THE AMERICAN *HOUSE OF CARDS* – A VIEW FROM A CULTURAL, POLITICAL AND TRANSLATION- RELATED PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The present article offers an introduction to the relationship between the entertainment and translation industry, arguing that dubbings and subtitles are by-products of the entertainment industry, directly contributing to the success of the show. It also deals with the translator's competence, offering examples of translation challenges from the (in)famous American TV show, *House of Cards*, connected to terms and expressions pertaining to general knowledge of the world and of the United States. The Introduction offers an insight into audiovisual translation and its successful branches and explains *binge-watching* and *binge-translation* as well, also including several scholars' analyses of the TV show. The Methodological Background describes how a collection of term bases came into being starting from the original English script and several Romanian subtitles of the episodes of official (DVD-release and Netflix) and amateur (freely available online) versions. This is followed by thirty examples in two sets, discussing the translation of terms belonging to general knowledge and US geopolitics in particular. The Conclusions section discusses the terms of 'professional' and 'amateur' translator irrespective of their qualifications, focusing instead on 'quality assurance', a rather subjective term. Certain corpus-based findings are also highlighted connected to the possibilities of relying on generalization, explicitation or calque referring to general culture and US politics focusing on the intelligibility of *politicotainment*, a term recently coined by Riegert.

Keywords: *US, culture, binge-translation, Romanian, subtitling.*

INTRODUCTION

The age of globalization and the revolution of technology have tremendous effects on all aspects of life worldwide, triggering the revolution of translation studies as well. Thus, as Gouadec explains, “[t]he PRAT or Pencil and Rubber-Assisted Translator is clearly on the way out”, and the age of “Computer-Assisted Translator has taken over.” (Gouadec 109), leading to a fully-fledged *translation industry* with extensive ramifications.

The growing popularity of the entertainment industry has had beneficial effects on certain branches of translation industry, most notably *audiovisual translation* (or AVT, including dubbing, subtitling, surtitling, voice-over, fandubs, fansubs,¹ etc.) and *videogame localization*. While it was suggested earlier that “AVT is definitely one of the fastest growing areas in the field of Translation Studies” (Díaz Cintas 1), this statement?? is still valid, although another field, videogame localization, is much more promising. Prior to 2020, both the film and videogame industry showed an incredible increase in revenues, reaching \$42 billion (2019)² and \$152 billion (2019)³, respectively. The high popularity of movies, TV shows (through video streaming services) and videogames has directly led to *binge-watching*⁴ and *binge-gaming*, which might not be possible at such a large scale without the constant effort of translators, subtitlers or localizers, giving rise to the concept of *binge-translation* as well.

Although the amount of time allotted to these translation activities is ever shrinking, the audience still expects high quality renditions, given that the majority of sources are (American) English, and that, due to the global popularity of English, more and more people can compare the original and the translated version (although in the case of dubbed version this might be more difficult to do). This abundance of US entertainment products brings along American culture as well, embedded in virtually any product, directly or indirectly. The previously mentioned binge-watchers and gamers turn into real ‘connoisseurs’ of the American (popular) culture, and translators and localizers alike have to keep abreast of it all, while subtitlers must be familiar with an extensive cultural background to create successful renditions.

It is also important to note that however thriving the entertainment industry is, translators and localizers have to accept that dubbing, subtitling, voice-over or videogame localization is a potential ‘by-product’, whose

¹ *Fandubs* and *fansubs* are dubbings and subtitles created by fans or amateurs.

² <https://www.statista.com/topics/964/film/>, 2.25.2021.

³ <https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/the-global-games-market-will-generate-152-1-billion-in-2019-as-the-u-s-overtakes-china-as-the-biggest-market/>, 2.25.2021.

⁴ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/binge-watch>, 2.25.2021.

existence is largely motivated by the financial possibility and/or preference of the target language community. The larger this community, the more chances to be in the limelight of the translation industry, which is further influenced by community preferences, such as dubbing or subtitling nations.⁵ While translators must have certain types of competence (linguistic, cultural, domain, research, technical and translation, cf. Imre 69–82), assuring quality (QA) encapsulates further skills as well, such as self-management, project management, time management (Imre 91–123) in order to avoid binge-translation. These skills and competences need constant improvement, and being an expert in one field is not enough anymore. As explained, the entire community must have some knowledge of specialized language terminology in the fields of politics, economics, finances, government, IT, medicine and pharmacology (Bańcerowski 279).

The present article focuses on the expected cultural competence of subtitlers, starting from the basic idea that Hollywood productions mostly reflect the ‘American’ way of life, thus all translators and subtitlers involved must have a solid USA-related cultural background. Although we have watched and collected terms from the entire TV show (six seasons, 73 episodes), we have selected only 30 cases to cover with terms belonging to general knowledge, US politics and culture-related issues.

The American *House of Cards*⁶ is among the top one hundred highest rated TV shows,⁷ and its most concise summary is offered by the Internet Movie Database: “A Congressman works with his equally conniving wife to exact revenge on the people who betrayed him.”⁸ Other sources highlight various values of the Netflix TV show (2013–2018, creator: Beau Willimon, stars: Kevin Spacey, Michel Gill and Robin Wright), such as the depiction of “anxieties of our current realities... provoking our worst fears that politics cannot deliver on the promise of justice” (Hackett 1). Similarly, the show signals “distress” with the upside-down American flag flashing “across the screen with each episode” (Palm and Stickers 42), a distress which may stem from the fact that this “modern TV tale... is very much a product of the financial times of the twenty-first century” (Sorlin 38), taking the viewers “behind the scenes of politics, showing them the raw machinations behind any Congress vote” (Sorlin 216). While it is “a rather entertaining and addictive show,” viewers should not take it

⁵ See this map: <https://bigthink.com/strange-maps/dubbing-map?rebelltitem=5#rebelltitem5>, 2.25.2021.

⁶ Actually, it is based on the BBC Mini Series with the same title (1990), which was inspired by the novel of Michael Dobbs, politician, former advisor to Margaret Thatcher, speechwriter and government special advisor.

⁷ <https://www.imdb.com/chart/toptv/>, 2.25.2021.

⁸ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1856010/>, 2.25.2021.

too seriously, as it “aggressively depicts things as they are not” (Masket), even if there may be a kernel of truth in the series showing “the co-dependency between politics and the media, the one vitally needing the other and vice versa” (Sorlin 65).

As the main theme of the TV show is politics, translators should be prepared to find an interesting mixture of political terminology with other fields as well, signaled by various scholars (Bidu-Vrăncianu 11–13; Sorlin 200–01; Stoichițoiu Ichim 51; Kajtár 233): media, economics, philosophy, law, mathematics, linguistics, biology, geography, physics, military, medicine, psychology, sports or meteorology,⁹ or even theater (cf. in our case the protagonist’s asides, demystifying the ‘fourth wall’ between the audience and the show). Nevertheless, we are interested whether the subtitlers were successful enough to render the specific US (political) culture, phraseology and lexical terms.

METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The methodology used was rather time-consuming, as it involved watching all the seasons and episodes in full length: according to the DVD-release by Empire Film (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment), the total running time is around 3,051 minutes (S01–650’, S02–637’, S03–663’, S04–620’, S05–655’ and S06–423’).

After having watched the show, we created an Excel-database with thousands of entries from the original script in English, then further columns were added with the various Romanian renditions (DVD, Netflix, Amateur, Unknown), filled in various categories (grammar, vocabulary, culture, political term, etc.). As the Romanian subtitle was included in the DVD-release, we also looked for the collected entries in the Netflix version with the available official Romanian subtitle, then also searched for these entries in two amateur Romanian subtitles created by fan subtitlers (fansubbers). The most widespread amateur subtitle belongs to an unknown translator under the nickname Little Badger, but we could also track further interesting versions by other amateurs (e.g., Retail, or completely unknown subtitlers).

Although the collected words and phrases from the show are only a few hundred, we have collected all their occurrences, thus the database reaches thousands of entries, containing the season number, episode number, timing, the English entry, number of occurrences, the Romanian translation and translator (in case it was specified at the end of the episode). The collected term base has

⁹ <http://ebooks.unibuc.ro/filologie/lexic/caph.htm>, 2.19.2021.

drawn our attention to the necessity of discussing general culture entries separately from entries connected directly to US politics and culture.

RENDERING TERMS BELONGING TO GENERAL KNOWLEDGE OF SPECIFIC CULTURES

As there are many translation scholars stating that *culture* is vital for translators, who must understand both languages and cultures (cf. the terms of “bilingual” and “bicultural” discussed by Vermeer, 1986), it is worth checking how the term is described.

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines culture (definition 7 for the noun *culture*) as “[t]he distinctive customs, achievements, products, outlook, etc., of a society or group; the way of life of a society or group” (Trumble and Stevenson 575). It is relevant to notice that the enumeration is not exhaustive (marked by *etc.*), and that another definition links culture and language: “Language is an expression of culture and culture is expressed through language” (Pettit 44). These two definitions already signal that an ‘ultimate’ definition of ‘culture’ is impossible, as it should include attitudes, behavior, history, the entire human communication, enabling various scholars (linguists, ethnographers, historians, sociologists, etc.) to approach it from their own perspective. These divergent approaches enable us to focus on culture from the perspective of translation, as “[t]he concept of culture as a totality of knowledge, proficiency and perception is fundamental ... to translation” and the translator “must ... be at home in two cultures” (Snell-Hornby, 1995, p. 42).

Our selected examples contain versions from various officially released sources, as well as subtitles deriving from fansubbers, labeled in following way:

- (*D*) for the DVD-edition; in this case, there are various names behind the Romanian subtitles (e.g., Empire Video Production, Anișoara Anghel, Ligia Bradeanu, Marcela Alina Fărcașiu, Rodica Daiana Ghitescu, Elena Mititelu, Elena Pașcalău, and Elena Rodica Ionas), while a few episodes have no subtitlers specified (e.g., Season 3);
- (*N*) for the Netflix release;
- (*L*) for the Little Badger version;
- (*U*) for multiple unknown/unidentified translators.
- Square bracketed numbers after the examples refer to the number of occurrences found in the entire series (six seasons, 73 episodes).

Clothes belong to the basic vocabulary in each language, yet some of them – being less central – might cause translation issues:

(1) *sweat pants* [1]

- (D) *pantaloni mulați*
- (N) *pantaloni de trening*
- (L) *pantaloni*

(2) *G-string* [1]

- (D) *chiloței sumari*
- (N) (U) *tanga*
- (L) *ceva mai puțin sexy*

(3) *pushup bra* [1]

- (D) *sutienul care ridică sânii*
- (N) *sutienul push-up*
- (L) *sutienul cu pushup*
- (U) *sutienul minune*

Example 1 displays an adapted version (D), as a back-translation would result in *stretch pants* or *leggings*, while (L) uses generalization, which is less successful in this case. The second example proves the resourcefulness of translators, even if (L) once again uses a too general interpretation.

Example 3 demonstrates why there is an evergreen debate in the majority of nations whether an anglicism is justified or not. Although the original transcript does not use the standard spelling (*push-up bras*), the Romanian translators offered four variants ranging from explication (D) to metaphorical adaptation, while the anglicized versions reflect both written variants (with and without a hyphen).

A political TV show contains many institutions, bodies, companies, associations, committees, etc., including initialisms, acronyms or abbreviations. A few challenges in this category are the following:

(4) *OPEC* [3]

- (D) *OPEC* [2], **OTEP* [1]
- (N) *OPEC*
- (L) *OPEC*

The example shows a real translation challenge, exemplified in (D). While *OPEC* is an organization known all over the world, especially its acronym, the Romanian translators had to decide whether to display the original term (hassle-free and quick, relying on the general knowledge of the viewers) or its possible equivalent in Romanian. While two occurrences preserve the original (S04E42,

unidentified translator; S05E64, Elena Pașcalău), *OTEP* marks that one of the translators of Empire Video Production knew the Romanian term for it (there is an official Romanian translation: *Organizația Țărilor Exportatoare de Petrol*).¹⁰ However, this online Romanian word-for-word translation also prefers to preserve the original English acronym. By doing so, the translator endangers the understanding of the term, as viewers may not have met this Romanian acronym anywhere else. A site of Romanian orthography actually reinforces a basic rule for subtitles: in order to enhance communication, no uncommon abbreviations may be used.¹¹

On the other hand, it is good that all of them disregarded the period between the capital letters, as this is stipulated in a few recent sources¹² (*Ghid Practic al Departamentului de Limba Română Din Direcția Generală Traduceri a Comisiei Europene*, 2014, p. 19; Stoichițoiu Ichim, 2009, p. 52). Nevertheless, we were able to find cases when periods between capitals were used:

(5) C.W.I. [11]

(D) CWI [1], *organizația* [8], - [2]

(N) CWI [6], *asociația mea caritabilă* [1], *organizația* [3], - [1],
*Inițiativa "Apa Curată"*¹³

(L) CWI [2], C.W.I. [9]

While the full name is not explicitly stated (it only appears as an inscription on a glass wall, *Clean Water Initiative*),¹⁴ both (L) and (U) reuse the acronym mainly with periods, which may not be clear to the Romanian viewers at all. The Netflix-version is a clear winner if we disregard the obvious differences between an association and an organization, as it both offers the translation of the full name and the initials without periods. The DVD-subtitles (D) – seemingly – avoid to use both the full name and the acronym, mostly relying on explication (generalization: *organization*) or skipping the term, preserving it only once out of the 11 occurrences.

¹⁰ <https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/OPEC>, 2.20.2021.

¹¹ In the original Romanian: "Pentru o cât mai bună folosire a scrisului ca mijloc de comunicare în limba română, nu se vor folosi prescurtări de cuvinte care pot face lectura dificilă." <https://ortografia.ro/ortografia-limbii-romane/limba-romana-abrevierile/>, 2.20.2021.

¹² <https://publications.europa.eu/code/ro/ro-4100100.htm>, 2.20.2021.

¹³ Although the Romanian starting quotation mark is at the bottom of the line („...”), it is typical to use the English quotation marks in subtitles, hence they are preserved this way all through the article.

¹⁴ Interestingly, this initiative exists in reality as well:

<https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/initiatives/clean-water-initiative/>, 10.30.2021.

The next term refers to a well-known bank with established equivalents in many languages, including Romanian, provided by (N) and (L). Still, the DVD-release (Empire Video Production) omits to offer the Romanian established equivalent, puzzling the viewers with a rather misleading term, non-existent in this form:

(6) *World Bank* [1]

(D) **Banca Internațională*

(N) (L) *Banca Mondială*

An expression connected to any subject of studying causes trouble for (L), signaling a complete misunderstanding of the sentence:

(7) *He's cramming for the bar.* [1]

(D) *tocea pentru Barou*

(N) *tocea pentru examenul de barou*

(L) **studia cu atenție barul de la Bryn Mawr*

While the two official releases offer suitable versions for the legal expression, the amateur subtitle clearly misinterprets the situation, as the person has nothing to do with a bar located at Bryn Mawr.

Our next example leads us to popular conspiracy theories, reflected in one of the translations:

(8) *The Rockefeller Trilateral Commission* [1]

(D) *Comisia Trilaterală Rockefeller*

(N) *Comisia Trilaterală a lui Rockefeller*

(L) **Comisia Trilaterală Francmasonică*

It is obvious that the first two translations offer a calque version (word-for-word rendition), although a simple online search reveals that Rockefeller's name is unnecessary.¹⁵ However, the last version is more than interesting, as the translator gives an interpretation, which actually fits the context (the speaker draws the attention to various US conspiracy theories). On top of that, at least one name of the two Romanian representatives in the Trilateral Commission is connected to Freemasonry, although in the context of the TV series the reference to freemasonry is not justified whatsoever.

¹⁵ https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comisia_Trilateral%C4%83, 2.20.2021.

Further cultural translations involve coffee, illegal smoking, puppet show, job, religion and geopolitics, exemplified below:

(9) *Med lat, dec.* [1]

(D) **O cafea medie, cu lapte...*

(N) *Med, latt, fco.*

(L) **Un latte cu puțină cofeină.*

(10) *roll a joint like this?* [1]

(D) **să ruleze țigări așa?*

(N) **să facă o țigară cu marijuana*

(L) *să ruleze un joint așa?*

(11) *Punch and Judy show* [1]

(D) *spectacolul de marionete*

(N) *teatrul de păpuși*

(L) *emisiunea cu Punch și Judy*

(12) *meter maid* [1]

(D) **fata de la parcare*

(N) **agenta de parcare*

(L) (U) *polițista*

(13) *And he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.* [1]

(D) *Și oricine se va smeri va fi înălțat.*

(N) (L) *și cine se va smeri pe sine se va înălța.*

(14) *West Bank* [2]

(D) (N) *Cisiordania*

(L) **Malul de Vest*

Example 9 shows that one translator (D) omitted the translation of an abbreviation (*dec.* = decaffeinated), while (L) clearly misinterpreted the abbreviation, and instead of no caffeine *little caffeine* is proposed. The Netflix-solution is puzzling again: while it may be understood that *fco.* stands for *fără cafeină* ('without caffeine'), this is not an established abbreviation, thus it may hinder the storyline. The next example is also worth mentioning: the (D) version omits the very important aspect of the joint, being 'downgraded' to the 'level' of legal cigarettes, while the second option reflects explication for the sake of dismissing the English term, which is preserved in the third case, once again

leading to the issue of preserving or not the English terms. However, joint is made of tobacco and cannabis, thus the Netflix-variant is wrong.

The *Punch and Judy show* has two very good interpretations (generic terms for the puppet show), while (L) preserves the original name, without specifying what kind of show it is.

A simple online search could have offered a simple interpretation of the *meter maid* (Example 12),¹⁶ which is interpreted as a *parking valet* in the DVD- and Netflix-versions. Interestingly, both amateur subtitlers offer more correct variants, although there are more faithful renditions (~ *polișista de la circulație, polișista locală*). A US *meter maid* is, after all, “a female member of a police or traffic department responsible for issuing tickets for parking violations.”¹⁷

The Bible verse offers an interesting insight into personal preferences. The original wording reveals that the 21st Century King James Version (KJ21) is used,¹⁸ while for Romanian two Bible editions are used: the DVD-subtitle uses the Cornilescu-version¹⁹ (Romanian Protestant), while the Netflix-subtitle and the amateur version quote the standard Romanian Orthodox Bible (published under the guidance of Patriarch Teoctist).

And finally, *West Bank* is a term of great geopolitical sensitivity, so the translators should use the established equivalent without any further ado. While (D) and (N) do so, the last version is a grievous mistake (‘the west bank/shore/coast’) committed two times.

This brief overview demonstrates that, due to various possible reasons, the majority of these translations might be improved, raising the question whether there was need, time, energy or financial background for revision, post-editing or proof-reading. The following section will further discuss cultural terms closer to the specificity of the TV series, US and its politics.

US POLITICS AND CULTURE-RELATED TERMS IN *HOUSE OF CARDS*

Although it might come difficult to establish which US-related cultural and political terms constitute compulsory reading for translators, for instance viewers learn that the President of the United States works at *600 Pennsylvania Avenue* (Season 2, Episode 20), which is the synonym of the *White House*, and –

¹⁶ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meter%20maid>, 2.22.2021.

¹⁷ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/meter-maid>, 2.22.2021.

¹⁸

<https://www.biblegateway.com/quicksearch/?quicksearch=humble+himself+shall&version=KJ21>, 2.22.2021.

¹⁹ <https://www.bible.com/ro/bible/191/MAT.23.12.VDC>, 2.20.2021.

in this case – translators should choose the intended meaning instead of the address.

Furthermore, it is obvious that in the US political life there are two major parties constituting the American Senate, which is either overlooked (omitted, thus neglecting important information in these cases) or mistranslated in a few cases:

(15) *the aisle* [13]

a. *respect across the aisle* [1]

(D) *și se bucură de respect...*

(N) *respectată peste tot...*

(L) **e respectată pe coridoare*

b. (on) *the other side of the aisle* [3]

(D) *de cealaltă parte a baricadei, partidul oponent, *de la celălalt capăt al culoarului*

(N) **de cealaltă parte a culoarului, *cealaltă parte a sălii, tabăra adversă*

(L) **pe partea cealaltă a coridorului, *cealaltă parte a coridorului, tabăra adversă*

c. *on either side of the aisle* [1]

d. *both sides of the aisle* [6]

e. *my side of the aisle* [2]

While the term *aisle* refers to a “a long, narrow space between rows of seats in an aircraft, cinema, or church,”²⁰ its American political context is completely different: the term *across the aisle* refers to the ‘other’ party (either the Democrats or the Republicans), completely neglected in the first two interpretations (a too vague translation does not fit into this context), while the third version demonstrates that the amateur translator has no idea about the political message referring only to the American Senate. The interesting thing is that it is visible that, except for an isolated case (S05E53, DVD-release), only Season 1 contains these translation errors (Example 15a and 15b), while subsequent occurrences are rendered correctly: *parties, both parties, my political party, the opponent party* etc.

The national anthem of the US (*The Star-Spangled Banner*) may sound familiar to all of us, and translators should always check whether it already has an accepted translation or not. The only ‘officially’ translated Romanian version belongs to Cristian Petru Bălan,²¹ which has been the “authorized and full

²⁰ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/aisle>, 8.29.2021.

²¹ <https://www.gandaculdecolorado.com/innul-statelor-unite-ale-americii-tradus-in-limba-romana/>, 1.17.2021.

translation” since 2008. Its first line is quoted correctly by (D) and (L), while – apparently – the Netflix subtitler lacks this piece of information:

(16) ♪ O SAY CAN YOU-- ♪ [1]

(D) (L) “O, spune, poți tu zări...”

(N) “Ai putea să...”

US cities, states various places also appear in the first two episodes, but those with nicknames and metaphorical meanings might be reconsidered in the Romanian versions:

(17) *The City of Brotherly Love* [1]

(D) *Orașul Iubirii Fraterne*

(N) *Orașul Iubirii Frățești*

(L) (U) *orașul iubirii frățești*

(18) *Keystone State*²² [1]

(D) *statul “Cheie de Boltă”*

(N) *statul Keystone*

(L) *stat cheie*

(U) *stat crucial*

While Americans can instantly understand from Example 17 that the city is Philadelphia, it might be less obvious for Romanian viewers. More than that, the two versions reflect that there is no established Romanian equivalent for the nickname, whereas the lowercase variant may be considered a spelling mistake as well.

Example 18 offers several improper Romanian versions, including calque, or possible dictionary translations of *keystone*, although in this case the syntagm refers to Pennsylvania, due to its historic importance. Under the circumstances, the Netflix-version is by far the worst option, as it suggests that there is a US state with this name.

The metaphorical *Sarasota* stands for the best living area in Florida, and *the Berkshires* is a rural region, basically ‘in the middle of nowhere,’ although popular with tourists. Unfortunately, all translators fail to carry out these metaphorical transformations (moreover, the amateur version leaves the term *McMansion* in the translation, headed by the most generic term for houses):

²² <https://statesymbolsusa.org/symbol-official-item/pennsylvania/state-nickname/keystone-state>, 1.17.2021.

(19) *Money is the McMansion in Sarasota that starts falling apart after ten years.* [1]

(D) *Banii reprezintă conacul din Sarasota, care se năruie după 10 ani.*

(N) *Banii sunt marele conac din Sarasota, conac care începe să se dărâme după zece ani.*

(L) *Banii sunt casele *McMansion din Sarasota care au început să cadă după 10 ani.*

A possible solution could be to rely on an image commonly associated with a lot of money (e.g. *Banii reprezintă un conac boieresc, care se năruie după 10 ani.*), thus making use of generalization (and adaptation), a procedure that may be applied in the following example as well, where Berkshire may be replaced with something similar (e.g. *în pustietate*), which was well-applied in Example 22 later:

(20) *a trailer park in the Berkshires* [4]

(D) *parc de rulote din Berkshires*

(N) *într-o rulotă, în Berkshires*

(L) *dintr-un parc de rulote din Berkshires*

Even if clothes were mentioned in the previous section, there are items specifically connected to the US. In these cases we have a slightly more comforting version for two culture-bound clothing items, namely *Daisy Dukes*²³ and *Vera Wang* (American fashion designer).²⁴ The DVD-subtitle interprets and adapts perfectly *Vera Wang* as ‘elegant outfit’ (omitting the first term, i.e., *Daisy Dukes*), while the unknown subtitler offers a similarly good rendition of *Daisy Dukes* (‘shorts’ or ‘breeches’); the Netflix-version and Little Badger merely preserve the original terms (pure borrowing), probably causing a little anxiety when seen by the Romanian viewers:²⁵

(21) *We Southern girls clean up well when we get out of our Daisy Dukes - and into some Vera Wang.* [1]

(D) *Noi, sudistele, ne adaptăm perfect la ținutele elegante.*

(N) *sudistele, când înlocuim Daisy Duke cu Vera Wang*

²³ https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daisy_Duke, 1.17.2021.

²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vera_Wang, 1.17.2021.

²⁵ The author of the present article tried to look for Vera Wang on Romanian sites, but there were only cosmetics and cutlery items found, no wedding dresses whatsoever.

- (L) *Noi, sudistele, ne curățăm bine când ieșim din Daisy Dukes - și intrăm la Vera Wang.*
 (U) *Noi fetele din Sud ne arănjăm [sic] bine când trecem de la pantalonii scurți la o costumație Vera Wang.*

Similarly, a prestigious higher education institution for women is mentioned, belonging to the first elite women's colleges in the US,²⁶ whose metaphorical meaning is rendered excellently in the DVD-version; however, the other versions fail to do this 'extra mile' of interpretation:

- (22) **Vassar** [1]
 (D) *băncile școlii*
 (N) (L) *Vassar*
 (U) *Colegiul Vassar*

There are certain US initialisms mentioned as well (institutions or organizations), which – similarly to the institutions known worldwide – are either borrowed (with or without periods between the capital letters) or figure with the acronyms stemming from the Romanian translation of the full version (the DVD-release):

- (23) **FEMA**²⁷ [26]
 (D) *AFMU* [2], *AFSU* [5], *FEMA* [18], - [1]
 (N) *FEMA* [24], *fonduri de urgență* [2]
 (L) *FEMA* [24], *Fondul pentru Dezastre* [2]

- (24) **the A.C.L.U.**²⁸ [1], **ACLU** [1]
 (D) **UAALC* [1], *ACLU* [1]
 (N) *ACLU* [2]
 (L) *the* [sic] *A.C.L.U.* [1], *ACLU* [1]

One DVD-subtitler from Empire Video Production knows that *FEMA* has a somewhat established equivalent in Romanian²⁹ (*Agenția Federală pentru Managementul Situațiilor de Urgență*), although no Romanian acronym is given

²⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vassar_College, 1.18.2021.

²⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Emergency_Management_Agency, 1.18.2021.

²⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Civil_Liberties_Union, 1.18.2021.

²⁹ <http://fundatiapentrusmurd.ro/en/2016-2017-cursuri-de-formare-continua-cu-lectori-fema-din-sua-pentru-imbunatatirea-expertizei-priving-gestionarea-unei-situatii-de-urgenta/>, 1.18.2021.

when the term is described. However, *AFMU* appears two times (S01E02 and S02E16), but later on this is changed back to *FEMA*, then Season 3 (E33 and E37) makes use of *AFSU*, which clearly indicates that there are more subtitles for the series. There is no information about the translators for Season 3, but we know that the translator for episode 67 is Rodica Daiana Ghitescu [sic], with two occurrences of *FEMA*.

In the case of *ACLU*, we could not find why it was rendered as *UAALC*, which is even misleading,³⁰ whereas the amateur subtitler reproduces the original spelling, first with, then without the dots.

Our next category is connected to historical events in the US, which were either rendered correctly (with the help of explicitation) or with the original preserved, leading to ambiguity or lack of background information:

(25) *You think Katrina was incompetence?* [1]

(D) *Katrina a reflectat incompetența?*

(N) *Uraganul Katrina a fost incompetentă, crezi?*

(L) *Crezi că faza cu Katrina a fost incompetentă?*

(26) *Waco* [1]

(D) *asediul de la Waco*

(N) (L) *Waco*

Although Hurricane Katrina mostly devastated the city of New Orleans in 2005, it was not necessarily an ‘internal affair,’ gaining much coverage all over the world. Yet, almost two decades after the event, some viewers might not understand what *Katrina* refers to. Hence, we consider that the Netflix-version is a brilliant example for suitable explicitation by adding the proper keyword. Contrary to this ingenious solution, we face a rather ambiguous version (L), probably derailing the viewer from the original meaning.

The DVD-version in Example 26 demonstrates once again how vital a translation technique (cf. Molina & Hurtado Albir 499) can be: the *Waco siege/massacre* (1993) happened even before Hurricane Katrina; thus, the simple takeover of the place name is not suitable in the context when government repression is discussed.³¹

Two politically important figures are also mentioned: *Deep Throat* (Mark Felt, FBI associate director in 1972), directly contributing to the

³⁰ https://www.umass.edu/oir/sites/default/files/publications/factbooks/Factbook_AY2012.pdf, 1.18.2021.

³¹ https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asediul_de_la_Waco, 1.18.2021.

Watergate scandal and the resignation of President Richard Nixon.³² In this case, we have two very good interpretations (total transformation of the figure's nickname):

(27) *How very Deep Throat of you.* [1]

(D) *Ce misterios sunteți.* ('How mysterious you are.')

(N) *Ce stil "Deep Throat"!*

(L) *Câtă secretomanie!* ('That's a great amount of secrecy!')

The other occurrence invokes another scandal, albeit probably less devastating at a national level. The sentence is part of a telephone conversation between a couple, clearly making allusion to a sex scandal of a US president and an employee from 1998. Her name is widely known due to the extensive media coverage, not to mention that later on she stepped up against cyberbullying and held a famous TED Talk in 2015.³³ The sentence makes a rather mean reference to the scandal, once again proving that viewers' entertainment is above all:

(28) *Make me squeal like Monica Lewin...* [1]

(D) *să mă faci să urlu ca Monica...*

(N) *să țip ca Monica...*

(L) *și să mă faci să țip ca Monica Lewin...*

(U) *și să mă faci să gem ca Monica Lewin...*

The 'official' versions seem to overlook the importance of the family name, only mentioning the first name (censored variants?), taking the edge of the political allusion of the comparison, while the amateur renditions preserve the fragment of the family name, thus making it clear who the comparison is about. However, it is also noteworthy the meanings of verbs involved in the simile: *howl, roar, shout, scream* or *yell* in (D), (N) and (L), while *moan, groan* in (U), which is associated with suffering, involving prolonged, excruciating pain.

A final example brings into discussion a rather difficult term, involving some background check or the help of an expert in economics. Although the English term hides the name behind the expressions, experts know (or it can be found easily on the Internet) that it is about Ronald Reagan's policy:

(29) *trickle-down diplomacy* [2]

(D) *diplomație progresistă* [2] ('progressive diplomacy')

³² <https://www.history.com/topics/1970s/watergate>, 1.18.2021.

³³ https://www.ted.com/talks/monica_lewinsky_the_price_of_shame, 1.18.2021.

- (N) *diplomație cu percolare* [1], *diplomație în cascadă* (calque)
 (L) *diplomație cu facilități* [1], *diplomației care acordă facilități bogaților* [1] ('diplomacy facilitating the rich')
 (U) *diplomație pentru toți* [1]

(30) *trickle-down economics* [1]

- (D) *economia lui progresistă* ('progressive economics')
 (N) *modelul economic în cascadă* (calque)
 (L) *noțiunea de economie cu facilități fiscale pentru bogați*
 ('concept of economics with fiscal facilities for the rich')

The translators try to do their best systematically (which is visible from the parallel translations), yet their results show that there is no established political-economic term for that in Romanian. Nevertheless, there is an 'official' version (*efectul de transmite pe plan economic*),³⁴ found by an online bilingual concordance search engine.³⁵ The theory of *trickle-down economics* is beneficial for the wealthy, as they benefit from tax cuts, which enables them to invest more and hire workers. It is even called *Reaganomics*, but the intended effect was not achieved, proven by the increased government spending, as explained by the experts.³⁶

CONCLUSIONS

First, it is important to remark that no far-fetching conclusions may be drawn from only one TV show with 73 episodes. Nevertheless, it may offer a starting point to mind-map how intricate political terms are.

Out of the 862 collected entries from *House of Cards*, 256 are connected to political bodies, gatherings, documents, election, occupations, institutions, buildings, verbs etc. (*the State Department, deputy caucus, Camp David Accords, reform bill, the Keystone State, to leak a draft, filibuster, speaker, Chief of Staff, Joint Chiefs, Majority Whip, the Hill, to dispatch, to vet, to tap*), roughly 30% of all collected entries. However, understanding the political terms embedded in the audiovisual environment referred to as 'politicotainment'

³⁴ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2011-01-20_RO.html?redirect, 2.25.2021.

³⁵ <https://www.linguee.com/english-romanian/translation/trickle-down+economics.html>, 2.25.2021.

³⁶ <https://www.thebalance.com/trickle-down-economics-theory-effect-does-it-work-3305572>, 2.25.2021.

(Riegert) also includes an entire arsenal of entries belonging to general knowledge and cultural allusions.

The American *House of Cards*, as a product, is a show “about mean people doing mean things, and it does that well. But if you want to understand American politics, watch just about anything else”, summarizes Masket (2015). Although this harsh criticism, the show still enjoys undisturbed popularity, and the subtitles available in multiple languages also contribute to remain in the limelight.

As Gouadec (2007, Foreword) explains, “the qualified professional translator is a vital player, both economically and technically: professional translators are highly skilled technical experts, both on account of the contents they translate and of the various ever more sophisticated IT tools and software they must be able to use. They are in fact experts in multilingual multimedia communication engineering.” In his view, people become translators coming from the “language sector” or from the “world of industry and techniques” (Gouadec 150), but he distinguishes salaried and freelance translators (the professionals) from “outlaws” and “invisible” translators (Gouadec 100–1) who are amateurs and undermine the business. We accept that high quality used to be associated with education and training, but nowadays expertise may be gained from non-academic sources as well, leading to the re-definition of what ‘professional’ means.

In our case, compared to the ‘amateur’ Romanian subtitles, the quality of the two ‘professional’ versions is not always convincing, although we have spotted more blunders in (L). It is known that the once clear-cut division of ‘professional’ versus ‘amateur’ is more and more blurred, and while ‘professional’ used to mean certified translators/subtitlers (with a degree at least in linguistics/translation studies/specialized field), this is not the case anymore, affecting the translator’s status directly. Although it might hurt to admit, present-day professional subtitlers serve ‘the crowd’, who must be satisfied with the (by-)product, asking for more subtitles (cf. the feed-back option for subtitles in *BS Player* or the online rankings). The dubbed versions and the subtitles in various languages are part of the commercial establishment, taking part of the commercial success or failure of the audiovisual product. As such, they have to be popular with the viewers, contributing to the overall success of the primary product. As the movie production is a multimillion-dollar industry, the famous translator’s *risk aversion* is easy to understand, producing ‘safe’ versions for the large public. As Skuggevik explains, subtitlers “have nowhere to hide” as “[t]hey present their translated rendition of whatever is spoken at the precise moment when it is said, and any viewer with a grasp of the original language is able to make an instant comparison” (Skuggevik 197).

On the other hand, binge-watching derives from binge-production, logically leading to binge-translation, with little time left for proofreading. Sorlin mentions the “dictatorship of urgency” (Sorlin 67, translated from French), referring to the media, where “news circulates faster than ever,” making us realize that this is a feature of our everyday life, and is characteristic of the subtitles as well. Under the circumstances, quality assurance can separate ‘professionals’ from ‘non-professionals’, as all work under the pressure of time.

A good question is whether the older generation of professional translators and subtitlers can and is willing to face the new challenges of shrinking deadlines, changed terms (e.g., payment methods, delayed payments, dropping prices) and the younger generation of translators/subtitlers, who may be more tech-savvy on the one hand, and can more easily break any written or unwritten translation rules on the other hand for the glory of offering a subtitle faster than anyone else. Although this way the quality standards may fall below expectations, they may be ‘fresh’ enough, not to mention that ‘amateur’ experts and fan(atic)s lacking academic training may create high quality subtitles relying on the plethora of online information and their own expertise on a particular subject. Whatever the case, the concept of ‘professional’ might be reconsidered from the point of view of quality rather than qualifications.

The corpus shows that official translators might miss important cultural renditions (e.g., the official Romanian version of the American anthem), but working in a team to produce subtitles in a shorter period of time leads to inconsistency of terms (e.g., the DVD-release with at least eight subtitlers, some of who are not even mentioned). Yet, the amateur translators also proved that they also lack basic cultural knowledge (e.g., the Romanian established equivalent for *West Bank*). However, the most puzzling discovery was that all subtitles failed to render the first occurrences of *the other side of the aisle* in Season 1, which may signal that they lacked basic knowledge of American political terms when the translation started, but evolved quickly in the subsequent cases. Thus, from a pragmatic point of view, the term ‘professional’ should refer to translators/subtitlers who commit very few to no mistakes in the required area, while ‘amateurs’ are those who commit grievous translation errors connected to the area of expertise they are supposed to know. This also involves certain decision-taking in particular cases, when generalization (*Deep Throat*), particularization, explication (*Waco*, *Katrina*), or calque (*the City of Brotherly Love*) may be involved, having in mind the ultimate goal: intelligibility.

Another disturbing issue might be the case of abbreviations and acronyms (e.g., *FEMA* and *ACLU* in the presented examples), which needs further investigation as acronyms may lead to two infelicitous options: a rather character-consuming explication (when the acronym is explained in full words, at least at its first occurrence), or the preservation of the original acronyms,

which may leave the viewers in the dark. Of course, certain acronyms are known worldwide or have established variants in the target language (e.g., UN – Ro. ONU), but in specific areas (law, economics, medicine etc.) this is not the case.

There are cases when subtitlers excel in rendering cultural challenges, while at other times translation blunders are difficult to explain, some of which have been presented previously. Overall, the official Romanian subtitles contain fewer mistakes than the amateur ones, yet it is questionable whether the accuracy rating of 98% is achieved to be labeled as ‘good’ (considering the number of words, translation errors, recognition errors, overall flow of subtitles, coherence etc., cf. Cintas & Remael 143). While Munteanu argues that movies are so popular because of the high quality of translations and adaptation to the viewers’ social and cultural needs (Munteanu 110), we cannot say that this may be proven.

Although Netflix “may no longer need *House of Cards* – even if that’s what helped transform the company into what is now,”³⁷ viewers still need good quality subtitles, which help them immerse in the storyline without noticing disturbing cultural, political or general knowledge translation errors.

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