

A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Polish and American Prison Slang within the Context of Selected Translation Techniques in Films with Subtitles

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Abstract: Cultural differences around the world may pose problems for translators who face issues connected with finding equivalents in source and target language occurred in the films. One of the most difficult styles is constantly changing, the hermetic and colloquial variety known as slang. Depending on the environment, it may vary, even in one language, of which an example is prison slang used by convicts to communicate with one another. Although very pejorative and full of negative connotations, it is a very curious subject matter to analyze, as well as, to investigate how it is translated, because more and more films about criminal environments are being produced. This study examines which translation techniques were used in the cases of the movies: *Lockdown* (2000), *American Me* (1992) and *Animal Factory* (2000). The research focuses on the issues connected with the most often used translation techniques, the reasons of using them, the other possible solutions, the untranslatable phrases and with translating taboo words.

Keywords: *prison slang, translation techniques, sociolinguistics, criminal environment, equivalents, American prison films, taboo words, subtitles*

1. Description of the Study

Many linguists (Appiah, 2004; Newmark, 1987; Orel, 1996) believe that there is no perfect translation because something is always lost. Whether this is true or not, the translator should always use an appropriate translation technique for a given case, and it is important to choose the best method, depending on the type of film. With the right choice, there is a great probability that the resultant production will be very well received. This study shows which techniques were used in *Lockdown* (2000), *American Me* (1992) and *Animal Factory* (2000) in the translation of particular prison slang expressions, which are the most popular ones, and whether using them was correct. Based on the dialog lists, the survey investigates which translation techniques developed by Vinay and Darbelnet ([1958] 1995) are employed during the translation of particular phrases. Unfortunately, translators of these films are unknown, however, their translations are available on <http://www.opensubtitles.org/>, the most popular website regarding subtitles.

Prison slang in the USA and in Poland are different, inasmuch as the criminal environment is a closed community developing in separate places. One of the main distinctions is that Polish prisons are represented by two main in-groups; the so called *gity* (or *gitowcy, ludzie, grypsrzy*) and the *frajerzy*, where the former have achieved the highest level of criminal initiation, and thereby receive respect from the other convicts, whereas the latter are disdained and cannot even touch a “git’s” mug (Grabias, 2001, p. 248). Instead, American

prison society constitutes representatives of different races, which are formed into gangs. This results from the history of segregation and the legacy of slavery in the United States (Krisberg *et al.*, 2015, pp. 258–260). For this and similar reasons, it is sometimes difficult to find counterparts to particular Polish and American prison slang phrases. In order to do this properly, research has been conducted based on the following dictionaries: *Urban Dictionary: Urban Dictionary: Freshest Street Slang Defined* (2012), *The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (2015), *Prison Patter: A Dictionary of Prison Words and Slang* (1996), *McGraw's-Hill's Dictionary of American Slang and Colloquial Expressions* ([2005] 2006), *The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (2015), the most extensive internet dictionary of modern slang: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/>, as well as, consultations with people from the criminal environment. The corpus on which this study is based contains six separate types of material: the three original subtitles of the above-mentioned films plus their Polish translations. Most important, however, are the dialogs containing slang which appear during the imprisonment of the main and the peripheral characters. Moreover, it has to be remembered that this is a subjective analysis given by the author of this MA thesis and it may, therefore, vary from other views on this subject.

1.1. *Lockdown* (2000)

The first film to analyze in respect of the occurrence of the slang expressions and techniques used in its translation is *Lockdown* (2000) produced in the USA and directed by John Luessenhop. This is the story about three Afro-American friends, who had been unfairly convicted of a murder, causing their imprisonment. Since most of the scenes take place in prison, and the better part of the dialogs is between convicts, it is congruous and relevant as research material for the investigation of prison slang expressions appearing in the film.

The survey shows that there are approximately 150 slang expressions in the film, where translation techniques developed by Vinay and Darbelnet ([1958] 1995) were used. More than half, that is 51% of the whole, pose modulations, much fewer, namely 13 %, used two techniques: transpositions and adaptations; then equivalences, comprising 11 %, followed by literal translations, 9%; last but not one, are calques, 4%; and the end – borrowings, 3% of the all the translated slang expressions. The table below contains each technique developed by Vinay and Darbelnet ([1958] 1995) with examples of these phrases and their translations using subtitles.

Translation technique	Slang expression	Polish translation ¹
Borrowing	This is <i>contraband</i> .	To <i>kontrabanda</i> .
Calque	Lockdown is over!	Koniec zamknięcia!
Literal translation	You need something in here, you holler.	Jak coś chcesz, krzycz.
Transposition	Handle it, I'll cut you in on 15 percent.	Złatw to, a dostaniesz 15%.
Modulation	Better not be trying your sticky fingers on me.	Nie kantuj mnie.
Equivalent	This is the <i>pen</i> , nigga.	Jesteśmy w <i>pierdlu</i> .
Adaptation	So the <i>shank</i> was yours?	Więc to był twój <i>nóż</i> ?

Table 1. Translation techniques by Vinay and Darbelnet ([1958] 1995) and selected dialogs from the film *Lockdown* (2000) with Polish translations.

Taking borrowings into account, there were a few English-borrowed expressions in the translation, which have already permeated Polish slang. Besides *kontrabanda* meaning *contraband*, there were for instance, *drugi* which is a slang word for different types of *drugs*, or *wyrolować* that means *to roll over somebody*. Regarding calque, *Koniec zamknięcia* might have been translated into *Otwieramy* or similarly, by using modulation to sound more relevant. Calque occurred in the film also when a prison guard greeted new convicts saying: *Welcome to the Big Papa* which was translated into: *Witajcie u Wielkiego Tatki*, where the meaning is also not very clear to Poles. Except for a given example of literal translation, there were a few more such as *I got better idea for that fool – Mam lepszy pomysł na tego głupka*. Transpositions are necessarily used in subtitle translation, because they often help to reduce the length of a sentence in order to accommodate it in the time-lapse. An example of this from *Lockdown* is *Motherfucker can't be on my court unless he gonna play ball or pay rent.*, translated into *Może tu być jeśli gra lub płaci*. Modulation is also a frequent technique because the receiver can obtain a clearer version of a translation, although a version without modulation is also grammatically correct, for instance *better not be trying your sticky fingers on me* translated into *nie kantuj mnie*, which sounds better for a Polish viewer, and is quicker than *lepiej nie próbuj swoich lepkich palców na mnie*, although *lepkie palce* is an idiomatic equivalent for *sticky fingers*. There were also more English-Polish equivalents of slang in the film; *You fucked up my life – Spieprzyłeś mi życie, Lock them down! – Zamknąć ich!*, *iso – izolatka*. The last technique, which is adaptation, was used instead of equivalence, because some of the words derived from Polish prison slang might be not understood by ordinary people. To give an example: *fish* was translated into *nowy*, however, a Polish prisoner would rather call it *świeżak*; a translator used a word *wyro* to say *bunk*, thus avoiding the word *kojo*, because most people are rather more familiar with the former.

To sum up, the majority of prison slang expressions were translated using the modulation technique, whereas borrowing and calque were the least common. Moreover, the translator usually omitted most swear and offensive words, including the word *nigga*, which occurred in the original scenario 56 times, and in the Polish version it was translated only 12 times. One of the reasons is that it would probably look unnatural. The other is because most

¹ Available on <http://www.opensubtitles.org/pl/subtitles/3276506/lockdown-pl> [ED: 03/2016]

people in the world are familiar with English swear words and there is no need to fill space needed for more crucial phrases.

1.2. *Animal Factory* (2000)

The prison movie *Animal Factory* (2000) directed by Steve Buscemi shows the story of a young man who has just been jailed for selling drugs, but he has not got any criminal record or experience. For this reason, he feels tense and confused, especially because his appearance makes other convicts interested in him. This is a plausible story, which could have happened in real life: thus the dialog list of the film is appropriate material to investigate in order to find prison slang expressions. Indeed, this movie contains approximately 200 phrases derived from authentic prison life.

The most common translation techniques used to translate *Animal Factory* (2000) was adaptation – 31%, but its prevalence to the next, namely equivalence, is not so high; it is 25%. Thus, these two techniques take together more than half of the whole. Slightly lower than the previous one is modulation 23%, then less than one-tenth of the all techniques percentage constitute: transposition 7%, calque 6%, literal translation 5%, and at the end of the list, borrowing, comprising only 3 % of all the translated slang expressions in the film. The following table presents examples of prison slang expressions derived from the *Animal Factory* (2000), as well as, their Polish translations.

Translation technique	Slang expression	Polish translation ²
Borrowing	Earl Copen would shoot piss if he thought it would get him <i>high</i> .	Earl Copen dla <i>haju</i> wstrzyknąłby sobie szczyzny.
Calque	Don't read that <i>bitch</i> .	Chłopie nie czytaj tej <i>suki</i> .
Literal translation	Hit them in the pocketbook.	Uderzmy ich po portfelu.
Transposition	Convict's the term solid dudes prefer.	Skazany to lepsze określenie.
Modulation	All a convict has is his name among his peers.	Cały majątek skazanego to jego reputacja u innych więźniów.
Equivalent	New <i>bull</i> got sick.	Nowy <i>klawisz</i> zachorował.
Adaptation	This guy Psycho Mike, he says someone's saying <i>shit</i> about me.	Ten facet Mike Psychol mówi, że ktoś <i>coś na mnie nadaje</i> .

Table 2. Translation techniques by Vinay and Darbelnet ([1958] 1995) and selected dialogues from the film *Animal Factory* (2000) with Polish translations

The data gathered in the table show examples of possible using the translation techniques. The first is borrowing; for example: *Earl Copen would shoot piss if he thought it would get him high* [*Earl Copen dla haju wstrzyknąłby sobie szczyzny*] where the word *haj* is

² Available on: <http://www.opensubtitles.org/pl/subtitles/206643/animal-factory-pl> [ED 03/2016]

derived from English *high* which means being under influence of drugs. Similar examples from *Animal Factory* (2000) are: *cell block* which was translated into *blok* meaning one part of a prison, or *group* into *grupa* that means in this context peers who stick together. Calque occurred, for instance, in *Don't read that bitch* translated into [*Chłopie nie czytaj tej suki*], which might sound irrelevant for Polish viewers, but in the USA the word *bitch* is slightly less offensive and it is colloquially used as a replacement of many words, but it is obviously still a curse. Another example of calque may be: *I heard someone got stuck in the gym* [*Słyszałem, że kogoś zakhuto w siłowni*]. Regarding literal translations; *Hit them in the pocketbook* was translated into [*Uderzmy ich po portfelu*], although it is not a popular idiom, especially among convicts. Transposition occurred in *Snitchin' motherfucker, huh?* [*Skurwiel sypie, co nie?*], where a verbless phrase was changed into a noun plus verb, as well as, in: *Convict's the term solid dudes prefer* [*Skazany to lepsze określenie*], since the translator omitted an agent in the sentence and changed it into a verbless sentence, presumably because of the limited space for subtitling. The next technique is modulation, for instance: *All a convict has is his name among his peers* [*Cały majątek skazanego to jego reputacja u innych więźniów*]. There, *all a convict has* was changed into *whole wealth*, what is more, the translator did not use the phrase *imię*, which is an equivalent of *name*. Another example of this technique is: *I've done a total of 18 calendar years in this place* [*Ja tu kibluję łącznie przez osiemnaście lat kalendarzowych*], where instead of translating into [*Jestem tu*], there was a choice of [*Ja tu kibluję*], which is a very appropriate Polish prison slang term meaning *I've been jailed*. The following technique is equivalence comprising many compelling terms, as for example: *New bull got sick*. [*Nowy klawisz zachorował.*], where *bull* means a prison guard. Other instances from *Lockdown* (2000) are: *shoot dope* [*strzelanie w żyłę*] meaning to inject drugs, *coke* [*koka*] meaning cocaine, and *shitter* [*kibel*] meaning a toilet. The last technique, namely adaptation contains the following example: *This guy Psycho Mike, he says someone's saying shit about me*. [*Ten facet Mike Psychol mówi, że ktoś coś na mnie nadaje*]. It is impossible to translate literally *że ktoś mówi o mnie gówno*, since it would change the meaning. The next example is *boss jocker* [*władca haremu*], where the original meaning is a man, who dominates other convicts, including by homosexual acts forcibly performed on them. It is difficult to find equivalents to the above-mentioned phrases, so the translator decided to adapt them, which made them understandable.

The findings support the prediction that the film *Animal Factory* (2000) is a mine of information about prison slang. The translator usually tried to retain equivalents to this vocabulary, unlike those who avoid this practice in case it would not be understood by the ordinary viewer. What is more, there are many congruous idioms in the film, such as: *Does this screw up our timing?* [*Czy to popsuje nam szyki?*] and domesticated proper names, for example, *Bad Eye* [*Kaprawy*]. To conclude, the study of the film *Animal Factory* (2000) proved that translation techniques may be useful even for prison slang translation.

1.3. *American Me* (1992)

Since the movie *American Me* (1992) directed by Edward James Olmos begins with the sentence "The film you are about to see is inspired by a true story" one expects to hear the real language used by the prison communities appearing there. Indeed, this movie contains about 120 slang expressions, usually accompanied by swear words, real names for items of

everyday use in prison, as well as, the actual names of notorious American gangs. Skarbek (2014) enlists three types of gang associations, beginning with “Security Threat Group I”; the most forceful, hazardous and ruthless affiliation. This one includes, among the others, the *Aryan Brotherhood*, *Black Guerilla Family*, *Mexican Mafia* and *Nuestra Familia*, the constant struggles of which are presented in the film.

Taking Vinay and Darbelnet’s ([1958] 1995) translation techniques into account, the most common ones are modulations – 34%, slightly lower equivalents – 28%, adaptations – 13% and transpositions – 11%, which are in the middle frequency, then literal translations – 7%, and the most rarely used techniques, namely calques – 4% and borrowings, constituting 3% of the all translated slang expressions.

Translation technique	Slang expression	Polish translation ³
Borrowing	You're nothing but a fucking dope <i>dealer</i> .	Jesteś tylko zwykłym, pieprzonym <i>dilerem</i> .
Calque	I'm <i>clean</i> , man.	Jestem <i>czysty</i> .
Literal translation	What you laughing at, <i>punk</i> ?	Z czego się śmiejesz, <i>śmieciu</i> ?
Transposition	Excuse me, ma'am. You're not supposed to pass items to convicts	Przepraszam panią, ale nie można nic przekazywać
Modulation	Shit, homes, the best tattoos in L.A.. Now I can't draw shit, ese.	Dziarzałem najlepiej w L.A. A teraz gówno z tego.
Equivalent	You ever been in the <i>joint</i> ?	Siedziałeś w pudle?
Adaptation	An extended sentence with a <i>guaranteed bus ride to the big time</i> as soon as I turned 18.	Nowy wyrok i <i>przeniesienie do puchy</i> , gdy tylko skończę 18 lat.

Table 3. Translation techniques by Vinay and Darbelnet ([1958] 1995) and selected dialogs from the film *American Me* (1992) with Polish translations.

Analyzing the dialog list of the film, there are very few borrowings in slang expressions. Besides *dealer* [*diler*], which means a person who distributes drugs, there were, for instance; *gang* [*gang*] and many Spanish-Mexican borrowings and interjections, which are included in the next table. Calque also was not common there, but the following example: *I'm clean, man* [*Jestem czysty*] means in this context that the person does not use drugs anymore, but: *You guys are flyin' high, huh?* [*Widzę, że wysoko latacie.*] was a slightly unsuccessful attempt at saying that the boys are under the influence of drugs. *What you laughing at, punk?* [*Z czego się śmiejesz, śmieciu?*] is a typical literal translation containing an offensive name, meaning exactly the same in both Polish and English languages. Another example is: *Wipe that fucking smile off your face, asshole.* [*Zetrzyj uśmiech z twarzy, dupku!*] omitting only the word *fucking*, as is the usual practice in the translations of films. However, the rest of the sentence is literal. Transposition occurred in the translation of: *Excuse me, ma'am. You're not supposed to pass items to convicts* into [*Przepraszam panią ale nie można nic przekazywać*], where the subject *you* has been changed into an impersonal form and the dative *to convicts* has been recognized as useless, because it is obvious. Modulation appeared; for example, in the sentence: [*Najwięcej kasy zarabiał się na prochach.*], which originally

³ Available on <http://www.opensubtitles.org/pl/subtitles/4090189/american-me-pl> [ED: 03/2016]

sounded: *And the biggest money-maker; drugs*. There is a change of syntax; an impersonal sentence in the former and a verbless sentence with the subject *drugs*. The translator probably recognized that the translation: *[I największa maszynka do robienia pieniędzy – narkotyki]* would sound irrelevant to the Polish viewer. Another example is: *Shit, homes, the best tattoos in L.A.. Now I can't draw shit, ese. [Dziargalem najlepiej w L.A. A teraz gównno z tego.]* In the second sentence, the translator decided to avoid a translation: *[A teraz nie potrafię narysować gównna]*, because this version does not sound suitable for a Polish native speaker, although it is still grammatically correct. An interesting part of this study is equivalence, which was very frequent in this translation and the usage of this usually was correct, for example; *You ever been in the joint?* is a good equivalent of *[Siedziałeś w pudle?]* since *joint* means not only a rolled marijuana cigarette and a rap song but also a prison or a jail. Other examples of these techniques are: *I'm gonna go make my collections. [idę zebrać haracz]*, *Pass that wire [Rzuć chabete]* meaning passing on a drug, *Pump it! [Wyciskaj!]* as an exclamation to somebody who is currently working out, *a crime partner [współas]*, *yard [spacerniak]*, *juvie [poprawczak]*. When there is lack of an equivalent, the translator has to use adaptation, as here: *An extended sentence with a guaranteed bus ride to the big time as soon as I turned 18. [Nowy wyrok i przeniesienie do puchy, gdy tylko skończę 18 lat.]* Finding an equivalent to the phrase *bus ride to the big time*, meaning moving from a juvenile detention center into a prison is difficult in this context, so the translator recognized *i przeniesienie do puchy* as sufficiently understandable. Similarly, *Control the inside, you own the outside* was translated into *Mając kontrolę w pudle, posiadasz ją na wolności*, because for example *Mając kontrolę wewnątrz, posiadasz ją na zewnątrz* does not exist in Polish prison slang, and what is more, it does not sound precise.

Since 18.6 % of the whole 2.3-million population of American prisons comprises Hispanics, namely among others: Mexican; Puerto Rican, Cuban (Miller, 2012, pp. 1489–1490), their vocabulary is also well-known among other convicts and officials. Moreover, many ordinary people in the United States understand them because they are used on American streets. In the film *American me* (1992) there are many terms specific to Spanish-Mexican gangs and usually, by using a foreignization strategy, they were not translated.

Hispanic slang word or phrase	Translation in the film ⁴	Possible English equivalent	Possible Polish equivalent
ese, hombre, carnal, vato	ese, hombre, carnal, vato	homie, homeboy, fellow, dog, dawg dude, buddy	ziomek, ziomuś, kumpel, koleś
orale	orale	hell yeah, hell yes, aight, okay	wporzo, tak jest, ok, spoko, luz
mayate	mayate	nigga	czarnuch
clica	clica	clique, gang, crew, band	gang, szajka, ekipa
How you doin' on the tecato side?.	Walisz coś? (omitting)	druggie, dooper, BOOF, perma-fried	ćpun, narkus

Table 4. Hispanic slang words and phrases, their translation in the film *American Me* (1992) and their possible English and Polish equivalents.

⁴ Available on: <http://www.opensubtitles.org/pl/subtitles/4090189/american-me-pl> [ED: 03/2016]

Hispanic terms were usually left in their original form; sometimes they were omitted. It may be a suitable strategy, because it is possible to understand them from the context. On the other hand, replacing these words with the proposed Polish phrases would also be appropriate and it would not look artificial. The terms: *ese*, *hombre*, *carnal*, *vato* may be used interchangeably, so they have been grouped in one lot. In case of English, these given possible equivalents may vary depending on a race; white man prefer saying *dude*, whereas Afro-American would choose, for example: *dawg*. *Orale* has a lot of similar meanings, but they usually stand for informal confirmation, *mayate* is an offensive word used for Afro-Americans, literally meaning a *beetle*. *Clica* means people who act together, *tecato* is a word for a drug-addicted person.

From the research that has been carried out, it is possible to conclude that the translation of the English prison slang phrases in *American Me* (1992) contains plenty of Polish equivalents, but Spanish interjections are either omitted or retained in the original language. The most common are modulations, the least frequent are borrowings (Hispanic ones were not accommodated). As the film is an authentic story, prison slang in subtitles looks all the more credible, and it ought to be preserved.

2. Results of the Study

This study investigates the role of translation techniques in translating prison slang expressions that occur in films with subtitles. Based on those developed by Paul Vinay and Paul Darbelnet ([1958] 1995), dialog lists and the Polish translations of the three movies: *Lockdown* (2000), *American me* (1992), and *Animal Factory* (2000) have been examined. The most important research issues are: frequency of usage of a specific technique, as well as, an attempt to explain why the translator used it, whether he or she has done it properly, and how close to reality is the given choice.

The overall results show that the most common technique used by translators in prison slang movies is modulation, comprising 36% of the whole. It is a technique which may help to reduce the sentences in a limited time on the screen: thus it constitutes one-third of the seven techniques. The next in respect of occurrence is equivalence – 21%, which means that translators are trying to find the most relevant counterparts to the authentic prison slang expressions. The next technique is adaptation, comprising 19 %, which is used to translate phrases that do not have equivalents. This is common in the case of prison slang, since in these two far-distant, further hermetic cultures of convicts, there are many possible differences in language. Transpositions, which take up 10%, are also appropriate because changing word class may shorten the sentence or influence the better comprehension of the given prison slang word. The low frequency of literal translations, constituting 7%, may result from the fact that these sometimes made sentences look unnatural. Similarly, calques – 5%, which rarely occur in the case of prison slang, and finally, borrowings – 3%, since Polish convict slang is rather short on loan words.

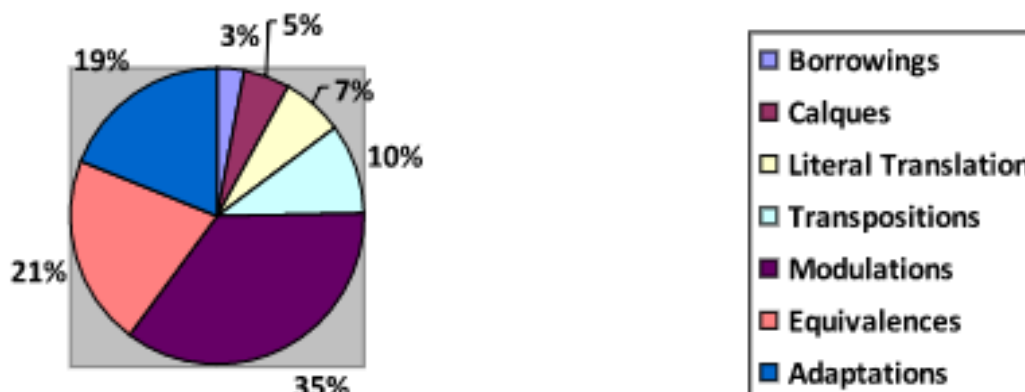


Figure 1.
Overall percentage of the Vinay and Darbelnet ([1958] 1995)
translation techniques occurring in films:
Lockdown (2000), *American Me* (1992) and *Animal Factory* (2000)

Based on the results, it can be concluded that the research into prison slang regarding the usage of translation techniques has been very successful. True-to-life films used in this sociolinguistic study turn out to be excellent research material that lead to satisfying results. Powered by them, one can go as far as to say that the most frequent technique used by prison slang translators in films constitutes modulation, but the least common are borrowings. It is not surprising, since the latter comprise only 2% of the modern American slang (Widawski, 2003, p. 154). Moreover, translators often try to find equivalents, or they adapt phrases when it is impossible to find counterparts. Nevertheless, this is only a subjective analysis, and using the respective techniques, might be interpreted differently.

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