"Soprano-Speak" in the French Dubbed Translation of *The Sopranos*

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ABSTRACT

One of the defining elements of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) is the distinctive language variety used by its characters. This article investigates the manifold changes that the variety undergoes in the French dubbed translation of the series. Non-standard language and profanity are found to be less frequent in the French version. The show's lexicon of Italian loanwords and derivations is all but eliminated and largely supplanted by French terms, thus conforming to Venuti's (1995) concept of domestication. Finally, the deliberate use of metaphorical language, which is integral to the series' themes of cultural insularity and *omertà*, is minimized in the translation. The paper concludes by arguing that this bias towards standardizing and clarifying the dialogue precludes the French audience from experiencing one of the series' greatest strengths: its ambiguity.

KEYWORDS: audiovisual translation; cultural transfer; domestication; levelling; explicitation

Introduction

The subject of cultural transfer is a continuing point of interest in the study of audiovisual translation (AVT). This area of research explores how culture-specific items, whether extralinguistic (intertextual references, brand names, nonverbal elements, etc.) or intralinguistic (accents, slang, etc.), can be rendered in languages other than that of the source text. A number of popular television programmes and films have been analyzed from this perspective, in some cases multiple times, as with *The Simpsons* (cf. Plourde 2000; Armstrong 2004; Dore 2009; Ferrari 2010; among others).

It is surprising that there is a relative paucity of such investigations of *The Sopranos*. The series, originally broadcast on HBO from 1999 to 2007, poses a significant challenge to translators in that they must adapt not only the representation of American culture, but also the distinctive language style used by the New Jerseyan, Italian-American and "mobbed-up" cast of

characters, which forms a substantial part of the show's cultural legacy. "You may be speaking Soprano – and not even know it", reads the opening line of a *North Jersey* article (Johnson 2019), which lists a number of terms popularized by the series, including "goomah", "marone", and "pasta fazool". The show itself depicts outsiders commenting on the speech patterns of the famous crime family, boiling it down to profanity – "He hangs around with Tony Soprano for fifteen minutes and it's *fuckin'* this and *fuckin'* that", as Jeannie Cusamano jokes in "A Hit is a Hit" (1.10).[1] One *New York Times* piece written at the height of *Sopranos*-mania describes a growing fanbase of New Jersey men attempting to emulate the main character simply by "kind of slur[ring] their words" (Purdy 2002). Finally, Douglas L Howard's 2002 study of what he terms 'Soprano-speak' reveals the importance of silence and ambiguity in the language of *The Sopranos*, showing that the uniqueness of the series' language goes well beyond vocabulary and phonology.

While Chiara Ferrari (2010) provides insight into the treatment of language in the Italian translation of the show, the French dubbed version, *Les Soprano*, has yet to be examined from this perspective. The French translation is of interest as it introduces a third culture – i.e., one that is neither American nor Italian – into the mix and shows how the idiom of the New Jerseyan mafia can be presented to a culture in which it has no functional equivalent. This paper will firstly offer some background into the discourse surrounding cultural transfer strategies in translation and specifically in AVT, as well as a survey of how these strategies are commonly used in the French context. It will then provide an overview of the sources and functions of the distinctive language style featured in *The Sopranos*, before turning its attention to how the French translation deals with the major hallmarks of "Soprano-speak" on phonological, lexical and pragmatic levels. Although a Francophone audience's experience of *The Sopranos* will never be exactly the same as that of an Anglophone audience, this paper will discuss the ways in which the choices of the French dubbing professionals have driven an unnecessarily large wedge between the two.

Cultural Transfer and AVT: Background

Lawrence Venuti's "foreignization vs. domestication" dichotomy is often at the centre of debates about cultural transfer in translation, although over time and through its application in

[1] Production codes for *The Sopranos* will be presented in the following format: Season Number.Episode Number. 1.10, for example, is the tenth episode of the first season.

narrower contexts (such as audiovisual translation), the terminology has been revised (see Nornes' [1999] "corrupt vs. abusive translation"; Pedersen's [2005] "source language-oriented vs. target language-oriented transfer strategies"). Furthermore, Nathalie Ramière (2006) argues that domestication and foreignization should not be thought of as a dichotomy but as opposing ends of a continuum, with specific approaches (such as transference, explanation, and cultural substitution) positioned at various points in between. However we choose to conceptualize the strategies, most theorists agree that what the translation of culture-specific items essentially involves is the negotiation between the Self (the target culture) and the Other (the source culture), which ultimately obliges the translator to pick one to favour. Venuti advocates strongly for foreignization, or the privileging of the source culture, describing its alternative as "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values" (1995:20). His opinion is echoed by others, including Abé Markus Nornes (1999), who recommends this strategy in the interest of promoting cross-cultural understanding. As Ramière puts it:

> The argument put forward by most scholars working in [the area of intercultural transfer] is that translators have at their disposal a whole range of strategies to translate cultural specificities and that the type of strategy used will impact on [target culture] perceptions of the [source culture] – preserving 'local colour', perpetrating (positive or negative) stereotypes, undermining or highlighting cultural specificities, possibly even creating cross-cultural misunderstanding – and therefore on the way a text or film is perceived in the foreign market. (2006:156-7)

The counterargument, especially where AVT is concerned, usually has to do with comprehensibility and/or marketability. Yves Gambier (2003:179) asserts that an audiovisual product must be "similar enough to what viewers are familiar with to retain their attention. In a way, the 'other' has to be sufficiently similar to us to be accepted." Candace Whitman-Linsen (1992:125) writes that professional translations of audiovisual content are often met with "either suggestions or outright orders from 'above' (distributor, dubbing studio, and the censorship agencies …) to alter 'foreign' elements and culturally unfamiliar items to make them more palatable and attractive (that is marketable) to the target language audience."[2] This

[2] For this reason, the present author acknowledges that translators cannot be considered solely responsible for the finished product, and will therefore refer to all parties involved in dubbing *The Sopranos* collectively as the "adaptors."

is observable in practice through the domesticating strategies that have been used to translate a number of American television series for European markets – as a rather extreme example, the Italian version of *The Nanny* erases the main character's Jewish identity and makes her Italian-American instead (Ferrari 2010). Martine Danan (1991:612) suggests that domesticating tactics prevail in formerly fascist European countries – namely Italy, Spain, and Germany – as a radically nationalistic culture "tends to be closed and reject or limit outside influences, since the home system is perceived as the embodiment of a firmly-established, superior tradition."

The Case of France

It has been noted that there is a prevailing trend of interference among French dubbing studios when it comes to translating American TV programmes (Goris 1993; Lebtahi 2004; Winckler 2012:67-86). Like Whitman-Linsen (1992), writer Martin Winckler attributes this to higher-ups within the networks who are not involved with the actual process of translation, but who nonetheless "*pensent qu'elles savent ce qui est bon pour le public*. [...] *Surtout, il ne faut pas qu'on affecte l'esprit de nos pauvres petits téléspectateurs avec un discours qui pourrait les faire peut-être réfléchir ou les choquer*" ("think that they know what is good for the audience. [...] Above all, we mustn't upset the mind of the poor little television viewer with the kind of talk that might make them think or shock them") (*Arrêt sur images* 2012; translation mine). This dogma is what he believes creates vast differences between the English and French dialogues in series like *Grey's Anatomy*; for example, a character nicknamed "The Nazi" in the original is renamed "*le tyran*" ("the tyrant") in the French dubbed version. A case study conducted by Yannicke Lebtahi (2004) supports this argument. Examining the French translations of three US sitcoms (*Mad About You, Friends,* and *Veronica's Closet*), she determines that there are a number of inexplicable discrepancies in the dubbed versions, including some that contradict the characterizations or the plot.

When it comes to culture-specific items, many find that French dubbing strategies tend overwhelmingly towards Venuti's notion of domestication. Lebtahi's (2004:403) study asserts that a number of the modifications made in translation are related to cultural markers, including references to brand names and American media. In her analysis of the treatment of cultural items like accent and slang in the French subtitled and dubbed translations of three English-language films, Zoë Pettit (2009:56) concludes that in the dubbed versions, "[t]here seems to

be a tendency to place the target text as close as possible to the target culture." Olivier Goris (1993:178) suggests that the paramount goal of dubbing studios is "to give the impression that the French translations are in fact originals", through the processes of "standardization" and "naturalization." His work reveals that non-standard speech in a source text – specifically when it is evocative of a regional dialect within the source culture – is often standardized (or made close to standard) by French dubbing professionals, even to the detriment of the translation. For instance, an exchange in the Dutch-language film *Hector* in which one character corrects another's use of dialectal Flemish is translated into French as though both characters were speaking the same language variety, rendering the finished product nonsensical (1993:177). Naturalization involves removing as many extralinguistic cultural specificities as possible; to this end, the French adaptors of *Hector* change the script by eliminating all references to the rivalry between Belgium and the Netherlands (*ibid.*).

Danan suggests that, like the former fascist nations, France tends towards standardization and naturalization due to its "strong nationalistic system" and its historical use of the standard language as an "instrument of political and cultural centralization" (1991:612). It is necessary to mention, however, that these strategies could equally be characterized as less time-consuming alternatives to finding a functional equivalent for a regional dialect or cultural marker in the source text. High pressure is often placed on dubbing studios to produce completed translations of television programmes within extremely short time frames, which "very often compels them to prioritize practical issues over quality, in terms of linguistic content or synchronization results" (Spiteri Miggiani 2019:14-5).

Although a major concern of this paper is the treatment of intralinguistic culture-bound references (namely dialect and slang) in *Les Soprano*, attention must also be paid to the kinds of modifications alluded to by Winckler (2012) and Lebtahi (2004), specifically the treatment of offensive language and the more general re-writing of dialogue, both of which impact the major hallmarks of 'Soprano-speak.' The aim is not to examine the possible effects of the translation strategies on the target culture's experience of the source culture (e.g., the perpetuation of stereotypes, etc.), but rather the target culture's experience of the show itself, as this paper argues that the phonological, lexical and pragmatic aspects of the specific language style featured in *The Sopranos* is a highly significant element of the series, contributing to its overall appeal.

"Soprano-Speak"

Sources

Sopranos creator David Chase writes:

> I grew up an Italian-American kid, first in Mount Vernon, New York, and later in North Caldwell, New Jersey (the same town where Tony Soprano lives). Over the years, I've picked up details about wiseguys – how they live and talk, what they value – from secondary sources. (2002:1)

Authenticity is important to the show's representation of New Jersey's criminal underworld. Casting choices allow for an accurate depiction of the speech of east-coast Italian-Americans, as the vast majority of the show's acting talent belongs to this demographic in real life.

Like perhaps every contemporary American mafia story (Messenger 2002:255), the series is heavily indebted to Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* films (1972-90). The writers of *The Sopranos* rely on the trilogy not only as a source of inspiration but also as a cultural benchmark that ensures the audience has an *a priori* understanding of how the mafia functions. As Horace Newcomb (2006:566) argues, "[...] *The Godfather* films clearly instruct viewers regarding the world of *The Sopranos*. We know about the organization hierarchies. We are familiar with some terminology." Indeed, many of the lexical items contextualized or outright defined in Coppola's films ("made man/guy", "*consigliere*", "*capo*", "sit-down") are used off-handedly throughout *The Sopranos* from the outset ("Your father, his younger brother, was a made guy before him" [1.01]).

Perhaps even more instrumental to *The Sopranos*' portrayal of the mob, however, is Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, which Chase once described as his "Koran" (quoted in Thorburn 2007:64). With its "staged documentary" style, the 1990 film sets itself in stark contrast to the "grand opera" of *The Godfather* (Larke-Walsh 2010:41), and its exaggerated characterizations and use of humour at times edge it closer in tone to the flurry of late-1990s mobster spoofs such as *Jane Austen's Mafia!* (1998) and *Analyze This* (1999) than to Coppola's epic, which "never takes itself as anything less than utterly seriously" (Messenger 2002:257). Set in the 1970s and '80s, *Goodfellas* depicts post-*Godfather* gangsters as wannabes, showing the machinations of the mafia through the eyes of Henry Hill, an outsider whose involvement with

organized crime is the result of aspiration rather than obligation. Karen, a Jewish woman roped into the underworld through her marriage to Henry, also acts as the audience's chaperone for a portion of the movie, and her voiceover narration is occasionally imbued with a satirical tone:

> The first time I was introduced to [Henry's family] all at once, it was crazy. Paulie and his brothers had lots of sons and nephews and almost all of them were named Peter or Paul. It was unbelievable. There must have been two dozen Peters and Pauls at the wedding. Plus, they were all married to girls named Marie, and they named all their daughters Marie. By the time I finished meeting everybody, I thought I was drunk.

The Sopranos, in many ways, constitutes an even more drastic departure from the sobriety of *The Godfather*, as it depicts turn-of-the-millennium mobsters clinging desperately to the memory of the halcyon days of Cosa Nostra (the Italian-American mafia; literally "Our Thing"). Nostalgia is a prominent theme throughout the series, made clear through the characters' idolatry of the *Godfather* trilogy. The characters use the films as cultural capital – quoting (and misquoting) lines, likening plot points to events in their own lives – to affirm an identity that has been eroded by the passage of time. As George Larke-Walsh (2010:42) argues, "the characters in *The Godfather* believe in themselves whereas most of those in *The Sopranos* and *Goodfellas* are playing out myths that no longer appear immutable." Their adulation of *The Godfather* often borders on parodic, perhaps the most comical example being Paulie's car horn, which blares a tinny, sped-up excerpt of Nino Rota's famous theme (1.11).

Functions

One major function of the linguistic style of *The Sopranos* is undoubtedly to exacerbate this parodic element. The high volume of Italianisms used by the cast are a source of irony, as they signal their loosening grasp on their ethnic identity. This notion comes to the forefront in 'Commendatori' (2.04), when Tony, Christopher and Paulie visit Naples, only to find themselves alienated in their supposed homeland – particularly Paulie, for whom language is a major source of pride, yet whose attempts to communicate with the locals are dazzling failures. Over dinner, his hosts joke in Italian about his poor taste, while Paulie nods along obliviously.

There is also humour to be found in the heavy and often innovative use of profanity throughout the series, as in this piece of film criticism from character Christopher Moltisanti: "That's the one beef I had with *Swingers*. You guys patterned yourselves after Frank and Dean, but there was like, uh, a *pussy-ass*-ness to it." (2.07) The copious use of profanity could be said to edge the series further away from Coppola's tragedies and closer to Scorsese's comedies – as Ilaria Parini (2014:147) points out, *The Godfather Part III* features only 21 swearwords, versus *Goodfellas'* 371 and *Casino*'s 528.

With that being said, *The Sopranos* is not primarily a comedy, and language can be one of its greatest assets for achieving verisimilitude. Jerry Capeci, a journalist specializing in gangland crime in America, comments that the series' mobsters, "while conducting their criminal business and in dealings with their relatives and 'comares,' have a real feel to them. [...] The dialogue rings true" (quoted in Murphy 2006). When asked to pinpoint the most accurate aspect of the show, Capeci answers, "the profanity" (*ibid.*). The ubiquity of obscure Italian borrowings and their even more obscure American derivations ("maloik", "scarole", and "ditsoon" being notable examples) exhibits meticulous attention to detail, as does the casting directors' commitment to hiring almost exclusively New Jerseyans who can speak with an authentic local accent.

Howard (2002) discusses the value of what is left unsaid or expressed euphemistically in *The Sopranos*. Ambiguity is a crucial element in the series – culminating with the controversially enigmatic series finale – and the deliberately vague use of language is another integral factor in achieving authenticity. Tony is cryptic in conversation not only with his therapist, Dr Jennifer Melfi (both of them acutely aware that if he admits to committing a crime, she is legally obliged to alert the authorities), but also with his associates, in the knowledge that any room he enters, or any phone line he uses, could be bugged by the FBI. *Omertà*, the code of silence, makes "ratting" one of the most egregious offenses within the mafia, as exemplified in the show by the executions of several characters once they are discovered to be informing for the government. This compels the criminals and their loved ones to be extremely prudent with their use of language; it is for this reason that we constantly hear Tony and his associates refer to "our friend" in place of specific names, and use the phrase "Do what you gotta do" as the standard method of signing off on an assassination.

Italian loanwords also occasionally form a code of a different variety, enforcing a sense of camaraderie between those who can understand them, as in Tony's response when Melfi asks him why he chose a female psychiatrist: "Cusamano gave me a choice between two Jewish guys and a paisan like me, so I picked the paisan" (1.06). Here, "paisan" (from the Italian "*compaesano*", "countryman") serves as a shibboleth (a culture-specific word generally only used and understood by members of the in-group) with which his Italian-American interlocutor is familiar, thus complementing his statement about his own cultural insularity. The various distinctive facets of 'Soprano-speak', then, not only provide humour and lend credence to its setting in the world of the modern-day mafia, but are used to reinforce major themes like *omertà* and ethnic identity.

The Sopranos Go to France

Les Soprano, the French dubbed version of the series, was first broadcast in 1999 on the television channel Canal Jimmy (Loulendo & Foubert 2017:i), and was subsequently moved to France 2. The translation and dubbing were carried out by SOFI (*Société de la sonorisation des films,* Society for Adding Soundtracks to Films). The main French cast includes Érik Colin (Tony), Dominique Dumont (Carmela), Marie-Christine Darah (Dr. Melfi), Lionel Melet (Christopher), Hervé Jolly (Paulie), Francois Leccia (Silvio), and Francette Vernillat (Livia).

This study looks at a sample of episodes in their English- and French-language versions. Both the original audio and the translation, accessible on *The Sopranos: The Complete Series* DVD box set, were analysed. The episodes chosen span all six seasons and contain significant examples of the various aspects of 'Soprano-speak' outlined above (profanity, Italianisms, and circumlocutions). Although the limited scope of this analysis does not allow us to make any definitive comments regarding the French translation overall, the sample size is large enough to give us a sense of the trends as regards the treatment of 'Soprano-speak' in the dubbed version. A list of all episodes studied is included in the appendix.

This paper will divide the analysis into four sections, each dealing with a different linguistic aspect of the original series and its translation: non-standard New Jersey English; Italianisms; profanity and slurs; and the use of coded language.

Garden State English into Garden-Variety French

With few exceptions, the cast of *The Sopranos* speak with a northeastern New Jersey accent, which shares many of its defining characteristics with New York City English, including non-rhoticity (/r/-dropping in words like "there" and "card") and the gliding /o/ (such that the vowel in "dog" becomes diphthongized as [dɔəg]) (Labov et al. 2006:234-6). Members of the older generation, like Tony's mother, retain more extreme features of 'Brooklynese', such as the "curl—coil" merger (Labov 1966:213). Some morphosyntactic features of their dialect include the elision of words and the double negative: "Tony wouldn'a never known 'im if it wasn't for me" (1.08). The characters' speech patterns are not only evocative of the east coast of the USA but also of their ethnicity; it is what James Pasto (2019:89-90) terms "Goombish", a koine derived from the "Italo-English" spoken by the characters' immigrant parents and grandparents. As the work of Ilaria Parini (2013; 2014; 2017) demonstrates, this ethnolect is so recognizable that it is frequently used in Hollywood films to mark characters as Italian-American or specifically as *mafiosi*, without making any explicit reference to these facets of their identity.

Dialect is considered by many theorists to be one element of language that is untranslatable (Brodovich 1997:25; Rittmayer 2009). Convention dictates that non-standard speech is most often neutralized in audiovisual translation – as Georg-Michael Luyken (1991:163) writes, "The fact that everybody speaks the standard language is in itself a strange feature of dubbed films but it is unavoidable, it seems." Many Italian translations of American audiovisual products present notable exceptions to this. Fabio Rossi (2006), Delia Chiaro (2009), Parini (2013; 2014), and others have written about a number of American films whose Italian versions adapt New York and New Jersey accents into the Sicilian regiolect, as a nod to these accents' shared connotations of the mafia. As for *The Sopranos*, the characters' southern Italian heritage (made explicit, for example, through Tony's pride in his family connection to the town of Avellino, near Naples) justifies the use of the Neapolitan regiolect in the Italian translation, particularly among the elderly characters (Ferrari 2010:109).

The French dubbed version, however, is deprived of the same opportunity for cultural transplantation. The principal voice actors speak with the Parisian accent that is a mainstay of French television (Goris 1993). This is not to say that they speak the language of the French Academy, however – there are regular deviations from standard French, as in:

	Source text (ST)	**Target text (TT)**	**Back translation (BT)**
Tony	The fuck is wrong with you?	Putain, mais qu'est-ce que **t'as** ?	What the fuck's the matter with you?
Christopher	Nothin'.	Moi ? Rien.	Me? Nothing.
Tony	Don't lie to me. You're high.	Ne baratine pas. **T'es** raide.	Don't give me the spiel. You're high.
Christopher	I smoked half a joint before you called. I'm fine.	J'ai fumé un reste de pétard avant que **t'appelles** mais tout baigne.	I smoked the end of a joint before you called but it's all good.

(4.09)

The characters demonstrate a rich vocabulary of slang terms and phrases, such as "*raide*" ("high"), "*pétard*" ("joint"), and "*tout baigne*" ("it's all good"). Additionally, the elision of the "*ne*" particle (as before *appelles*) and contractions like "*t'es*" and "*t'as*" are considered informal and non-standard. In her monograph on social variation in French, however, Françoise Gadet states that *ne*-elision is "*tellement fréquente à l'oral qu'elle n'est plus sentie comme stigmatisante*" ("so frequent in speech that it is no longer felt to be stigmatizing") (2007:66, translation mine). According to Goris, *ne*-elision and contractions are among the only syntactic features used by French adaptors in general to characterize dialogue as non-standard, despite not being "considered ungrammatical or even specifically oral anymore" (1993:174).

Moreover, choices like these do not give the audience any indication of the specific regional connotations carried by the characters' accents in the original version. Slang, *ne*-elision, and contractions are also used by French adaptors to translate African-American Vernacular English, for example (Mével 2011). The voice actors' speech in *Les Soprano* largely resembles the "supralocal" variety of French described by Armstrong and Boughton (2009:10), which they argue has come into existence by a process known as levelling. Other studies have found that the use of this supralocal variety has removed all traces of regional variation in characters' dialects in the French translations of other films and series, such as *The Simpsons* (Plourde 2000; Armstrong 2004).

As discussed above, the standardization of ethnolects and dialects in translation may be due to ideology, or simply used as a time-saving strategy. Additionally, in the case of *The Sopranos*, it can be considered necessary in the interest of coherence, as Francophone audiences would

likely struggle to understand the French dialogue if it were delivered in a New Jersey drawl. On the other hand, their Italian identity could feasibly be captured through accent, as is the case in the French dubbed version of Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973), which sees David Proval's character speaking with an Italian accent that is not present in the source text. However, such a choice implies that the character was born and bred in Italy, which is evidently not the case for the vast majority of *The Sopranos*' cast. All in all, the French adaptors appear to be following a precedent set by the dubbed versions of *Goodfellas* and *The Godfather,* in which the dubbed dialogue is clearly non-standard but again devoid of any region-specific features. There are other means by which the French script can capture the characters' Italian heritage – namely their lexicon.

Linguistic Artefacts from the Old Country

One would be hard-pressed to find an episode of *The Sopranos* without at least a passing reference to Italian cuisine or the interjection "Oh, Madon'!" What makes the language of the series particularly interesting is that most linguistic artefacts from the old country are not exact borrowings from standard Italian; instead, they are forms taken from southern varieties that have been adapted over time. Common innovations are the voicing of voiceless consonants, the dropping of final vowels, and the use of the vowel [u] in place of [ɔ], which give us, for example, "rigot" for ricotta, "moozadell" for mozzarella, and "gabagool" for capocollo sausage (Pasto 2019:91). Some words have also undergone a semantic shift, such as "*comare*" ("godmother"), which becomes "goumad" ("mistress"). Certain characters pepper their speech with truncated or otherwise modified versions of Italian phrases ("*Che puzz'*!", "What a stink!"; "*State zit'*!", "Be quiet!").

In the episodes studied, the adaptors' approach to the code-switching and borrowings varies widely. Firstly, they tend not to alter any lines delivered entirely in Italian. This mainly concerns the dialogue of the Neapolitan character Furio, who frequently speaks in his mother tongue, as well as other Italian-born characters like Isabella (1.12) and Annabella Zucca (2.04), whose speech is peppered with expressions like "*Come se dice* …?" ("How do you say …?"), in both the dubbed and original versions. But there are also some New Jerseyans who enjoy showing off their (limited) bilingualism. In 'The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti' (1.08), Tony taunts an Italian-American FBI agent with the sentence "*Ti faccio un culo così*" ("I'll kick your ass"), which remains unchanged in the French translation. Junior's exclamation "*Trippa di zia*"

("Your aunt's tripe", "bullshit") is likewise retained in the French (6.21). However, there are some discrepancies. Paulie's "*Che puzz'!*" (3.13) is rendered as the French "*Quelle puanteur !*" ("What a stink!"). In 'Johnny Cakes' (6.08), Tony asks Mrs Conti "*Come stai?*" ("How are you?"), which is changed to its French equivalent, "*Comment ça va ?*" Similarly but more bizarrely, the same question is translated into Spanish ("*¿Como está?*") in 1.08.

Matters become more complicated when it comes to the Italian words that have entered the characters' everyday vocabulary and occur amidst English words. Perhaps the most notable of these are the names of food items. In general, these stay the same in the French, although the names of more obscure dishes may be modified.

	ST	**TT**	**BT**
Janice	**Bolognese** has meat, obviously. The **marinara** doesn't. And Barb will be here with the **chicken parm'** and the **veal pizzaiol'**.	La **bolognaise**, c'est à la viande, et la **marinara**, c'est au poisson, comme vous savez. Barbara arrive avec le **poulet mariné** et le **veau à la sicilienne**.	The **bolognese** has meat and the **marinara** has fish, as you know. Barbara is coming with the **marinated chicken** and the **Sicilian veal**.

(5.03)

As seen above with "parm'" (from "*parmigiana*") and "pizzaiol'" (from "*pizzaiola*"), shortened variants of Italian words can be omitted in the French dub, supposedly as the truncation would be unfamiliar to a Francophone viewer. In some cases, the altered version reverts to its standard Italian form, as in the translation of Paulie's reference to "Pizza, calzon', buffalo moozadell, olive oil" (1.02), which is rendered as "*La pizza, le calzone, la mozzarella, l'huile d'olive*" ("Pizza, calzone, mozzarella, olive oil").

Italian food-related terms are largely eliminated when they are used metaphorically. In 'The Happy Wanderer' (2.06), Paulie points his pistol at a friend's crotch and says "It's going in your *braciola*", using the Italian word for pork chop as a slang term for the penis. In French, this becomes "*Je vise la braguette*" ("I'm aiming for your fly"). Later on in the same episode, Tony uses the phrase "five boxes of ziti" (a pasta variety) interchangeably with "five grand"; this is translated plainly as "*cinq mille*" ("five thousand"). Johnny Sack provides one particularly complex circumlocution after he hears that Paulie has been bad-mouthing Tony to his uncle: "What are you making, minest'?" (3.13) Here Johnny is perhaps implying that Paulie

is adding to his own woes the same way one continuously adds ingredients to minestrone soup, or "stirring the pot". The adaptors sidestep the challenge of making the phrase work in French by simply rendering Johnny's remark as "*Qu'est-ce que t'as foutu, la merde ?*" ("What the fuck have you done?")

Beyond food, other Italian borrowings seem to be used on an *ad hoc* basis. "*Capo*", a term for a middle-ranking member of the mafia, is left unchanged in the French translations of 1.11, 1.12, 5.03, and 6.08. "*Consigliere*", which refers to the boss's advisor, is also retained in the French version of 4.03, but translated as "*éminence grise*" in 5.01 and "*conseiller*" ("advisor") in 5.03. The word "*disgraziato/a*" ("good-for-nothing") is translated as "*malédiction*" ("curse") in 2.12, but left as-is in 3.06. The exclamation "Madon'!" (from "Madonna") is preserved in the translations of 2.12, 3.13, and 4.09, but omitted in those of 1.11, 2.03, and 6.03. Other Italian-derived words – mainly those which have been significantly altered in New Jersey English – are avoided completely in the French dub. "Goumad" is usually rendered as "*poule*" ("girlfriend", as in 1.08), "*maîtresse*" ("mistress", as in 5.07) or "*gonzesse*" ("chick", as in 5.09). "Maloik" (from "*malocchio*", "evil eye" or "hex") becomes "*la poisse*" ("bad luck") in 1.11, while the sentence "Don't give me the maloik" is translated as "*Ne me prend pas pour un cave*"[3] ("Don't take me for a sucker") in 3.03. Other words and phrases like "*state zit*'" ("be quiet"; 3.12) and "goombah" ("member of a criminal gang", from "*compare*"; 3.12 and 4.13) are also omitted in the French. Overall, although some attempt has been made to capture the Italian influence in the French translation, it is clear that the dubbed version mostly tends towards domestication, privileging the fluidity of the target text over fidelity to the source.

Profanity and Slurs

As some of the above examples have shown, profanity is nothing short of ubiquitous in *The Sopranos*, especially (though not exclusively) in the language of the male characters. Amelia Burns (2016:91-2) writes that profane language is a "demonstration of virility" in the series; indeed, many arguments between crew members exemplify how swearing equates to peacocking. One rant from Silvio Dante, given below, exemplifies this. Silvio's French counterpart delivers the tirade at the same volume and with the same vitriol, but the vocabulary has been rendered noticeably more polite:

[3] Curiously, the slang term "*cave*" ("sucker") is primarily a Québécois term, despite the French dialogue being delivered in a Parisian accent.

	ST	**TT**	**BT**
Silvio	Leave the **fuckin'** cheese there. Alright? I love **fuckin'** cheese at my feet. I stick **motherfuckin'** provolone in my socks at night so they smell like your sister's crotch in the morning. Alright? So leave the **fuckin' cocksuckin'** cheese where it is!	Ce fromage est très bien là où il est, compris ? J'adore piétiner le fromage. Je me colle une tranche de provolone dans mes chaussettes le soir, comme ça le matin ça pue comme la culotte de ta soeur. Pigé ? Alors tu vas me faire le plaisir de laisser ce fromage là où il est !	The cheese is fine where it is, understand? I love standing on cheese. I stick a slice of provolone in my socks at night, so that in the morning it smells like your sister's panties. Get it? So you're going to do me the favour of leaving the cheese where it is!

(2.06)

This is not to say that *Les Soprano* is devoid of profanity – French swear words were heard in every episode studied. Nevertheless, there is a noticeable effort to soften the language where possible. Consider this exchange and its translation:

	ST	**TT**	**BT**
Christopher	**Fuck** you.	Va **chier**.	**Fuck** off.
Paulie	Excuse me?	Excuse-moi ?	Excuse me?
Christopher	You **fuckin'** heard me.	T'as très bien entendu, Paulie.	You heard me, Paulie.
Paulie	I'm telling you, Chrissy. I don't give a **fuck** anymore who you're related to.	Je te préviens, Christopher, fais attention. Je me **fous** de qui tu es le neveu.	I'm warning you, Christopher, be careful. I don't give a **shit** whose nephew you are.
Christopher	Go ahead, Paulie. Go for it. Your big **fuckin'** moment.	Eh bah vas-y, Paulie, t'as qu'à m'buter. T'as envie de me buter depuis tellement longtemps.	Go ahead, Paulie, you can clip me. You've been wanting to clip me for so long.
Paulie	You little **fuck**.	Espèce de p'tit **con**.	You little **asshole**.

(5.01)

Although the men's speech is profane in both versions, the original script clearly eclipses the translation, featuring the word "fuck" or a derivative of it in almost every line. Maurice Yacowar observes that profanity in *The Sopranos* "provides an authenticity that any Bowdlerizing would destroy." (2002:173) It may be argued that these liberties are taken in order to match the American actors' lip movements to the voices of the French performers, which seems to be the reasoning behind the translation of AJ Soprano's "Holy shit" as "*Oh, la chiote*" (literally "Oh, the crapper") in 2.07. However, this point becomes moot in the case of Silvio's outburst in 2.06, much of which is shot from behind the actor's back, giving the audience a view of Matthew Bevilacqua's bewildered reaction. These shots would have surely provided the adaptors with ample time to sneak in a "*putain*" ("fuck") or two, in order to reflect the level of outrage signalled by Silvio's "fuckin' cocksuckin' cheese."

Raphaël Garrigos and Isabelle Roberts (2003) note that translated programmes broadcast on the network France 2 often fall victim to censorship like this, supposedly so that series like *Friends* can be shown during the afternoon without receiving complaints from parents over the bawdy jokes. With *The Sopranos*, however, the authors are less certain of the motivation: "*les dialogues français* [*des* Soprano] *adoucissent la version originale, très dure. Et ceci alors que France 2 diffuse la série à une heure du mat*" ("the French dialogues [of *The Sopranos*] soften the very rough original version. And this despite the fact that France 2 broadcasts the series at one o'clock in the morning") (translation mine). The answer may lie in the simple fact that France 2 is a state-owned channel – unlike HBO, a premium network – and therefore more vulnerable to criticism from the public. A failure to recognize this distinction is what Dawn Johnson (2002:33) suggests caused the backlash against the programme in Canada, where the unedited English-language version was shown on a public channel.

This approach to profanity is not exclusive to French dubbing studios – Parini (2014:156) notes that taboo language is often significantly toned down in the Italian translations of American gangster films. She suspects this to be the result of an overall tendency towards self-censorship among the translators and adaptors. This, too, may explain the less vulgar substitutions used in the French translation of *The Sopranos*.

This argument breaks down, however, when we turn our attention to the translation of Italian-derived obscenities. These words, so prevalent in the original script, are all but eradicated from the French dub, and often replaced with equally offensive terms. As an example, let us examine

a scene from 'Proshai, Livushka', in which Tony meets his daughter's mixed-race boyfriend Noah for the first time and begins quizzing him about his ethnic background.

	ST	**TT**	**BT**
Tony	So what did you check [on your application to Columbia University]?	Alors, t'as coché quoi [le jour de l'inscription à la fac Columbia] ?	So what did you check [the day you enrolled at Columbia University]?
Noah	African-American.	Afro-Américain.	African-American.
Tony	So we do understand each other. You're a ... **ditsoon.**	Donc apparemment on est d'accord tous les deux. T'es un ... **négro.**	So apparently we both agree. You're a … **negro.**
Noah	Excuse me?	Excusez-moi ?	Excuse me?
Tony	A charcoal briquette. A **mulignan**.	Une espèce de métèque. Un **moricaud**.	A coloured person. A **darkie**.

(3.02)

The original script makes use of the racial slurs "ditsoon" (from "*tizzone*", Italian for "ember") and "mulignan" (from "*melanzana*", Italian for "aubergine") (Edgerton 2013:33). The French dubbed version discards these in favour of "*négro*" and "*moricaud*", which are far more familiar to Francophones, yet no less offensive. Similarly, Carmela's use of the word "fanook" (a homophobic epithet from the Italian "*finocchio*", meaning "fennel" [Burns 2016:107]) is replaced with *"tante*" ("queer") (6.06). Even fairly mild insults are not safe from this domesticating tactic: for instance, Richie Aprile's use of the word "chooch" (from "*ciuccio"*, meaning "dummy" [Kemmer 2008]) is translated as "*mariol*" ("idiot") (2.06). It is clear, then, that for the French adaptors, it is not necessarily the vulgarity of these words that pose problems, but the fact that they are Italian.

As before, the motivation behind these liberties in translation would appear to be clarity. However, the same approach is taken even when the slur is outright defined for the audience. An especially pertinent example of this can be found in 'D-Girl' (2.07). In the episode, Christopher visits the set of a film produced by Jon Favreau and starring Janeane Garafolo (both of whom appear in cameo roles). Garofalo interrupts the shoot to complain about the

blandness of the script, specifically the use of the word "bitch", and Christopher, watching from a distance, proffers a suggestion.

	ST	**TT**	**BT**
Garofalo	I mean, is there anything other than 'bitch'?	Elle ne peut pas me dire autre chose que « pétasse » ?	She can't call me something other than 'bitch'?
Christopher	**Puchiacc'.**	**Marrana.**	**Marrana.**
Director	What?	Quoi ?	What?
Christopher	Let that one call that one **puchiacc'**.	Il faut que cette fille, elle traite celle-ci de **marrana**.	That girl should call that one **marrana**.
Garofalo	That sounds more interesting.	Je trouve ça plus intéressant.	I think that's more interesting.
Director	Uh … **puc** … what?	Ah … **marr** … quoi ?	Ah … **marr** … what?
Christopher	**Puchiacc'**. If she's from **Brooklyn** …	**Marrana** ! Elle vient de la **banlieue Chicanos**.	Marrana! She comes from the **Chicanos' neighbourhood**.
Garofalo	That sounds okay.	Ouais, ça me paraît aller.	Yeah, I think that'll work.
Favreau	Okay, let's roll. What does it mean?	Bon, alors, regarde. Et ça veut dire quoi ?	Good, well, look. And what does it mean?
Christopher	'Cunt.'	« Salope. »	'Slut.'

Christopher's knowledge of obscure slang sparks Favreau's interest in him as a screenwriter for a gangster movie he wants to direct. In the original version, it is no accident that the word (a truncated variant of "*pucchiacca*", a Neapolitan word for female genitalia [De Stefano 2006:332]) is Italian; as the plot will later reveal, it is Favreau's stereotyped perception of Italian-Americans that draws him to Christopher. In *Les Soprano,* the Italian word is replaced with a Spanish term, "*marrana*", and the reference to Brooklyn is replaced with a reference to Chicanos, a Mexican-American subculture. This pointless discrepancy cannot be dismissed as a choice made in the interest of comprehensibility (as Christopher promptly explains the word's meaning), and therefore signals a disregard for the cultural implications of certain linguistic features, if not an outright aversion to Italian borrowings.

Codes, Ambiguity and Omertà

As previously stated, language in *The Sopranos* is often employed to create codes that include some characters (e.g., fellow Italian-Americans, criminals) and exclude others (e.g. non-Italians, law enforcement). We have seen how Tony uses the term "paisan" to establish an understanding between himself and his psychiatrist about their shared heritage. In the French translation, this word is omitted:

	ST	**TT**	**BT**
Tony	Cusamano gave me a choice between two Jewish guys and a **paisan** like me, so I picked the **paisan**.	On m'a donné à choisir entre deux noms, un juif et un **italien** comme moi. J'ai choisi **italien**.	I was given a choice between two names, a Jewish one and an **Italian** one like me. I chose **Italian**.

(1.06)

Though it is often hard to pinpoint exactly why some Italianisms are left out in the French, here perhaps the justification is the resemblance between "paisan" and "*paysan*" (French for "farmer" or "yokel"). Francophone audiences may have been left confused by the use of this false friend, which is likely why the adaptors opted instead for the explanatory "*italien*." The translation of Italianisms into more common, less ambiguous terms can be considered as examples of "explicitation", which Goris describes as a trend in French AVT overall. In his case study, he notes that "many equivocal or vague expressions have become clearer or more precise in the dubbed versions" (1993:183). Shoshana Blum-Kulka (1986) suggests that explicitation is a common if not unavoidable feature of translated texts in general, though Goris (1993:185) points out that, of all the translated films in his study, "explicitation occurs most frequently in the versions which also present a high degree of socio-cultural adaptation."

Another example of explicitation in *Les Soprano* can be found in the translation of "medigan." "Medigan" is a derogatory term used to denote any American without Italian roots, deriving from a pun on the Italian words "*Americani*" and "*merda di cane*" ("dog shit") (Cieri 1986, quoted in Pasto 2019:91). It carries historical connotations, representing the privileged communities that have placed Italian-Americans at an economic and social disadvantage since their arrival in the New World, as explained by Tony:

> They needed us to build their cities and dig their subways and to make them richer. The Carnegies and the Rockefellers. They needed worker bees and there we were. But some of us didn't want to swarm around their hive and lose who we were. [...] Now we weren't educated like the Americans. But we had the balls to take what we wanted. And those other fucks, those other – the JP Morgans, they were crooks and killers, too. But that was business, right? The American way. (2.09)

The names cited here (Carnegie, Rockefeller and JP Morgan) suggest that Tony's definition of "American" is narrower than mere nationality. It refers to rich, powerful WASPs with a long-standing presence in the US. In "A Hit is A Hit", however, Tony calls a fellow Italian-American – his clean-cut neighbour Dr Cusamano – a "medigan", implying that his conception of an American is purely a socio-economic one.

	ST	**TT**	**BT**
Tony	Guys like me, we're brought up to think that **medigan** are fuckin' bores. Truth is the average white man is no more boring than the millionth conversation over who should have won, Marciano or Ali.	Les types comme moi, on trouve les conversations des **gens distingués** ennuyeuses. Faut savoir que l'homme blanc moyen a souvent un discours qui manque autant d'intérêt qu'une discussion sur le combat Marciano contre Ali.	Guys like me, we find **refined people**'s conversations boring. You should know that the average white man often has a way of speaking that is as uninteresting as a conversation about the Marciano-Ali fight.
Melfi	So am I to understand that you don't consider yourself white?	Dois-je comprendre, est-ce que j'entends que vous ne vous considérez pas comme blanc ?	Am I to understand, do I hear that you don't consider yourself white?
Tony	I don't mean 'white' like 'Caucasian.' I mean a white man like our friend Cusamano. Now, he's Italian, but **he's a medigan**.	Non, quand je dis « blanc » je veux pas dire « des types caucasiens. » Je parle de « blanc » comme notre ami Cusamano. Il est italien, mais **il est parvenu à s'intégrer**.	No, when I say 'white' I don't mean 'Caucasian guys'. I'm talking about 'white' like our friend Cusamano. He's Italian, but **he's managed to integrate**.

(1.10)

The Italianism has disappeared from the translation, glossed firstly as "refined people" and then as those who have "managed to integrate". Once again, by elaborating on the term rather than preserving it, the French dubbed version has failed to capture the cultural connotations and coded nature of Tony's lexicon.

In other words, the French translation has traded subtlety for clarity. We have certainly seen this before: Christopher's taunt "your big fuckin' moment" becomes an outright incitement for Paulie to kill him. The metaphorical quality of Johnny Sack's "what are you making, minest'?" is lost. These liberal renderings veil an extremely important aspect of the language of *The Sopranos*. Ambiguity in conversation not only complements the clandestine nature of the characters' work but also drives conflict, heightens tension, and overall, makes speech more interesting. In his study of language use in the series, Michael E Gettings (2012:161) points to one particular remark said by Junior that exemplifies this deliberately vague use of language: "Out. And next time you come in, you come heavy or not at all" (1.04). Gettings then attempts to "translate" Junior's dialogue into more explicit terms, which gives us: "I order you to leave, and if you return, come armed." As he comments, this version "lacks the punch" of the original script, yet this is very close to how the French translation renders it: "*Dégage. La prochaine fois que tu viens ici, viens armé ou reste chez toi*." ("Get out. The next time you come here, come armed or stay at home.") The translation has done more than simply put Junior's words into French – it has turned this veteran mobster's doublespeak into a weak and clumsily explicit threat.

Perhaps the most revelatory example of this comes from the series' final episode (6.21), in which Tony visits his now-senile uncle in a retirement home and attempts to jog his memory about his criminal past. Mentioning his financial affairs and specific people gets Tony nowhere, but, as a testament to the evocative power of ambiguous language for the Sopranos, it is the four simple words "this thing of ours" that trigger a moment of lucidity for Junior (who then asks, "I was involved with that?"). In the French version, Tony says, "*Les caïds de Jersey. Ça te dit quelque chose ?*" ("The Jersey bosses. Does that mean anything to you?") Not only is the allusion to the deliberately vague sobriquet "Cosa Nostra" lost, the adaptors have decided to clarify Tony's dialogue even further by having him add "Does that mean anything to you?", a line completely absent from the original.

One has to wonder if the explicitating approach to the dialogue – which can also be understood to include the domesticating treatment of Italianisms – is really necessary. It is clear that rendering "medigan" as "*gens distingués*" and "fanook" as "*tante*" makes the material more comprehensible to a French-speaking audience, but does it give them an experience of the series that is in any way similar to that of an Anglophone viewer? Johnson (2002) and Joanne Lacey (2002) write of *The Sopranos'* success in Canada and the United Kingdom, respectively – are we to believe that viewers from these regions are any more familiar with terms like "chooch" than a Francophone would be? Surely not. Even some Americans – namely those who are not from New York or New Jersey – are bound to perceive these terms as exotic. To return to the aforementioned scene between Tony and Meadow's boyfriend, though a majority of Anglophones may not know the exact meaning of "ditsoon" or "mulignan", Noah's indignant reaction to hearing them is enough context for us to be able to take an educated guess. Why should we expect any different from French viewers?

Conclusion

Throughout its run, *The Sopranos* was lauded for its challenging nature. One HBO promo advertised it as "television for adults" (Johnson 2002:32). In 1999, before the show's first season had concluded, a *New Yorker* reviewer wrote that it "gives you something – almost too many things – to think about. There has certainly never been anything like it on TV" (Franklin 1999). Language is just one of many of the show's elements that solidifies this, but it is certainly a significant one. It acts as a preventative measure to outsiders' comprehension, whether an eavesdropping FBI or a "medigan". The viewer is placed at a half-way point between the inner circle and the out-group, and, grappling with a distinctive accent, obscure Italian-derived lexical items, and deliberately vague metaphors, must always work to stay in the loop. The series may be demanding to watch, but this has never seemed like much of a deterrent for most audiences, as proven by its enduring popularity.

The practice of domesticating and explicitating dialogue is, in essence, a move to make the source material more accessible to the target audience, which is in conflict with the purpose of the original script. To return to Winckler's assessment of French dubbing conventions:

> *C'est la mentalité des chaînes qui disent, « Non, ces dialogues, ça va pas pour la France. Il faut qu'on le change. » Moi, j'ai vu par exemple doubler des épisodes*

> *inédits de* La Loi de Los Angeles*, et j'ai vu de mes yeux vus les doubleurs changer les dialogues parce que les dialogues ne leur plaisaient pas. Ils ne cherchaient pas à rendre les dialogues plus fluides en gardant le sens. Non – ils disent, « Ce qu'ils disent, c'est ridicule. On va le changer. »*
>
> That's the mentality of the networks, who say, 'No, this dialogue doesn't work for France. We have to change it.' For example, I saw an unedited episode of *L.A. Law* being dubbed, and I saw with my own eyes the dubbers changing the dialogue because they didn't like it. They weren't trying to make the dialogue more fluid while keeping the meaning. No – they said, 'What they're saying here is silly. We're going to change it.' (*Arrêt sur Images* 2012; translation mine)

In his book *Petit éloge des séries télé,* Winckler calls the French dubbed version of *The Sopranos* "*ridicule*" ("ridiculous") (2012:74; translation mine); though he does not elaborate on this evaluation, in light of his comments about the French dubbing industry, as well as the findings of this paper, it is not difficult to imagine why he may have described it this way. The adaptors have demonstrated a lack of appreciation for – if not an aversion to – the coded nature of the show's linguistic style, explaining circumlocutions and tending towards Venuti's notion of domestication rather than foreignization. This investigation has determined that at certain points, a more faithful approach would have served the source text better than the style of translation that was actually used. By failing to capture the ambiguity of the original script, the French dubbed version fails to replicate the very essence of 'Soprano-speak', underestimates its audience's intelligence, and, to a degree, assimilates *The Sopranos* with so many other shows to which it is, in reality, incomparable.

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Appendix

Episodes studied

Episode Number	**Name (in English)**
Season 1	
1.02	'46 Long'
1.04	'Meadowlands'
1.06	'Pax Soprana'
1.08	'The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti'
1.10	'A Hit is a Hit'
1.11	'Nobody Knows Anything'
1.12	'Isabella'
Season 2	
2.04	'Commendatori'
2.06	'The Happy Wanderer'
2.07	'D-Girl'
2.12	'The Knight in White Satin Armor'
Season 3	
3.02	'Proshai, Livushka'
3.03	'Fortunate Son'
3.06	'University'
3.11	'Pine Barrens'
3.12	'Amour Fou'
3.13	'Army of One'
Episode Number	**Name (in English)**
Season 4	
4.03	'Christopher'
4.09	'Whoever Did This'
4.13	'Whitecaps'
Season 5	
5.01	'Two Tonys'
5.03	'Where's Johnny?'
5.07	'In Camelot'
5.09	'Unidentified Black Males'
Season 6	
6.03	'Mayham'
6.06	'Live Free or Die'
6.08	'Johnny Cakes'
6.21	'Made in America'