger. In entry 10, however, the repetition together with the two instances of *fucking* in the SL clause can be argued to hold a higher level of anger and as such, a more intense *affect* than the translation in the TL clause.

The adjective *fucking* and the adverb *fucking*, besides being homonymous, have another similarity between them. Both are considered generally non-offensive when applied in certain contexts (Beers Fägersten, 2007, 29). In Figure 6, *fucking* follows the same pattern as its adjective counterpart, meaning that it generally lacks a swear word in its TL clause with the exception of the utterances in entry 10. A similar discrepancy as with the adjective then happens when an adverb is left out of the clause. Entry 6 not only contains *fucking* as an adverbial, but also *fucked* as a verb. To highlight the discrepancy between the two clauses, using a similar back-and-forth translation as in section 6.2, which in this case turns ‘Förlåt, det var fel av mig’ back to ‘Sorry, that was my mistake’

I'm <b>fucking</b> sorry, I <b>fucked</b> up man.	Sorry, that was my mistake
---	----------------------------

Figure 7: On the left: Entry 6 SL clause, On the right: The corresponding TL clause translated back to English through OpenAI (2023) and Google Translate (2023).

While both of these could be expressed in a number of similar ways, the context and audiovisual clues make it clear that the clause is said in intense fear. It is spoken by Jonny Weeks, a heroin addict, just as he was caught after an unsuccessful defrauding of a group of narcotics dealers. The adverbial here is thus attributed to *affect* since it intensifies the emotion in the clause which experiences a significant drop in TL clause due to it missing its adverbial.



Looking at *offensiveness*, *fuck* as part of an adverbial was not specified in Beers Fägersten's study (2007). However, it was instead mixed with other *fucks* belonging to different word classes when graduating its offensiveness. However, *fucking* was in 98% of the cases used as an adverbial or an adjective (2007, 29), and *fuck* consistently rated higher in the graduation. Considering the general offensiveness scaling, where sexual words rated the highest, while religious words rated the lowest, one could argue that there is a decisive difference between *fuck* as an adverbial and *fan* or *helvete*.

## 7. Discussion of results

### 7.1 The words

The theme that runs through the research questions explores what words are used when translating clauses containing the word *fuck*. In terms of mirroring the variants of the swear word, the Swedish terms were rarely sexual in their roots, and instead tended to be either excretory or religious. The only times the TL clause used sexual terms, were when *fuck* was used as a literal verb.

Derivatives of *fuck* as a figurative verb poses a translational challenge due to the lack of an all-encompassing Swedish term. *Skit*, while lower on the graduation of offensiveness, functioned as a figurative verb in the clauses that implied neglect, while a multitude of other expressions were used when *fuck* was spoken in other figurative ways. Many of these would not generally be considered swear words regardless of provided contexts.

While Swedish has attributive adjectives that simultaneously are swear words, few uses were seen in the processing of the material. In both instances, a corresponding swear word was used in the TL clause, the word was *jävla*.

As a figurative predicative adjective, *fucked* most often means that the subject of the clause is in a dire or catastrophic situation. Much like the figurative verb, the Swedish words that carry the same semantic meaning, are not swear words. Neither would it be idiomatic to use the Swedish literal adjective in the same figurative manner. The resulting TL clauses are either grammatically restructured to incorporate a swear word or contain a non-offensive word if the grammatical structure is retained.

## 7.2 The discrepancies

While there are bound to be discrepancies when translating language and culture specific expressions, the ways in which the discrepancies manifest warrant a closer look. When neglect was suggested through the use of *fuck* [object], the TL clauses containing *skit i* [object] were semantically the same. While excretory terms rated lower in *offensiveness* than sexual terms, if one wants to use a swear word when suggesting neglect, the excretory term *skit* is more common and idiomatic than sexual terms when expressing neglect. Thus, there was not necessarily any discrepancy in the *attitude* nor *force* of the clauses. The level of neglect in the different clauses are on par with each other, and both imply that the object of the clause is solely worth various biological functions of the targeted recipient.

Discrepancies concerning verbs manifest when *fuck* means to sabotage something, where four different Swedish words had to be used to capture the semantic nuances that *fuck* inherits. None of these were swear words by Beers Fägersten's (2012 p.3) definition, and the resulting clauses do not mirror the *attitude* of the respective SL clauses. The *force* can be argued to be equal with the SL clauses, since the nuances captured by the different TL words can portray to what extent the subject or object was, or is going to be, sabotaged. The same is true of the figurative adjective *fucked*, where one TL clause was restructured to incorporate a swear word, while another sacrificed the swear word to retain a structurally important aspect of the clause.

The perhaps most obvious discrepancy is seen in the adjectives and adverbials, where the corresponding phrase was left out of the TL clause altogether. In these cases, there were significant aspects of *attitude* missing from the TL clauses. The examples where the emotion

was shown through the use of adjectives or adverbs, showed a loss of *affect* and the intensity of a *judgement* or *appreciation* is lost when the intensifier itself is removed. However, in terms of offensiveness, there could, as previously said, be a lesser discrepancy than expected, due to the notion that *fucking* was not considered particularly offensive when used as an adjective or an adverbial.

With all of the above in mind, the discrepancies mainly follow the pattern hypothesized by both Pardo (2011) and Koponen (2018), where the swear word is either omitted or softened in the TL clause. The same betrayal that Pardo (2011) mentions could be argued to apply in the cases of adjectives or adverbials in this study, where the swear word was often omitted. However, in the case of figurative verbs, the Swedish vocabulary does not contain a verb that is offensive while simultaneously filling the semantic role of *fuck* in those clauses. It would therefore be somewhat unrealistic to expect the Swedish verb to fully cover the same various aspects of the appraisal syst, together with offensiveness and still contain the semantic meaning of the source language clause.

### 7.3 Limitations in the methodology

While this essay rests on a thoroughly developed analysis tool, together with studies that explore offensiveness, there is no escaping that offensiveness, as well as analysis, are by their nature subjective. The same could be argued concerning what constitutes idiomaticity as well as some of the semantical aspects discussed in this essay.

While the material is sated by the sheer number of *fucks* that occurs in *The Wire*, it is sated through a rather homogenous diet. A more comprehensive method, where different TV-shows from different production companies, or at least different subtitling companies, were used, could offer a broader perspective on the challenges of translating language-specific phenomena.

The analysis itself is based on the author's own interpretation of words and utterances in his second language, and only a select few will have read this essay prior to release. Despite being aided by previous studies, the analysis is, as previously mentioned, subjective by its very nature. There is therefore no guarantee that a peer would come to the same conclusions

in their own analysis of the material, and the conclusions are made with only loose discussions with fellow students of language and linguistics. Any critique that the analysis suffers may therefore be as valid as the analysis itself, and no claim of irrefutable truths can be made by the author.

## 8. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore how *fuck*, being a word of high versatility, could be translated into a language that does not have a complete equivalent, while simultaneously investigating what is lost in terms of underlying meanings as well as offensiveness when attempts to translate it are made. Keeping semantics, idiomaticities, attitudes, gradations and possible offensiveness intact proved to become problematic whenever the *fucks* in the SL-clause are figurative. While Swedish contains swear words that function as figurative verbs, adjectives or as first elements, they are either rated lower in offensiveness, or do not carry the same range of figurative meanings. Maintaining clausal semantics often meant sacrificing either swearing in general, or the level of offensiveness, which in turn could change both the *force* and the *attitude* of an utterance. However, these discrepancies were at times lessened using various strategies, such as grammatically restructuring a sentence to idiomatically incorporate a similar attitude as the SL clause contains while not changing the semantics, which is reasonable since semantically different subtitles would be of little use to a viewer unfamiliar with the source language.

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