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Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen
Department of English Studies



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PREFACE

The second issue of volume 13 of *Studies in Linguistics, Culture, and FLT* for 2025 includes various articles related to studies in fields such as cognitive linguistics, political and media discourse studies, translation studies, literature, and didactics.

Thus, for example, the first two articles cover issues oriented towards the discourse of politics and mass media and their role in introducing new concepts as well as shaping public opinion and awareness. Nelly Tincheva's small-scale research titled "Conceptual re-contextualizations and re-(re)-contextualizations: The story of 'sglobka'" dwells upon the change of the original meaning of the Bulgarian word 'sglobka' ('assemblage') primarily used as a technical term, yet nowadays re-contextualized as it has been introduced lately in the Bulgarian political discourse to refer to the present-day political situation in Bulgaria. The theoretical basis for this investigation is Cultural Linguistics and cognitive-sociolinguistic research. The results from the study are grounded on a questionnaire the answers to which 'unravel' the ways 'sglobka' is conceptualized by Bulgarians when it first appeared on the political arena. A similar endeavour is undertaken with some UK political actors as well.

The article by Andrii Kaptiurov that follows next, "Civil society as political narrative concept in English-Language news reports and opinion articles" analyzes English-language mass media texts. While news reports present events the way they are, opinion articles investigate social processes in detail and in depth thus depicting civil society as a 'permanent political actor'.

The third article touches upon one of the latest Covid-19 hot issues as they appear in comics. Albeena Stephen and Reshma Jacob deconstruct the verbal and non-verbal comic devices that enable communication in a period of uncertainty, doubt and contradictions by applying a multimodal discourse analysis. They claim that comic discourses can act as 'non-emergent healthcare tools and a pedagogical tool for the successive policy implementation of mental healthcare measures'.

Tsvetalina Aneva's article unravels the grammatical deviations in Bob Dylan's lyrics used to challenge the conventional linguistic structures, in this way putting an emphasis on the artistic impact of the songs' music. For that reason, she applies quantitative and qualitative methods in her error analysis, thus trying to find the reason why Bob Dylan breaks grammatical rules and to 'justify' Dylan's incorrectness of language.

The next two articles focus on interesting translation issues. The first one, titled "Netflix versus Google translate: A case study of the English-Arabic translation of scatological terms" by Maram Al-Darabee, Mohammed Farghal and Ahmad S. Haider, makes an attempt to explain the trespassing of traditional bans of

using such taboo words in Arabic countries excerpted from the movie *The Wolf of Wall Street*. The rendering of such words in the two translations is obviously different as the two versions differ by foregrounding cultural sensitivity and appropriateness in Netflix, while prioritizing understatement in Google, to name but a few techniques. The findings show that Netflix does not provide incomprehensible transliterations, while Google turns out to lack linguistic accuracy. The second of the series is even more challenging as it poses questions about translations without knowing the respective target language. It is a study by Tan Ying Yee, Amin Amirdabbaghian and Yeo Siang Lee on the English translation of *Daomu Biji*, a Chinese web novel series, by a professional translator as well as by fans of the series. Surprisingly enough, the readers prefer fan translations because of the numerous comments and because of the fact that they can also make comments and contribute in a certain way so that the translated versions can be improved. This fact is contrary to the idea that the rendering of information in a text from one language into another should only be done by professionals.

“Interactive representation of trauma in postmodern theatre: Audience and character interaction in Bryony Lavery’s *Frozen*” by Merve Feryal Ashmawy takes a completely different stand from the abovementioned investigations as the title itself presupposes. Lavery uses theatrical techniques which involve the audience in an emotional and cognitive way by turning it into active witnesses and participants. Trauma is represented as something dynamic rather than static. Thus, Merve Feryal Ashmawy’s analysis is based on some of the theories introduced by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Judith Herman. The characters ‘communicate’ and ‘interact’ with one another with the help of direct address, monologues, and fragmented narrative.

The other literary article in the issue “‘Seascape epistemology’ and native Hawaiian healing: A reading of Kimo Armitage’s *The Healers*” by Kristiawan Indriyanto and Rudy Rudy presents a different approach to human-environment relationships. There is again dynamism described as in the previous study but this time the ocean is the active, sacred entity central to identity, ancestry, and well-being taking a central part in some Native Hawaiian healing physical and spiritual practices in the novel. The latter depict the sea as a genealogical and ethical space in which cultural memory and ecological balance take place.

The issue finishes with a paper on FLT. Nebile Uslu Kaplan and Gamze Erdem Coşgun have conducted a study, which is on the ‘crossroads’ between digital escape room games and EFL methodology. The reason for that merging of these two practically incompatible domains of study is that ‘flow’ is actually a ‘psychological state characterized by deep immersion and focus, where individuals experience heightened engagement in a task and suppress external distractions’ as the authors have stated. The measures used in the study

and applied in an EFL environment include seven key dimensions of flow: concentration, goal clarity, feedback, challenge, autonomy, immersion, social interaction, and knowledge improvement. The methods are descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The results showed that digital escape room games turned out to be highly effective in the EFL classroom.

CONCEPTUAL RE-CONTEXTUALIZATIONS AND RE-(RE)-CONTEXTUALIZATIONS: THE STORY OF 'SGLOBKA'

Nelly Tincheva

Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski', Bulgaria

Abstract: 'Sglobka' is a word that entered abruptly Bulgarian political discourse in 2023. Before that, 'sglobka' had existed only as a technical term designating the manner of conjoining wooden or metal components. Within hours of its first public appearance in reference to the then Bulgarian government, 'sglobka' went viral. It even became the 2023 Bulgarian Word-of-the-year runner-up.

The main argument underlying this investigation sees the transition of SGLOBKA from the domain of technical discourse to the domain of political discourse as a process of cognitive re-contextualization. The theoretical framework of the investigation is that of Cultural Linguistics, harmonized with cognitive-sociolinguistic research techniques. The paper first establishes how the concept of SGLOBKA came to be re-contextualized against the political domain through its mediatized uses. Then the paper presents the results from a questionnaire-based study revealing how SGLOBKA is conceptualized by Bulgarians at the present stage of the concept's evolution. The paper also reports on a probe revealing how SGLOBKA is conceptualized by certain UK political actors.

Keywords: political discourse, conceptualization, cognitive sociolinguistics, Word of the year

About the author: Nelly Tincheva, DSc, is a Professor in Cognitive Linguistics and Discourse Analysis at the Department of British and American Studies, Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'. She lectures in Text and Cognition, Discourse Analysis, Political Discourse, and Research Methods. Her research and publications are primarily associated with Cognitive Sociolinguistics, (Multimedia) Text Analysis, and Pragmatics.

e-mail: tincheva@uni-sofia.bg

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7383-5939>

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Introduction

In June 2023, a new word entered Bulgarian political discourse: *sglobka* (in Cyrillic, *сглобка*). Within hours of its first public appearance, *sglobka* was all over the media, social media included. In a few months, it became the 2023 Bulgarian Word-of-the-year runner-up. Before that, however, *sglobka* had existed only as a technical term: it designated either the manner of conjoining wooden or metal components, or the place where wooden or metal components are conjoined in a movable or in a fixed connection ('sglobka', n.d.).

The main argument underlying the investigation reported here is that the transition of *sglobka* from the domain of technical discourse to the domain of political discourse can be seen as a process of cognitive re-contextualization. This paper explores how the process occurs as well as what the conceptual specificities of the process are. The research questions addressed are the following:

1. How did SGLOBKA come to be re-contextualized cognitively through its initial mediatized uses?
2. How is SGLOBKA conceptualized by Bulgarians nowadays?
3. How is SGLOBKA conceptualized nowadays by political actors outside Bulgaria (e.g. in the UK)?

As these research questions associate with principles of conceptualization and with socio-political cultural specificities, the theoretical approach adopted here is that of Cultural Linguistics, which is harmonized with cognitive-sociolinguistic research techniques. Sections 2 and 3 below discuss why and how those two specifically are harmonized.

Theoretical background

The investigation reported here is positioned against the general theoretical background of Cultural Linguistics (Sharifian, 2011, 2017), which draws heavily on Cognitive Linguistics (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Langacker, 2001, 2008) and overlaps with Cognitive Sociolinguistics (Geeraerts et al., 2010; Hollmann, 2017; Kristiansen et al., 2022). One of the many precepts Cultural Linguistics inherits from Cognitive Linguistics, a precept central to our investigation, is that language is not only a form of cognition but language uses are (relatively) tangible access points to underlying cognitive processes. Accordingly, the word *sglobka* is seen here as such an access point to how people interpret a concept related to the domain of POLITICS, namely GOVERNMENT. In its turn, the concept of SGLOBKA is approached here as a cultural category, i.e., as a cognitive representation of an object, an event, or a mental state (Sharifian, 2017), which exists as a cognitive structure (e.g. a schema or a conceptual metaphor) (ibid.).

Any such cultural category, it needs to be highlighted, operates ‘in interaction’ with its current context (Polzenhagen et al., 2024).

‘Context’, however, represents a “frustrating” term (Givón, 2005) because “almost every encounter one has with context opens up to the slippery slope of relativity” (ibid., p. 14). Several points could still be formulated about the nature of the academic notion of ‘context’. The first one is that it originated as ‘context of culture’, when it was first introduced by anthropologist Malinowski (1923) and it was shortened to ‘context’ only later. In other words, the importance of cultural environments, evident in Malinowski’s phrasing, has been present since the very origin of the term ‘context’.

Halliday and Hasan (1985), too, speak of ‘cultural context’ and discuss it as ‘broader context’ in opposition to the ‘narrower’ option of ‘immediate-environment context’. The latter was the object of analysis in earlier linguistic studies (e.g. Firth, 1950; Hymes, 1964; Labov, 1972; Lewis, 1972), which aim to correlate immediate-environment parameters with the presence of certain linguistic features in a text (for a discussion see Tincheva, 2015). In similarity to Halliday and Hasan, Duranti and Goodwin (1992) treat context as either physical or social: ‘physical context’ is analogous to ‘immediate environment’, while ‘social context’ reaches beyond the current communicative situation. In principle, the distinction between the two types of context can be argued to represent variations in scope – as evident in Halliday and Hasan’s (1985) very use of the words ‘narrow’ and ‘broad’. Another generalization that could be made is that all of the above works treat context as a phenomenon existing objectively ‘out there’, i.e., a phenomenon not ontologically different from a real-life ‘communicative situation’, ‘environment’ or ‘setting’.

Alternatively, context could be seen as a cognitive phenomenon constructed by the human mind and subjectively representing, construing or simulating (see, e.g. Barsalou, 2006, 2023) an objectively existing communicative situation, environment or setting. Van Dijk (1979, p. 419), for instance, discusses ‘context spaces’ by which he means “the referential context focused upon by a speaker”. In his later research, van Dijk (1997) discusses those spaces as ‘context models’, which are cognitive in nature and which can additionally involve personal viewpoints, social attitudes, ideologies and cultural norms (van Dijk, 2009, 2014). Following Sharifian (2011), Cultural linguist and Conceptual Metaphor theorist Musolff (2016) also argues that contexts include socially shared knowledge, i.e., socially shared cognitive structures.

Here context is seen, first, as cognitive in nature and, more specifically, as a cognitive simulation of real-life experience. Second, context is seen as either ‘broad’ or ‘narrow’, but ‘broad’ and ‘narrow’ are approached as two end points on a scale and not as dichotomous types. Thus, through cognitive scope variation (term as in Barcelona, 2011), we could consider an IMMEDIATE

ENVIRONMENT to function as CONTEXT; we could also consider a TYPE OF DISCOURSE, or a DISCOURSE DOMAIN, to function as CONTEXT; and we could consider a whole CULTURE to function as CONTEXT to a language use. Section 4 below will discuss the real-life cultural context against which *sglobka* transitioned from the technical domain to the political domain. Section 5.1. will analyze the mediatized context against which SGLOBKA transitioned. Section 5.2. will provide data on how SGLOBKA is perceived nowadays against the general context of Bulgarian culture. Finally, Section 6 will provide cross-cultural data on how SGLOBKA is perceived nowadays against the context of UK political culture. Each section will be thus dedicated to a different context against which SGLOBKA is positioned. As the TECHNICAL DOMAIN was the only one against which SGLOBKA originally operated, each of the successive contexts against which SGLOBKA is studied here will be approached as an instance of re-contextualization.

The last point to note in this section concerns precisely the term ‘recontextualization’. So far, in the literature, the term has been typically used to indicate “the process whereby content that has been given expression in one context (to be known here as the “source” context) is subsequently reused and made manifest in a different context (to be termed the “destination” context)” (Connolly, 2014, p. 378). ‘Recontextualization’ has been predominantly used to indicate discursive and social processes, not cognitive ones. For example, Bernstein’s (1990) recontextualization deals with how texts can be re-used in pedagogical discourse. Linell’s (1998) version distinguishes Intratextual recontextualizations (which happen within the same text), Intertextual recontextualizations (which connect elements from different texts), and Interdiscursive recontextualizations (which move across different genres). Fairclough’s (2004) recontextualization is ‘a chain of genres’ and, arguably, resembles Linell’s Intertextual recontextualization (Gruber et al., 2023). It is Krzyżanowski’s (2016) recontextualization as ‘conceptual and discursive change’ that perhaps comes closest to the interpretation of the term adopted here but even it does not cohere with the cognitive and cultural linguistic premises adopted for our purposes, which are further discussed in the next section.

Method

An issue, which makes our goal of tracing cultural re-contextualizations not as straightforward as it might seem, is that, with few exceptions, cognitive studies of language have supported the primacy of individual cognition over social cognition. Admittedly, there have been voices alerting researchers to the need for a change in that tendency. Cognitive linguist Langacker (1997, p. 376) emphasizes that “the dynamic nature of conceptual and grammatical structure leads us inexorably to the dynamics of discourse and social interaction”.

Geeraerts et al. (2010, p. 3) maintain that “meaning does not exist in isolation: it is created in and transmitted through the interaction of people”. Croft (2009, p. 395) suggests that “to be successful, cognitive linguistics must go ‘outside the head’ and incorporate a social-interactional perspective on the nature of language”. In Cultural Linguistics, Sharifian (2017) addresses the presence of distributed cultural cognition, which is now generally seen as “a set of implicit knowledge shared, negotiated, and re-negotiated by the members of a cultural community” (Baranyiné Kóczy & Brdar-Szabó, 2023, p. 261). The question we are faced with is what research techniques could be used to study such distributed structures of social and cultural cognition.

The answer could be found in research techniques employed in Cognitive Sociolinguistics (e.g. Pütz et al., 2014; Callies & Onysko, 2017; Benczes & Ságvári, 2018; Kristiansen et al., 2022). The approach studies how language users’ communicative competence is stored mentally and how this competence works during communication; it focuses on variation in cognitive processing models, perceptual dialectology, conceptual metaphor variation, etc. Importantly, Cognitive Sociolinguistics also studies cultural conceptualizations and their diversity (Baranyiné Kóczy & Brdar-Szabó, 2023).

This area of overlap between Cultural Linguistics and Cognitive Sociolinguistics makes it possible for us to harmonize quantitative sociolinguistic research techniques with cultural-linguistic premises. Our investigation will accord with cognitive studies such as Rosch’s (1973, 1975), which rely on numerical data obtained from real language users. Rosch’s experiments have demonstrated the compatibility of research on cognitive structures with research on socio-cultural factors (Lakoff, 2007). They also uphold the assumption that there exists socio-cultural and, consequently, statistically verifiable agreement among the members of a community about conceptual issues (Tinceva, 2023).

In sum, *sglobka* here is studied from the two overlapping viewpoints: first from the cultural-linguistic one and then from the cognitive-sociolinguistic one. Section 5.1. will approach SGLOBKA from a cultural-linguistic angle. Section 5.2. and Section 6 will provide data on SGLOBKA from a cognitive-sociolinguistic perspective. Hopefully, that will allow us a better, multi-faceted understanding of the re-contextualizations of the concept.

Political-discursive and rhetoric peculiarities of the initial re-contextualization

In June 2023, Lena Borislavova (a member of Bulgaria’s *WE CONTINUE THE CHANGE* party) sent a text message to Desislava Atanasova (a member of Bulgaria’s *GERB* party). The latter later confirmed the exchange took place, although neither of the two actually made the text message public. The content

of the message concerned the rising tension between *WE CONTINUE THE CHANGE* and *GERB*, tension which then threatened the existence of the two parties' rotational government. In the text message, Borislavova used for the first time the word *sglobka* to refer to said rotational government and not to a technical entity. This use can be seen as the first instance of the concept (i.e., SGLOBKA) being re-contextualized. The instance could have remained just a one-off in a one-on-one exchange between colleagues and it could have remained outside Bulgarian cultural cognition.

But then, a third politician, Boyko Borisov, the *GERB* party leader, gave an impromptu interview in a Parliament corridor. In the absence of Borislavova and Atanasova, he shared with the media that:

Lena Borislavova yesterday wrote a text message saying "We will break the assemblage". I have not made any assemblage and I will not participate in their assemblages.

(translation mine; original: *Лена Бориславова вчера пише SMS-и "Ще счупим сглобката" Аз сглобка не съм правил и няма да участвам в сглобките им.*)

Presumably, Borisov's statement was intended to perform several discursive functions. First, through it, he demonstrated to both politicians and general public he was well-informed about everything in the Bulgarian political process. Second, he constructed himself as someone who had little to hide and who willingly allowed the general public a glimpse at the political backstage goings-on. Third, again presumably, Borisov was well aware that, in her text message, Lena Borislavova used the word *sglobka* in a way that was not discursively acceptable and, at best, was highly idiosyncratic. Thus, Borisov possibly implied Lena Borislavova did improper things (i.e. improper linguistically and otherwise) through writing that message and/or through writing it the way she did.

From a rhetoric perspective, in a classical rhetoric manner, Borisov used *sglobka* three times within a span of a 19-word utterance. Relying on three-part structures is a common rhetorical technique, and using it allowed Borisov to make sure Borislavova's 'wrong' use of the word was not be overlooked and that it stayed in people's minds. However, by doing so, perhaps unintentionally, he also started a process of normalization of the word's new sense by starting a process of the word's adjustment to a new – political-discursive – context. Thus, Borisov's making the a-typical use of *sglobka* public can be seen as the second instance when SGLOBKA became re-contextualized. Crucially, this time it was a public re-contextualization.

After Borisov mediatized the re-contextualization of the concept, the new way of using *sglobka* went viral: within 48 hours, *sglobka* appeared across all major media, social media included. It also inspired countless of memes, such as:



Fig. 1. A meme with the pseudo-villain character from the movie “Despicable me” (author: MemeTeamBg)

Cartoonists, too, joined by visualizing, i.e., framing (term as in Hart, 2023) the ongoing political situation. Since then, they have kept re-framing other political situations through the now-political notion of SGLOBKA, as in:



Fig. 2. A cartoon from the SEGA newspaper (author: Komarnitski)

In a meagre 6 months’ time, through its frequent mediatization, *sglobka* rose to occupy the runner-up position in the 2023 Bulgarian National Radio’s ‘Word of the Year’ list. It also brought about its own antonym – the newly-coined *разглобка* (literally, an UNDOING OF SLGOBKA) – to indicate A MECHANICAL OBJECT THAT IS (BEING) TAKEN APART.

At present, *sglobka* can be seen used on a daily basis across all kinds of media. As far as Boyko Borisov’s use of *sglobka* is concerned, any internet search will confirm his persistent and continued use of the word, especially when he discusses *WE CONTINUE THE CHANGE* and the party’s interactions with other political entities.

Bulgarian re-contextualizations of SGLOBKA

SGLOBKA and its mediatized conceptualizations

In the interview, in which Borisov used the word for the first time publicly, he focused on his desire for a coalition to be formed, and he clearly contrasted the meaning of *sglobka* to that of *coalition*. In this way, he framed SGLOBKA as an undesirable alternative, i.e., he presented it in a negative light. He also distanced himself from the SGLOBKA by excluding himself from it and by speaking of *their assemblages*. His intentional use of the plural *assemblages* further enhanced the perception of the word being used improperly, and served to imply Borisov's opinion of a *sglobka* as wrong on all levels. Thus, the word entered the public domain as expressing something wrong, out of place, vague, which makes people uncertain how to use it.

Since then, Borisov has kept imbuing the word with negative connotations. To use just one example, he also did so at the party's 2024 National Conference:

You shouldn't call us 'an assemblage' anymore. I do not see in this word – 'assemblage' – anything rational, anything good for people.

(translation mine; original: *Повече не трябва да ни наричате 'сглобка'. Не виждам в тази дума 'сглобка' нищо рационално, нищо добро за хората.*)

This negative attitude of his is very likely to have been shared by many Bulgarians, as a high percentage of the voting population were reported (Alpha research, 2022) not be enthusiastic about the existence of co-operation between *WE CONTINUE THE CHANGE* and *GERB*. Another high percentage of the population were not happy with the 'un-coalition' state of the relations between the two parties. I see that as a likely reason why Borisov's initial use of the word went viral at such a speed in the first days after his first interview mentioning it.

Another reason for the success of *sglobka* as a political catchword (apart from the negative connotations resonating with many) could be that *sglobka* expresses those general sentiments metaphorically, i.e. non-literally. Through SGLOBKA, the TWO PARTIES' CO-OPERATION is only interpreted as A MATERIAL, TECHNICAL ASSEMBLAGE. It is not indeed such an entity.

The persuasive power of metaphors being a well-explored topic (e.g. Charteris-Black, 2005, 2017; Hampl, 2012; Musolff, 2005, 2022; Romano, 2024), I do not intend to dwell on that here, but I feel I need to note that a COALITION/UN-COALITION is not conventionally thought of figuratively as PART OF A TOOL/A MECHANICAL ASSEMBLAGE. Instead, typically, we would conceptualize THE MODERN STATE AS A MACHINE/MECHANISM/APPARATUS (Anter, 2014), where THE WHOLE STATE – and just not a governing BODY

– is seen as a MECHANISM. In parallel, the BODY POLITIC metaphor (Lakoff, 1996; Musolff, 2021, 2022) sustains pervasive conceptualizations of THE (WHOLE) STATE AS A BODY. This metaphorization is the one typically dominating the construal of how a government operates (ibid.).

In brief, SGLOBKA as A MECHANICAL ASSEMBLAGE represents a new, unexpected figurative use, which has the potential to cohere with already existing figurativity in the domain but is not completely aligned with it, or, at least, not yet. As of today, SGLOBKA can be claimed to operate at a level of granularity (term as in Körner et al., 2023) which differs from that prescribed by the already existing metaphonymies (term as in Barcelona, 2011) in Bulgarian political discourse. In other words, a SGLOBKA is too small and too unattached a part of the state MACHINE, and the metaphorization seems to run against conventionalized knowledge of the importance of a GOVERNMENT as A DRIVING FORCE, or as a TOPMOST PART of the state MACHINE/MECHANISM.

That subconsciously operating cognitive discrepancy, I believe, adds to the negatively framed cognitive construal of what a SGLOBKA is and, importantly, these perceptions still persist. The next section is dedicated to this issue.

SGLOBKA and its non-mediatized conceptualizations

In tracing the socio-cognitive distribution of SGLOBKA at the collective level of cognition (see 3. above), I employ a sociolinguistic experiment technique, namely a questionnaire study, which involves 60 Bulgarian respondents. Clearly, conclusions drawn from a relatively limited population as this could not claim general validity; yet, the sample can allow us to establish whether there are any traceable tendencies that could be further studied in statistically-apt research or not.

The participants were divided into three age groups of 20 respondents each: those aged between 16 and 21 (i.e., those underaged), those between 21 and 35 (i.e., those considered young members of the population), and those aged 35+ (i.e., those considered mature members of the population). The purpose was to reflect existing generational differences. The division also allowed me to keep a 50:50 proportion between respondents with a higher degree of education and respondents without one.

The questionnaire included one open-ended question: ‘What do you understand by *sglobka*?’ Additional comments were also allowed.

The data obtained point to the following:

(a) Out of the 60 respondents:

- 49 reported they were not sure what exactly *sglobka* means;

- 8 commented that the non-literal *sglobka* use still feels ‘unnatural’ to them;
- 3 (aged between 22 and 25) reported they had never heard the word before;
- None of the under-aged participants appeared to be unaware of the existence and the meaning of the word.

(b) The conceptual features of SGLOBKA most frequently mentioned across the responses relate to:

- Something that is not permanent
- Something that is not well-fitted
- Something put together in a hurry
- Something temporary

(c) More rare descriptions characterize SGLOBKA as:

- Something consisting of parts that are incompatible
- Parts that are hooked together and not glued together
- Cold (to the touch)
- Clanky

The last two above can be argued to represent more sensory descriptions and seem to suggest a lesser degree of metaphorization due to the persisting salience of the metaphoric source domain.

Additional generalizations based on the data are:

- The responses in this questionnaire study are predominantly negative (a 16-year-old even defined SGLOBKA as ‘usurping power’).
- Roughly $\frac{1}{4}$ of the answers are neutral. (One respondent commented hers was a neutral attitude to the realia, but she was fully aware that any connotations attached would be dependent on a user’s whole political worldview and their evaluation of the whole political situation.)
- 11 respondents (none of the under-age group) commented that, originally, they ‘felt’ anyone’s using *sglobka* was funny, or there was a funny aspect to it. At present, *sglobka* triggers in them feelings of awkwardness, negativity, and even fear.

In general, the study confirms the presence of a clear tendency for Bulgarians to conceptualize SGLOBKA negatively. More specifically, the pervasive cognitive cultural metaphorization controlling the use of *sglobka* proves to be that of

SGLOBKA as an ENTITY, which is NOT WELL-FITTED and can exist only TEMPORARILY. As the last bullet above suggests, at this stage of the concept's evolutions, SGLOBKA re-conceptualizations are already heterogeneously distributed across Bulgarian culture and they continue to evolve.

UK re-contextualizations of SGLOBKA

This section turns to the possibility for yet another SGLOBKA re-contextualization to be in existence: it turns to the question whether there are any cross-cultural (i.e., non-Bulgarian) re-contextualizations of SGLOBKA. To account for that possibility, I tried and verified if and how *sglobka* has travelled to the UK political-discourse domain.

First, I verified which translation alternatives of *sglobka* are actually employed in English. The result was a somewhat surprising unanimity in translators' and interpreters' preference for *assemblage* in that respect. The 5 most frequently used sources for Bulgarian news in English (verified through Google and Yahoo searches) all reveal the same preference:

1. <https://kinsights.capital.bg/>
2. <https://sofiaglobe.com/>
3. <https://www.novinite.com/>
4. <https://www.bta.bg/en>
5. <https://bnr.bg/en/news/list>

Next, I organized a questionnaire probe involving 12 UK representatives of both public bodies and privately-held businesses, who communicated and co-operated regularly with Bulgarian politicians and diplomats. In their professional duties as Government officials in various departments and agencies as well as executives at non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), the UK respondents had to acquaint themselves with the word *assemblage* as a translation of *sglobka*. 3 of the respondents were aware of the existence of the word *sglobka*, although they never actively used it. 9 of the respondents only knew the translated version of *assemblage*.

The questionnaire was distributed via a key networked individual in London, who is a Bulgarian citizen and whose native language is Bulgarian. This networked questionnaire distribution was meant to ensure a (near)-random selection of participants. The individual in question did not participate in any fashion while the respondents answered the questions, nor did that person steer the respondents' answers in any direction.

The questionnaire included only one open-ended question: 'What do you understand by *sglobka*?' Additional comments were also allowed.

The data obtained point to the following:

(a) Out of the 12 respondents:

- All 12 reported they were not sure what exactly *assemblage* means within a political context;
- 5 mentioned their confusion between *assembly* and *assemblage*. They discussed their never being sure whether the word was a matter of bad translation/interpreting or not.

(b) The conceptual features of ASSEMBLAGE most frequently mentioned across the responses relate to:

- Something to do with the Bulgarian government
- Something well-fitted
- Something flexible

(c) The connotations reflected in the responses are predominantly neutral or positive.

In sum, the probe, however limited, confirms the presence of a tendency for UK political actors to conceptualize SGLOBKA non-negatively. In that, UK cultural conceptualizations of SGLOBKA differ significantly from Bulgarian ones. This tendency also confirms the presence of a re-contextualization of the concept that follows a different path than the concept's path in Bulgarian culture.

Conclusion

This paper has traced how a (strictly technical) term can be metaphorized conceptually and can be thus re-contextualized within another (in this case, the political) domain.

The paper has discussed how the concept of SGLOBKA came to be re-contextualized against the political domain through its mediatized uses. Next, it has presented the results from a questionnaire-based study revealing how SGLOBKA is conceptualized by Bulgarians at this stage of the concept's evolution. It has also reported on a second questionnaire-based probe, which lifts the curtain on how SGLOBKA is interpreted by certain political actors in the UK.

In this way, the investigation presented here has traced several stages in the re-contextualization of SGLOBKA. In other words, it has traced several successive re-contextualizations and re-(re-)-contextualizations of the concept.

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CIVIL SOCIETY AS POLITICAL NARRATIVE CONCEPT IN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE NEWS REPORTS AND OPINION ARTICLES

Andrii Kaptiurov

*Research and Educational Center of Foreign Languages,
NAS of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine*

Abstract: *In the 21st century, civil society represented by non-governmental organizations and activist movements has become an influential actor, along with governments and the business sector. Mass media play an important role in shaping citizens' awareness and attitudes towards actions initiated by activist groups, yet mass media representations of civil society have not been analyzed so far. The research approaches English-language mass media texts (news reports and opinion articles) that cover civil society and its activity as narratives and civil society as a political narrative concept. In other words, the sample of articles consists of recurring stories about a conflict in which civil society representatives confront their opponents in an attempt to eliminate a social problem with varied outcomes. The findings suggest that representations of civil society in news reports and opinion articles are complementary. News reports depict civil society by covering events straightforwardly and factually, with headlines being succinct narratives with predetermined slots and the main body adding more details. Opinion articles aim to explore social processes in depth to show their complexity: they contain several interrelated narratives on different levels (personal, local, and national) and resort to retrospect to present civil society as a permanent political actor.*

Keywords: *civil society, narrative, political narrative concept, mass media, genres of news reports and opinion articles*

About the author: *Andrii Kaptiurov is currently a PhD student at the Research and Educational Center of Foreign Languages, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Kyiv. Holding two MA degrees – in political science and English philology – he combined his academic interests in researching the linguocultural aspects of civil society (based on the English-language media). He is conducting his doctoral research under the supervision of Full Professor Olga Ilchenko and has already published some articles based on his findings in reputed journals.*

e-mail: *andrkap@gmail.com*

ORCID iD: *<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8385-9475>*

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Introduction

Attempting to erase injustice, civil society has scaled up its influence from local to global and has become an influential political actor in the 21st century (e.g., worldwide protests organized by #MeToo, BlackLivesMatter (BLM), Just Stop Oil, etc.). It is through global media coverage, a new public sphere of the 21st century, that activists have risen to power (Bondarenko, Kaptiurova & Orlova, 2021; Kapranov, 2024). Activism has embraced the whole world: long-term demonstrations initiated as a reaction to a particular injustice on one continent spread worldwide. ‘Relocated’ to the digital environment, mass media are the key to the global interconnection: for instance, #MeToo protests sparked after the news of sexual abuse by American film producer Harvey Weinstein in 2017, BLM started in 2012 after reports of the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Travon Martin and swept anti-racist protests after the death of George Floyd in 2020, etc. Mass media coverage primes people to join activist movements and, therefore, impacts political and social processes. Some research into the mass media’s mirroring, altering, or even creating versions of reality for their audiences has been carried out (AlOteibi, Haider & AlSaed, 2023; Cheshmedzieva-Stoycheva, 2017; Gorchev, 2021), however, the narrative of activism and activists in English-language mass media discourse has not yet been explored.

Theoretical framework

Civil society is considered a participant in a tripartite model of modern societies, where it interacts with or confronts the state and/or corporate bodies to protect/promote the interests of marginalized social groups (see Kaptiurov, 2024). Mass media texts format their reports of interactions between activist movements and the other two actors in the model into narratives, i.e., a set of at least two states linked chronologically and causally to make up an event (Prince, 1987, p. 53).

The modern public sphere has become a “marketplace” of ideas, so governments as well as other political actors “must learn how to compete with or harness a plethora of voices” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle, 2013, p. 69) and turn mass media into a platform to deliver a strategic narrative, i.e., “a story line used to forge consensus and influence audiences to understand complex events in a way that supports a particular stance and its associated actions” (Blas, 2023, p. 47). ‘Strategic narratives’ define, construct and explain causes of social conflicts and motives of the parties involved:

Different episodes are narrativized, put into cause–effect sequences, and given meaning with regard to an overall narrative given to the conflict. Both characterization and narrativization are subject to dispute and contestation, and used for the legitimization of claims and actions (Roselle, Miskimmon & O’Loughlin, 2014, p. 79).

This type of narrative is rooted in facts and predetermined scripts, deprived of ambiguities, relates to beliefs, and evokes predictable reactions from audiences (Steblyna, 2019, p. 100).

Strategic narratives are developed in numerous contexts and through various texts that shape a certain worldview in audiences. Thus, Wertsch (2002) argues for ‘schematic narrative templates’, namely cognitive models that “concern abstract, generalized functions” and “underlie several different specific narratives, each of which has a particular setting, cast of characters, dates, and so forth” (op. cit., p. 57). An attempt to extract such templates has been made by Hansen (2020), who examines stories on migration and suggests that they fall into the antagonistic neo-nationalist and humanitarian discourses of inequality and discrimination, on the one hand, and the agonistic discourse based on equality, on the other hand. Other studies of the migration narrative support Hansen’s research, e.g., Nedelcheva (2017) and Cheshmedzhieva-Stoycheva (2017), who explored Bulgarian and British mass media.

The term ‘political narrative concept’ put forward by Zhabotynskaya (2017, p. 30) bridges ‘narratives’ and ‘concepts’ and provides the necessary theoretical framework to explore CIVIL SOCIETY concept in mass media discourse. According to Zhabotynska (2017, p. 32), the political narrative concept is construed from information of numerous texts where this concept is recurrent. The body of texts unfolding the political narrative concept forms a metatext of peculiar referential and relational coherence. These texts contain a recurring set of characters who interact with each other in a certain way within a certain temporal and spatial framework (Zhabotynskaya, 2017, p. 32-33). A political narrative concept presupposes an iconic sequence of events as well as axiological connotations (Zhabotynskaya, 2017, p. 33). In other words, it combines factual and discursive, evaluative information: numerous messages may present the same fact differently to influence the addressee’s attitude to the fact (op. cit.).

The recurrent tripartite model in mass media texts about civil society organizations and their activity suggested by Kaptiurov, (2024) justifies approaching CIVIL SOCIETY as a political narrative concept since these texts feature permanent relations (usually confrontation of a various scope and intensity) between three permanent participants (activists, state authorities, and marginalized people).

Methodology and research questions

The research aims to elaborate on the way CIVIL SOCIETY is presented in English-language mass media as a political narrative concept.

The study draws on the corpus of 507 articles from British and American mass media (BBC, The Guardian, The New York Times, and Fox News) covering non-governmental organisations’ (NGOs’) activities and leaders between 2014-

2024. The articles fall into two genres: 399 news reports and 108 opinion articles (80% and 20% of the sample, respectively). Different functions of the genres, namely to inform and to shape the audience's opinion, entail differences in their volume, structure, and analytical depth. News reports are short, factual texts with high narrativity, whereas opinion articles are investigative and speculative, which reserves space for literary creativity. The specificity of the two genres results in peculiar methods of their analysis.

News reports were studied with the help of componential analysis, which facilitated distinguishing their essential textual components (e.g., headline and main body) and presenting them as a pattern of permanent slots.

At the first stage of studying opinion articles, componential analysis was used. Yet, it was not enough to reveal the complex representation of CIVIL SOCIETY concept in this genre. Hence, Critical Discourse Analysis was applied to show how the mass media texts embed multiple narratives in the macro sociolinguistic context and reveal their overlapping.

Results and discussion

Representation of CIVIL SOCIETY in news reports

News reports are constructed as short factual texts, with headlines as self-sufficient and informative components. The sample supports the observation that headline patterns contain "empty "slots" or positions which are open to be filled by various elements to produce specific occurrences" (Iglíkova, 2017, p. 72). The headline patterns may be divided into 'person-focused' and 'event-focused'. In the sample, the ratio is 1:4, namely 102 person-focused and 297 event-focused headlines.

Person-focused headlines contain names of activists, if they are well-known (e.g., Greta Thunberg, Carola Rackete, etc.):

1. *Greta Thunberg's Atlantic crossing: 'Why I wanted to help'*

There may also be common nouns (*protester, activist*) to refer to less famous people:

2. *Activists sentenced over milk pouring stunts*

3. *Greyhound protesters overturn compensation order*

In approximately two-thirds of the headlines, lexemes that denote activists function as subjects of passive predicates, which presents civil society as controlled by the opponent (government, police, etc.):

4. *Italy migrant rescue boat: Captain Carola Rackete freed*

5. *Hong Kong: Pro-democracy activist Tony Chung jailed under security law*

6. *Greta Thunberg interrupted at climate protest after changing the topic to the Israel-Hamas war*

There are 'grey areas' where formally active constructions imply passive meanings. For example, in (7), the verb *learn* is used in the active voice, yet its subject is an experiencer, not an agent and, in addition, the phrase *learn fate* implies the subject's helplessness:

7. *Climate activists learn fate for red powder attack on US Constitution at National Archives*

As mass media cover events organized by NGOs and lasting for several days or months, event-focused headlines specify the current stage of a protest. It may be its climax (activists' action):

8. *Extinction Rebellion: **Activists block** four London bridges*

9. *Climate change: Young people across Europe **protest by skipping school***

10. *Climate protesters glue themselves to John Constable masterpiece*

11. *Violence breaks out after **anti-Israel agitators surround LA synagogue, clash with Israel supporters***

Long-lasting events result in a chain of reports that highlight how the movement embraces the world. In 2019, *Fridays for Climate* movement was such a case. Headlines of BBC news reports go as follows:

12. Jan 24: *Climate Change: Young people **across Europe** protest by skipping school*

13. March 15: *Climate strikes spread **worldwide** as students call for action*

14. May 24: *School strike for climate: Protests staged **around the world***

15. September 20: *Climate strike: Thousands protest **across UK***

The regularity of such news reports emphasizes the continuity and globality of narrated events: the youth climate movement is marching the planet and winning over ever more supporters.

The finale, crackdowns on protests or sanctions against activists are outcomes of the narrative, verbalized in headlines:

16. *Extinction Rebellion: Seventy **arrested** at climate change protests*

17. *Police **arrest** 170 at NSW Rising Tide protest as activists temporarily block coal ships*

18. *Activists **sentenced** over milk pouring stunts*

There are 'grey areas' between event- and person-focused headlines as well, since headlines featuring an activist group may hardly be 'person-focused':

19. ***Moms for Liberty*** warns ‘hate group’ label is ‘putting targets’ on backs of parents: ‘*Very concerned*’

Yet it is irrefutable that the headline presents the NGO as a human agent capable of a verbal action (*warns*) and an emotion (*very concerned*).

In general, headlines of news reports, be they event- or person-focused, tend to verbalize the narrative’s ‘skeleton’, filling in such slots as characters (activist(s) and their opponent(s)), action, purpose and outcome. Some components may be implicit and rely on audiences’ background knowledge. In (17), the headline delivers succinctly the following narrative: “*Rising Tide* activists (agent) blocked coal ships (action). Police (opponent/agent) arrested (action) 170 activists (patient)”. The headline presents the events in a reversed order: the outcome (*Police arrest*) precedes the cause (*block coal ships*). The headline relies on lexical markers that activate the audience’s background knowledge and help identify the activists’ purpose: *Rising Tide* is an environmentalist movement, *coal* activates the dichotomy ‘fossil fuels: alternative energy sources’ and the assumption that coal causes air pollution:

17. *Police arrest 170 at NSW Rising Tide protest as activists temporarily block coal ships*

Some headlines are meant to attract audiences’ attention and create suspense by outlining an event in general. These headlines draw on audiences’ expectations and urge to check whether the expectations are met. For example, in (20), there is no explicit nomination of the next target selected by eco activists; it only quotes their threat:

20. *Climate activists have new target in mind for major summer protest: ‘Make their lives miserable’*

Thus, taking into account activists’ creative protest methods, readers are likely to look for detailed information in the article. Despite its ‘vagueness’, this headline also fits the narrative pattern as it fills in the slots of characters: climate (purpose) activists (agents) plan protest (action) to make the opponent (patient) miserable (outcome).

Narratives in news reports do not unfold chronologically. Texts tend to start with outcomes (or the latest event in the sequence) followed by previous events delivered chronologically. Hence, (21) starts with reporting on the police raid of Last Generation activists’ houses and then informs of the activists’ actions that caused persecution as well as citizens and state officials’ attitudes to the activists’ actions:

21. *German police raid climate activists who blocked traffic*

The same reversed chronology is observed in article (22): the painting is returned to the museum (outcome), then there is information of Just Stop Oil

activists' protest that consisted of gluing themselves to the frame of Van Gogh's masterpiece.

22. *Van Gogh's Sunflowers back on display after oil protesters threw soup on it*

This pattern is found in the article about a refugee from Côte d'Ivoire (23), who became the chairman of a Welsh language campaign group, *Cymdeithas yr Iaith*: the article begins with informing of his election and then tells his life story: from his confrontation with Côte d'Ivoire's regime and escape to the present-day life in Cardiff. It should be noted that the positive outcome is rare for the civil society narrative, which makes this report distinct from the majority.

Hence, the analysis confirms that CIVIL SOCIETY may be approached as a political narrative concept, since it is represented in a multitude of news reports with recurrent referential and relational coherence and may be generalized in the following way: activist/NGO acts to eliminate a social problem – their opponent hinders – activist/NGO wins or loses.

Representation of CIVIL SOCIETY in opinion articles

Opinion articles aim at interpreting facts and shaping audiences' outlook on causal relations between them. An opinion article usually consists of an introduction that contains facts to familiarize the reader with an event, person, or phenomenon. Then, a journalist typically provides quotes from interviews with people involved, dwells on controversial aspects, compares reports and views on the event provided by participants or observers, suggests analogies, etc. In a way, opinion articles may combine features of literary works with those of philosophical, sociological, psychological, and historical research. Due to volume constraints, only one article, *This Italian Town Once Welcomed Migrants. Now, It's a Symbol for Right-Wing Politics* by Jason Horowitz published in the New York Times on July 7, 2018, (25) is selected from the sample as typical of the genre.

The article gives insight into CIVIL SOCIETY concept by delving into a conflict in the Italian town of Macerata. In the text, the crime committed by Luca Traini, a 28-year-old Italian from Macerata, who killed and injured several migrants, fired into the office of the Democratic Party, tried to shoot a pub manager and then “climbed the steps of a Fascist-era monument, wrapped himself in an Italian flag and straightened his arm in a Fascist salute”, reveals a divide in the local community. The journalist weaves the thriller of a story to describe what triggered the crime:

On the morning of Feb. 3, Mr. Traini went to the gym, heard a news report about Ms. Mastropietro on the radio and, according to his lawyer, went insane with a desire to kill drug dealers. He returned to his mother's house

and retrieved his Glock handgun. Armed with 50 bullets, he took off in his Alfa Romeo 147, music blasting.

The journalist argues that the “shooting rampage” combined political protest with personal vendetta: Traini revenges on migrants for the murder of a young Italian girl allegedly killed by a drug dealer from Nigeria, he protests against the Democratic Party’s pro-migration policy and gets even with the pub manager who fired Traini as a bouncer.

Yet, Traini’s story is only one of several in the article. The journalist alternates between telling about nationwide events and personal stories. Thus, Traini’s plot line is causally bound with the story of the murdered Italian girl, with the lives of several migrants, with the anti-fascist activity of Macerata’s mayor Romano Carancini as well as with the mayor’s ideological rival and Traini’s leader, Italian Interior Minister and right-wing politician Matteo Salvini.

Luca Traini’s story, namely his transformation from “*a chubby kid*” into a weight lifter who keeps Mein Kampf and a black flag with a Celtic cross in his room, is only one of many life stories of the Lost Generation. According to one interviewee, many locals approve of Traini’s actions: “*If you ask most people about Luca Traini, they will tell you, ‘He did well, but he should have killed them.’” She added that Italy owed him a debt of gratitude for “having revealed a problem...”*

The national level of the conflict is represented by Matteo Salvini’s right-wing ideology and its congruence with Italians’ reactions: he condemns Traini’s violent act, but is quick to relate it to “*unchecked immigration*” that “*brings chaos, anger*” and “*drug dealing, thefts, rapes and violence.*”

There is another story, that of Italian leftist youth trying to raise the alarm about right-wing radicalization:

In the university, founded in 1290, **left-wing students** warned that a group of **hard-right students** in the humanities department were espousing the works of Julius Evola, the spiritual and intellectual godfather of Italian Fascists and Italy’s post-Fascist terrorists.

On the national level, liberal ideas are expressed by Romano Carancini, Macerata’s mayor, who attempts to integrate migrants into the town’s community: **Romano Carancini**, the city’s affable mayor from the center-left Democratic Party, **spent the winter preparing a dossier called “Friendly Macerata” as part of a campaign to become Italy’s 2020 capital of culture.**

However, the anti-fascist views of civil society groups, their actions and projects are consistently described as ‘the past’ against the national background trend towards tougher migration policies: this idea is expressed in the very headline, *This Italian Town Once Welcomed Migrants. Now, It’s a Symbol for Right-Wing*

Politics, that contrasts the past and the present tenses (*welcomed : is*) and is boosted with the contextual antonyms *welcomed :: right-wing politics*. This is inferred from the change in people's attitudes in the main body of the article and is verbalized with the verbal past forms (*had, won, boasted*) that describe Macerata as a tolerant town. Tolerance is said to have been the community's gene, yet now the present-tense verbal form introduces the noun *tensions*:

It [Macerata's population] **had a reputation for tolerance** and, in 2013, **won** national recognition for its **integration efforts**. The former bishop once **boasted** about the "welcoming spirit" encoded "**in the DNA of the city.**" (...) But that version of Macerata **seemed more in the past tense**. Macerata's new bishop, handpicked by Pope Francis, observed recently that "all the **tensions rising in the country** are now visible in this city."

Salvini, who used to represent marginalized views (a metaphorical "blemish"), has grown into the mainstream ideology:

Only a few years ago, **Mr. Salvini**, the interior minister, seemed like **an old blemish on Italy's fresh new skin**. He led the Northern League, a regional separatist party **seemingly out of step with the national mood**. (...) By 2016, **Mr. Salvini was on the rise**.

He enjoys grass-roots support. To show this, the journalist tells about the politician's visit to the market:

He walked through a market in Milan, **receiving the warm regards of Italian fruit vendors** and pointing disapprovingly at the foreigners selling cloves of garlic. He stopped into a bar and talked about whether he wanted to leave the euro ("Definitely yes, tomorrow morning") or whether Russia had paid for his support ("It's geopolitical and free"). **Several times, people interrupted to encourage him. "Do what you say you'll do," one woman said.**

He and many Italians oppose not only Italy's liberal elite, but also that of the European Union: "... *he railed against the elite and against the mainstream media...* (...) *He had once disparaged evil bureaucrats in Rome. Now he turned his ire on Brussels.*"

Narratives of migrants are controversial. The journalist offers a glimpse of their lives: he tells about a class of the Italian language given by a volunteer to an 18-year-old Senegalese. This story is replete with humanness, simplicity, and innocence: the adult migrant is described as a language beginner making his first steps:

Inside the Caritas reception center, **Ibrahim Diallo, 18, from Senegal**, spent a recent afternoon practicing conjugation of the verb "to be" with

a young Italian woman, Luigina. “Io sono Ibrahim; tu sei Luigina,” he said. “Noi siamo a Macerata.”

Other personalized episodes describe migrants as innocent and helpless victims whose lives are disrupted by hard-right radicals and Italy’s anti-migrant policy:

Omagbon Festus, 33, **was walking to the grocery store** when **Mr. Traini** pulled up next to him. Mr. Festus said he saw “a pure white Italian man” **pointing a pistol** before **he felt the bullet that shattered the bone in his left forearm.** “I crossed the Sahara and the Mediterranean,” said Omagbon Festus, one of the people who was shot on Feb. 3. “And this happened to me in Europe?”

As a social group, migrants are depicted from Salvini’s perspective where they are involved in crime and violence and cause unemployment in Italy: *He [Salvini] accused undocumented migrants of taking jobs from young Italians and advocated extreme measures, including “a mass cleansing, street by street, neighborhood by neighborhood.”*

The narratives of today take root in history: the journalist provides historical analogies of the events in Macerata and Europe in general. Hence, Italy is metaphorically called “*Europe’s laboratory for political change*” and “*the birthplace of Fascism*”, a country that “*flirted seriously with communism*”. He juxtaposes Europe’s present-day “*heaven*” to its “*bloody*” history adding ruefully that “*people forget*”. Yet, reporting a conversation between two activists reveals two opposite interpretations of historical events rather than short memory: the local leader of Salvini’s party says about the holiday held to commemorate the end of Nazi occupation, “*It’s not a holiday for us*”. The idea of the profound divide in Italian society is expressed by a volunteer, who explains some people’s resistance to embracing migrants by saying, “*some parts of the population aren’t ready*”.

These narratives depict Italy’s civil society as a fractal, where two opposing nationalist and liberal strategic narratives are consistently reproduced at the personal, communal, and state levels. Individuals interact with each other and unite into activist organizations to fix injustices in ways congruent with their opposing strategic narratives promoted to the national level and winning over new supporters. The clash between the narratives and the function of mass media as a surreptitious opinion shaper is inherent in the description of an anti-fascist street ceremony and volunteers offering lunch for residents and migrants in front of “*newsstands selling local papers headlined “Pamela: Torture and Crime, The Secrets of the Nigerians.”*”

Conclusion

The research confirms that CIVIL SOCIETY is presented in English-language mass media as a narrative concept, yet news reports and opinion articles differ significantly in the way they depict the concept.

A peculiar feature of news reports is their ‘headlines narratives’, which follow a pattern with the slots reserved for participants (civil society members and their opponents), their goal-directed action(s), and outcome. The main body of news reports is also marked with high-scale narrativity, though the ordering of reported events is reversed: from the current situation (outcome for the time being) back to the initial situation and participants’ actions that bring them to where they are at the moment of publication. News reports shape the slots in CIVIL SOCIETY political narrative concept as follows: activists act to eliminate a social problem and confront their opponents who respond by persecuting the activists.

Opinion articles are woven with overlapping narratives of several civil society representatives and, thus, embed them in a complex sociopolitical context, where they oppose each other. People’s ‘close-up’ stories are combined with zooming out, i.e., flashbacks to history or a switch from the local to the global. Artfully enhanced by juxtaposing, contrast and metaphors, this story-telling technique presents CIVIL SOCIETY political narrative concept as omnipresent in all social strata and, therefore, multi-dimensional and fractal.

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Appendix

	Author and Title	Media	Date	Link
1	Baggs, M. <i>Greta Thunberg's Atlantic crossing: 'Why I wanted to help'</i>	BBC	Dec 4, 2019	https://bbc.com/news/newsbeat-50659318
2	<i>Activists sentenced over milk pouring stunts</i>	BBC	Dec 12, 2024	https://bbc.com/news/articles/cm2vejejr7o
3	Grant, J. <i>Greyhound protesters overturn compensation order</i>	BBC	Aug 5, 2024	https://bbc.com/news/articles/cn9lll0d555o
4	<i>Italy migrant rescue boat: Captain Carola Rackete freed</i>	BBC	Jul 2, 2019	https://bbc.com/news/world-europe-48838438
5	<i>Hong Kong: Pro-democracy activist Tony Chung jailed under security law</i>	BBC	Nov 23, 2021	https://bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-59390728
6	Wehner, G. <i>Greta Thunberg interrupted at climate protest after changing the topic to the Israel-Hamas war</i>	Fox News	Nov 12, 2023	https://foxnews.com/world/greta-thunberg-interrupted-climate-protest-changing-topic-israel-hamas-war
7	Price, S. <i>Climate activists learn fate for red powder attack on US Constitution at National Archives</i>	Fox News	Nov 25, 2024	https://foxnews.com/us/climate-activists-learn-fate-red-powder-attack-us-constitution-national-archives
8	<i>Extinction Rebellion: Activists block four London bridges</i>	BBC	Apr 15, 2022	https://bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-61120179
9	<i>Climate change: Young people across Europe protest by skipping school</i>	BBC	Jan 24, 2019	https://bbc.co.uk/newsround/46988771
10	<i>Climate protesters glue themselves to John Constable masterpiece</i>	BBC	Jul 5, 2022	https://bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-62038615
11	Betz, B. <i>Violence breaks out after anti-Israel agitators surround LA synagogue, clash with Israel supporters</i>	Fox News	Jun 23, 2024	https://foxnews.com/us/violence-breaks-out-after-anti-israel-agitators-surround-la-synagogue-clash-israel-supporters
12	<i>Climate Change: Young people across Europe protest by skipping school</i>	BBC	Jan 24, 2019	https://bbc.co.uk/newsround/46988771
13	<i>Climate strikes spread worldwide as students call for action</i>	BBC	March 15, 2019	https://bbc.com/news/world-47581585
14	<i>School strike for climate: Protests staged around the world</i>	BBC	May 24, 2019	https://bbc.com/news/world-48392551
15	<i>Climate strike: Thousands protest across UK</i>	BBC	Sept 20, 2019	https://bbc.com/news/uk-49767327

	Author and Title	Media	Date	Link
16	<i>Extinction Rebellion: Seventy arrested at climate change protests</i>	BBC	Apr 17, 2022	https://bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-61133235
17	<i>Police arrest 170 at NSW Rising Tide protest as activists temporarily block coal ships</i>	The Guardian	Nov 24, 2024	https://theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/nov/24/police-arrest-170-at-nsw-rising-tide-protest-as-activists-temporarily-block-coal-ships
18	<i>Activists sentenced over milk pouring stunts</i>	BBC	Dec 12, 2024	https://bbc.com/news/articles/cm2vejejr7o
19	Hill, B. <i>Moms for Liberty warns 'hate group' label is 'putting targets' on backs of parents: 'Very concerned'</i>	Fox News	Jul 12, 2023	https://foxnews.com/media/moms-for-liberty-warns-hate-group-label-putting-targets-backs-concerned-mothers
20	Richard L. <i>Climate activists have new target in mind for major summer protest: 'Make their lives miserable'</i>	Fox News	Apr 23, 2024	https://foxnews.com/politics/climate-activists-new-target-mind-major-summer-protest-make-lives-miserable
21	McGuinness D. & Kirby, P. <i>German police raid climate activists who blocked traffic</i>	BBC	May 24, 2023	https://bbc.com/news/world-europe-65693412
22	Youngs, I. <i>Van Gogh's Sunflowers back on display after oil protesters threw soup on it</i>	BBC	Oct 14, 2022	https://bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-63254878
23	Clements, L. <i>Ivory Coast asylum seeker becomes top Welsh language activist</i>	BBC	Oct 10, 2023	https://bbc.com/news/uk-wales-67065122
24	Horowitz, J. <i>This Italian Town Once Welcomed Migrants. Now, It's a Symbol for Right-Wing Politics</i>	New York Times	Jul 7, 2018	https://nytimes.com/2018/07/07/world/europe/italy-macerata-migrants.html

COVID-19 COMICS AS GRAPHIC NETWORKS OF NON-EMERGENT HEALTHCARE: A MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF PANDEMIC COMICS

Albeena Stephen¹, Reshma Jacob²

^{1,2}CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore, India

Abstract: COVID-19 comic discourses articulating lived experiences during lockdown, isolation, and quarantine constructed a creative space of self and collective care. This research article explores how the multimodality within COVID-19 comic discourses aids in constructing a 'networked public of graphic care'. Resorting to Dannah Boyd's (2008; 2011) methodological framework of 'networks of graphic care,' comics on the themes of self-care, coping mechanisms, and mental well-being from the work *COVID Chronicles: A Comics Anthology* (Boileau & Johnson, 2021) is analysed. A Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) is performed to decipher the visual and verbal comic devices employed in constructing this graphic network of care using Thierry Groensteen (2007) and Scott McCloud's (2008) comic theories. The analysis highlights the various visual and linguistic techniques that enhance the communicative effectiveness of COVID-19 comics as self-care tools. By intervening in the visuality of COVID-19 comics as a tool of mental healthcare on individual and collective levels, this study illustrates the potential of comic narratives as a sustainable mode of sustenance and care in times of adversity and uncertainty. Furthermore, drawing from the results, the article also proposes the potentiality of comic discourses as non-emergent healthcare tools and a pedagogical tool for the successive policy implementation of mental healthcare measures.

Keywords: COVID-19 Comics, Graphic care, Mental health, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), Self and collective care

About the author: Albeena Stephen is a researcher at the Department of English and Cultural Studies at CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore, India. Her doctoral work in graphic medicine attempts to explore the visual language within COVID-19 Comics to understand the narrativization of psychological distress. An awardee of the Indian Council of Social Science Doctoral Research Fellowship, she was also a Summer Visiting Doctoral Research Fellow at Boston College, Massachusetts, USA. Her publications and research interests include comic/cartoon studies, trauma studies, posthumanism, and climate fiction. She is also a Secretarial Assistant to the *Artha Journal of Social Sciences*.

e-mail: albeena.stephen@res.christuniversity.in

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7045-2745>

About the author: Dr Reshma Jacob, Assistant Professor, CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore, India has completed her higher studies in Linguistics from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her MPhil and PhD were on the phonological aspect of second language acquisition and learning. She has to her credit paper presentations and research publications in various national and International conferences and refereed journals pertaining to the field of grammaticalization, sociolinguistics, phonetics and Phonology.

e-mail: reshma.jacob@christuniversity.in

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9656-9968>

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Introduction¹

The COVID-19 outbreak invoked a worldwide health emergency and was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation on March 11, 2020. The sudden disruption of physical and mental health was one of the most visible implications that led to a severe collapse of several global public health achievements (Holst, 2020, pp. 1396-1403; Mejia et al., 2020, pp. 99-103). Deemed as a global traumatic stressor, the visible mental health implications of the pandemic ranged from depression, stress, anxiety, fear, and stigma, caused by various sociocultural stressors like prolonged quarantine, deprivation of social interaction, information overload and further (Beam & Kim, 2020, p. 58; Menzies & Menzies, 2020, p. 3; Marshall, 2020, p. 340; Brooks et al., 2020, pp. 912-930). The COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant lack of non-emergent health care. It demanded alternative sources and mediums of care, and this study explores the potentiality of comic discourses as mental healthcare tools. COVID-19 comics, via empathy-driven relatable narratives, served as the most cost-effective advocates for healthcare access, facilitators of emotional support, and educational mediums for reducing and coping with the physical and mental pressure of the pandemic.

The paper's primary agenda springs from the same, i.e. to examine the utilisation of COVID-19 comic discourses as mental health care tools, specifically by decoding the interactive semiotic activity that unfolds within the act of comic creation and consumption. It explores the effective visual and verbal strategies used to construct a communicative act within COVID-19 comics discourses in static multimodal print mediums. The study's scope attempts to contribute to the existing scholarship on graphic medicine, an interdisciplinary field that explores the intersection of comics and healthcare discourses (Czerwiec et al., 2015, p. 1). The data is taken from the 2021 published work, *COVID Chronicles: A Comic Anthology*, edited by Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson, a collection of around sixty-five comics from artists worldwide. Ranging through various narrative styles, the anthology consists of comic discourses depicting characters battling the emotional toll of pandemic-curbing measures, fear and anxiety of catching the virus, the stigma suffered by patients, the grief of losing loved ones, and more. These discourses served as a platform for collective storytelling, enabling comic creators to voice their struggles and, through the same, helping the readers navigate their own mental health struggles. Therefore, the selected anthology offers an avenue to look further into the scope of COVID-19 comic discourses and explore the plausibilities of using these as mental health care tools.

1. This research is a part of the researcher's doctoral research on COVID-19 comics, funded by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), Doctoral Research Fellowship by the Ministry of Education, Government of India. Grant number: ICSSR/RFD/2023-24/18 as per the award letter issued on 27-12-2023

The research article is formulated as an analytical essay. It provides a comprehensive, in-depth, and objective multimodal discourse analysis of select comics from the anthology to demonstrate how the interactive affordances of visual and verbal elements help in the effective construction of a communicative act. The multimodality within the communicative ability of static comics can be bifurcated into visual and verbal elements, each having a specific task and function in the meaning-making process. Consumers of comics are major partakers in this communicative process, and their interpretation of the various multimodal cues leads to the completion of the discursive process. As Pinar (2014) argues, the repertoire of means of expression in comics includes verbal, pictorial, and typographic signs, which combine in a monosensory medium, and the comic relies on only one of the senses – the eyes – to convey a world of experience to transmit multimodal meaning (*ibid.*, p. 360). An amalgamation of visual elements like spatio-topia, panels, colour palettes, icons, and further along with verbal or linguistic aspects like grammar, sentence construction, usage of pronouns, font size, shape and spacing and further engages the reader in a communicative act and, through that, facilitates the co-construction of comic discourses. This visual-verbal synergy within COVID-19 comics creates an immersive, cathartic, and economic narrative construction process. Thereby, the analysis section of this study illustrates the interactive affordance of the multimodality of comic discourses that facilitates the same. However, neither the research article nor the researchers involved are posing to make any medical, psychiatric, or psychological claims that comics can replace medicalised support. Instead, this research is a modest attempt to build on existing scientific, psychological, and graphic medicine works that propose comics as a plausible alternative for mental health support. Furthermore, since it is a work done by literary and cultural studies researchers, the study strictly focuses on the visual language of comics.

Review of previous literature

The heightened production of discourses on the COVID-19 pandemic reveals its significant media presence, unlike other pandemics (Klein & DeTora, 2023, p. 2). Li (2024) writes about a shift from purely linguistic forms to the domination of images, audio, videos, and other modalities, demonstrating a significant multimodal characteristic, a visible trend observed within COVID-19 pandemic discourses (Li, 2024, p. 1). The affordances embedded within visual discourses offer a communicative effectiveness in conveying complex emotions. Thereby, visual discourses provide effective strategies for producing, organising, and distributing messages that can potentially engage audiences on a visually enunciating level (Glowka, 2023, p. 89). Therefore, examining these discourses reveals how the pandemic was conceived, communicated, and represented in the initial phase. Tan and Marissa's (2023) edited collection of essays cumulates

an analysis of the various multimodal discourses from the early stages of the pandemic, circulated via various mediums and reveals how these discourses helped shape the wider communicative meanings of uncertain situations and their impact on daily lives (*ibid.*, p. 3). In the larger context of mental health narratives, it can be argued that visual pandemic discourses furthered the evolution of visual health literacy/care discourses as they aided in informing about the virus and, through that, shaping the perception and understanding of the viral containment (Ternullo, 2022, pp. 1096-1109; Gabore, 2020, p. 299; Nickl et al., 2024, p. 2). Henceforth, to quote Callender et al., “In our increasingly visual society, images are a vital component of the outbreak narrative and ... contribute to the visual culture of contagion” (2020, p. 1061).

Within the various modalities of visual pandemic discourses, several studies revealed the heightened production of comics, cartoons, and infographics that offered pandemic protective and stress-coping measures (Callender et al., 2020, pp. 1061-1063; Saji et al., 2021, pp. 136-157; Peter et al., 2023, p. 102; Murray, 2022, pp. 1-40; Mustafa, 2021, p. 23; Venkatesan & Joshi, 2022, p. 698). Digital technological interventions made it easier for comic creators, illustrators, and publishers to reach a larger audience in real-time and engage in discursive communication on the mental health implications of the various pandemic preventive measures. Most COVID-19 comic discourses attempted to address the mental health challenges experienced due to the stringent measures of isolation, lockdown, and quarantine. Peter and colleagues (2023) state that healthcare comics economically and effectively convey vital information to a massive audience through simple verbal-visual narrative elements, and this adds to the social commitment of affordable healthcare that the field of graphic medicine inhibits (*ibid.*, p. 103). This further highlights the utility value of COVID-19 comic discourses for crisis communication and coping mechanisms as they offer an “alternate way of presenting data” (Al-Jawad & Czerwiec, 2019, p. 90). To substantiate the same, several works highlight how the contribution of comic discourses has strengthened the healthcare discourses within the context of AIDS (McAllister, 1992, p. 22; Czerwiec, 2018, p. 200), disability studies (Squier, 2008, p. 72), infertility (Venkatesan & Murali 2018, pp. 609-621; Venkatesan & Murali, 2020, pp. 576–595) and further.

The vivid functionality of COVID-19 comics as effective medical discourses emanates from the semiotic potential embedded within the co-deployment of verbal and visual elements, facilitating the understanding of complex and abstract concepts (Lim et al., 2021, pp. 45-55; Saji et al., 2021, pp. 136-154). This strategy aids in constructing a visual narrative, enabling active reader participation by invoking an understanding of the message, influencing the attitude towards the message, and the intent to act after reading the message (Tan & Marissa, 2023, pp. 44-46). An advantage of pandemic discourses via the comic medium is their ability to cushion the negative impacts of the

pandemic stress (Alabi, 2021, p. 1) as it creates an “emotionally engaging but safe environment” (Tan & Marissa, 2023, p. 46). Mazowita uses Boyd’s (2008, 2011) concept of networked publics to analyse Instagram-based mental health comics. She expands the phrase “networked publics” to “networks of graphic care”, where she defines these Instagram comics on COVID-19 as “mental health communities which form on social networking platforms” (Mazowita, 2022a, n.p). Her research focuses on the comment thread responses to the comics rather than the visuality within comic discourses. However, her work is far from performing an intricate visual discourse analysis of these comics (Mazowita, 2022a; Mazowita, 2022b, pp. 99-114); the analysis section of this study attempts to fill that gap by venturing into the discursive structure within COVID-19 comics that facilitates care and catharsis in times of care. Hence, the core objectives of this paper are: (a) Defining and establishing COVID-19 comic discourses within the anthology as “networked publics of graphic care”. (b) Deciphering the potential of COVID-19 comic discourses as a sustainable tool of care in times of crisis. (c) Analysing select comic discourses within the anthology to decipher the utilisation of multimodality to create narratives that function as sites of self and collective care.

Methodology and Method

The research borrows Dannah Boyd’s (2008, 2011) concept of “networks of graphic care” as the methodological framework to decipher the comic devices employed in constructing this graphic network of care. The analysis section performs a Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) of select comics on themes of self-care, coping mechanisms, and mental well-being from the anthology using Thierry Groensteen’s (2007) and Scott McCloud’s (2008) comic theories. Bateman and Wildfeuer (2014) criticise linguistically inspired analysis methods for the visual medium of comics and propose a method based on models of discourse that facilitates the understanding of comics as a social practice of visual communication – this adherence to discourse coherence plays an important role in interpretation (2014, pp. 384-400). Further, they argue that this method “offers a suitable basis for a new round of more detailed empirical investigations of the nature of comics and visual meaning-making – one which lets us move beyond the application of metaphors of grammaticality” (Bateman & Wildfeuer, 2014, p. 401). They build further on the structurality of this analysis method based on the comic theories of Groensteen (2007; 2013) and McCloud (2008). The analysis method this research adopts is juxtaposed with the same scholarship, and this discursive analysis method is applied to COVID-19 comics within the anthology. This further strengthens the standpoint of positioning COVID-19 comics as “visual discourses” and offers an avenue for exploring the role of the meaning-making process in the construction of a network of graphic care.

Boyd formulates the idea of “social network sites as a genre of networked publics” (Boyd, 2011, p. 39), defining “networked publics” as spaces reconstructed by networked technologies that form an imagined collective through the intersection of people, technologies, and practices, facilitating social, cultural, and civic engagement by enabling people to connect beyond their immediate personal networks (Boyd, 2011, pp. 38-39). She emphasises that the dynamics of networked publics transcend the digital realm, integrating into everyday life. Building on this framework, the article conceptualises the COVID-19 comics within the anthology as a creative space that engenders a “networked public of graphic care”. The comic discourses within the anthology serve as both creative expressions and catalysts for forming a networked public through the heightened reader engagement of the form. Within this framework, comic discourses emerge as a potent medium that fosters deeper audience interaction with the sign systems constructed by creators. The construction of COVID-19 comic discourses offered the comic creators a therapeutic opportunity to voice the hinged psychological turmoils, thus making visible their experiences. It also provided a comforting sense of solidarity for the individuals within the reading public, inhibiting the same uncertain reality. The consumers of these discourses could make sense of their pandemic experiences by suiting the sign system to fit their needs. Hence, these comics also functioned as a site of self and communal care. The visual system within comic discourses makes the whole process more evocative and engaging than any other medium, thereby forging a deeper reader-creator connection. Livingstone (2005) offers an additional lens to understand the public, defining them as groups with a shared understanding of the world, a collective identity, and a claim to inclusiveness based on a consensus of shared values and interests (*ibid.*, p. 9). Within this definition, the comic discourses within the anthology function as a public sphere, amalgamating creators and consumers into a community, and the relatability in terms of the themes within the comic discourses further asserts the same. Through narrativising their experiences of quarantine and lockdown for an imagined audience, the comic creators not only locate and define their own experiences but also contribute to a broader public dialogue. The public constituting this networked public is largely unknown, comprising strangers who witness the comic creators’ work. As Boyd (2011) argues, networked publics are not confined by geographic or temporal boundaries (*ibid.*, p. 50), and the anthology exemplifies this by making the experiences of pandemic-induced psychological distress widely accessible. Two key factors reinforce this idea of a mediated public: firstly, the functioning of the anthology as a shared archive of pandemic experiences, and secondly, the replicability of these comics fostered a sense of collective suffering.

Analysis & Discussion

The structure of themes within the COVID-19 comics within the select anthology aligns with McNicol's (2016) argument on the various purposes of healthcare comics, ranging from raising awareness, preparing patients on what to expect from medical procedures, assisting with decision-making, promoting self-management, or simply increasing understanding and acceptance of a condition (*ibid.*, pp. 21-22). The size of the comics within the anthology, spanning just a few pages, is another critical aspect that makes them suitable for healthcare comics because they can reach a larger audience. Further, by binding over these visual comic discourses, this networked public gets entwined over an "affective sense of belonging" evoked by the visual sign system of comics (Mazowita, 2022a, n.p; Hendry, 2020, p. 8). This sense of belongingness is not detrimental by medical diagnostic tools and symptoms; instead, it is the socio-cultural self-identification that the constituents of this public make with the visual sign system. This self-identification emanated from an element of relatability inhibited within mutual lived experiences. This relatability experienced by the consumers can be within the creator's entire narrative perspective within the comics, or probably just a couple of panels, a single panel or characters, or even, for that matter, just a minute visual element within the entire comic narrative. Divided into four major thematic divisions, the multimodal discourse analysis is structured using broader visual and verbal techniques within the text. The attempt is to draw on comics that fit under such techniques and then perform an in-depth analysis of one sample each from the text.

Spatio-topia, mirroring techniques, and semantic load

Sara Firth's 'State of Emergency' is a seven-page comic narrating the emotional crisis experienced by the protagonist narrator from the anthology. The structuring of the narrative can be analysed along Freytag's (1900) pyramid of dramatic action in five stages. The comic begins with an exposition, laying out the setting and context of the first wave of the pandemic and the sudden mood of uncertainty. Juxtaposing the scene with the devastating Australian bushfires, the orange-yellow colour pallets on the first page and the masked narrator add to the exposition. The second page underlies the rising action by depicting the building tension of the impacts of pandemic uncertainty, such as information overload, screen saturation, and mental health strains resulting from the same. Most panels on this page consist of close-up shots of the character, heightening the impact of this building emotional tension. The third page depicts the climax, the turning point that transforms the protagonist's situation in resolving a positive angle.



Figure 1. Fourth page from 'State of Emergency' by Sarah Firth.
 Reproduced with permission from the artist.

The critical emphasis of the storyline, drawing as a mental health tool, comes within this climax stage, where the narrator testifies that “I’ve been drawing and writing. A way to think and feel on the page. To try and make sense of all this”. This caption is placed on a panel that shows her creating a dotted concentric circle icon on a page. This icon inversely reflects the concentric spiral icon, where the narrator, etched to an aeroplane, is stuck within the second panel at the top right corner. As Groensteen (2007) elaborates on the concepts of spatio-topia within the system of comics, the reflexive technique mirrors an inversion. This inversion reflects an emotional transformation from emotional entanglement to emotional liberation. Groensteen highlights that the site of a panel within a page layout determines its significance within the reading protocol (2007, p. 34). The most pivotal panels within the climax stage are situated perpendicularly at the bottom right corner of the third page. This positioning enhances the narrative significance of the panels and hence heightens the impact of the message conveyed. The lower right-hand corner comes right before turning the page, bringing forth the dramatic effect of a transition and closure. This site emphasises the idea of closure because this panel serves as the narrative endpoint for the sequence of panels on the page. This added weight makes it an apt site to incorporate this powerful resolving

visual. Also, the ending panel before turning the page affects the natural reading rhythm, allowing the reader to contemplate and absorb the message. These visual techniques deepen the significance of the narrative and the message conveyed by the panel. The panel that proceeds to the next page, i.e. the fourth page, is an extension of the climax. A rectangular bleeding panel, occupying half of the page's area in landscape mode, breaks the existing panel layouts on the previous page. These further garner more reader attention towards the panel content, which is structured as a message for the readers. The panel emphasises, "Start where you are. Do what you can...I remind myself that I've got to separate my well-being from the global news cycle". The bleeding panel furthers the metaphor of emotional liberation from pandemic anxieties through art and self-care. Hence, Firth, highlighting this idea through her comic, constructs a self-reflexive comic and furthers the message of care to the consumers of her comic. Furthermore, the spatial composition of the comic employs a linguistic application of the diagonal mirroring technique creatively to depict the various stimuli and the various emotional consequences within the first and fourth panels on the third page. In both these panels, that is, the various stimuli in panel one and consequences in panel four, are verbally enclosed within word clouds and positioned along path lines emanating from the wry facial expression of the protagonist. The all-caps font, along with these visualisation techniques, highlights the communicative effectiveness of the message, encompassing visual and verbal cues. Also, throughout the entire comic, Firth capitalises all the words with a higher semantic load, which guides the readers further into the core message of the comic.

Repetition of affirmative phrases and usage of second-person pronouns

The three-page comic "Sheltering in Place: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" from the anthology by Ajuan Mance depicts the transition of the mental state of the character as the lockdown begins and proceeds further in time. The comic visually depicts some of the stressors and the state of distress invoked by the same via manipulating panel size, gutter gap, and colour palette. As we proceed through the tripartite panels from pages one to three, the panel width decreases from 5.5cm to 4.5cm to 4.2cm, the gutter gap increases from 0.5cm to 0.7cm to 0.9cm, and the colour palette transitions from yellow to orange to red. Most countries resorted to a colour coding system of Blue/Yellow/Orange/Red to indicate the intensity and number of COVID-19 cases from high to low. Hence, the colour palette transition from Yellow to Orange to Red within Mance's comic can also be interpreted as depicting the prolonged duration of the lockdown as COVID-19 cases escalated significantly.



Figure 2. Panels from 'Sheltering in Place: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly' by Ajuan Mance. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

This is evident from the second panel on the third page, where the character is seen holding a newspaper that reads "virus in 50 states", and the third panel within the same page shows a TV screen that says "COVID-19 pandemic now global". The increased gutter gap can be interpreted as the extended duration of the lockdown that built up a sense of uncertainty and a heightened need for social distancing. It further reflects the separation and loneliness that emanated as the days of lockdown increased. McCloud (2008) depicts how tight and narrow panels are often used within action sequences to create a feeling of tension and suspense. Simultaneously, the decrease in panel width here adds to the sense of confinement, the claustrophobic nature of being quarantined, and the tension built up as a counter-result of extended lockdowns. The comic employs a graphic technique to assert that collective care is visible in the phrasing and

placement of comic captions. The comic technique used here is the repetition of affirming words and phrases. Comic captions on the third page assert the idea of collective care by repeating the phrase “YOU ARE NOT ALONE”. From a linguistic angle, looking at the verbal elements used within this comic, the sentence is framed as a declarative sentence. Further, using the second-person pronoun ‘you’ cultivates the intimate feeling that the narrator directly addresses the reader and positions them more emotionally within the communicative act. These visual and verbal techniques exemplify the discursive attempt to enunciate a feeling of catharsis within the readers, providing a global companionship for the consumers of these comics. The narrative voice asserts that feelings of isolation, fear, and frustration are collective emotions that the networked public feels, which constitute the creation and consumption of the comic. The repetition of affirmative phrases provides a feeling of care by creating a mantra-like effect, thus emanating soothing and visual reassurance.

Profanity and the interplay of visual metaphors

In “Quarantine Week 10” by Comic Nurse, utilises the visual metaphor of angels and devils to represent the duality of emotional experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This creative interplay between “good” and “bad” figures is a symbolic space for exploring the emotional frustration and ambiguity experienced during prolonged quarantine. Rather than demonising negative emotions, the comic engages these feelings with empathy, presenting them as part of a shared human experience rather than isolating or chastising them. The juxtaposition of angels and devils within the comic allows readers to navigate their emotional landscapes, especially the confusing mix of emotions brought on by pandemic confinement. By visually depicting these emotional polarities, the comic helps readers process their internal conflicts, validating the wide range of positive and negative feelings they may have experienced. The caption tags assigned to these figures further emphasise the emotional bifurcation common to the pandemic experience. For instance, in the third panel, the devil emanates phrases like “WHERE’S YOUR GOD NOW?”, “STOP WAITING”, “ALL IS LOST”, and “YOU LOOK TERRIBLE” which reflect the emotional weight of doubt, despair, and impatience that many felt during quarantine. These negative emotions, however, are not simply left unchecked. The introduction of four angels empathetically counterbalances them, each representing virtues: FAITH, HOPE, PATIENCE, and HUMILITY.



Figure 3. *'Quarantine Week 10' by Comic Nurse. Reproduced with permission from the artist*

This visual metaphor symbolises a conscious effort to counteract the emotional temptations of negativity, demonstrating the internal struggle between despair and resilience. The angels become symbols of emotional regulation, embodying the values needed to resist the pull of negative emotions during such an uncertain time. In this way, the comic visually and narratively constructs a dialogue between emotional fluctuation and moral guidance, inviting readers to reflect on their own experiences of inner conflict. By personifying these emotional struggles through the metaphors of devils and angels, the comic allows the audience to identify and name their feelings, making them more manageable and less overwhelming. This is particularly evident in the devils' second appearance, where they tempt the reader with behaviours contradicting pandemic protocols: "GO TO THAT FRAT PARTY," "IT'S END TIMES!" "MASKS ARE DUMB!" and "SOCIAL DISTANCING MY ASS!" Loaded with profanity, these sentences employ the same language as a linguistic tool. Studies within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic exemplify that using profane language helps handle emotional and physical pain (Hussain et al., 2023, p. 2). Hence, these emanata embody emotional temptations and the frustrations tied to pandemic fatigue and rebellion against public health measures. Again, the comic introduces the counteracting angels, now masked, offering empathetic responses that reinforce emotional resilience: "LISTEN TO US!," "HANG IN THERE!," "WE'RE STILL HERE!," and "HEY, MY WINGSPAN IS SIX

FEET, BACK UP.” These comforting sentences counter the profane language by offering hope and support. Therefore, these dialogic exchanges between devils and angels, fashioned as linguistic opposites in terms of the mood of the sentence, are symbolic of emotional fluctuation and are designed to offer therapeutic relief. By presenting these emotional conflicts in a conversational, even humorous manner, the comic establishes a network of care, where readers are invited to actively engage with their emotional responses and find comfort in shared struggles. Through this structured visual metaphor of good versus bad, the comic creates a cathartic and therapeutic environment, transforming the narrative into a space of shared care. This visual technique encourages readers to acknowledge and address their emotional instability without judgment, providing a supportive communal space for emotional processing. The counter-positioning of emotional fluctuations, represented by the devils and angels, highlights the comic’s role in fostering emotional balance. Rather than dismissing negative emotions, the comic uses these visual metaphors to explore how resilience, patience, and hope coexist with feelings of despair and frustration, ultimately creating a space of emotional care that engages the networked public in a dialogue between individual experience and collective empathy. The comic depicts the emotional struggle and actively participates in the care process, offering recognition and resolution for the conflicting emotions experienced during the pandemic. Through this creative use of metaphor and visual dialogue, the comic becomes a tool of graphic care, offering readers a pathway to emotional catharsis and community-based resilience.

Panel styling and spatiality

Gerry Chow’s comic ‘Meditations’ from the anthology consists of seven pages, each containing a single panel. Structured as an internal monologue, the comic captures the narrator’s perception of the emotional landscape of the pandemic. Notably, all panels within the comic, except the one on the fifth page, are ‘bleeding panels,’ a panel as McCloud (2008) describes, wherein the artwork extends beyond the panel’s borders. This technique disrupts the ‘spatiotopia’ that Groensteen (2007) describes as a page’s spatial/locative layout. It offers an avenue to venture into the notions of confinement and freedom, visually reflecting the emotional and psychological experience of the pandemic. Through the narrator’s dialogue on the chaotic and overwhelming nature of pre-pandemic life, the bleeding panels immerse the reader in a chaotic emotional environment characterised by constant hustle and rush. Amidst this visual and emotional intensity, the fifth page introduces a stark contrast: a single “confined panel” depicting a caricature of a character with closed eyes, accompanied by the caption “BREATHE”. The preceding panel on the fourth page portrays three stifled figures alongside the captions: “routines like constant movements in circles concentric habits kept us spinning,” “in our bodies in our heads,”

and “leaving us so preoccupied that we might just forget to”. The transition to the confined panel Chow brings within the fifth page, with the singular word “breathe”, emphasises a deliberate shift in tone.



Figure 4. Fifth page from 'Meditation' by Gerry Chow.
Reproduced with permission from the artist.

Here, the narrator uses the confinement of the pandemic as a symbolic space to pause and reflect, suggesting a reprieve from the relentless pace of daily life. In this way, Chow presents a positive recontextualisation of the pandemic, framing it as an opportunity to slow down, breathe, and regain composure. The consistent use of the first-person plural pronoun 'us' throughout the comic transforms the narrative into a collective internal dialogue, where the reader is invited to partake in the experience. The comic thus offers a psychological message, revamping the negative aspects of the pandemic into an opportunity for collective mental pause and self-care. Hence, the comic's sole "confined panel" has been tactically used to convey the idea of reconsidering the pandemic as a moment of collective pause and care. The manipulation of spatio-topia has been creatively used to define the pandemic as a space of collective care.

Conclusion and future implications

From the select examples of analysis in the previous section, it is evident that comic discourses offer an accessible and comprehensive format for the co-deployment of visual and verbal elements and thus create a widely accessible interpretative space. The artists have creatively used the system of comics to depict the emotional turbulence invoked by the initial phase of the pandemic. These communicative elements within these comics are fashioned engagingly and interactively in terms of verbal and visual cues, which offer the comic consumers an avenue to engage in critical discourse with their own emotional responses towards the pandemic. The analysis affirms the argument that the various artists' communicative techniques have resorted to functioning as a do-it-yourself self-help care site and helping construct a networked public of graphic care. These comic discourses are a shared experience of coping and offer community care and resilience through accessible and cost-effective creativity. The interplay of spatiotopic techniques like mirroring, closure, gutter gap, and panel styling, along with linguistic techniques like thrust on semantic load, usage of pronouns, profane language and irregular grammatical sentences, demands of the comic consumers to be more than just passive readers but rather active partakers in the communicative act.

Compiling around sixty-five short comics with the theme of "living through the pandemic", the anthology affirms that "no one is alone" and that we are all together. Most comics offer a resolution to untangle the psychological and emotional turmoils experienced directly and indirectly by creatively utilising the flexibility and high readerly engagement embedded within the system of comics. These comics offered comfort and sustained the networked public of comic creators and consumers etched to them. Therefore, it can be argued that the anthology and the comics serve as non-emergent sources of self-care and collective mental health care extended during a global crisis. Seeing one's experiences replicated within the work through the lived experiences of the comic characters was the factor that incited the readership of COVID-19 comics. This is how these comic discourses served as alternatives to cope with the absence of non-emergent healthcare sources as society resorted to popular culture for therapeutic and cathartic relief. As a mediated public sphere of graphic care, these comic discourses fostered collective meaning-making and emotional catharsis.

Drawing from the analysis and discussion section, it can be concluded that deploying visual and verbal communicative tools within intentional comic creation could act as therapeutic interventions. This potentiality of the system of comics, thereby, can be resorted to address post-pandemic mental health challenges. Comics offer a unique way to foster resilience and emotional balance by creating a networked public of graphic care. The patterns and results

derived from the discourse analysis can be used as a framework for pitching the pedagogy of comic discourses as an aide and method of imparting non-emergent care during times of crisis, akin to the pandemic in the future. Comics also offer a medium to normalise conversations around mental health. This can reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues and encourage community-based resilience and self-care. Comics can be resorted to as pedagogical tools for mental health care and education, as the narrative and multimodal flexibilities of the medium serve a therapeutic function by imparting a sense of narrative companionship and support – potentially easing the subjective articulation of fears, emotional distress, and other psychologically challenging experiences. Not akin to conventional objective, fact-based patient interaction, comics provide a more affective, emotionally resonant space of personal engagement – thereby enabling a navigation of emotional experiences, fostering reflective and empathetic engagement. Additionally, comics can be effectively integrated into training programs for mental health care professionals, facilitating a more empathetic, patient-centred, and relational mode of care. The use of comics as a compelling communication medium in public health communication and mental health literacy campaigns could also be explored, as comics offer a more emotionally oriented, culturally responsive, and accessible medium for community outreach. Also, incorporating comics into mental health education and awareness campaigns within school curricula or public health initiatives can support emotional literacy among students and the broader public.

The study's framework can inform post-pandemic strategies for addressing mental health concerns by leveraging comics as an innovative communication tool. This could play a vital role in preventing and managing mental health conditions cost-effectively, and engagingly, in line with the global focus on improving mental health services and psychosocial support. Nevertheless, this study has confined itself to a visual and verbal analysis of how the multimodal semiotic resources within these COVID-19 comic discourses can be utilised to construct healthcare discourses in an accessible and potentially effective manner. Such an approach can be subjective since it utilises researchers' analytical skills and lacks objective measures to examine the audience's reception of comics. However, this offers further scope for exploring the core objective empirically using technological audience reception skills in collaboration with medical practitioners and graphic artists.

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BREAKING THE RULES: AN ANALYSIS OF GRAMMATICAL DEVIATIONS IN BOB DYLAN'S LYRICS

Tsvetalina Aneva

Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen, Bulgaria

Abstract: *The present research examines the deviations from standard grammar that appear throughout Bob Dylan's lyrics. The study applies qualitative and quantitative analysis to analyse eleven types of errors, such as subject-verb agreement, double negation, noun followed by a personal pronoun, omission, using an adjectival form instead of adverbial form, etc., that appear in his lyrics and to determine their possible purpose and impact. The analysis reveals that being one of the most influential and innovative songwriters in history, Dylan has frequently challenged traditional language structures, often bending grammatical rules to enhance the artistic impact of his music.*

Keywords: *language in music, grammatical deviations, error analysis, Bob Dylan's lyrics, qualitative and quantitative analysis*

About the author: *Tsvetalina Georgieva Aneva, PhD, is a Senior assistant professor at the Department of English Studies at Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen, Bulgaria. Her academic interests are in the field of Cognitive Linguistics, Comparative Studies and Second-language acquisition research. She teaches grammar and vocabulary practice, academic reading and writing skills.*

e-mail: *c.aneva@shu.bg*

ORCID iD: *<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1193-420X>*

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“It’s not a question of breaking the rules, don’t you understand?
I don’t break rules because I don’t see any rules to break.
As far as I’m concerned there aren’t any rules.”
Bob Dylan

Introduction

The decision to focus on Bob Dylan’s lyrics is grounded in his remarkable impact on both music and literature. He is the only singer-songwriter who has been nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. In 2016, he was awarded the highly regarded honour “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition,” (All Nobel prizes in literature, n.d.), thus recognizing his role in making music a literary art form. While it is unquestionable that his lyrics are masterfully created and reflect his artistic talent, this paper explores the grammatical inaccuracies present in his work.

Theoretical background

Bob Dylan’s lyrics have been a central subject of research for decades. Many studies focus on sociolinguistic, literary, and discourse analyses of his songs. Previous research has examined themes like ambiguity, intertextuality, key phrases, motifs and politics within Dylan’s lyrics. Academic studies have discussed how Dylan’s use of ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations (Gearey, 1999; Al-Husseini, 2011). His lyrics often draw on intertextual references, engaging with literary, religious, and cultural texts to add depth to his message (Boucher & Browning, 2009; McDonald, 2018). Many studies also emphasize Dylan’s role in voicing criticism of social and political issues such as racism, inequality, and war in American society (Gezari, 2001; Muhadi, Thoyibi & Hidayat, 2014). Overall, these studies present Dylan’s lyrics as an exceptional combination of poetry, social awareness, and literary depth, showing how his work goes far beyond music (Shank, 2002; Lloyd, 2014; Czechowski, Miranda & Sylvestre, 2016; Mathews, 2017; Thakur, 2018; Yusuff, 2022).

Apart from thematic analyses of Dylan’s lyrics, other studies focus on quantitative analyses and error categorisation examining the educational and stylistic significance of nonstandard grammar in popular song lyrics (Nurchaerani et al., 2020; Žarković McCray, 2023). Werner (2020) analysed a 550k-word corpus of English pop lyrics, arguing these are not errors but intentional choices that help raise awareness about language and add personality and emotion to the music. Additionally, song-specific case studies have examined songs of various artists to understand how they use these features creatively and discuss their artistic effect (Uktolseja, 2020; Simanjuntak et al., 2022; Julieta, 2023). Together, these

studies prove that bending grammar rules in song lyrics is part of how artists make their songs authentic and connect with their audience.

Research methodology

The paper uses qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse the grammatical inconsistencies in 100 of Dylan's songs. Given the fact that his work covers multiple decades, a selection of the top 100 Bob Dylan songs, as ranked by Rolling Stone magazine, is used for this analysis (See Appendix). To guarantee accuracy, the lyrics have been obtained from the official Bob Dylan website (The official Bob Dylan Site, n.d.). By using the official site, the analysis ensures that the lyrics are presented as intended by the artist, free from any divergence that might emerge from unconfirmed sources.

Research questions

The questions which this study aims to address are:

1. What are the grammatical deviations in Bob Dylan's songs?
2. What are the most frequent types of deviation found in the lyrics?
3. What purpose do they serve?

The aims of this research are:

1. To identify and analyse the grammatical deviations in Bob Dylan's songs.
2. To identify the most frequent types of deviations.

Data analysis

The analysis of the data was carried out in a systematic process consisting of five key steps. Initially, the lyrics were downloaded from the relevant source, and any grammatical irregularities within the text were carefully extracted, paying special attention to the specific context in which each error¹ appeared. This made it possible to interpret the grammatical discrepancies in light of the surrounding context and overall meaning. The second step involved categorising these errors according to established grammatical rules. In the third phase, the errors were further examined to determine their possible purpose and impact, focusing on whether they were intentional for stylistic reasons. Finally, the analysis concluded with a comprehensive evaluation of the overall effect of these grammatical errors, considering their impact on the text. In the final stage a quantitative analysis was conducted.

1. The term "error" is used in the paper to describe deviations from standard English, referring to instances of usage that do not align with strict grammatical rules.

After studying 100 songs, 83 deviations from standard grammar have been found in 46 songs. The errors could be classified in 11 categories: double negation, improper use of the objective pronoun, incorrect subject-verb agreement, using an adjectival form instead of adverbial form, a noun followed by a personal pronoun, omission, incorrect past participle, the subjunctive, incorrect verb, word order, incorrect contracted form.

Results/ Key findings

Subject-verb agreement

The main parts in the grammatically correct English sentence are subject and the verb, which agree in number and person in order to fulfil their function. Thus, generally, singular subjects require singular verbs and plural subjects require verbs in the plural. There are, naturally, additional rules regarding compound and abstract subjects.

The analysed corpus of song lyrics reveals that twenty-two phrases in the lyrics of 18 songs presented in the following table do not comply with the rules of subject-verb agreement:

Table 1. *Subject-verb agreement*

Song	Original lyrics
Subterranean Homesick Blues	The pump don't² work
Positively 4th Street	What he don't know to begin with
Don't Think Twice, It's All Right	It don't matter, anyhow
Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again	But I know that he don't talk
Things have changed	I'm in love with a woman who don't even appeal to me
Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues	And negativity don't pull you through
Percy's Song	He just don't deserve
To Ramona	A world that just don't exist
Going, Going, Gone	Where the willow don't bend
It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry	Don't the moon look good, mama
It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry	Don't the brakeman look good, mama
It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry	Don't the sun look good

2. In the present paper the sentences that do not comply with strict grammatical rules are indicated by the subject word or phrase being marked by **boldface** letters along with a citation of the song source.

Song	Original lyrics
It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry	Don't my gal look fine
If You See Her, Say Hello	If she's passin' back this way, and I sure hope she don't
I'm Not There	She's my prize forsaken angel but she don't hear me cry
Highlands	And says, " That don't look a thing like me!"
Corrina, Corrina	Life don't mean a thing
Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)	This place don't make sense to me no more
Isis	There was no jewels , no nothin'
One more cup of coffee	There's no books upon your shelf
Sweetheart Like You	They say in your father's house, there's many mansions
Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)	Señor, señor, you know their hearts is as hard as leather

According to subject-verb agreement rules, the third person singular should be followed by the correct verb form. However, in these cases, the choice is clearly made for stylistic reasons – the songwriter has intentionally deviated from strict adherence to this rule, using the one-syllable “don’t” instead of the two-syllable “doesn’t” to reduce the number of syllables. It can be assumed that the decision to use “don’t” instead of “doesn’t” serves the rhythmic needs of the songs. This, however, does not refer to all of the examples included in this category. For instance, the phrase “There was no jewels” is not grammatically correct in standard English, as “was” is used with singular nouns. Using the correct form “were” would not change the rhythm of the song in any way. So, in this case we cannot say that Dylan has intentionally broken the rules for achieving an artistic or stylistic effect. Similarly, if the author had used “there’re no books” or “there’re many mansions”, the rhythm of the line would likely remain the same because the number of the syllables and the stress pattern would be very similar to “there’s no books” and “there’s many mansions”. The difference would be slight, and the line would still fit the music.

Double negation

It’s not unusual to see double negatives in song lyrics. Double negation is often used in song lyrics for a variety of stylistic reasons, such as to create emphasis, achieve a particular tone, or suit the rhythm and the melody. As such, the presence of double negatives in song lyrics highlights the dynamic relationship between grammar and artistic expression. Furthermore, double negatives are common in informal speech or certain dialects, and songs often try to capture

the natural way people speak. According to Cambridge dictionary “...we hear double and triple negatives spoken in some regional dialects of English. This is common when people from the same region are speaking with one another” (Double negative, n.d.). Using double negation can make the lyrics feel more conversational and authentic.

Table 2. *Double negation*

Song	Original lyrics
Like a Rolling Stone	You never understood that it ain't no good
All Along the Watchtower	There's too much confusion; I can't get no relief
Highway 61 Revisited	Welfare Department they wouldn't give him no clothes
Don't Think Twice, It's All Right	It ain't no use to sit and wonder why, babe
Don't Think Twice, It's All Right	It ain't no use in turnin' on your light, babe
Don't Think Twice, It's All Right	It ain't no use in callin' out my name, gal
You ain't goin' nowhere	You ain't goin' nowhere
Jokerman	Ain't nobody there would want to marry your sister
Percy's Song	But he ain't no criminal
Buckets of Rain	I ain't no monkey but I know what I like
Not Dark Yet	I ain't looking for nothing in anyone's eyes
Tombstone Blues	She ain't got no shoes
Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)	Son, this ain't a dream no more , it's the real thing
One Too Many Mornings	That don't mean no one no good
Highlands	I don't want nothing from anyone, ain't that much to take
Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)	This place don't make sense to me no more

The table presents 16 occurrences of double negation in 13 songs. Changing “nowhere”, “nothing”, “nobody”, “no one” to “anywhere”, “anything”, “anybody” and “anyone”, respectively would certainly affect the rhythm as an additional syllable would be added to each of the lines. It seems that the songwriter has chosen to prioritise the sound over strict grammatical accuracy. It can be concluded that this is not an error, but rather a deliberate choice of shorter words over their longer counterparts made by the songwriter for stylistic reasons. Michael Gray (2006) points out that Dylan's lyrical style is often shaped by the idiomatic speech of the American South and Midwest, which includes the frequent use of “ain't” and double negatives to convey emotional authenticity and resonance. Apart from giving the song a natural, almost conversational rhythm, the phrase “ain't no use” and its repetition in Bob Dylan's “Don't Think

Twice, *It's All Right* plays a crucial role in establishing the song's emotional tone, evoking a sense of hopelessness.

Noun followed by a personal pronoun

According to standard rules, a pronoun is used to take the place of a noun, functioning as its substitute. "A personal pronoun is a pronoun such as *I, you, she, or they* which is used to refer to the speaker or the person spoken to, or to a person or thing whose identity is clear, usually because they have already been mentioned" (personal pronoun, n.d.).

Table 3. *Noun followed by a personal pronoun*

Song	Original lyrics
Tangled Up In Blue	Her folks they said our lives together
All Along the Watchtower	Businessmen, they drink my wine
Visions of Johanna	The fiddler, he now steps to the road
Highway 61 Revisited	Well Georgia Sam he had a bloody nose
Highway 61 Revisited	Now the rovin' gambler he was very bored
Ballad of a Thin Man	Well, the sword swallower, he comes up to you
It's All Over Now, Baby Blue	All your seasick sailors, they are rowing home
Desolation Row	Cinderella, she seems so easy
Desolation Row	And the Good Samaritan, he's dressing
Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands	Oh, the farmers and the businessmen, they all did decide
Isis	The wind it was howlin' and the snow was outrageous
One Too Many Mornings	My eyes they start to fade
One more cup of coffee	Your daddy he's an outlaw
To Ramona" (1964)	But soon my words / They would turn into a meaningless ring
Most Likely You Go Your Way and I'll Go Mine	The judge, he holds a grudge
Highlands	The wind, it whispers to the buckeyed trees in rhyme

Sixteen instances in the lyrics, included in the research, feature a noun followed by a personal pronoun. In each case, the pronoun serves the same function as the noun. From a grammatical perspective, one of them – either the noun

or the pronoun – should be omitted. For instance, in the phrase “His voice it trembles as he calls out” the pronoun “it” is irrelevant and incorrect. In English grammar, the subject of the sentence (in this case, “his voice”) does not need to be repeated. The more accurate and natural version would simply be “His voice trembles”. However, in all of the examples included in this category the pronoun adds another syllable to the line and, therefore, it could be assumed that it is used for stylistic reasons.

Omission

Omission is “the fact of not including something that should have been included, or the thing that is not included” (omission, n.d.). It is generally used in colloquial speech and in telegraphic messages, where content words are retained and transmitted, while function words, i.e. auxiliaries, prepositions, etc., are being omitted to save space and costs.

All of the examples included in the table, lack the auxiliary verb “have” in the parts in bold:

Table 4. Omission

Song	Original lyrics
Isis	She said, “ You been gone”
Spanish Harlem Incident	I been wond’rin’ all about me
Spanish Harlem Incident	Ever since I seen you there
Up to Me	She’s the one you been wond’rin’ about, but there’s really nothin’ much to tell
Buckets of Rain	I been meek
Absolutely Sweet Marie	Now, I been in jail when all my mail showed
Tough Mama	Angel Baby, I wonder what you done back there
Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat	You know, I never seen him before
Going, Going, Gone	I been hangin’ on threads / I been playin’ it straight -
Pay in Blood	I been through hell, what good did it do?
Pay in Blood	You been accused of murder, how do you plead?
Corrina, Corrina	Gal, where you been so long?
Corrina, Corrina	I been worr’in’ ’bout you, baby
Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)	Seems like I been down this way before

In “You been gone” for instance, the correct version would be “You have been gone”. Adding the auxiliary verb “have” in its contracted form would not affect the rhythm, therefore it could be assumed that it is not left out to serve any rhythmic purposes. It likely reflects a deliberate choice to mirror informal speech patterns, typical of various dialects of English, in particular Southern American English, where omitting auxiliary verbs is common in everyday speech. Therefore, it could be assumed that it serves as a means of grounding the message within a specific cultural and social context.

Using an adjectival form instead of adverbial form

In standard English grammar, adverbs are often used to modify adjectives, adding precision and depth to descriptions. Eight examples that diverge from this rule are shown in the following table:

Table 5. *Adjective vs. adverb*

Song	Original lyrics
Like a Rolling Stone	Now you don't talk so loud
I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine	Arise, arise," he cried so loud
Things have changed	I hurt easy , I just don't show it
I Shall Be Released	All day long I hear him shout so loud
Desolation Row	Right now I can't read too good
Girl from the North Country	Where the winds hit heavy on the borderline
One of Us Must Know (Sooner or Later)	I didn't mean to treat you so bad
She's Your Lover Now	Why'd you have to treat me so bad

In the line “Now you don't talk so loud”, the use of the adjective “loud” is intentional and plays an important role in both the meaning and the structure of the song. Apart from being another example of informal or colloquial English, by using the adjective “loud” instead of the adverb “loudly”, the songwriter preserves the rhyme with “proud” in the line that follows (“Now you don't seem so proud”). Using the adverb “loudly” would not only disrupt the rhyme, but would also affect the rhythm in the line as the adverb would add one more syllable to the phrase. The same refers to “I didn't mean to treat you so bad”, where the adjective rhymes with “sad” in the next line (“I didn't mean to make you so sad”) and “All day long I hear him shout so loud, where “loud” rhymes with the noun “crowd”. (“Standing next to me in this lonely crowd/ Is a man who swears he's not to blame/ All day long I hear him shout so loud”). On the other hand, in “Why'd you have to treat me so bad”, using the adverb “badly” instead of the adjective “bad” would not be of any benefit with regard to the rhyming pattern.

Incorrect verb

Understanding the distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs is essential when analysing the grammatical accuracy of the usage of the verbs “lie” and “lay”. A transitive verb is one that requires a direct object to complete its meaning; the action of the verb is transferred to something or someone. In contrast, an intransitive verb does not need a direct object and can stand alone to convey a complete thought.

Table 6. *Incorrect verb*

Song	Original lyrics
Lay, lady, lay	Lay , lady, lay / Lay across my big brass bed
Tangled Up In Blue	I was layin' in bed

“Lie” is an intransitive verb (does not take an object), while “lay” is transitive which means that it should be accompanied by a direct object. What the author is really saying in this song is that the lady (the subject in the sentence) should lie down across his bed; hence, the correct form of the title and the song lyrics should be “Lie down lady”.

However, “lie” does not rhyme with “stay”, which appears in the following line (“Stay, lady, stay”), so it can be assumed that the choice of the verb “lay” could be explained with the reason for achieving a rhyme. We could therefore consider that, using the verb “lay” in the song is a deliberate choice related to the style. In the other example included in the research “I was layin’ in bed”, the correct form should be “I was lying in bed” as “lying” is the present participle of “lie”, which is used when talking about being or moving into in a horizontal position. In that case, however, changing the verb “lay” with “lie” would affect neither the rhyming nor the rhythm of the song.

The subjunctive

The subjunctive mood is used to express wishes and hypothetical situations. Unlike the indicative mood, which states facts, the subjunctive conveys ideas that are not real.

In song lyrics, the subjunctive mood is often employed to deepen emotional impact and highlight the gap between reality and possibility, desire, or imagination. Constructions such as “If I were,” “I wish I could,” and “If only I had” are frequently used since they allow songwriters to express wishes, regrets, and dreams, establishing a deeper connection with the listener.

Table 7. *The subjunctive*

Song	Original lyrics
Positively 4th Street	If I was a master thief /Perhaps I'd rob them

To analyse the example, it is essential to understand the difference between the subjunctive and indicative mood. The primary distinction between the two is that the past indicative is used to state facts, whereas the past subjunctive refers to hypothetical or imagined situations. In this case, “being a thief” refers to a state that is a possibility rather than a reality, so the standard phrase would be “If I were a master thief”. However, in informal speech, the use of “was” in place of “were” is frequently observed. Thus, this could serve as another example of a colloquialism found in everyday language.

Incorrect past participle

The past participle is a verb form used to create passive voice constructions, where it combines with a form of the auxiliary verb “be” to indicate that the subject is receiving the action rather than performing it.

The line in the table below is grammatically incorrect. The past participle of “speak” is “spoken”, which should have been used with the auxiliary verb “was” to form the past passive construction.

Table 8. *Incorrect past participle*

Song	Original lyrics
Shelter from the Storm	Not a word was spoke between us, there was little risk involved

Using “spoke” rather than “spoken” deviates from standard grammar and would typically be considered an error in standard English. However, in the context of the song lyrics, this variation may be stylistically motivated, since using the correct form would undoubtedly affect the rhythm as it would change the number of syllables in the line. Therefore, it could be regarded as an intentional choice.

Word order

In indirect questions, the word order typically follows the structure of a statement, rather than the typical question order. The subject precedes the verb, as it would in a regular declarative sentence. In the sentence, “I’m wondering what in the devil could it all possibly mean?” the word order reflects a stylistic choice rather than the standard indirect question structure.

Table 9. *Word order*

Song	Original lyrics
Highlands	I'm wondering what in the devil could it all possibly mean?

Another point of deviation from the strict rules in the example above, is in the punctuation. A question mark is not used at the end of indirect questions. This type of error occurs only once throughout the entire set of lyrics that is used for the purposes of the research. This suggests that the rest of the lyrics follow the structure of indirect questions, and this example of unconventional word order is an isolated case. It stands out as a minor departure from standard grammar.

Improper use of the objective pronoun

Objective pronouns function as the object of a verb or a preposition, and they typically appear immediately after the verb or preposition they relate to. They correspond to specific subject pronouns, serving as their complementary forms. The phrase “That it is not he or she or them or it” is not grammatically correct because of the inconsistency in the use of pronouns and their case.

Table 10. *Pronouns*

Song	Original lyrics
It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)	That it is not he or she or them or it

Since both pronouns “he” and “she” are the object in the phrase, they should be changed into object pronouns “him”, respectively “her”. It is important to note that of all songs included in the corpus of the study this type of error is observed only once.

Incorrect contracted form

Contractions are shortened forms frequently used in English to create a more casual and natural flow, especially in spoken English. However, while contractions like “I’m” (I am), “you’re” (you are), etc. follow standard grammatical patterns, the phrase “I was” is typically left uncontracted in standard English and should be used in its full form.

Table 11. *Contracted form*

Song	Original lyrics
Tangled Up In Blue	I's just about to do the same

It seems that in this case the author might have chosen to “experiment with language” and alter the standard usage for stylistic reasons, as using the correct form “was” would add one more syllable to the phrase and would affect the

rhythm. Thus, rather than being an error, the use of “I’s” could be considered an intentional stylistic decision, allowing greater flexibility in expression and giving priority to the rhythm over strict grammatical accuracy.

Conclusion and implications

The analysis of 100 of Bob Dylan’s most successful songs over the past 62 years reveals that nearly 46% of them feature grammatically questionable phrases. The table below provides summarised information about the frequency of each of the type of grammatical inconsistencies analysed in the research.

Table 12. *Types of grammatical deviations*

Types of grammatical deviations	Number	Percentage
Subject-verb agreement	22	27%
Double negation	16	19%
Noun followed by a personal pronoun	16	19%
Omission	14	17%
Using an adjectival form instead of adverbial form	8	10%
Incorrect verb	2	3%
The subjunctive	1	1%
Incorrect past participle	1	1%
Word order	1	1%
Error of pronoun	1	1%
Incorrect contracted form	1	1%
Total	83	100

Based on the findings and discussions, it can be concluded that the most prevalent grammatical error process identified in the analysis of Bob Dylan’s lyrics is in the category of incorrect subject-verb agreement (27%), followed by errors involving noun followed by a pronoun (19%) and double negation (19%), with omission close behind at 17%. These deviations from grammatical rules are not accidental but appear to be deliberate choices that serve mainly the rhythmic needs of the songs. Conforming to grammatical norms would certainly disrupt the natural flow and timing, as it would add extra syllables to each line, potentially affecting the song’s rhythm and overall feel. The other types of departures from standard grammar included in the research occur infrequently and can be considered isolated cases.

The results show that the manipulation of language in the lyrics of Bob Dylan’s songs can take many forms to fit the rhythm or the melody. Just as poetry often plays with language to create unique patterns or rhythms, music allows for a similar subversion of norms. The analysis demonstrates that sometimes, the rules need to be bent or even broken and confirms that they serve as a

framework rather than a strict boundary. Those grammatical choices which break conventional rules are viewed as vital elements rather than errors.

The elicitations from the present paper could serve as a basis for future research to explore the linguistic choices across different periods of Bob Dylan's career. They may help facilitate comparisons across various songs or artists to identify common patterns or unique approaches in lyric writing. Additionally, they could be used to provide insight into broader trends in songwriting, where grammatical flexibility is used as a tool to achieve specific lyrical effects.

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Appendix

Bob Dylan's songs included in the research (Rolling Stone magazine's list of the 100 greatest Bob Dylan songs):

1. "Like a Rolling Stone" (1965)
2. "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" (1963)
3. "Tangled Up in Blue" (1975)
4. "Just Like a Woman" (1966)
5. "All Along the Watchtower" (1967)
6. "I Shall Be Released" (1971)
7. "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" (1965)
8. "Mr. Tambourine Man" (1965)
9. "Visions of Johanna" (1966)
10. "Every Grain of Sand" (1981)
11. "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" (1965)
12. "Desolation Row" (1965)
13. "Subterranean Homesick Blues" (1965)
14. "Highway 61 Revisited" (1965)
15. "Simple Twist of Fate" (1975)
16. "Positively 4th Street" (1967)
17. "This Wheel's on Fire" (1975)
18. "Ballad of a Thin Man" (1965)
19. "Blind Willie McTell" (1991)
20. "Blowin' in the Wind" (1963)
21. "Mississippi" (2001)
22. "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" (1963)
23. "Forever Young" (1974)
24. "Lay, Lady, Lay" (1969)
25. "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" (1973)
26. "Masters of War" (1963)
27. "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" (1966)

28. "The Times They Are A-Changin'" (1964)
29. "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere" (1971)
30. "Girl From the North Country" (1963)
31. "Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?" (1965)
32. "Chimes of Freedom" (1964)
33. "Idiot Wind" (1975)
34. "Isis" (1976)
35. "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" (1964)
36. "With God on Our Side" (1964)
37. "Maggie's Farm" (1965)
38. "My Back Pages" (1964)
39. "Hurricane" (1976)
40. "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine" (1967)
41. "I'll Keep It with Mine" (1985)
42. "I Threw It All Away" (1969)
43. "Gotta Serve Somebody" (1979)
44. "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again" (1966)
45. "It Ain't Me, Babe" (1964)
46. "Jokerman" (1983)
47. "Spanish Harlem Incident" (1964)
48. "Sara" (1976)
49. "Up to Me" (1985)
50. "Not Dark Yet" (1997)
51. "Things Have Changed" (2000)
52. "Tears of Rage" (1975)
53. "When I Paint My Masterpiece" (1971)
54. "4th Time Around" (1966)
55. "If Not for You" (1970)
56. "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go" (1975)
57. "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues" (1965)

58. "Percy's Song" (1985)
59. "Million Dollar Bash" (1975)
60. "Buckets of Rain" (1975)
61. "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry" (1965)
62. "Queen Jane Approximately" (1965)
63. "If You See Her, Say Hello" (1975)
64. "Abandoned Love" (1985)
65. "Tough Mama" (1974)
66. "Shelter From the Storm" (1975)
67. "Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat" (1966)
68. "One Too Many Mornings" (1964)
69. "One More Cup of Coffee (Valley Below)" (1976)
70. "To Ramona" (1964)
71. "Most Likely You Go Your Way and I'll Go Mine" (1966)
72. "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35" (1966)
73. "I'm Not There" (2007)
74. "All I Really Want to Do" (1964)
75. "Sweetheart Like You" (1983)
76. "Gates of Eden" (1965)
77. "Tonight I'll Be Staying Here With You" (1969)
78. "Absolutely Sweet Marie" (1966)
79. "Romance in Durango" (1976)
80. "Someone's Got a Hold of My Heart" (1991)
81. "Series of Dreams" (1991)
82. "One of Us Must Know (Sooner or Later)" (1966)
83. "Nettie Moore" (2006)
84. "The Man in Me" (1970)
85. "She's Your Lover Now" (1991)
86. "Meet Me in the Morning" (1975)
87. "Most of the Time" (1989)

88. "Tombstone Blues" (1965)
89. "Changing of the Guards" (1978)
90. "The Groom's Still Waiting at the Altar" (1981)
91. "You're a Big Girl Now" (1975)
92. "Going, Going, Gone" (1974)
93. "Pay in Blood" (2012)
94. "Highlands" (1997)
95. "On a Night Like This" (1974)
96. "Farewell, Angelina" (1991)
97. "Where Are You Tonight? (Journey Through Dark Heat)" (1978)
98. "Corrina, Corrina" (1963)
99. "John Wesley Harding" (1967)
100. "Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)" (1978)

NETFLIX VERSUS GOOGLE TRANSLATE: A CASE STUDY OF THE ENGLISH-ARABIC TRANSLATION OF SCATOLOGICAL TERMS

Maram Al-Darabee¹, Mohammed Farghal², Ahmad S Haider³

^{1, 2, 3}Department of English Language and Translation, Applied Science Private University, Amman, Jordan

Abstract: This study examines Netflix and Google Translate's renditions of English scatological taboo expressions into Arabic. The corpus consists of 110 items extracted from the movie *The Wolf of Wall Street*. The findings reveal that Netflix prioritizes cultural sensitivity and appropriateness by employing understatement (58.18%), explication (27.27%), and omission (14.55%) as subtitling procedures to either tone down or eliminate scatological offending language. For its part, GT proves to be even more attentive to using understatement (90.91%), albeit it is far less competent than Netflix in terms of language fluency (64% vs. 100%). GT is also less prone to employing omission (6.36%), a Netflix mishap (14.55%) which adversely affects discursive tone and emphasis. The findings also show that Netflix, in contrast with GT, effectively utilizes explication and does not produce instances of incomprehensible transliteration. On the one hand, the study concludes that the omission of some scatological terms by Netflix, which can be readily captured by non-flagrant Arabic counterparts, can mar the tone of dialogic discourse. On the other hand, GT, while it is adequately trained to detect scatological terms and tone them down, it seriously falters in terms of linguistic accuracy.

Keywords: Netflix, Google Translate, scatological terms, translation procedure, English-Arabic.

About the author: Maram Al-Darabee is an MA holder in Audiovisual and Mass Media Translation at the Applied Science Private University. Her main areas of interest include corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, and translation studies.

e-mail: mema842009@gmail.com

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2799-4822>

About the author: Mohammed Farghal (PhD in General Linguistics, 1986) is currently Professor of Linguistics and Translation/Department of English and Translation/Applied Science University. He has authored/coauthored more than 100 scholarly papers in linguistics and translation studies, which have been published in highly recognized international linguistics and/or translation studies journals. He is also the author of many books. Also, he has made many translations of important literary works, including Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006).

e-mail: mfarghal56@gmail.com

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5012-8550>

About the author: Ahmad S Haider is a professor in the Department of English Language and Translation at the Applied Science Private University, Amman, Jordan. He received his Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of Canterbury/ New Zealand. His current research focuses on how political events are socially, discursively, and linguistically represented in media, combining Corpus Linguistics and (Critical) Discourse Analysis. His main areas of interest include corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, and translation studies.

e-mail: a_haidar@asu.edu.jo

ORCID iD: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7763-201X>

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Introduction¹

Subtitling, the most common audiovisual translation (AVT), involves adding captions in the target language (TL) to an AVT material that renders temporally and spatially the meaning of the communication segment being spoken and viewed (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2014; Gambier & Gottlieb, 2001). It has a rich history dating back to the early 1900s, when the first subtitles were introduced in silent films (Nagels, 2012). It is crucial to ensure that the subtitled text accurately matches the visual content on the screen. This requires observing specific guidelines regarding the space available, the number of lines, and the characters per line. Time limitations in subtitling are also important to ensure that all content is synchronized and displayed on-screen properly. These constraints can affect the subtitling process and intermittently lead to the production of shorter text. Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2014) observe that text reduction can involve condensing, rephrasing, or omitting information.

Netflix has effectively emerged as a video streaming service that provides a large range of movies and TV series in several languages to delight consumers worldwide (Ponkala, 2018). Launched in 1997, it started as an online interface, delivering its large inventory of movies through the US Mail, which took several days to arrive. Therefore, the service only attracted a few customer groups, such as movie fans who didn't care about new releases, early adopters of DVD players, and online purchasers (Christensen, Raynor & McDonald, 2013). However, as new technologies allowed Netflix to shift to streaming video over the Internet, the company eventually became more appealing to customers worldwide. This shift enabled Netflix to offer a wider content selection with an all-you-can-watch, on-demand, low-price, high-quality, and highly convenient approach.

Netflix also provides subtitles in several languages, recognizing the significance of subtitling and its components, including localization, human subtitles, formatting guidelines, quality assurance methods, and collaboration with translation partners. In particular, localization is a significant subtitling function that tailors subtitles to specific languages and cultural preferences. It guarantees that the subtitle is culturally appropriate and acceptable to the intended audience (Esselink, 2000). To ensure accuracy, trained translators provide human subtitles that carefully follow the platform's subtitling guidelines. Style and formatting guidelines are also vital in subtitling. They ensure that subtitles are reliable and adhere to prescribed formatting requirements, making them easier for viewers to read and understand. Furthermore, quality control measures ensure that the subtitles are visually appealing and easily interpreted.

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Netflix has a quality control method to ensure the authenticity and reliability of its subtitles. This technique involves checking subtitles for correctness according to the platform's requirements (Xie & Aurisset, 2016). While auto-generated or semi-automatic translation systems may be employed to create subtitles, they frequently lack the quality and accuracy of human subtitles. Consequently, Netflix prioritizes the use of human subtitles to provide the greatest possible viewing experience for consumers globally (Ponkala, 2018).

For its turn, Machine Translation (MT) is a field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) that creates automatic tools capable of translating text or speech from one language to another. The core aim of MT is to remove language barriers and enable communication between people who speak different languages. One of the most reputable tools in the MT field is Google, which has implemented GT, an advanced MT technology. The popularity of GT has grown significantly in recent times due to its web interface, mobile apps, and API that can translate a variety of language pairs. Google utilizes statistical machine translation (SMT) and neural machine translation (NMT) procedures to produce translation (Bahdanau, Cho & Bengio, 2014).

Previously, GT has relied on SMT, which involves developing statistical models based on bilingual corpora to predict translation choices. MT systems apply language standards and alignments between parallel phrases to generate translation. However, it employs NMT models significantly to enhance the quality of translation. MT leverages artificial neural networks, specifically recurrent neural networks (RNNs) or transformer models, to extract contextual and semantic data from source statements to produce more accurate translation (Wang et al., 2022). Google benefits from ongoing research and development to improve GT's effectiveness. It has refined the translation procedure by using large-scale training data, improving neural network structures, and innovating artificial intelligence approaches. Google also values user feedback and contributions to improve translation accuracy over time.

Theoretical Studies

Scholars have suggested different approaches to translating/subtitling taboo expressions in general. For example, Gottlieb (2016) noted that censorship involves using less offensive expressions or omitting taboo expressions altogether. However, censorship has limitations, as it can lead to a loss of meaning and nuance in the translation. Euphemisms or less offensive expressions can be another approach to subtitling taboo expressions. This approach involves finding an expression in the TL that conveys the intended meaning without being abusive or vulgar (Gambier & Gottlieb, 2001). Xavier (2022), on the other hand, suggested that there are options in applying strategies such as addition, maintenance, dysphemism, euphemism, standardization, omission. They are

employed when pragmatic, communicative, semiotic aspects, and subtitling constraints are influenced by these options.

Farghal (1995) emphasized the importance of context and intention in understanding the use of euphemisms in translation, asserting that the Cooperative Principle, as proposed by Grice, plays a vital role in using euphemisms, as speakers rely on shared knowledge and assumptions with their interlocutors to convey their intended meaning. He identifies several forms of Arabic euphemisms, including figurative language, understatement, ellipsis, borrowing, circumlocution, etc., as well as several taboos that call for euphemism, including sexual, scatological and religious references.

Censorship has been a common approach in countries with strict censorship laws or cultural beliefs prohibiting certain types of content. It entails employing more acceptable terms or avoiding the taboo expressions entirely (Carroll & Ivarsson, 1998). However, censorship can have detrimental implications, such as depriving the translation of its intended meaning and subtleties, thus affecting the audience's understanding of the original text.

Additionally, the use of taboo expression is a sociocultural practice. Sulpizio et al. (2019) stated that the use of taboo words and processing their offensive nature is a cross-cultural phenomenon. Moreover, the reception of taboos is affected by the receiver's relation to the language with taboos in one's native language appearing more offensive. Likewise, Hunt et al. (2023) related taboo language and its varieties with sociocultural influences and contexts. In the same vein, Abdulhadi and Hamza (2023) stated that the use of swearwords is influenced by culture with their connotative meanings emerging from the context of their use.

Sulpizio et al. (2024) also suggested that the use of taboos is globally common as a universal linguistic behavior that relates to social and psychological functions with influences of sociocultural knowledge that is specific to its communities. Furthermore, Lafreniere, Moore, and Fisher (2022) indicated that the function of swearwords is not limited to offense as they may also influence how a statement is perceived and even believed. In addition, Arvian and Hadi (2024) listed expressing negative emotions such as anger and disappointment, identifying or confirming statements, discrediting, offending, and emphasis or bringing attention as functions or reasons for swearing.

Therefore, cultural adaptation becomes a more practical approach, as it involves lowering taboo expressions to make them more appropriate to the target audience's cultural norms, which requires a deep understanding of the SL and TL cultural norms and linguistic principles. It is beneficial when the taboo expression is culturally specific and has no direct equivalent in the TL (Gambier & Van Doorslaer, 2016). However, exaggerated cultural adaptation may result

in the loss of the intended meaning and impact of the ST, which can eventually affect the audience's overall experience of the audiovisual material.

While these procedures were traditionally facilitated by human translators with their choices being influenced by internal and external factors, like many forms of translation, machine translation began to take root in subtitling. According to Karakanta (2022), this may take shape as the employment of neural machine translation or as automated subtitles. However, Hagström and Pedersen (2022) argued that the introduction of machine translation into subtitling resulted in increased subtitling speed but also led to issues in cohesion and completeness among others. More recently, Calvo-Ferrer (2023) saw that machine translation could have a place in providing quality subtitles as some programs like ChatGPT are currently able to provide subtitles that are not always discernible from human subtitles. These views were affected by knowledge in subtitling and they would likely be affected by the contents of the text as well as the machine translator.

Empirical Studies

Censorship of English taboo expressions in Arabic audiovisual translation is a pervasive phenomenon shaped by sociocultural norms, religious sensitivities, and institutional policies in the Arab world. Several studies have documented how translators systematically tone down, euphemize, or omit offensive content – particularly those involving sexual, scatological, or blasphemous language – to align with conservative cultural expectations. According to Abu-Rayyash, Haider, and Al-Adwan (2023), the translation of swear words in English-Arabic subtitles on Netflix often relies on mitigation strategies such as paraphrasing, omission, and generalization to avoid direct confrontation with taboo terms, thereby softening their pragmatic impact. Al-Adwan and Yahiaoui (2021) also observe that audiovisual content distributed in Arab countries undergoes considerable censorship, especially in the subtitling of sexual and religious taboos, leading to a loss of authenticity and a shift in narrative tone. Similarly, in their analysis of Arabic-dubbed American films, Alghamdi and Mazid (2020) show that cultural taboos frequently necessitate creative strategies such as euphemistic substitution or humorous reformulation to preserve viewer acceptance without fully distorting the message. These translational choices, while often seen as pragmatic, underscore the ideological filters governing the Arabic AVT industry, which seeks to reconcile global media flows with local cultural values.

Several case studies have dealt with human subtitling of English taboo expressions into Arabic. Al-Yasin and Rabab'ah (2019) investigated the connotative equivalence of taboo expressions in American hip-hop movies and their Arabic subtitles. The results show that Arab fansubbers render taboo words into Arabic through euphemism and omission. While euphemism conveys

the connotative functions of English taboo words, omission obliterates them. Similarly, Almijrab (2020) argued that cultural substitution and taboo for taboo subtitling procedures are more effective than omitting taboo expressions, which may lead to the loss of the ST's intended meaning.

In a similar context, Debbas and Haider (2020), in their study of Arabic subtitles of *Family Guy*, showed that in subtitling religious taboo remarks, the predominant procedures are scene deletion and word omission. Their results also indicate that euphemism and word omission are the two strategies adopted for subtitling taboo expressions. Similarly, Abdelaal and Al Sarhani (2021) and Al-Zgoul and Al-Salman (2022) found euphemism and omission to predominate the scene in Arabic subtitles of taboo expressions and swear words.

Al-Jabri, Allawzi, and Abushmaes (2021) compared the euphemistic strategies employed by MBC4 and Netflix in two Arabic-subtitled versions of the US sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*. The findings indicate that Arabic subtitles produced by the satellite Arabic TV channel reflect a higher level of politeness due to the utilization of euphemism as a main politeness procedure to avoid rude and embarrassing terms, while Netflix has used more liberal subtitling procedures.

Haider and Hussein (2022) examined the use of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) as a means of euphemism in the intralingual subtitles of Netflix's Arabic series *Jinn*. It is found that the MSA intralingual subtitles have contributed to toning down the inappropriate language and rendering the show more acceptable to the audience. Additionally, Haider, Saideen, and Hussein (2023) explored the subtitling of taboo expressions from a conservative to a more liberal culture in the Arab TV series *Jinn*. They demonstrate that subtitlers have used various procedures to render culture-bound expressions from Arabic into English, including euphemism and cultural equivalence. They also show that unfriendly suggestions and noun supports are the most frequently targeted connotative functions of swear words.

These empirical studies, as can be observed, have investigated subtitling procedures of taboo expressions mainly from English into Arabic audiovisual materials, highlighting euphemism, cultural substitution, and omission as subtitling procedures.

By contrast, only few studies have investigated the quality of the product of MT tools and auto-generated subtitles. Zong (2018) stated that the process of MT depends on the text analysis in terms of grammar, meaning, and style. The MT process starts by splitting the sentence into words and then identifying the meaning of each word through the online dictionary, then by analyzing the sentence or clause according to grammar rules in order to convert it into a conceptual construct, and finally, a TL model is used to generate the sentence

in the TL. The language model, according to him (p. 4), is an “intermediate language between the source language (SL) and the TL, through which various languages can be translated into another desired language. If coupled with bidirectional translation software, the automatic translation system can translate multiple languages”.

Ali (2020) examined the quality of machine translation from English into Arabic, focusing on the impact of various linguistic features on translation quality. He identifies the common errors machine translation systems make and suggests strategies to improve machine translation quality. MT quality can be improved by incorporating more linguistic knowledge into MT systems and using post-editing procedures to refine the generated translation.

Malakul and Park (2023) addressed the impact of three different types of subtitles in the Thai language (auto-subtitles, edited subtitles, and no subtitles) on learning comprehension, cognitive load, and satisfaction to determine whether it is sufficient to use AI technology as an auto-subtitles system to facilitate online learning with educational videos. His results show that the auto-subtitles system that generates Thai language subtitles for English educational videos has greater feasibility of implementation to facilitate online learning compared to editorial subtitles by Thai natives. Therefore, Thai subtitles generated by the auto-subtitles system in English educational videos can facilitate students’ learning comprehension, cognitive load, and satisfaction.

Chan, Kruger, and Doherty (2019) investigated the impact of automated subtitling on student learning in a sample of English first- and second-language speakers. The results show that high error rates and high presentation speeds reduce the potential benefit of subtitles. These findings provide an essential foundation for future studies on using subtitles in education.

Finally, Varga (2021) analyzed online automatic subtitling platforms’ key features and limitations based on different applications such as video-to-text transcription programs, machine translation programs, and text segmenters. Concerning MT subtitles, the study indicates that online applications must be sufficiently trained and adequately calibrated. Therefore, post-editing is highly recommended to ensure quality translation, especially in less known or used languages. As for auto-generated subtitles, the results show that the text segmenters are still struggling with spatial and temporal limitations specific to subtitling. In addition, numerous errors were noticed on the screen, including issues with reading speed, subtitle duration (both maximum and minimum), segmentation, and line length, among others. It is concluded that this technology needs to be further developed and enhanced.

These MT studies have provided some empirical evidence that MT and auto-generated subtitles still encounter serious issues that relate to accuracy, fluency,

and adequacy. However, they also point to some potential areas for improvement, such as incorporating more linguistic knowledge into such systems and using post-editing techniques to refine machine-translated texts.

Despite the growing interest in studying subtitling between English and Arabic, the research on MT in this area is still scarce. While several studies have investigated Arabic subtitles of English taboo expressions in general (Mehawesh & Neimneh, 2021; Shhaiber & Haider, 2023; Thawabteh, 2012; Yahiaoui, Hijazi, & Fattah, 2020), none to the best of our knowledge has compared them in terms of translation procedure and quality with an MT output (specifically GT output), a research gap which this study seeks to fill. The present study, therefore, attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What translation procedures do Netflix and GT employ to render scatological taboo expressions?
2. How effective are these procedures in terms of translation quality?
3. Is GT trained to detect and deal with cultural sensitivities like Netflix human translators?

Methodology

Data selection

After careful consideration of several movies, *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) is chosen as the primary source of data due to its unfiltered use of bad language. Directed by Martin Scorsese, the movie is a biographical black comedy that depicts the story of a stockbroker who engages in fraudulent activities to deceive investors. The characters' disregard for societal norms is reflected in their reckless behavior, creating a world of extreme indulgence and debauchery. Therefore, it is recommended that viewer discretion be exercised watching the movie.

Data Collection

Scatological taboo expressions are carefully detected and noted before they are collected into a distinct corpus. Scatological expressions were selected based on specific semantic and cultural criteria drawn from existing literature on taboo language and audiovisual translation (e.g. Allan & Burridge, 2006; Jay, 2009).

The corpus consists of 110 items of scatological expressions. The obtained data is analyzed using Sketch Engine software, which provides a variety of tools for corpus linguistics analysis, including frequency, distribution, and translation patterns of taboo terms (Tables 1 below).

Table 1. *Frequency and percentage of scatological terms.*

Term	Frequency	Percentage
shit	93	84.55%
ass	10	9.09%
asshole	3	2.73%
scum	2	1.82%
crap	2	1.82%
Total	110	100%

Data Analysis

A modified taxonomy of euphemizing strategies based on Farghal (2005) and Allan and Burridge (2006) is adopted to examine Netflix and GT's procedures for rendering English scatological taboo expressions into Arabic. The data reveals four procedures: understatement, omission, explicitation, and transliteration.

Findings and Discussion***Netflix procedures for subtitling scatological taboo expressions***

Three subtitling procedures are attested: understatement, explicitation and omission. Table 2 shows the distribution of subtitling procedures for scatological taboo words.

Table 2. *Distribution of Netflix subtitling procedures for scatological taboos.*

Subtitling Procedure	Frequency	Percentage
Understatement	64	58.18%
Explicitation	30	27.27%
Omission	16	14.55%
Total	110	100%

First, as Table 2 shows, the majority of scatological terms (58.18%) have been understated to avoid explicit or objectionable expressions. Netflix uses gentler terms than their more expressive vernacular Arabic counterparts to make them acceptable to the viewers. The examples in Table 3 demonstrate the strategic use of euphemistic terms to convey the intended meaning while minimizing the possible effect of scatological expressions.

Table 3. *Examples of understating scatological taboo expressions.*

No. ST	Netflix subtitles	Literal translation
1.	Most of the Wall Street <i>jackasses</i> that I bust.	«تيرتس لوو» يقم ح م طعم مهيل ع ضب قأ ن يذلا Most of the Wall Street <i>idiots</i> I catch.
2.	You know what else? You dress like <i>shit</i> !	يف عشب كقوذ؟ فرعتأ !سبالمل You know? Your taste is <i>ugly</i> in clothes!
3.	And you as well. I see you've already met the village <i>asshole</i> .	تلباق كنأ ىرأ. أضيا أنأو ةيرقلا قمحأ لعفلاب Me too. I see you've already met the village <i>idiot</i> .
4.	She was a single mom on the balls of her <i>ass</i> .	اهل لوح الءابزع أمأ تنك قوق الو She was a <i>helpless</i> single mother
5.	They're up my <i>ass</i> . Don't worry about it.	ال، يترخؤم يف اهان قلقت She's in my <i>groin area</i> . Don't worry.

As is clear in Table 3, Netflix has handled the English scatological taboos by employing less offensive Arabic equivalents that appropriately capture the intended meaning without flagrantly offending the target audience. For example, the terms *jackasses*, *shit*, and *asshole* in examples 1-3 are replaced with their euphemized Arabic equivalents 'يقم ح، عشب، قمحأ' 'idiots, ugly, stupid'. By way of illustration, for instance, if the subtitler decided to preserve the degree of offence in the English scatological taboo term *shit* in example 3, they would offer 'You know? Your taste is *shit* in clothes!' By such a decision, they would offend the audience by breaking acceptable social norms. Similarly, the taboo expression 'on the balls of her *ass*' in example 4 has been subtitled into the mild idiomatic Arabic expression 'قوق الو اهل لوح ال' 'She neither has will nor power, i.e. She is helpless' and the formal 'يترخؤم' 'my behind' is used to tone down *my ass* in example 5 instead of the offensive 'يضي' 'my ass'. In this way, understatement proves to be a very effective and socially acceptable procedure for rendering many scatological taboo terms while preserving the tone and context of discourse.

Second, explicitation, which is a translation procedure used to make the implicit information in the SL more explicit in the TL, is commonly used to ensure that the TT effectively conveys the intended meaning in a way that the target audience can easily understand it while considering cultural and linguistic factors. Nord (2005) states that explicitation bridges the gap between implicit ST and the need for explicitness in the TT. Venuti (2017) also discusses the importance of highlighting the linguistic and cultural characteristics of the TL when dealing with implicit terms. Explicitation is noticeably used when dealing with scatological taboo expressions as Table 4 above shows (27.27%), particularly when the scatological term *shit* is used as a heavy duty general word to indicate something specific within the context while expressing anger and frustration, as the examples in Table 4 demonstrate.

Table 4. *Examples of explicating scatological taboo expressions.*

No.	ST	Netflix subtitling	Literal translation
6.	It's stupid. <i>Shit</i> with me?	؟ينصخت روماً	Things about me?
7.	did a lot of bad <i>shit</i> .	نم ريثكلا تبكترا ي.صاعملا	I committed a lot of sins.
8.	for <i>shit</i> that had nothing to do with me.	انصخت ال قةمتهت ببسب	Because of a charge that doesn't belong to us.

Table 4 indicates that the general scatological taboo term *shit* may be explicated into contextually non-taboo specific items when subtitling utterances like the ones in examples 6-8 above. That is why *shit* has been successfully explicated into 'روماً', 'ي.صاعملا', 'things, sins, charge', respectively. This contextual and cautious selection which involves a move from semantic generalization to semantic specification is consistent with explicitation, seeking to make implicit information explicit while preserving cultural sensitivities and language subtleties.

Finally, omission accounts for 16% of subtitling scatological taboos. This involves unjustifiably deleting inappropriate scatological terminology, which may have an emphatic discursive function, rather than replacing them with softer substitutes. Table 5 gives some illustrative examples.

Table 5. *Examples of omitting scatological taboo expressions.*

No	ST	Subtitle	Literal translation
9.	What's up her <i>ass</i>	؟اهتل كشم ام	What's wrong with her?
10.	Meanwhile, he thinks he's getting <i>shit</i> rich,	نظيس، ءانثألا هذه يفو ،اي رث حبصأ هأ	In the meantime, he will think that he has become rich.
11.	My first <i>shitty</i> day as a broker.	راسم س ك يل موي لوأ	My first day as a broker.

One should know that the omitted scatological terms in examples 9-11 perform an emphatic discursive function in the ST and could be appropriately captured by less offensive language while preserving the strained context of discourse in Arabic. In example 9, the Arabic interaction 'قنعللأاب' 'Damn it' may be used to reflect the speaker's frustration, viz. 'اهتل كشم ام! أبت' 'Damn it/Gee! What's wrong with her?' Similarly, in example 10 the emphatic post-modifier 'قياغلل' 'to the highest limit' may be utilized to reflect the emphasis furnished by the taboo word *shit*, viz. 'ءانثألا هذه يفو' 'In the meantime, he will think that he has become rich 'to the highest limit', i.e. so rich'. For its turn, example 11 may be subtitled as 'راسم س ك يل موي لوأ' (My first shocking/damned day as a broker) in order to convey the tone of the scatological term *shitty*.

GT procedures for translating scatological taboo expressions

Understatement proves to be a predominant procedure (90.91%), higher than that of Netflix (64%), for rendering scatological taboo expressions by GT. The small remaining percentages are claimed by omission (6.36%) and transliteration (2.73 %). Table 6 below displays this distribution.

Table 6. *Distribution of GT procedures for translating scatological taboo expressions.*

Procedure	Frequency	Percentage
Understatement	100	90.91%
Accurate understatement	64	64%
Inaccurate understatement	36	36%
Omission	7	6.36%
Transliteration	3	2.73%
Total	110	100%

First, let us look at some examples of accurate and inaccurate use of understatement in GT's translation of scatological taboo expressions, as displayed in Table 7.

Table 7. *GT Examples of accurate and inaccurate translations of scatological expressions.*

No	ST	GT	literal translation
12.	Look at this <i>shit</i> .	فارقلا اذه لى رظنا	Look at this <i>disgusting</i> thing.
13.	Then they kicked his <i>ass</i> .	هتارخؤم اولكر مٹ	They kicked him in the <i>groin</i> .
14.	We would wipe our <i>ass</i> with it.	هب ان تارخؤم حسمن انك	We were wiping our <i>groin</i> with it.
15.	She was a single mom on the balls of her <i>ass</i>	تارك لى ع قبزاع مأ تن اك اهتارخؤم	She was a single mother on her <i>ass</i> balls.
16.	You don't know <i>shit</i> about chop.	نع فارقلا فرعت ال تنأ مرفلا	You don't know the dirt about the chop.
17.	very acidic above the shoulders mustard <i>shit</i> .	قئضم حلا تاروذاقلا عي م ج لدرخلا نيفتكلا قوف	All the acidic dirt is above the mustard shoulders.

As observed in Table 7, GT employs understatement in translating commonly-used scatological expressions like *shit* and *ass*. This procedure tones down the taboo word and appropriately conveys the nuances or implications of the English expressions into Arabic. For example, the word *shit* (vernacular ارخ in Arabic) in example 12 is translated into فارقلا 'filth' and the word *ass* (vernacular زيظ in Arabic) in examples 13 and 14 is rendered as تارخؤم 'behind'. It would be insulting, for instance, to render example 12 into the Arabic utterance لى رظنا

ارخلا اذه 'Look at this shit', hence the appropriate use of understatement while preserving the tone of the utterance.

However, GT has offered many inaccurate cases of understatement due to linguistic and coherence problems, as can be observed in 15-17. In example 15, despite understating *her ass* into امرخوم, the literal translation of the English idiomatic expression does not make sense and is incomprehensible. Similarly, the literal translations in examples 16 and 17 do not make sense and are incomprehensible despite GT's understating the scatological term *shit* into الفرقل 'filth' and ثاروذاق 'dirt' in them, respectively. Apparently, GT needs to be contextually sensitized to idiomatic and figurative use in order to convey the intended meaning of such utterances.

Second, as shown in table 6, omission of scatological taboo expressions accounts for only 6.36%, which is less than half Netflix's percentage (14.55%). Table 8 below presents some examples of omission.

Table 8. GT examples of omitting scatological taboo expressions.

No	ST	GT	Literal translation
18.	Meanwhile, he thinks he's getting <i>shit</i> rich,	، كلذ نوضغ ي ف حبصأ هنأ دقت عي ، أي رث	Meanwhile, he thinks he has become rich,
19.	They don't give a <i>shit</i> about money.	لاملا اب نومته ي ال مهنأ	They don't care about money.
20.	Earning <i>shit</i> money	لاملا بسك	Earning money.

As can be observed, GT's use of omission in examples 18-20 demonstrates its conscious attempt to modify language for different linguistic and cultural settings, which aligns with the tool's clear goal of retaining linguistic sensitivity. However, just like omission of scatological terms by Netflix, it is critical to recognize that while this procedure helps to maintain appropriateness, it usually affects the intensity and subtle meaning of the original phrases by compromising the discursive emphasis furnished by such terms. For instance, the omission of *shit* in example 20 neutralizes the utterance and strips it of its evaluative tone, which implicates that the money referred to is earned illegally. This tone can be readily captured in the Arabic utterance by understating *shit* into مارحل 'religiously forbidden, i.e., illegal,' viz. مارحل لاملا بسك 'Earning illegal money'.

Finally, the investigation shows that there are few instances (3 only) where GT has erroneously transliterated scatological taboo expressions, as is displayed Table 9.

Table 9. *GT examples of transliterating scatological expressions.*

No	ST	GT	Literal translation
21.	would ever stop thinking of us as some <i>shitkicker</i> bucket shop.	نع يضم تقو يا نم رجتمك انيف ريكتلتا ولد ريك تي ش	Ever thought of us as a <i>chit-kicker</i> bucket shop.
22.	No <i>shit</i> , you can't even buy 'em anymore.	يتح كنكمي ال ، تي ش ال نأل دعب اهئ ارش	No <i>shit</i> , you can't even buy it anymore.
23.	You are such a fucking <i>douchebag</i> , Hanna.	شودلا اذه لثم تنأ انح ، ني عللا	You're such a fucking <i>dosh</i> , Hanna.

The scatological expressions *shit-kicker*, *shit*, and *douchebag* in examples 21-23 have been transliterated, thus resulting in the incomprehensible Arabic forms ش.شودلا ، تي ش ، ريك تي ش. In fact, one cannot explain why GT has resorted to incomprehensible transliteration instead of understatement, or even omission, the way it has done with the bulk of other similar scatological taboo words in the corpus. For instance, the expression *No shit* in example 22 may be readily toned down into 'Nonsense' or 'empty talk, i.e., nonsense' and, consequently, capture the discursive tone and emphasis of the utterance appropriately.

Conclusions

The findings demonstrate that Netflix subtitling procedures for scatological taboo terms prioritize cultural sensitivity and appropriateness. That is why toning down such terms by the understatement procedure accounts for more than half the corpus (58.18%). This approach reflects the platform's commitment to preserving a balanced tone and respecting cultural sensitivities. However, while understatement maintains the contextual emphasis furnished through scatological expressions by toning them down in an acceptable manner in the TT, omission, which accounts for 14.55%, does away with this contextual emphasis by neutralizing and flattening the tension in the dialogic discourse, thus offering a false impression of what is going on emotionally and dynamically. Therefore, understatement is a more effective and appropriate subtitling procedure than omission for scatological taboo expressions. It works well when calling up general Arabic emphatic markers that are socially less offensive than their English counterparts.

Interestingly, GT turns out to be more attentive to toning down scatological expressions in the flow of discourse, viz. understatement scores 90.91% against 58.18% by Netflix. However, the competence in effectively employing understatement by Netflix (100%) far exceeds that of GT (64%), which means that 36% of GT's understatements are inaccurate in terms of language fluency. This clearly points to the serious need to improve GT's performance in fluency and coherence.

GT has also used omission less frequently than Netflix in handling scatological expressions (6.36% vs. 14.55%), which indicates that it gives more attention to the emphatic function of such expressions. While Netflix subtitlers' awareness of cultural sensitivities in intercultural communication is a move in the right direction, it need not go to the extreme by deleting scatological expressions and, by so doing, it flattens the discourse and strips it of its contextual dynamism. Instead, Netflix needs to make more use of understatement in cases where a scatological word plays a key role in the tone and context of discourse.

Further, the findings indicate that Netflix has significantly resorted to explicitation (27.27%) as a subtitling procedure by calling up the specific items referred to by *shit* when it is used as a slot filler representing a variety of specific referents, a procedure that is not accessible to GT, which predominantly prefers understatement (90.91%). In this way, explicitation emerges as a very effective subtitling procedure for scatological terms by Netflix in contrast with GT, which needs to be technically programmed to handle cases where a move from general terms, e.g., *shit* to specific terms, e.g., *money* becomes necessary through explicitation in order to avoid taboo expressions.

To conclude, on the one hand, Netflix shows supremacy over GT in effectively handling understatement as a main translation procedure due to GT's problems with language fluency and coherence, despite the fact that it emerges as more attentive to this procedure. This points to the dire need to improve GT's performance by providing it with linguistic algorithms that can deal more effectively with morphological, syntactic, and semantic features to upgrade its language fluency. On the other hand, Netflix's noticeable use of omission of scatological taboo expressions adversely affects the tone and emphasis of dialogic discourse and should be kept to a minimum, if not forsaken altogether, especially that the function of such expressions can be readily captured by non-scatological and less offensive emphatic markers or by explicitation when the scatological term *shit* is a replacement for a non-taboo specific one.

While this study offers meaningful insights through a focused analysis of *The Wolf of Wall Street*, it is worth noting that the use of a single film may limit the broader applicability of the findings. Future research could build on this case study by examining a wider range of films to further validate and expand upon the results.

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CAN ONE TRANSLATE WITHOUT KNOWING THE SL? A STUDY ON THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF *DAOMU BIJI*

Tan Ying Yee¹, Amin Amirdabbaghian², Yeo Siang Lee³

^{1,2,3}Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract: The publication and international circulation of Chinese Internet Literature (CIL) translations have recently garnered considerable attention. However, a notable gap exists in the comprehensive examination of the translations, both at the process and product levels. Notably, the translation of Chinese Internet Literature significantly influences the exposure of the said literary works to an international readership. To address this gap, the study aims to investigate the translation process of “Daomu Biji” (Grave Robbers’ Chronicles), a Chinese web novel series within the supernatural genre by Xu Lei. The book is written in eleven volumes, and six volumes were officially translated by Kathy Mok in 2011. On the other hand, a fan translation was released on the MereBear474765851 weblog, where the translator claims no knowledge of the source text. Essentially, the translator translates the source text using a machine, reads the official translation (indirect intralingual translation), heavily edits the translated text, and checks it with two specific users (native Chinese speakers) before publishing it on the blog. The readers are then free to comment on the translated text, and the translator would revise the text constantly. Surprisingly, most readers familiar with official and fan translations prefer the latter in their comments about the book. This study conducted an interview, where the identity of the translators are kept anonymous and confidential (as requested by them) to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations and procedures in the process of translating. The outcome may contradict the fact that to translate, one needs to master at least two languages.

Keywords: Chinese Internet Literature, translation process, crowdsourcing, indirect translation, Daomu Biji

About the author: Tan Ying Yee is a postgraduate student at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, Universiti Malaya, enrolled in the Master of Arts (Linguistics) program. Her current dissertation research focuses on Audiovisual Translation, specifically subtitling between Chinese and Malay.

e-mail: 22054912@siswa.um.edu.my

ORCID id: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4779-4709>

About the author: Amin Amirdabbaghian (PhD) is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, Universiti Malaya, where he teaches and mentors Master’s and PhD students conducting research in Translation Studies. His main areas of research interest include socio-ideological aspects of translation as well as audiovisual translation. Dr. Amin Amirdabbaghian is the corresponding author for this paper.

e-mail: amirdabbaghian@um.edu.my

ORCID id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6503-8446>

About the author: Yeo Siang Lee (PhD) is a senior lecturer at the English Language Department, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, Universiti Malaya, where he teaches copyediting and academic writing courses. Always eager to hone his translating skills, he has translated a wide range of materials from academic papers and official documents to literary works in the past three decades. His main research areas are human communication disorders, disability studies, and the interaction of individuals with autism.

e-mail: yeosl@um.edu.my

ORCID id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1423-8063>

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Introduction

Translation is a complex cognitive process that requires not only linguistic knowledge but also cultural understanding and contextual awareness. The issue of whether one can translate effectively without knowing the source language (SL) is particularly pertinent considering increasing globalization and the advent of advanced translation technologies. The current research explores the thoughts of the fan translator, particularly in the context of translating works such as *Daomu Biji* (also known as *Grave Robbers' Chronicles*), a popular Chinese literary series written by Xu Lei. An interview is conducted with the fan translator, where her identity is kept anonymous and confidential. The interview questions are based on the disclaimer (*Daomu Biji*. MereBear's Translation, n.d.) provided by the fan translator on the website where the English translation of the novel is published. The communication with the fan translator was via email. By exploring diverse perspectives on translation processes, challenges, and methodologies, this study aims to highlight knowledge gaps and suggest future research directions.

Chinese-to-English literary translations started to flourish when online forums promoted the publication of CIL. The vast number of people who read online literature may be attributable to the active promotion of both free and paid content by prominent platforms, which highlights the digital nature of the Internet literature market (Xiao et al., 2022). In addition, the growing demand for online literature has led to an increase in author employment in the digital economy. The 2023 interim report from Chinese Literature Limited, a company primarily engaged in operating online literature platforms, states that in the first half of this year, over two hundred thousand authors and three hundred fifty thousand literary works were produced. In response to the rapid development of Internet literature in overseas markets, a great deal of outstanding Chinese online literary works have been translated by numerous overseas literary translation websites (Xiao et al., 2022, p. 11). This illustrates the potency and positive impact of CIL in fostering cross-cultural understanding.

Translation Processes and the Source Language

The translation process goes beyond simple word-for-word substitution; it requires deep cognitive engagement with the text. Translation is a complex and multifaceted process, often necessitating a profound linguistic and cultural understanding of the source language (SL). Li et al. (2021) highlight the significance of cultural context in translation, emphasizing that translators must develop culturally effective strategies to convey meaning accurately. This indicates that a strong comprehension of SL cultural nuances can significantly enhance translation quality, suggesting that a lack of SL knowledge may impede effective translation. According to Shadieff et al. (2018), the promotion of cross-cultural understanding through technology raises questions about the necessity of SL knowledge in traditional translation methods. The argument is that while

technology can assist in translation (Guo & Amirdabbaghian, 2025), it does not replace the nuanced understanding that a human translator possesses, especially when dealing with culturally rich texts like *Daomu Biji*.

Furthermore, Haldane et al. (2022) explore the translation processes in multilingual contexts, suggesting that familiarity with the SL can facilitate better collaborative translation outcomes. Their findings imply that translators who lack knowledge of the SL might struggle to navigate complex cultural and contextual elements, further supporting the notion that knowledge of the SL is crucial for nuanced translation. Moreover, Ho et al. (2019) discuss the implications of translating sensitive qualitative data, emphasizing that a lack of familiarity with the SL can result in misinterpretations and loss of meaning, particularly when addressing the cultural nuances. This suggests that understanding the SL is not merely beneficial but perhaps essential for accurate and effective translation.

In contrast, the emerging role of artificial intelligence and machine translation presents a different perspective. With the popularity of Chinese Internet (CIL) Literature, substantial translated novels have been automatically produced by machine translation systems (Guo & Amirdabbaghian, 2025). The reliance on machine translation tools, as discussed by Zhang (2023) and Kuek et al. (2024), raises concerns about the accuracy and reliability of translations, particularly when the question posed is not in English. This study indicates that while machine translation may facilitate understanding, it also risks oversimplifying complex linguistic structures and cultural contexts inherent in the SL. Similarly, Al-Jarf (2022) identifies specific difficulties in translating polysemous words between English and Arabic, which can lead to significant misunderstandings. This issue is compounded in the translation of culturally specific texts where polysemy and cultural references are prevalent. Such challenges underscore the importance of SL knowledge in ensuring fidelity to the original text. The work of Robertson and Díaz (2022) also further emphasizes the critical nature of understanding the SL, particularly in the context of machine translation. They note that users often employ strategies to recover from mistranslations, which indicates a reliance on their comprehension of the SL and the target language (TL) to navigate these challenges. Without a foundational understanding of the SL, translators may struggle to identify and rectify inaccuracies, leading to potential miscommunication.

Literary Translation

Literary translation is one of the types of translation that has drawn the attention of many scholars, with numerous studies examining the literary translation of various cultures. According to Boase-Beier, Fisher, and Furukawa (2018), literary texts exhibit three key traits as “they are fictional, employ literary devices like rhyme or ambiguity, and yield distinct cognitive impacts on readers,

evoking emotions such as happiness, sadness, anger, excitement, empathy, and more” (2018, p. 3). Several theorists have raised several issues regarding literary translation, particularly regarding how closely it must be treated in relation to culture. For instance, a growing number of scholars have turned their attention to literary translation in China. Valdeón and Zhao (2020) conducted an overview of the significant contribution literary translation has made to the development of translation studies in China. They explain that in the middle of the nineteenth century, Western powers started to exert a major influence over China. As a result, classic works from languages like English, French, and Spanish have been translated into the Chinese language (Valdeón & Zhao, 2020, p. 2). In the thirty years between 1987 and 2016, Han and Li (2019) conducted a comparative study of literary translation research in China. They discovered that literary translation clearly predominates in Chinese translation studies, and that “Chinese translation researchers seem to be obsessive about literary translation” (Han & Li, 2019, p. 3). Unfortunately, there is very little knowledge available on this phenomenon because “there is not much research on the subject and most of the data they rely on are not reliable enough or representative” (Han & Li, 2019, p. 34).

Chinese Internet Literature

The origin of Chinese Internet Literature (CIL) can be traced back to an online journal called *China News Digest* (华夏文摘) (My China news digest, n.d.), established in 1989 by a group of Chinese students studying in the United States (Chen, 2012). They wrote and published literary works such as prose, novels, and poetry on the website to cater to the needs of overseas Chinese students. This movement did not gain much attention outside the Chinese students’ circle in America, let alone in China, where the Internet was almost non-existent. With the growth in the use and popularity of the Internet in China, the first dedicated Chinese literary website, *Under the Banyan Tree* (榕树下), was launched in 1997. Some scholars considered this to be the official beginning of CIL in China because it provided a platform where aspiring writers were welcome to publish their works (Hockx, 2015). *Under the Banyan Tree* continued to grow and produce many writers who later became acclaimed authors in the print industry, such as Murong Xuecun and Anni Baobei (Aquilino, 2023). What truly promoted CIL to an even bigger scale was the serialized web novel *The First Time of Intimate Touch*, published by Cai Zhiheng on the bulletin board system (BBS) in Taiwan. It was a phenomenal success that motivated even more writers to join the CIL world.

With CIL being established, CIL translation has slowly gained momentum since the year 2000, as wuxia novels by Gu Long and Jin Yong garnered tremendous attention in overseas online forums. To date, there are at least fifty-one websites, mostly based in America, dedicated to translating and disseminating CIL (Zheng,

2018). Statistics from thirteen CIL translation websites, such as an average DRV/P (daily reading volume/person) of 8.7 times and an average DRT/P (daily reading time/person) of twenty minutes, reflect the huge number of followers such CIL translation portals have (Zheng, 2018). Speaking of Wuxia web novels, the creator of Wuxiaworld (Wuxiaworld, n.d.) Chinese-American Lai Jingping, also known online as RWX, was worth a mention. As an avid Wuxia novel fan, he translated the *Coiling Dragon* (盘龙) saga originally written in Chinese by a popular fantasy novel writer, *I Eat Tomatoes* (我吃西红柿), and created Wuxiaworld in 2014 to share the English translations with the world. Subsequently, other serial novel websites were created, including Gravity Tales (n.d.), Novel Updates (n.d.), and Paper Republic (n.d.) to cater to the growing population of writers, translators, and readers. To date, Wuxiaworld remains the leading CIL translation website, which attracts an average of 672,000 visitors per day and approximately 6.5 million pages per visitor every day (Xu & Hua, 2020).

According to the 2023 Research Report on the Development of Chinese Online Literature (Chen et al., 2024), the CIL market size was reported to reach 40.4 billion RMB, and the CIL IP market increased to 260.5 billion RMB. There were 24 million registered writers of whom 2.3 million were new, producing 36.2 million writings with an increase of 4.2 million and an increase of 9% in registered users, amounting to 537 million. Using Web Novel (n.d.) as an example, there were 3,800 translated works, increasing 31% from 2022. Such staggering figures only reflect the prominence and significance CIL has achieved since its early years.

Given the development of CIL in the past two decades, many observers have called it a phenomenal media wonder. Some even consider CIL to have the potential to be one of the major cultural phenomena in the world, capable of competing with America's Hollywood, Japan's anime, and Korea's KDrama (Shao, 2016, p. 19). While CIL's influence and soft power remain to be seen, it is undoubtedly an important vehicle to promote Chinese culture, values, and tradition, as can be seen in the growing number of studies focusing on the promotion and dissemination of CIL with keywords like "going out" "going global" "going overseas" or "going to the world" (Hao, 2019; He, 2021; Ji, 2016; Liu & Song, 2019; Peng & Hu, 2019; Wu, Gu & Zheng, 2020; Song, 2021; Yang, 2021; Yang & Zhang, 2021; Zhao, 2021).

Other major focuses of CIL research are on the genres or categories of web novels, namely *wuxia* (martial heroes), *xianxia* (hero fantasy), and *xuanhuan* (magical fantasy) (Chang & Zhao, 2022; Tang et al., 2023) and the themes, most significantly on growth, adventure, conquest (Wu, Gu & Zheng, 2020). On the features and characteristics of CIL, researchers agree that being light novels, CIL provides a pleasurable and satisfactory reading experience as well as a sense of escapism for the readers (Wu, Gu & Zheng, 2020; Yang, 2021;

Shao, 2020). Other factors that contribute to the popularity of CIL, as seen in the increasing reader base, include CIL's reader-centered and reader-friendly stories with minimal cultural or ideological content. Some works like *Coiling Dragon* are infused with new elements like gamification or Western character names, such as Linley Baruch, Delia, and Bluefire. Such strong literary vitality and creativity help CIL open new frontiers in the digital realm, making it easily acceptable for readers from the English-speaking world (Wu, Gu & Zheng, 2020; Yang, 2021).

Different from traditional Chinese literature, CIL offers a totally new reading experience to the readers, in which the readers play multiple roles. This unique feature corresponds with the CIL translation modes and strategies, which are another major branch of CIL research. Different from the author-centered mode of writing in the past, CIL emphasizes reader-translator/writer dynamics (Yuan & Xue, 2022) because the readers may join as members of the writing/translating team and contribute to the collective effort of writing/translating part of the series; therefore, the readers are the authors and translators (Chang & Zhao, 2022; Liu & Teng, 2022). The mode of translation is shifting from user-generated (translations posted by the user/translator on online forums or social media) to that of crowdsourcing (translations coordinated and completed by volunteers on translation websites like Wuxiaworld) (Wu, Gu & Zheng, 2020).

Also, some of the readers play the role of sponsors as well as translation critics (Chang & Zhao, 2022; Hao, 2019). Termed "commissioned production of fictions" (Tian & Adorjan, 2016, p. 881), CIL has entered the era of commercialized, freemium readership, when Qidian (n.d.) was established in 2008 (Tang et al., 2023). Qidian is currently China's largest web novel platform, which not only hosts original online literature but also provides source materials to be translated and published on Wuxiaworld. It was Qidian that introduced the free-to-read but pay-to-unlock-VIP-contents membership subscription system. Readers are allowed to interact with the authors by tipping them or paying for customized stories (Tang et al., 2023). This is a game-changer as the readers could actively engage with the authors directly in the creation process and have more power over what or how they read.

Supernatural fiction and *Daomu Biji*

Supernatural fiction is defined by its focus on supernatural phenomena or aspects, which frequently defy naturalist interpretations of reality. Afolayan (2023, p. 26) describes the supernatural world as "the unknown and potentially unknowable or that which cannot be apprehended". Supernatural fictions typically incorporate elements that defy rationality in science and the natural world. It can deal with objects, people, animals, or phenomena that are deemed "abnormal", "strange", or "extraordinary". Traditionally, supernatural fictions in Chinese

culture are part of the zhiguai (志怪), which means “record of abnormalities”, or “tales of the supernatural”. Zhiguai is one of the earliest forms of fantasy literature in Chinese. According to Liu and Zhang (2018), the term zhiguai was first used in the early Daoist classic *Zhuangzi* (around 320 BCE). It continued to be utilized as the title of various collections of supernatural tales during the Six Dynasties period. It is important to note that zhiguai is very different from fantasy and supernatural literature in the Western tradition (Liu & Zhang, 2018). This is because the zhiguai collection is greatly influenced by Taoist or Buddhist philosophy. As a result, it frequently incorporates principles, values, and ideas that are meant to promote Buddhism or religious beliefs. The zhiguai and Western supernatural literature are only similar in the way they deal with abnormalities that defy natural laws in the human world (Liu & Zhang, 2018). A taxonomy of abnormalities discovered in zhiguai collections from the Wei and Jin periods has been mentioned by Liu and Zhang (2018) to provide additional insight into the many forms of abnormalities in zhiguai. The table below shows the types of traditional abnormalities listed by Liu and Zhang (2018).

Table 1: *Types of traditional abnormalities by Liu and Zhang (2018)*

Types of abnormalities	Examples
1. The Supernatural Beings	Deities, ghosts, monsters, immortals
2. The Realms Beyond the Human World	Heavens, underworld, immortal land, exotic territories
3. Cross-Boundary Oddities	Omens, thaumaturgy, metamorphoses, trafficking between humans and supernatural beings, interactions of humans with humanized beasts
4. Human World Oddities	Legendary figures, strange creatures, natural wonders, other marvels

In Chinese pre-modern literature, zhiguai is a historical writing that can still be traced in supernatural fiction. According to Macdonald (2019), Tianxia Bachang is one of the representative authors who wrote *Gui Chui Deng* (鬼吹灯)¹, an online novel series released in 2006. *Gui Chui Deng* is a series of zhiguai that plays with the uncertainty between the real and the unreal by re-creating the ghost story as a parody of history and fiction. In fact, the series even gave rise to a completely new genre known as grave-robbing fiction (Macdonald, 2019, p. 18). Another author named Xu Lei began serializing a similar story on grave robbing in 2006 on the Baidu forum, before moving to Qidian China, a platform for reading, publishing, and writing Chinese novels, under the pen name *Nanpai Sanshu*. This series, *Daomu Biji* 盗墓笔记², was inspired by the *Gui Chui Deng*. *Tomb Raiding* is a novel series that chronicles the tomb-robbing exploits of Wu

1. Ghost Blows out the Light
2. Grave Robbers' Chronicles

Xie, who was born into a family of grave robbers and is the sole heir of the Wu Family. The narrative unfolds 50 years ago when four men embark on a tomb raid at Biaozi Hill in Changsha. The story takes a tragic turn when they encounter a mutated corpse (referred to as a zombie in the official translation), leaving Wu Laogou as the lone survivor. Half a century later, Wu Laogou's grandchild, Wu Xie, is visited by an old man bearing a photocopy of a silk script for valuation. Wu Xie shares the silk script with his third uncle, Wu San Xing, the only inheritor of the tomb-raiding business in the family. It is revealed that the silk script is a map leading to an ancient tomb. From this point, Wu Xie begins his adventure into the mystery of tomb-raiding, entwining himself with centuries-old truths that somehow relate to the history of his family. Alongside Wang Pangzi and Zhang Qiling, his fellow tomb raiders, they collaborate to uncover the truth and embark on the thrilling journey that unfolds before them. The original novel series is accessible on the Qidian (n.d.) website, with the first fifty-six chapters of the first volume available for free, while a subscription is required to access the remaining content. Alternatively, readers can purchase the printed version at bookstores or online platforms like Amazon. Additionally, all six volumes of the official translation can be purchased from Amazon, whereas the fan translation is available online in PDF form. This way of writing establishes a balance between realism and fantasy, producing literary works that are distinct in their combination of adventure and the supernatural. Literary translators often work with supernatural fiction, particularly when there is a market for the translated works. However, it might be difficult for translators to grasp the meaning and allusion behind terms relating to the paranormal when their degree of cultural awareness comes as a barrier.

Written over five years, the main novel series comprises eight volumes, with the final volume split into two books, resulting in a total of nine physical books. As reported in the *People's Daily* (2015), the novel series underwent its initial adaptation into the 2015 TV series *The Lost Tomb*, focusing on the narrative of the first book. The following year, a cinematic adaptation, *Time Raiders*, hit the screens, securing the ninth spot for the largest box office in mainland China and ranking fifth in the Chinese movie box office. In 2019, *The Lost Tomb 2* was unveiled, featuring new casts and encompassing the storyline of the second, third, and partially fourth books. The year 2020 witnessed the release of *Ultimate Note*, which encompassed the events of the fifth, sixth, and seventh books. The unfolding narrative continued in 2021 with the debut of *Explore with the Note* on WeTV, exploring the events of the Heavenly Palace on the Clouds (Part 1 and Part 2 draw inspiration from books 2 and 3, respectively). Although no adaptation addresses the events of the final volume of the book, various TV series have explored the prequel, sequel, and side-story elements of the narrative.

A translation of the original novel series was published in English by Kathy Mok in 2011, but the serialization concludes with Volume six, specifically covering events from the fifth book. Later in 2020, a dedicated fan translator took up the task, completing the translation for the remaining volumes, including the prequel, sequel, and side story, and even resumed work on the first four volumes. For a better understanding, the following table illustrates the list for each novel volume and its English translations.

Table 2: *Overview of the volumes and the English translations*

Vol	Titles	Official Translation (Volumes/Titles)	Fan Translation (Volumes/Titles)
1	七星鲁王 (Seven Star Lu Palace)	Volume 1	Volume 1
		Cavern of the Blood Zombies	Seven Star Lu Palace & Angry Sea, Hidden Sands
		Volume 2 Angry Sea, Hidden Sands	
2	秦岭神树 (Qinling Mountain Sacred Tree)	Volume 3 Bronze Tree of Death	Volume 2 Qinling Mountain Sacred Tree & Heavenly Palace on the Clouds (Part 1)
3	云顶天宫 (Heavenly Palace on the Clouds)	Volume 4 Palace of Doom	Volume 3 Heavenly Palace on the Clouds (Part 2)
4	蛇沼鬼城 (Snake Swamp Ghost Town)	Volume 5 Deadly Desert Winds	Volume 4 Snake Marsh Ghost City
5	谜海归巢 (Mystery Sea Returns to Nest)	Volume 6 Graveyard of a Queen	
6	阴山古楼 (Yinshan Mountains Ancient Building)		Volume 6 Ancient Building Under the Dark Mountain
7	邛笼石影 (Qionglong stone shadow)		Volume 7 Stone Shadow in Qiong Cave
8	大结局 1 & 2 (The Finale Part 1 & 2)		Volume 8 The Finale (Parts 1 & 2)

It is noteworthy that Nanpai Sanshu originally ventured into writing as an amateur driven by his passion for producing stories of grave-robbing adventures. In the epilogue of the novel series sequel *Ten Years Later*, he openly acknowledges being a writer who joined the field midway, expressing a constant unease, fearing that others might discover his amateur status. This aligns with Duan's (2018) assertion that many online writers initially start as grassroots writers, later attaining fame and professional standing due to the success of their literary works. Overwhelmed by pressure, the author even announced his retirement from writing in 2013, citing challenges arising from the conflict between the demands of the publishing cycle and maintaining writing quality. He also mentioned facing substantial criticism due to delays in uploading new chapters. After a long hiatus, he returned to writing in 2018 with another sequel, *Reboot: Thunder at the Distant Sea*. The novel series received the Best Adventure Novel Award in the 7th China Writers Rich List in 2012, and the author was honored with the New Talent Award for Internet Literature in the 2nd Mao Dun Literature Prize in 2019. With over twenty million copies sold (Brzeski, 2016), the series has become one of the noteworthy representatives of the grave robbers (Duan, 2018, p. 674), breaking various publishing records at the time.

Results and Findings

As promised, the interview was conducted anonymously to safeguard the translator's identity. According to the US copyright law, anyone found liable for civil copyright infringement may be ordered to pay either actual damages or "statutory" damages affixed at no less than \$750 and no more than \$30,000 per work infringed. For "willful" infringement, a court may award up to \$150,000 per work infringed. Since it is believed that the fan translator resides in the US, the identity of the translator is kept confidential. The questionnaire, as stated, is based on the disclaimer published on the weblog managed by the translator regarding the *Daomu Biji*. The interview revealed some demographic information about the translator. The translator is a female (therefore, from now on will be addressed as she), in her early 30s. She is no Chinese diaspora and has no knowledge of the Chinese language.

Regarding the translation, she believes in mastering the source text (ST) to do the original work justice, while she claims no knowledge of the original language of *Daomu Biji*. Therefore, that could be the reason why she believes that her target text (TT) would be different if she knew the Chinese language. To get a preliminary target text, she utilizes three online translation websites, namely Baidu (n.d.), SOGOU (n.d.), and Google Translate (n.d.), as well as an online Chinese-to-English dictionary called MDBG (n.d.). Moreover, she refers to several context clues to figure out the addresses of pronouns when she is confused about what the author conveys. She also refers to the first six books published by the official translator to double-check the references. She

also considered watching some Chinese dramas inspired by the *Daomu Biji* in 2020 to translate the names of characters correctly, but she did not reveal which dramas exactly she had in mind. Therefore, she confirms that her work is a retranslation. After she puts the ST in online translation machines, she imagines herself in the author's shoes and tries to reword the statements in the English language. She even modifies the tense of verbs in the text following the context. That is how she manipulates the TT heavily.

However, it is noteworthy to say that she is not alone on this journey. As stated in the disclaimer and confirmed in the interview, two readers are also in the picture, helping the translator with the task. Tiffany X and Yvette are two readers who reached out to the translator with their comments on the text. The translator decided not to reveal any demographic information about them. However, both are claimed not to be part of the Chinese diaspora and not to have a strong command of the Chinese language. From the pronouns she used, it is understood that Tiffany X is a female since whenever the translator refers to her, she uses the pronoun *she*. Tiffany X, according to the translator, acts as a quality control person in charge, where she provides feedback and/or corrections on the work the translator edited using machine translation. Tiffany X has the experience of translating *The Southern Archives*, another Chinese Internet Literature, into English, published in 2021 on the *Daomu Biji* Wiki website as well as the weblog managed by the fan translator of the *Daomu Biji*. Similarly, in 2019, Yvette translated *A Thousand Faces*, an extra written by the *Daomu Biji* author, and published it on the same platforms.

Asking her about the collaborative translation work, the fan translator refuses to call her work a collaborative and/or crowd-sourced translation since she believes that it is her who is doing most of the work. However, she claims that any individual who helped her with constructive comments received credit on the website. She usually receives comments on the TT from several readers as well. She claims to edit and revise the TT based on the readers' comments continuously if she agrees with their corrections and believes the comments are reasonable and constructive. Her definition of constructive comment is either a misinterpreted source text with a correction provided or pointing out a typo in the TT. For her, there is no set stop-point for editing the TT.

She also revealed the motivation behind the translation of *Daomu Biji*. As stated by the fan translator, she first watched the drama series *The Lost Tomb* on a whim, then started reading the English translations related to the story. Since she could not find more of the stories in English, she managed to find the ST. At first, she used Google Translate to read it in English, but the text was not to her satisfaction. After editing the TT heavily for easier reading, she thought there might be others out there who would like to read the rest of the stories like her. That was the time she decided to publish her version of the TT on a website.

For this, she does not carry any knowledge of the ST language, and based on the definition provided to her during the interview, she considers herself a post-editor rather than a translator. Since she has no permission from the ST author, she publishes her TT freely on her website, which she believes is ethical.

Discussion

The current research tries to not only shed light on the role of ST language knowledge in producing an acceptable translation for the readers but also provide insights specifically on the fan translation of *Daomu Biji*. As concluded by the current body of literature, a certain level of knowledge in SL as well as the cultural context of both the SL and TL are required factors for translators to be able to deliver a translated product that would be understood by the TT readers (Shadiev et al., 2018; Ho et al., 2019; Ratnasari, 2020; Li et al., 2021; Haldane et al., 2022; Al-Jarf, 2022; Robertson & Díaz, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). However, as the results of the interview revealed, the fan translator of *Daomu Biji* does not know the SL and she acquires her ST cultural context online, which may not even be accurate and/or enough. Considering her answers to the questions regarding the crowd-sourced translation and intralingual translation, it could be safe to say that her work is not related to any of the notions above. However, as confirmed by her, this fan translation could be safely discussed under the phenomenon of retranslation since the work of fan translation is heavily influenced by the official English translation. In other words, the official English translation has been accepted as the main source of inspiration for this fan translation, according to the interview. Retranslation can generally be understood as the act of translating a text that has already been translated before. It often involves the re-examination of the source material and the previous translations, intending to produce a new version that may better reflect contemporary language use, cultural nuances, or authorial intent. The past studies, therefore, confirm that retranslation has emerged as a significant area of study within the field of translation studies, particularly due to its implications for understanding the dynamics of meaning, cultural reinterpretation, and the evolving nature of texts across different contexts and periods (Carl et al., 2019; Sipahutar et al., 2021; Munkova et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Official and fan translations are said to be two categories of online literary translations. Official translations are those that have been produced by certified translators and checked for accuracy, making them legally acceptable translations. These translations are usually commissioned and/or managed internally by institutions or administrations on behalf of private clients (Taibi & Ozolins, 2022). Meanwhile, fan translations are unofficial translations of texts

made by fans. It is a literacy practice in which people translate for enjoyment, usually in response to a concrete fan activity that they find appealing. Typically, fans translate because they have learned the language through their frequent online interactions and the process of finding suitable expressions in translation (Vazquez-Calvo et al., 2019, p. 50). In most cases, fan translations are even made freely available due to the non-availability of the official translations in the corresponding language. The types of fan translation include the translation of literary works, comics, fan fiction, fan subbing or dubbing, video games, sports, music, etc. Fan translation can be considered a service to the fan community since it enables the texts to be read in languages other than their original languages, sometimes even before an official translation is prepared and made available, or as a substitute for it (Evans, 2019, p. 178). It is important to note that fan translations are done primarily for the sake of text accessibility and improved attribution to the original works, and not for financial gain. As a result, fans may be inspired to participate in discussions and share their enthusiasm for these cultural products (Deppey, 2005; Lee, 2009, pp. 1015-1017; Evans, 2019, p. 178).

The present study conducted an interview with the fan translator of *Daomu Biji* to reveal more about the motivations and procedures in the process of translating the said novel. The results reveal that the translator considers her work a retranslation of the ST, where the official English translation plays a role in inspiring this task. It is traditionally believed that translation requires knowledge in both source and target languages; however, the current study could be said to be the only one conducted that contradicts the belief. The fan translator clearly does not know SL. Moreover, she carries no information on the ST cultural context, which makes it clear that the fan translator is only proficient in the TT. This research confirms that in the modern world of Translation Studies, with the heavy overcast of technology and artificial intelligence (AI) involved in the process of translation, translators may not necessarily need knowledge of the SL. As confirmed by the fan translator, inspired by the definition of post-editing, she prefers to carry the title of post-editor instead of translator. This could mean that individuals involved in the act of translation using technology and AI could possibly translate a text without knowing the SL and post-edit the TT with their personal preferences. This, of course, would be favorable and/or rejected by the readers. The positive side of the story is that there might be an increasing number of fan translations, making it easier for readers to access foreign writings in their preferred languages. However, the threat of manipulation, since even the fan translator of *Daomu Biji* pleaded with it, would be a greater concern for the readers as well as the Translation Studies scholars.

The current research is considered to be a case study, looking at a single fan translator. The results may not seem suitable for generalization, which is clearly due to the limitations of this research. It is recommended that further studies

consider looking deeper at the process of translation and post-editing involving a group of individuals who are not familiar with the SL. That would help to delve deeper into the complex cognitive processes of translation as well as a possible comparison between the translated products.

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INTERACTIVE REPRESENTATION OF TRAUMA IN POSTMODERN THEATRE: AUDIENCE AND CHARACTER INTERACTION IN BRYONY LAVERY'S *FROZEN*

Merve Feryal Ashmawy

Sinop University, Türkiye

Abstract: *This study explores the interactive representation of trauma in Bryony Lavery's Frozen (2015), emphasizing the crucial role of audience and character interaction in postmodern theatre. Rather than portraying trauma as a static or detached narrative, Lavery utilizes theatrical techniques that engage the audience emotionally and cognitively, transforming them into witnesses and participants. Drawing on trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Judith Herman, the study illustrates how trauma is not only represented but transmitted through performance. The characters Nancy, Ralph, and Agnetha – each embody different aspects of trauma, inviting the audience into a shared emotional space. Through direct address, monologues, and fragmented narrative, the play destabilizes conventional storytelling and fosters catharsis. This paper analyzes how postmodern theatrical strategies blur boundaries between character and audience, enabling an immersive experience of trauma and recovery. The implications of such interactive forms are discussed, with suggestions for future research on trauma representation in contemporary performance.*

Keywords: *Postmodern theatre, trauma representation, Bryony Lavery, Frozen, catharsis.*

About the author: *Dr. Merve Feryal Ashmawy completed a Ph.D. in Western Languages and Literature at Karabük University/Türkiye and is currently a lecturer at Sinop University. Her research areas include English drama, postmodern drama, trauma, and psychoanalytic theories. Specializing in English language and literature, Dr Merve Feryal Ashmawy continues to conduct in-depth analyses in these fields. During her tenure at Sinop University, she has contributed to various studies on literary criticism and theoretical approaches.*

e-mail: merveashmawy@gmail.com

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0340-7602>

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Introduction

Postmodern theatre challenges traditional boundaries between performer and spectator, inviting the audience into a more active, immersive experience. This form of theatre foregrounds fragmentation, self-reflexivity, and direct audience engagement, offering a fertile ground for representing psychological and social phenomena such as trauma. Within this framework, Bryony Lavery's *Frozen* (2015) stands out as a compelling example of how theatre can serve as a medium for both representing and processing traumatic experiences.

Frozen (2015) revolves around the disappearance and murder of a young girl and the intersecting lives of her mother, the perpetrator, and a psychiatrist. Rather than dramatizing the act of violence itself, Lavery focuses on its emotional and psychological aftermath. Each character undergoes a journey of grief, guilt, and confrontation, and the audience is drawn into these experiences through carefully crafted interactive techniques. As trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman argue, trauma often resists linear narration and is instead expressed through fragmentation, repetition, and emotional disruption – all of which are central elements of *Frozen*.

This paper examines how trauma is interactively represented in Lavery's play, focusing on the role of audience-character interaction in fostering empathy and understanding. Through monologues, direct address, and the staging of memory, *Frozen* (2015) invites the audience to witness and internalize the characters' emotional realities. The play not only reflects trauma but also performs it, creating a shared space in which the audience becomes part of the healing process. This paper contributes to trauma studies in theatre by offering a model of interactive representation that fosters ethical engagement through emotional immersion.

Frozen

Frozen was first performed at the Birmingham Repertory Theater in 1998. The play, which was performed in many other theaters in England, received a Tony Award nomination for the best play on Broadway in 2004 and significantly increased the awareness of the public in America towards this issue. After the play was performed, Lavery was accused by the critics and the audience of plagiarizing the case of Lucy Partington who was missing for twenty years and found out that she was murdered. Lucy's family, like Rhona's family, did not hear about their daughter for twenty years and only found out what happened to her twenty years later. It is claimed that Lavery was inspired by this event to write *Frozen*. Marian Partington, Lucy's sister, shared in a statement that it was impossible to describe the impact her sister's loss had had on them, as if it was looking for a body at the bottom of the frozen Arctic Ocean. It is thought that Lavery named the play *Frozen*, and was inspired by this event. In

fact, it is noteworthy that the characteristics and discourses of the character of Ralph are similar to those of Frederic West, Lucy's murderer, and Robert Black, who was another serial killer (Wald, 2006, p.118). The play consists of two acts and 30 scenes. The first act consists of monologues. The main characters are Agnetha, Nancy, and Ralph, who use these monologues in order to show their frozen states to the audience. In the second act, these monologues are replaced by the dialogues between the characters in which they communicate. While pre-traumatic and post-traumatic situations are included in the play, traumatic situations or events experienced by trauma victims are not directly staged. For instance, the abuse and murder that Rhona was subjected to by Ralph, or the abuse, violence, and neglect that Ralph was subjected to as a child were reported but not directly acted on the stage. It is in line with the principle of trauma theory that traumatic experience eludes narrative memory (Wald, 2006, p.115).

In the play, a family deeply feels the impact of a traumatic situation. Their young daughter has been missing for twenty years. When she is finally searched for, it's revealed she was sexually abused and killed. Furthermore, the sexual abuser, Ralph, is also revealed to have been a victim of childhood sexual abuse himself. This situation makes the audience question the clear-cut line between victim and victimizer. It's confusing because the mother initially feels an intense desire for revenge. However, this feeling of revenge is then replaced by a sense of calm and ultimately, forgiveness. It brings the question of "Could I forgive, if it were me?" to the minds of the audience. Bryony Lavery, who is an important playwright in English Theater, includes black comedy elements from time to time; however, putting black comedy elements into a serious subject, such as sexual abuse can be considered as a controversial topic. Considering the period in which the play is written, issues such as sexual abuse and rape are among the topics that are not talked about much in the society and are mostly kept secret. In this play, Lavery aims to raise awareness in society by openly talking about sexual abuse and rape. The 1990s was a period marked by numerous cases of missing children who, upon investigation, were discovered to have been sexually abused and murdered (Aston, 2003, p. 55). So, if these are the facts of life, then everyone should talk about them and people should be aware of them. In *Frozen* (2015), alongside the theme of sexual abuse, the play conveys to the audience the psychological and sociological harm inflicted on both individuals and society, as well as the underlying causes of such acts. At the same time, whether such an act is forgivable or not is left to the empathy of the audience.

Trauma Theory and the Interactive Representation in the Play *Frozen*

Trauma, as conceptualized in contemporary theory, is not simply a response to a past event but a complex and often delayed experience that disrupts the psyche

and narrative coherence. Cathy Caruth (1996) describes trauma as a wound that speaks through belatedness and fragmentation, manifesting in symptoms that appear disconnected from the original cause. Judith Herman (1992) emphasizes how trauma undermines the self, identity, and social connection, often isolating the survivor within a private world of suffering. These theoretical insights are vividly embodied in *Frozen*, where Lavery avoids dramatizing the traumatic event itself and instead focuses on the fragmented emotional aftermath.

The play opens with a series of monologues, each character trapped in their own mental space, symbolically “frozen” in time. Nancy’s pain as the mother of a missing child is not presented through overt dramatization but through repetition, silence, and bodily expression:

I’ve lost nearly two stone.

I’ve gone back to smoking.

Cast-Iron Excuse.

Even my mother has to let me.

It’s bad today because it’s Rhona’s

birthday tomorrow and they say

Missing Children often phone on their birthdays.

Get in touch...

She holds her stomach. Swallows.

This scene illustrates Caruth’s idea of trauma being both unclaimed and repetitive. Nancy’s physical responses (holding her stomach, swallowing) signal the body as a vessel for unspeakable pain. Through monologue, Lavery removes narrative distance, enabling the audience to directly receive Nancy’s internal monologue and thus engage in what Shoshana Felman (1995) terms the “act of witnessing.”

Ralph’s character complicates the audience’s emotional stance. As the perpetrator of the crime, he initially appears irredeemable. However, Lavery reveals Ralph’s distorted memories of his childhood – a defense mechanism that Freud (1899) referred to as “screen memories.” In one monologue, Ralph constructs a seemingly idyllic memory:

Big kitchen... with an Aga... a dark green Aga...

all copper pans gleaming in the light...

mother does the meals... we all sit down to eat together...

Yet these memories are later exposed as false, shaped by a deeply abusive childhood. This disruption of narrative coherence reflects trauma’s resistance to orderly recollection. The audience is prompted to experience what Felman

and Laub (1992) describe as “the crisis of witnessing” – a conflicted moral engagement that forces them to simultaneously condemn and empathize.

Agnetha, the American psychiatrist, functions as both observer and survivor. She is tasked with analyzing Ralph but is also dealing with her own unresolved trauma, which is revealed through emotional breakdowns during sessions with Ralph. In one key scene:

Agnetha is with Ralph in the prison room.

Tears are coursing down her cheeks, sobs interrupting her breathing.

Ralph is watching her...

Agnetha: Sorry.

Ralph: Stop.

Agnetha: Sorry... it's just...

Ralph: Stop that.

Agnetha: I'm sorry. His voice is upsetting me a little...

Here, the professional mask slips, and the boundaries between analyst and subject dissolve. This moment enacts Herman's claim that trauma is contagious – it destabilizes even those who attempt to study or contain it. The audience, witnessing Agnetha's vulnerability, is drawn further into the emotional core of the play, not as passive observers but as ethical participants.

Interactive Theatrical Techniques and Postmodern Structure

Bryony Lavery's *Frozen* (2015) exemplifies key aspects of postmodern theatre: fragmentation, non-linear narrative, character-audience interaction, and metatheatrical self-awareness. These devices are not merely stylistic; they are strategically employed to evoke emotional participation and simulate the fractured experience of trauma.

When examined in terms of monologues and direct address as tools of empathy, each character's direct engagement with the audience establishes an intimate one-on-one relationship. This direct address breaks the “fourth wall” and transforms the traditional spectator into a listener – what Felman (1995) calls an “ethical witness.” Unlike conventional dialogue, which mediates emotion through interpersonal exchange, monologues in *Frozen* (2015) externalize internal monologue, placing the audience inside the character's psyche.

Agnetha: I am not made of ice... But sometimes I feel as if I am... as if everything inside me is still...

This line is not spoken to another character, but to the audience. It is a quiet confession, performed in vulnerability, inviting silent reception. As Duggan (2020) notes, postmodern theatre often uses “emotional fragmentation and

repetition” to reflect the fractured identity of trauma survivors. Lavery’s use of monologue mirrors that fragmentation while drawing the audience into the emotional labor of understanding.

From the perspective of fragmented structure and temporal disruption, the play is divided into 30 scenes across two acts, with Act I dominated by isolated monologues and Act II introducing interactions between characters. This structure reflects trauma’s disruption of time and sequence. Caruth (1996) argues that trauma “does not simply serve as a record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned.” By displacing narrative continuity, Lavery positions the audience within this disorienting temporal logic. Scene transitions often occur without clear progression, allowing flashbacks and present moments to bleed into one another. For example, Nancy’s recurring birthday scenes blur past and present. Ralph’s memory sequences blend fantasy with reality. These narrative choices elicit from the audience the same confusion and lack of closure experienced by the characters.

In terms of staging and spatial symbolism, the set design is sparse and often abstract, emphasizing isolation. Characters are frequently lit alone on stage, reinforcing their emotional solitude and the symbolic “freezing” of their trauma. Shared space rarely occurs until Act II, where dialogue emerges and the potential for transformation begins. Audience positioning – physically and emotionally – is integral to this structure. By denying visual dramatization of the abuse (no flashback scenes of violence are enacted), Lavery resists voyeurism and instead emphasizes the ethical imagination of the viewer. The audience is not shown the trauma – they are made to feel its absence, its echo, its imprint.

Finally, when considering the effects of the interactive representation of trauma, the interactive structure of *Frozen* significantly alters the audience’s role, transforming them from passive spectators into emotionally engaged participants. As Smet (2024) emphasizes, the ephemeral nature of live performance intensifies emotional responses, particularly when dealing with themes such as trauma and psychological pain. Through direct address, the audience becomes a silent confidant. When Nancy reveals her inner torment or Ralph delivers his idealized but deceptive memories, the audience is forced into an ethical and emotional reckoning. They cannot distance themselves – they are implicated in the process of listening, judging, and feeling.

This proximity enables what Teasdale et al. (2021) refer to as “psychological mirroring.” The audience identifies with the characters, not necessarily in terms of shared experience, but through the emotional logic of pain, grief, and confusion. Empathy becomes an active process; the viewer is emotionally worked by the performance. In particular, the scene where Agnetha breaks down while listening to a child abuse recording, and Ralph silently watches, collapses traditional boundaries between actor, character, and audience. The

silence becomes more powerful than language, pulling the audience into an uncomfortable but revealing emotional space.

Catharsis and Emotional Resolution

Originally rooted in Aristotelian tragedy, catharsis refers to the purging of pity and fear through dramatic performance. In the context of trauma theatre, catharsis is both emotional release and a potential site of transformation. Lavery reconfigures this classical idea by embedding moments of catharsis in character-audience exchanges.

Khomami (2022) conceptualizes catharsis as a therapeutic loop – where cognition and emotion attempt to reconcile traumatic tension. In *Frozen* (2015), cathartic moments emerge not through resolution but through raw emotional visibility. Nancy's acceptance of her daughter's death, Agnetha's trembling confession, and even Ralph's sudden awareness of his fractured psyche – all these moments serve as catalysts for audience introspection.

Nancy: I thought I would kill him.

Then I thought: No. That would be too easy for him.

Then I thought: Maybe I could forgive him.

And now... I just feel cold.

This is not forgiveness in the traditional sense – it is emotional exhaustion, detachment, and clarity. It is a moment of release, both for Nancy and the audience. The play ends not with closure but with emotional resonance.

Lavery's emphasis on indirect representation – allowing trauma to speak through silence, fragmentation, and audience reflection – aligns with contemporary trauma theory. It honors the complexity of psychological pain without simplifying it. Instead, the theatre space becomes a site of shared witnessing and potential healing.

Conclusion

Bryony Lavery's *Frozen* (2015) is a masterclass in representing trauma through postmodern theatrical techniques. By abandoning linear narrative and embracing direct audience interaction, Lavery creates a performance space where trauma is not only observed but experienced. Drawing on trauma theory – particularly the works of Caruth, Herman, and Felman – the play enacts rather than explains psychological rupture. Each character embodies a distinct aspect of trauma: Nancy's grief, Ralph's distorted memory, Agnetha's empathetic breakdown. These narratives intersect not just with each other but with the audience's perception, creating a layered experience of emotional resonance.

Interactive theatrical strategies – monologues, spatial isolation, and fragmented narrative – blur the lines between performance and testimony. The audience becomes not only witness but participant, engaging in catharsis and emotional reflection. This study demonstrates that *Frozen* (2015) does not merely depict trauma – it performs its transmission. It offers a model for how contemporary theatre can ethically engage with suffering, fostering empathy without exploitation. Future research might compare *Frozen* with other trauma-based plays across cultural contexts or explore the impact of emerging technologies (e.g., virtual theatre) on trauma representation and audience involvement.

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‘SEASCAPE EPISTEMOLOGY’ AND NATIVE HAWAIIAN HEALING: A READING OF KIMO ARMITAGE’S *THE HEALERS*

Kristiawan Indriyanto¹, Rudy Rudy²

^{1,2}Universitas Prima Indonesia, Indonesia

Abstract: *This study analyzes Kimo Armitage’s The Healers to examine how seascape epistemology provides an alternative framework for understanding human-environment relationships. The novel presents Native Hawaiian healing practices that position the ocean as an active, sacred entity central to identity, ancestry, and well-being rather than a passive setting. Armitage’s narrative challenges terrestrial ecological paradigms by emphasizing oceanic relationships where healing encompasses both physical and spiritual dimensions. The novel draws on Indigenous Hawaiian cosmology to reframe the sea as a genealogical and ethical space that preserves cultural memory and sustains ecological balance. This interpretation advances blue humanities scholarship by centering Native epistemologies that Western environmental discourse often marginalizes. The analysis employs literary interpretation alongside cultural theory to demonstrate how The Healers articulates a comprehensive vision of oceanic existence and knowledge systems.*

Keywords: *blue humanities, environmental discourse, Indigenous literature, Native Hawaiian, seascape epistemology*

About the author: Kristiawan Indriyanto is a lecturer at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Prima Indonesia and head of the PUI Bahasa Sastra dan Literasi. He holds Ph.D. in American Studies from Universitas Gadjah Mada on the topic of postcolonial ecocriticism in Hawai’ian-American literature. His main research interests are analyzing literature with a postcolonial ecocriticism perspective, primarily focusing on Native Hawaiian literature and the decolonizing discourse of Hawaiian indigene through Aloha ‘āina. His other research interests include environmental ethics, econarratology, space in literature and world literature. He is the author of over 85 publications on various topics, a number of which are indexed in Scopus or Web of Science. He is also active as Editorial Board members, Section Editors and Reviewers of several International (SCOPUS-Indexed) and Indonesian nationally accredited journals.

e-mail: kristiawanindriyanto@unprimdn.ac.id **ORCID iD:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7827-2506>

About the author: Rudy Rudy been a lecturer at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Prima Indonesia since 2012. He holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from Gadjah Mada University, obtained in 2017, complementing his Master of Arts in American Studies (2008) and undergraduate degree in English Literature from Methodist University of Indonesia (2005). Beyond his teaching and mentoring roles, Rudy actively contributes as a reviewer for campus journals such as *The ELT* (English Language Teaching Prima), *RUBIKON* (Journal of Transnational American Studies), and *JOLALI* (Journal of Language and Literature). He also frequently publishes scholarly articles in *Literature, Culture, Film Studies, and Education*.

e-mail: rudy1@unprimdn.ac.id

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7381-1452>

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Introduction

Environmental literature scholarship increasingly recognizes how literary representations shape human-nature relationships, particularly as ecological crises demand new conceptual frameworks. Buell (1995) argues that environmental problems stem partly from “a crisis of the imagination” (ibid., p. 2) in how Western culture depicts and understands nature. While nature writing¹ has been a significant genre, Anglo-American viewpoints have dominated it. *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* (1990) demonstrates this bias by focusing on white authors like Emerson, Thoreau, and Leopold. This canonical bias has also emphasized nonfictional prose over poetry and fiction, particularly overlooking non-Western literary traditions. Indigenous environmental literature offers alternative frameworks that challenge Western nature-culture binaries. Rather than viewing landscapes as external resources, many Indigenous traditions conceptualize human identity as fundamentally interconnected with specific places and ecosystems (Kerridge, 2014). For many Indigenous communities, understanding and empathizing with the landforms is the core of their cultural identity, shaping their values, traditions, and practices. Indigenous worldviews remain fundamentally interconnected with the natural environment.

American environmental literature has historically emphasized untouched wilderness as a defining characteristic of national geography. Buell (2009) argues that this wilderness imagination distinguishes American environmental thought from European traditions, which lack comparable frontier experiences (ibid., p. 230). The wilderness paradigm became fundamental to American identity formation, reflecting what scholars term the myth-and-symbol approach in American Studies. Hamilton and Jones observe that “no nation on earth, perhaps, has defined itself so profoundly, for so long, or so intimately in terms of its environment” (2015, p. 3) demonstrating a distinctive process of national self-definition through landscape. This environmental nationalism supported narratives of frontier expansion and rugged individualism. Cultural tropes including the “American Adam” and “virgin land” mythology reinforced images of innocent civilization advancing into supposedly empty wilderness (Tate, 1973). Contemporary Indigenous writers challenge these foundational assumptions by offering alternative conceptualizations of human-nature relationships that complicate wilderness-centered paradigms.

1. Nature writing is a literary genre that examines human relationships with the natural world through observation, reflection, and environmental commentary. The genre draws from travel literature, pastoral traditions, and spiritual writing, achieving particular prominence in American literature. Representative authors such as Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold established its characteristic focus on wilderness experience and personal landscape engagement. Contemporary scholarship increasingly examines nature writing through postcolonial and Indigenous frameworks, challenging the genre’s historical dominance by white male voices (see Buell, 1995; Gatta, 2004; Slovic, 1992).

Contemporary Indigenous and ethnic environmental writers challenge wilderness-centered paradigms through what Homi Bhabha terms “cultural hybridity” – the productive intersection of different cultural systems that generates new forms of meaning (Bhabha, 1994). Bhabha’s “third space” concept illuminates how Indigenous writers construct alternative environmental epistemologies that neither reject nor assimilate dominant wilderness narratives (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). Adamson and Ruffin (2013) demonstrate how Indigenous and ethnic literatures generate new environmental knowledge within these hybrid cultural spaces (ibid., p. 12). Rather than opposing Western environmental frameworks, these texts create zones where traditional ecological knowledge intersects with contemporary environmental concerns. This hybridization transforms both Indigenous cultural practices and mainstream ecological discourse.

Native Hawaiian literature emerged as a distinctive voice within American environmental writing, shaped by the political and cultural complexities of Hawai‘i’s 1898 annexation despite Indigenous opposition (Ho‘omanawanui, 2015, p. 231). *Kānaka*/Native Hawaiian writers developed literary traditions partly in response to misrepresentation by non-Hawaiian authors, articulating Indigenous environmental perspectives often absent from mainstream American nature writing (Sumida, 1991, p. 231). Hawaiian literary works typically embody cosmological frameworks that position humans within genealogical relationships extending to all natural entities (Indriyanto, 2024; Møllegaard, 2023). This worldview, where ancestral spirits inhabit various physical forms and divine beings assume multiple manifestations, establishes what Ho‘omanawanui (2008) describes as fundamentally relational rather than extractive approaches to environmental engagement. Such perspectives challenge American nature writing’s historical emphasis on wilderness as separate from human culture, instead presenting integrated cosmologies where cultural identity and environmental knowledge develop through sustained kinship relationships with particular places and ecosystems.

‘Āina is the land that can nurture and sustain life by providing food, including the majority of environments from the ocean to the highest mountaintops; it is the land that provides food for all living things, not just humans. The *‘āina* (the land) value is not monetary but familial. The land sustains us and nurtures us like a family member. Thus, in our culture, the values of *aloha ‘āina* (love for the land) and *malama ‘āina* (caring for the land) are fundamental (Ho‘omanawanui, 2008, p. 124).

This study analyzes Kimo Armitage’s contemporary novel *The Healers* (2016), which exemplifies key themes in Native Hawaiian literature. Armitage has written over twenty books for young readers and integrates these healing practices with ancestral knowledge. The narrative follows cousins Keola and Pua, who train under their grandmother to become the next generation of family

healers. Through their apprenticeship, they discover plant medicinal properties and learn to treat community ailments. The novel portrays nature as a conscious, active force, reflecting Native Hawaiian epistemology rather than Western objectifying the natural world. Armitage connects the protagonists to their heritage and illustrates how their healing abilities bridge physical and spiritual domains. This representation reinforces traditional Hawaiian perspectives on the interconnectedness of human, natural, and spiritual realms.

The Healers and Hawaiian literature generally demonstrate a transition toward water-centered knowledge systems. This orientation corresponds with blue humanities, an emerging field examining oceans and waterways' cultural, historical, and ecological importance. According to Mentz (2024, p. 3), this aquatic criticism aims to describe water's complex dynamics and reconsider human-water relationships. Within this framework, islands function simultaneously as geographic locations and conceptual models for understanding environmental interconnections in the Anthropocene. Blue humanities scholarship suggests that aquatic ecosystem challenges are inseparable from sociocultural factors, arguing that capitalist political structures have degraded global waterways and that effective solutions require sociocultural approaches. Hawaiian scholar Ingersoll (2016, 2023) contributes to this discourse by proposing a seascape epistemology that positions the ocean as fundamental to place-based knowledge, contrasting it with conventional land-centered perspectives. Her methodology incorporates Indigenous Hawaiian sensory-based ocean understanding, a concept that will be examined in subsequent analysis.

Reading Seascape Epistemology in a Blue Humanities Context

This analysis employs blue humanities as its primary theoretical framework, drawing on scholarship that reconceptualizes the ocean as a dynamic cultural and epistemological space rather than passive setting (Mentz, 2009; Oppermann, 2023). Blue humanities reorient environmental criticism from terrestrial models toward literary texts that foreground human-ocean relationships. Blue humanities scholarship challenges environmental criticism's historical emphasis on terrestrial models by examining literary texts that foreground human-ocean relationships. Seascape epistemology, as developed by Karin Ingersoll, provides a more specific framework for analyzing Indigenous oceanic knowledge systems. Ingersoll argues that seascape functions as "a storied place where knowledge is produced through movement, immersion, and bodily engagement" (2016, p. x), emphasizing embodied rather than abstract ways of knowing. The analysis demonstrates how the novel positions marine environments as active participants in Hawaiian epistemology rather than external resources for human use.

Steve Mentz introduced the term "Blue Humanities" in his 2009 article "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies," establishing a framework which conceptualizes

maritime environments as active cultural and geopolitical forces rather than passive backdrops (Menz, 2009, p. 997). Blue humanities scholarship examines how oceanic spaces shape human experience through what Oppermann terms “intersecting Anthropocene narratives, social practices, and cultural dynamics” (2023, p. 4). This oceanic turn challenges environmental criticism’s historical emphasis on terrestrial knowledge systems, which Dobrin (2021) argues has marginalized maritime cultures and epistemologies across diverse historical contexts.

Blue ecocriticism erodes the land-based logic of ecological literacy. In doing so, it exposes literacy’s systemic exclusion of – and subsequent erasure of – Indigenous knowledge-making systems and methodologies and acknowledges the critical role diverse cultural oceanic knowledge plays in both representations of ocean and human–ocean interaction (Dobrin, 2021, p. 47).

Early 21st-century blue humanities scholarship emerged primarily in Anglophone literary contexts, focusing on Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Caribbean maritime spaces and their impact on Western cultural narratives (DeLoughrey, 2020; Mentz, 2023). By the 2020s, scholars expanded this framework to incorporate global, non-Western, and Indigenous perspectives, representing both geographical and conceptual enrichment. This expansion reveals oceanic knowledge systems frequently marginalized in Western environmental discourse.

Indigenous maritime epistemologies remain embedded within specific cultural, ecological, and geographical contexts. Decontextualizing such knowledge risks severing the complex relationships between cultural practice and environmental understanding. Analyzing Armitage’s *The Healers* therefore requires engaging with Karin Amimoto Ingersoll’s concept of “seascape epistemology,” which she defines as “an indigenous Hawaiian way of knowing” founded on a “sensorial, intellectual, and embodied literacy of the ocean” (2016, p. 6). This framework positions oceanic knowledge as foundational to Native Hawaiian cultural identity and environmental relationships.

Ingersoll’s seascape epistemology extends blue humanities scholarship by centering Indigenous oceanic knowledge as a complete worldview rather than supplementary perspective. This framework conceptualizes *‘āina* (land) and *kai* (sea) as an integrated system requiring respectful interaction to maintain environmental and cultural balance (Knopf, 2023, pp. 77–78). For Native Hawaiians, oceanic knowledge encompasses spiritual, intellectual, and embodied understanding that connects individual identity with ancestral wisdom. Ingersoll demonstrates how *ma ke kai* (immersion in the sea) enables *Kānaka* to access cultural knowledge systems that Western environmental frameworks often overlook.

the Hawaiian relationship to the ocean is moored in a historical relationship – in which the sea serves as an instrument of migration, as transportation, and as a source of food, medicine, and shelter – as well as spiritual right and responsibility, or *kuleana*, to the sea expressed in the concept of *mālama ‘āina* (caring for the land) The ocean is where we cleanse, dance, play, train, and die. It is the point from which we have always leapt off, physically and philosophically, into our pasts and our futures (Ingersoll, 2016, p. 6).

For Kānaka, genealogical relationships with ka moana (ocean) constitute fundamental aspects of cultural identity and knowledge systems. The Kumulipo, a traditional Hawaiian genealogical chant, traces life's origins to oceanic darkness, establishing marine environments as ancestral sources rather than external resources (Ingersoll, 2023, p. 39). This genealogical framework positions humans as integral components of marine ecosystems and cosmic relationships, with oceanic knowledge forming the foundation of Hawaiian epistemology. Pacific Islands emerge as extensions of the sea through geological formation, origin narratives, and cultural symbolism. DeLoughrey (2020) reinforces this understanding through her “Mother Sea” concept, which emphasizes oceans’ central role in Indigenous genealogies and practices throughout Oceania.

Seascape epistemology integrates practical knowledge of *ke kai* (the sea) and *moana* (the open ocean) with broader cosmological understanding. While UNESCO’s (n.d.) ocean literacy framework emphasizes scientific knowledge of marine systems, Hawaiian seascape epistemology encompasses cultural, spiritual, and genealogical dimensions that extend beyond conventional environmental education. The Hawaiian concept of *‘āina*, meaning “that which feeds,” encompasses origin, mother, inspiration, and environment, reflecting interconnected relationships between terrestrial and marine domains (Meyer, 2003, p. 163). For *Kānaka*, identity-place relationships develop through specific environmental interactions rather than through fixed territorial models. While a connection to land remains fundamental to Hawaiian epistemology, this relationship evolves through ongoing cultural, historical, and environmental interactions. These knowledge systems traditionally circulate through oral narratives that operate outside Western literacy frameworks, emphasizing embodied and relational ways of knowing.

From *Mo’olelo* to Genealogy: Reading of *The Healers*

This section examines how Armitage’s *The Healers* embodies seascape epistemology by portraying oceanic knowledge as foundational to Native Hawaiian identity², spirituality, and healing practices. The novel establishes

2. Native Hawaiian identity emerges through three interrelated concepts: genealogy (*kū‘auhau*), love for the land (*aloha ‘āina*), and commitment to family (*‘ohana*) (Kana’iaupuni, 2004; Kana’iaupuni & Malone, 2006), grounding individuals in place, ancestry, and relational responsibility.

genealogical connections between characters and marine environments, presenting the ocean as a living ancestor essential to cultural continuity rather than passive backdrop. Keola and Pua develop as healers through their deepening relationship with oceanic forces that actively guide their therapeutic work. This representation reflects Ingersoll's framework of marine spaces as sites for cultural reconnection and identity formation among *Kānaka*. The narrative challenges Western environmental paradigms that separate terrestrial and marine domains – what DeLoughrey (2010) identifies as “the terrestrial bias of Western epistemologies,” which privilege land-based narratives while rendering the ocean ahistorical, empty, or passive space. Armitage centers Indigenous knowledge systems by portraying healing methods that work in reciprocal relationship with oceanic forces rather than attempting dominance over natural environments.

For Hawaiians, *mo'olelo* (stories) maintain genealogical significance by connecting generations to their *kupuna* (elders) and preserving cultural heritage. These genealogical narratives emphasize care for *Moananuiākea* (the vast ocean) by rebuilding environmental relationships and replacing colonial practices with Indigenous approaches (Møllegaard, 2023, p. 2). *The Healers* examines the interconnection between terrestrial and marine environments and human relationships with both domains. The narrative explores sharks' function as *'aumākua* (spiritual guardians), illustrating Hawaiian perspectives on human-nature kinship. In Hawaiian culture, sharks occupy a complex position as ancestors, protectors, and predators (Kirch, 2012, p. 6). This duality appears when Pua loses a finger after being bitten by Kaleihepule, their family's shark guardian.

Keola put his tiny hand on his grandmother's ear. “We were playing in the water with our fish. Our fish ate Pua's finger. Scary. I'm afraid of our fish.”

Don't be afraid. Some fish are our family.” Tutu comforted Keola. She took the shark's tooth and held it to the light. “We will save this for Pua. I hope that when the time comes, she will remember our god who spoke to her this day,” Tutu said. “Come, Keola, let me tell you about Kaleihepule (Armitage, 2016, p. 4).

The narratives concerning Kaleihepule establish genealogical connections with Keola and Pua in Armitage's novel. Kaleihepule was the stillborn daughter of Kawanana and Kealo, the protagonists' great-great-grandparents. Following her stillbirth, Kealo placed her child, wrapped in *moelua* tapa cloth, into the ocean (Armitage, 2016, p. 4). Divine intervention transformed the child into a shark. When Kealo later gave birth to her son Kealu, Kaleihepule appeared carrying medicinal seaweed in her mouth. Kealo interpreted this as a sign that her son would develop healing knowledge, establishing the family's connection to medical traditions.

This child was going to ease the pain of other people. You see, even before this baby had even seen its first light of day, it already had a high expectation placed upon it. This baby was going to be a healer. Its knowledge would not be limited only to those medicines that come from the mountain but would include those medicines that come from the ocean (Armitage, 2016, p. 46).

Kaleihepule's legacy established the healing tradition in Keola and Pua's family, connecting them to their ancestor and shark *'aumākua*. This spiritual guardian linked the family to their genealogical heritage and the ocean. According to the Hawaiian creation chant *Kumulipo*, the ocean represents the origin of all life (Beckwith, 1972). For *Kānaka*, ocean knowledge carries cultural significance through genealogical ties rooted in the *Kumulipo*. In its verses, life begins in the ocean, with coral and marine creatures emerging first from the darkness, establishing the sea as the ancestral source of all existence. As such, the ocean becomes a living archive of Hawaiian identity, sustaining cultural continuity across time.

Trask (1993, p. 140), a *Kānaka* scholar, establishes that Hawaiian *mo'olelo* are fundamentally connected to *kū'auhau* (genealogies). Armitage employs genealogical narratives in *The Healers* to demonstrate the essential relationship between ancestry and natural environments, mainly marine systems. Like other Polynesian belief systems, Hawaiian spirituality centers on *akua*, divine beings embodying environmental elements. This cosmological framework positions Hawaiian environments – including celestial bodies, landforms, oceans, and marine life – as manifestations of these divine forces (Kana'iaupuni & Malone, 2006, pp. 282-283). Within this spiritual context, Kealu's birth represents divine intervention and blessing within the family's narrative.

The child was pushed out into the ocean water and so we say today that this birth was a sacred birth because it came out of one womb and into the womb of Hina, the salty womb, the ocean. It was born of a woman and then born of a goddess. The child was still connected to the mother and it was Kaleihepule who cut the umbilical cord with her teeth and pushed the new infant into the arms of Kealo (Armitage, 2016, p. 46).

This quote highlights the ocean's sacred role in Hawaiian culture, portraying it as a life-giving and spiritual entity. From a material ecocriticism perspective, the ocean emerges as a vibrant matter – not an inert backdrop but a generative force with agency, affect, and relational capacity (Alaimo, 2010). The “salty womb of Hina” symbolizes the deep bond between human birth and the sea, a central event that interweaves the Hawaiian identity and genealogy. In *The Healers*, this connection shows how Keola and Pua's healing practices are deeply tied to their ancestry and spiritual relationship with the ocean. Kaleihepule, their family *'aumākua*, often brought herbs from the shallows and depths of the

ocean, teaching them healing properties that set them apart from other local healers (Armitage, 2016, p. 64).

Armitage portrays seascape epistemology through characters' embodied relationships with marine environments. The protagonists' physical immersion – swimming, surfing, and interacting with ancestral marine creatures including octopuses, oarfish, and sharks – establishes oceanic knowledge through sensorial engagement rather than abstract learning. Their consumption of seawater, aquatic plants, and sea creatures represents what Ingersoll (2016) terms *ma ke kai* (immersion in the sea), a practice that connects *Kānaka* identity with ancestral wisdom through bodily experience. These embodied practices demonstrate how seascape epistemology operates through direct marine engagement, establishing what Ingersoll describes as alternative political and ethical relationships that transcend Western divisions between physical and spiritual domains. The novel thus illustrates how oceanic immersion becomes fundamental to Hawaiian identity formation and cultural knowledge transmission.

In the same way, Hawaiian ways of being in the sea transcend the physical world to include the metaphysical, spiritual, and sensational, creating codes of grammar through seascape epistemology, which normalise an indigenous sense of knowing and being those travels. Seascape epistemology enables reading and a knowledge of the self that resists the petrification of its dynamic character (Ingersoll, 2016, p. 16).

The novel depicts swimming and surfing as practices connecting characters to the ocean physically and spiritually. These activities represent a “being-in-the-sea” experience that incorporates Hawaiian spiritual traditions. Kealo demonstrates this connection by wanting to wade in water, gather seaweed, and surf (Armitage, 2016, p. 91). When immersed in salt water, he emerges renewed and unburdened. Swimming with Kaleihepule, removing barnacles from her back, and moving through the water together show their deep bond with marine life. This relationship strengthens as they recognize Kaleihepule as their family *‘aumākua*.

The Healers portrays the practices of traditional *kahuna lā‘au lapa‘au* (herbal healers) who combine Hawaiian plant knowledge, ocean wisdom, and spiritual techniques for healing. In Hawaiian culture, healing extends beyond physical treatment to address relationships with *‘ohana* (family), community, nature, ancestors, and *‘akua* (gods) to restore balance (Inglis, 2013, p. 45). The narrative emphasizes three healing elements: prayer, connection with nature, and hope – reflected in the saying, “If there is no hope, there is no cure” (Armitage, 2016, pp. 146-147). Central to Hawaiian healing is the metaphorical relationship between land and people, which requires balance with the environment. Traditional healers needed to understand the patient and environment, as illness disrupted *pono* (well-being).

Healers needed this communication with the people they were healing. They also got this from their environment. Once they understood the environment, they could understand how the world works. Once they understood the way it works, they were able to understand the nature of healing. Once they understood the nature of healing, they could understand people. Thus, healing restored the balance of the universe. People are their universe. As Keola had learned, a man is a house. He is a house of water. He is a house of wind. He is a house of fire. And he is a house of dirt. A body, like a house, is a shelter (Armitage, 2016, p. 164).

In Hawaiian mythology, Kanaloa, the god of the ocean and winds, plays a crucial role in spiritual and environmental domains. His relationship with Kane, the creator, highlights his significance in Hawaiian cosmology. Kanaloa governs the ocean and represents themes of creation, death, and the underworld. The octopus serves as one of his *kino lau* (physical manifestations) and features prominently in traditional healing practices. The novel demonstrates this connection when Keola uses an octopus to extract illness from a patient – a practice with deep spiritual meaning despite lacking Western medical efficacy. Armitage establishes the connection between environmental and spiritual health through this portrayal, emphasizing ocean knowledge as fundamental to Hawaiian healing traditions.

A length of cordage between two people or between one person and knowledge was a pathway. And just as the plant body forms of Kane required or stored water, the body forms of Kanaloa extended out. Keola felt good about everything he was learning from Kumu. Keola learned how to place an octopus on the navel of a sick patient. The octopus would symbolically pull the sickness out and disperse it through its tentacles. The tentacles, like the rope and spiderwebs, were necessary for healing because even though there were no medicinal values attributed to these body forms of Kanaloa, they were spiritual medicine (Armitage, 2016, p. 164).

The Healers embodies seascape epistemology by portraying the sea as a living, relational force central to Native Hawaiian identity and spirituality. Armitage presents the ocean not merely as a setting but as an active agent that shapes cultural memory, ancestral connection, and healing practices. Hawaiian tradition, the sea transcends its physical properties to become a sacred entity connected to 'akua and 'aumākua. Immersion in ocean waters provides healing that strengthens both body and spirit while connecting individuals to their ancestors and gods. This worldview affirms that true healing is holistic – requiring alignment not only with natural remedies but also with the spiritual rhythms of the ocean.

Armitage's *The Healers* contributes to American environmental literature by articulating seascape epistemology as an alternative to terrestrial-centered frameworks exemplified by Aldo Leopold's *land ethic* (1950). This oceanic approach aligns with blue humanities scholarship that challenges land-based environmental paradigms (Mentz, 2024, p. 8). The novel demonstrates how Indigenous Hawaiian perspectives reframe human-environment relationships through genealogical connections to marine spaces rather than proprietorial relationships to terrestrial territory. Seascape epistemology transforms oceanic environments into what Yi-Fu Tuan and Gretchen Holstein Schoff (1988) terms meaningful "place" – space invested with cultural significance through sustained interaction and emotional attachment. For *Kānaka*, the ocean functions as ancestral geography where identity formation occurs through generational knowledge transmission. This framework positions marine environments as active participants in cultural continuity rather than passive resources for human use. The novel's representation of oceanic healing practices thus offers alternative models for environmental relationships that integrate spiritual, genealogical, and ecological dimensions within contemporary literary discourse. This reconsideration becomes urgent given the increasing ocean threats, including coral reef degradation, plastic pollution, and climate change impacts (Morishige & McElwee, 2019; Randall, 2020).

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates how Armitage's *The Healers* embodies seascape epistemology by positioning oceanic knowledge as foundational to Native Hawaiian identity formation and healing practices. The novel presents marine environments as genealogical spaces where cultural continuity occurs through embodied engagement rather than abstract learning. Characters' physical immersion in oceanic environments – swimming, consuming sea creatures, and interacting with ancestral marine beings – illustrates how Hawaiian identity develops through sustained relationships with marine ancestors and ecosystems. The text challenges Western environmental paradigms that separate terrestrial and aquatic domains, instead articulating what Ingersoll (2023) terms oceanic ways of knowing that integrate spiritual, genealogical, and ecological understanding. By centering Indigenous Hawaiian perspectives on human-ocean relationships, *The Healers* contributes to blue humanities scholarship while demonstrating how literary texts can articulate alternative environmental epistemologies. This analysis suggests that seascape epistemology offers valuable frameworks for understanding Indigenous maritime cultures.

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IMMERSED IN LEARNING: EXPLORING FLOW IN DIGITAL ESCAPE ROOM GAMES FOR EFL TEACHERS

Nebile Uslu Kaplan¹, Gamze Erdem Coşgun²

^{1,2}Amasya University, Amasya, Türkiye

Abstract: Flow is a psychological state characterized by deep immersion and focus, where individuals experience heightened engagement in a task and suppress external distractions. This cross-sectional survey study investigates the flow experiences of pre-service EFL teachers participating in a digital escape room game over a four-week period. A total of twenty-four pre-service teachers, aged between twenty and thirty-six, were involved in the study. Data were collected using the eGame Flow Scale, which measures seven key dimensions of flow: concentration, goal clarity, feedback, challenge, autonomy, immersion, social interaction, and knowledge improvement. Upon completion of the game sessions, participants assessed their flow experiences through the scale. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were employed to interpret the data. The findings indicate that participants perceived digital escape room games as highly effective in fostering concentration, clear goals, timely feedback, appropriate challenges, autonomy, immersion, and social interaction, all of which contributed to knowledge acquisition. Correlation analysis further revealed that knowledge improvement had significant associations with concentration, feedback, challenge, and autonomy. These results underscore the pivotal role of feedback, challenge, and autonomy in enhancing knowledge and sustaining engagement in digital escape room games.

Keywords: Flow experiences, Digital escape room games, EFL teachers, Cross-sectional research, Immersive learning

About the author: Nebile Uslu Kaplan is an instructor at Amasya University's School of Foreign Languages in Türkiye, teaching in the English preparatory program. Her research interests include technology in English Language Teaching (ELT), gamification, curriculum development, teacher education, and professional growth. She is currently pursuing a PhD in ELT.

e-mail: nebile.kaplan@amasya.edu.tr

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8385-9475>

About the author: Gamze Erdem Coşgun is currently an assistant professor at Amasya University in Turkey. She received her bachelor's degree in ELT from Boğaziçi University, and her MA and PhD degree in ELT from Middle East Technical University. Her research interests include English language teacher education, technology, teacher identity, and professional development.

e-mail: gamze.erdem@amasya.edu.tr

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4598-8799>

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Introduction

Technological advancements have led to the proliferation of digital gadgets in modern society, becoming an integral part of daily life. These developments have also transformed student profiles, shifting their roles from passive recipients of information to active constructors of knowledge (Fu et al., 2009). This shift has prompted educators to adopt innovative strategies, such as incorporating games into classroom instruction, to better engage and understand younger learners. The integration of game elements into educational settings has been shown to create a more engaging and enjoyable learning environment by introducing aspects such as competition, rewards, and challenges (Wulantari et al., 2023). Research suggests that the inclusion of games can increase student participation, as individuals may be more likely to engage when faced with a game-based task (Bronner et al., 2013). Moreover, games – particularly digital ones – are believed to enhance students' self-efficacy by fostering a sense of progress and achievement, which in turn boosts their confidence and motivation to continue learning (Banfield & Wilkerson, 2014; Dehganzadeh & Dehganzadeh, 2020). The increased autonomy and control provided by e-learning environments further strengthens students' willingness to learn, with this self-initiated motivation having a more significant impact on learning outcomes than other factors (Fu et al., 2009).

Teachers have long emphasized the numerous benefits of using games in children's learning processes (Malone & Lepper, 1987). However, two predominant perspectives shape the discourse on the future development of e-learning games (Virvou et al., 2005). Advocates of digital games in education argue that individuals raised in an era of rapid technological advancements expect and even prefer the integration of games in their educational experiences, seeing them as a counterbalance to the perceived dullness of traditional textbooks. In contrast, some scholars argue against the use of game-based learning, citing the scarcity of "high-quality" educational games as a significant limitation to its adoption in pedagogical practices (Dondi & Moretti, 2007; Prensky, 2001; Virvou et al., 2005). As such, the effort invested in creating high-quality educational games is invaluable (Fu et al., 2009).

The quality of a digital game designed for educational purposes is evaluated based on several key principles. First and foremost, an educational game should align with the specific objectives of the lesson. Beyond merely delivering course content, a well-designed educational game should facilitate an easier and more engaging learning experience for students (Kiili, 2005). These experiences should also aim to enhance students' comprehension of the material (Fu et al., 2009). Additionally, an effective educational game must be engaging, as the level of enjoyment significantly influences students' willingness to participate in the game, enjoy the process, and achieve the intended learning outcomes

(Perttula et al., 2017). In other words, the game's ability to provide satisfaction and enjoyment is a crucial factor in determining whether students will actively engage with it and continue learning. Ultimately, the primary goal is to ensure that students achieve the desired learning outcomes, ideally motivated by intrinsic factors that encourage them to dedicate time and effort to the e-learning game as part of the lesson (Fu et al., 2009).

In this context, understanding user engagement is essential when examining the role of digital games in education. While user satisfaction surveys are commonly used in traditional usability studies to measure productivity, these methods are often insufficient for capturing all aspects of user enjoyment. To address this limitation, theories such as flow theory offer a deeper understanding of students' personal experiences (Jegers, 2007). Flow theory provides valuable insights into achieving optimal satisfaction and engagement, offering a more comprehensive perspective on user experiences (Perttula et al., 2017). Furthermore, the experience of flow can significantly influence an individual's decision to continue or return to an activity, as it is perceived as highly rewarding (Bronner et al., 2013). Flow theory is also a useful framework for evaluating game design and assessing user experiences, as it promotes learning, engagement, and performance improvement (Perttula et al., 2017).

Given its significance, previous research has explored flow experiences across various types of digital games (Bressler & Bodzin, 2013; Kiili, 2005; Kiili et al., 2012; Procci et al., 2012). However, there remains a gap in the literature regarding digital escape room games. Research has demonstrated that these games foster teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills (Fotaris & Mastoras, 2019; Hermanns et al., 2017; Montoro et al., 2020; Nicholson, 2015; Veldkamp et al., 2020; Wiemker et al., 2015), as well as enhance student motivation (Bartlett & Anderson, 2019; Karageorgiou et al., 2019; Macías-Guillén et al., 2021; Moura & Santos, 2019; Schenker & Kraemer, 2022; Voloshynov et al., 2020). This study aims to address this gap by investigating the game flow experiences of pre-service EFL teachers using digital escape room games. Specifically, it seeks to explore how the flow experiences of participants shape their perceptions of the benefits and challenges associated with this pedagogical approach.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the overall game flow experiences of pre-service EFL teachers when engaging with digital escape room games?
2. How do pre-service EFL teachers perform across the different sub-categories of the eGame Flow Scale?
3. What correlations exist between the sub-categories of the eGame Flow Scale, and how do these correlations influence the overall game flow experience?

Theoretical Framework

Flow theory

A state of total immersion or engagement in a particular task, in which a person blocks out all unrelated feelings and thoughts, is referred to as flow (Perttula et al., 2017) and it was first described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) through his research on participants in sports including rock climbing, chess, and dancing. Since then, flow theory has been implemented in a variety of fields, such as human–computer interaction, games, sports, art, and education (Perttula et al., 2017) and researchers have used flow extensively to measure happiness in various different contexts (Fu et al., 2009; Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005).

According to flow theory, the action must be autotelic and intrinsically satisfying in order for flow to exist. In this vein, flow is an end in and of itself. This is relevant to gaming since there is no outside incentive when playing games, whether they are computer or other. People play games for the experience alone. Ultimately, each flow activity offers a creative sense of exploration and a feeling of being thrust into a new reality – a feeling that gamers are familiar with (Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005). A person is in a favorable psychological state and so engrossed in the goal-driven task that nothing else seems to matter during the ideal experience. When engaging in such activities, a person may be willing to take action without thinking about the results of their actions because they are so enjoyable (Perttula et al., 2017). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), the ideal enjoyment experience is one that is unrelated to any particular activity and transcends cultural and contextual boundaries.

The way the elements of flow appear in computer games was discovered by a thorough analysis of the literature on usability and user experience in games. The literature was used to create a model of game enjoyment based on the components of flow and the proof of flow experiences in games. The end product is the eight-component GameFlow model: focus, challenge, skills, control, goals that are clear, feedback, immersion, and social interaction (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005) as given in Figure 1.

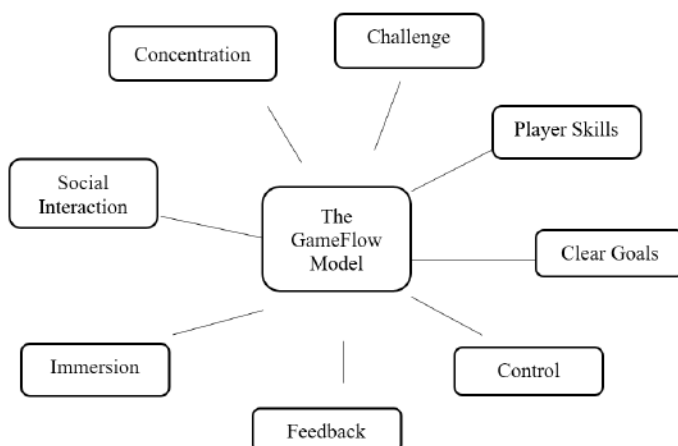


Figure 1. *The GameFlow Model (Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005, p.5-6)*

Sweetser & Wyeth (2005) explain these components in their study as follows:

Concentration

Games must grab and maintain players' attention by offering pertinent and entertaining stimuli, drawing players in fast, and keeping them focused the entire time. They should steer clear of overloading players with pointless chores, striking a balance between a heavy workload and their cognitive and perceptual capacities, and reducing distractions from crucial tasks.

Challenge

Games ought to provide challenges that correspond with the abilities of their users, changing as they advance and adding new challenges at an appropriate rate. There should be a range of difficulty settings to suit players and guarantee continuous participation.

Player Skills

Games should help players grow their skills and become proficient by letting them start without a manual and teach them through interesting tutorials or beginner levels. Online resources must be accessible, and skill development ought to be suitably paced with incentives for hard work. Mechanisms and interfaces ought to be simple to use and intuitive.

Control

Control over their characters, the game shell (including starting and saving), and the interface should all feel natural to the player. They ought to be able to move on from errors without suffering significant consequences and have an impact

on the game environment. Players should be able to customize their experience and the game to suit their preferences by supporting a variety of strategies.

Clear Goals

To properly manage the player's progress, games should establish clear, overarching goals early on and offer intermediate goals at appropriate intervals.

Feedback

In addition to instantaneous reactions to their movements and continuous updates on their score or status, players should receive timely feedback on their actions and progress.

Immersion

Deep, seamless immersion in the game should cause players to lose awareness of their surroundings and everyday worries, feel viscerally and emotionally invested, and experience a changed sense of time.

Social Interaction

By encouraging social networks both within and outside of the game, allowing in-game communication (such as chat), and promoting both competition and cooperation, games should promote social engagement.

Gamification

The incorporation of game elements and features into non-gaming contexts is known as gamification. It involves utilizing digital media, mobile applications, internet platforms, or even traditional classroom exercises to increase interaction, enjoyment, and immersion of activities through the use of game design principles, techniques, and features.

Gamification serves as an ultimate tool in teaching different subjects by enhancing interest and engagement (Boctor, 2013; Saud et al., 2022; Voloshynov et al., 2020). Educators can create a more engaging learning environment that promotes active involvement and discovery by introducing game components like competition and incentives. By promoting a greater comprehension of multicultural dynamics, this synergy enhances the educational process (Adipat et al., 2021; Merchán Macías, 2017; Wulantari et al., 2023). This also helps to create more engaging courses because the students may cooperate, collaborate, coordinate, and socialize with their peers in an authentic atmosphere (Adipat et al., 2021; Boctor, 2013; Merchán Macías, 2017; Voloshynov et al., 2020; Wulantari et al., 2023; Zhang & Hasim, 2023).

Digital Escape Room Games

To take advantage of gamification, educators use a range of games in the classroom. One of these creative educational settings is an escape room game. An escape room game, as the name implies, places players in a real or made-up room with a given amount of time to solve puzzles, riddles, and other tasks. To escape, they have to gather information or clues, finish several tasks, and uncover the secrets of the room (Bilbao-Quintana et al., 2021; López, 2019; Merchán Macías, 2017; Nicholson, 2015; Voloshynov et al., 2020).

To achieve these predetermined objectives, players collaborate in groups in these rule and theme-based games (López, 2019; Makri et al., 2021; Nicholson, 2015). Creating a scenario where participants must work together to complete a range of tasks within a set period of time is the basic goal of escape rooms, whether they are played in person or on a computer (Taraldsen et al., 2020). On the other hand, an innovative and practical learning environment that combines the educational component with the students' interests and preserves the essence of an escape room game is what is known as an educational escape room game (EERG). It can be constructed at any level or type of education, from elementary school to post-graduate and other teaching programs (Makri et al., 2021; Merchán Macías, 2017).

These engaging experiences enable students to navigate learning problems while strengthening cooperative problem-solving and critical thinking skills. Through students' engagement in these dynamic situations, teachers can create meaningful opportunities for better knowledge and learning process (Bellés-Calvera & Martínez-Hernández, 2022; Makri et al., 2021).

Methodology

Research design

To explore the flow experiences of pre-service EFL teachers within a digital escape room game context, this study adopted a cross-sectional research design. Cross-sectional studies involve the collection of relevant data at a single point in time, without any longitudinal dimension (Kesmodel, 2018). Since all data are collected during a specific period, this design allows for the examination of correlations between variables and the identification of patterns within the target population. The cross-sectional approach was chosen to capture a snapshot of the variables under investigation, facilitating an analysis of relationships and trends. Although the games included an intercultural topic, the focus of this paper is on the experiential aspect, namely how pre-service EFL teachers engaged in a flow state while completing digital escape room activities with an intercultural theme.

Participants

The study involved 24 pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers enrolled in their fourth year during the 2023–2024 academic year at a state university in Türkiye. These participants were selected based on their willingness to volunteer for the research. Their ages ranged from 20 to 36 years, providing a diverse range of perspectives within this cohort. All participants reported that they owned personal computers (N=24, 100%), ensuring they had the necessary technology to engage with the digital escape room games central to the study. To select the participants, the study employed a convenience sampling method. This non-probability sampling technique was chosen due to its practicality in identifying and recruiting participants who were easily accessible and motivated to take part in the research. Convenience sampling allows the researcher to gather data from individuals who are available in the nearby area or within the context of a specific program (Andrade, 2021; Stratton, 2021). Though it may introduce potential bias, this method was deemed appropriate given the scope of the study and the limited population of pre-service EFL teachers who met the criteria for participation.

In terms of prior digital gaming experience, 41% of the participants (N=10) had actively engaged with digital games before, indicating varying levels of familiarity with gaming environments. However, 50% (N=12) were aware of escape room games specifically but had not yet participated in them. This suggests that while there was some general familiarity with digital gaming, the escape room format was relatively new to many of the participants. Furthermore, 54% of participants (N=13) reported that they were somewhat familiar with the concept of intercultural competence, which was the main theme of the digital escape room games used in the study. This theme was chosen due to its relevance in contemporary EFL teaching, where understanding and fostering intercultural competence is increasingly recognized as an important aspect of language education. In this sense, through the incorporation of intercultural themes into digital escape room games, this study investigated how these game-based activities promote learners' flow and immersive experiences when engaging with intricate cultural material.

Data Collection Process

The data collection process was conducted over a four-week period, during which participants engaged in digital escape room games specifically designed by the researchers. Upon completing each game, all participants were asked to complete the eGame Flow Scale, which had been adapted to an online format using Google Forms. Participants accessed the scale via their smartphones and computers, and the data collection took approximately 30 minutes. No issues or misunderstandings were reported during this phase.

Digital Escape Room Games Used in the Study

To facilitate data collection, the researchers used four digital escape room games, which were initially created as an aspect of the researcher's master's thesis (Uslu Kaplan, 2024), each aligned with the subdimensions of the intercultural competence scale by Chao (2014). The subdimensions included: intercultural knowledge, intercultural affective orientation, intercultural self-efficacy, intercultural behavioral performance, and intercultural display of consciousness (Chao, 2014). Due to the smaller number of items in the "display of intercultural consciousness" and "self-efficacy in intercultural situations" subdimensions, these were combined, resulting in one digital escape room game for each of the four remaining subdimensions. Participants were introduced to one game per week, leading to a total of four games over the study period.

Prior to the formal implementation, the games were reviewed by three expert academicians specializing in English language teaching. The games were then pilot-tested with four pre-service EFL teachers who were not part of the formal study. Based on their feedback, the games were refined, incorporating adjustments to enhance their challenge and appropriateness for the participant level. The final set of games was developed using Thinglink.com and LearningApps.org, incorporating key elements of escape room games, such as solving puzzles to obtain codes. The games featured various tasks, including multiple-choice questions, word games, crosswords, matching exercises, cloze tests, and other interactive formats, with each game corresponding to a specific intercultural competence subdimension (Figure 2 and 3).

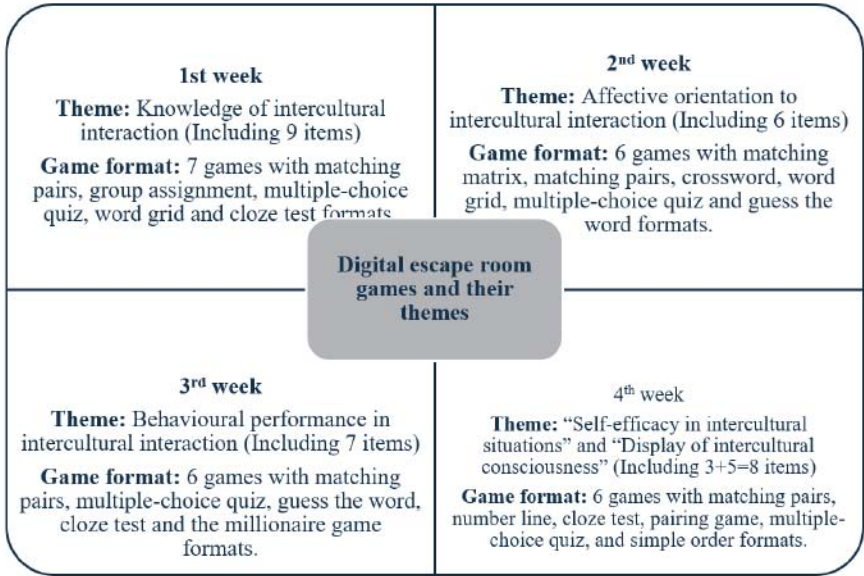


Figure 2. *Digital escape room games and their themes utilized in the research*



Figure 3. *A Sample of a preface for the digital escape room game*

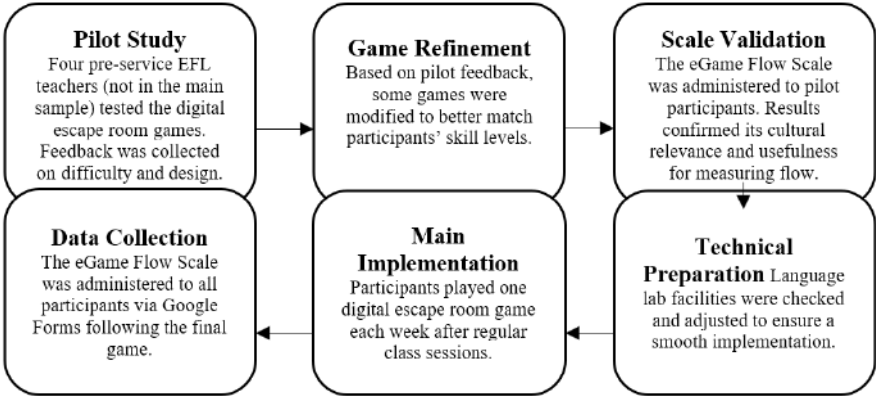
Data Collection Instruments

The eGame Flow Scale, originally developed by Fu et al. (2009), was used to assess the flow experiences of participants during the games. This scale is designed to measure the enjoyment and engagement levels in educational games and identifies strengths and weaknesses from the learner's perspective. It was validated through the use of four online educational games, yielding 166 valid responses, and refined from an initial 56 items to a final version with 42 items. These items are distributed across eight dimensions: Concentration (6 items), Goal Clarity (4 items), Feedback (5 items), Challenge (6 items), Autonomy (7 items), Immersion (7 items), Social Interaction (6 items), and Knowledge Improvement (7 items). The scale demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.942) and good test-retest reliability, making it a suitable instrument for this study.

Procedure

A pilot study was conducted with four pre-service EFL teachers who were not part of the main research sample. The pilot participants played all four digital escape room games in the university's language lab and provided feedback. Based on their suggestions, some games were modified to better suit the participants' level by increasing their complexity. After playing all four games, the pilot participants completed the eGame Flow Scale, and the analysis confirmed that the scale was culturally appropriate and effective in measuring game flow experiences.

Following the successful pilot, the researchers addressed all technical aspects of the language lab to ensure smooth implementation. The main study participants, selected through convenience sampling, played one game per week over a four-week period. At the end of the implementation, participants completed the eGame Flow Scale via Google Forms, which captured data on their flow experiences during the digital escape room games. The procedure of the piloting and the implementation of the games and eGame flow scale is visualized in Figure 4.



Data analysis

Prior to data analysis, the researchers conducted reliability checks to assess the normality of the data distribution. Skewness and kurtosis values were calculated. According to Hair et al. (2010), when z -values for skewness and kurtosis fall within the range of ± 1.96 (at a significance level of 0.05), the data are considered to exhibit normal distribution. In this study, all computed z -values for skewness and kurtosis were within this critical range, indicating normality in the dataset. Additionally, histogram and Q-Q plots were examined to further verify that the data adhered to a roughly normal distribution, making them appropriate for parametric analysis. Descriptive statistics, including the mean, percentage, and standard deviation of each item and subdimension, were calculated using SPSS software to provide a comprehensive overview of the dataset. Furthermore, correlation analysis was conducted to explore the relationships between the subdimensions of the scale. The results were presented in tabular form, allowing for a clear comparison of correlations across subdimensions.

Results

This section presents the descriptive statistics and correlation analyses for the items and sub-dimensions of the eGame Flow Scale.

Overall Game Flow Experiences of Pre-Service EFL Teachers When Engaging with Digital Escape Room Games

The analysis of the scale items as a whole showed that the scale was satisfactory regarding the reliability with Cronbach's Alpha value .936. In addition of the whole item results, descriptive statistics analysis was employed to each item separately to determine their mean and standard deviation. The results of each item's descriptive statistics were presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Game flow experiences of pre-service EFL teachers*

Scale Items		M	SD
Concentration	Most of the gaming activities are related to the learning task.	4.21	.93
	No distraction from the task is highlighted	4.04	1.04
	Generally speaking, I can remain concentrated in the game	4.38	.97
	I am not distracted from tasks that the Player should concentrate on	4.29	.91
	I am not burdened with tasks that seem unrelated	4.04	.91
	Workload in the game is adequate	4.08	1.02
Goal clarity	Overall game goals were presented in the beginning of the game	4.50	.78
	Overall game goals were presented clearly	4.67	.64
	Intermediate goals were presented in the beginning of each scene	4.71	.55
	Intermediate goals were presented clearly	4.79	.51
Feedback	I receive feedback on my progress in the game	4.00	.88
	I receive immediate feedback on my actions	4.13	.85
	I am notified of new tasks immediately	4.08	1.06
	I am notified of new events immediately	4.13	1.08
	I receive information on my success (or failure) of intermediate goals immediately	4.38	.71
Challenge	The game provides "hints" in text that help me overcome the challenges	4.42	.78
	The game provides "online support" that helps me overcome the challenges	4.29	.86
	The game provides video or audio auxiliaries that help me overcome the challenges	3.21	1.41
	The difficulty of challenges increase as my skills improved	4.33	.82
	The game provides new challenges with an appropriate pacing	4.38	.65
	The game provides different levels of challenges that tailor to different players	4.46	.78

Scale Items		M	SD
Autonomy	I feel a sense of control and impact over the game	4.08	1.18
	I know next step in the game	4.08	.83
	I feel a sense of control over the game	4.13	1.08
Immersion	I forget about time passing while playing the game	4.33	1.05
	I become unaware of my surroundings while playing the game	3.83	1.27
	I temporarily forget worries about everyday life while playing the game	4.00	1.10
	I experience an altered sense of time	4.25	.90
	I can become involved in the game	4.58	.65
	I feel emotionally involved in the game	4.13	.85
	I feel viscerally involved in the game	4.21	.83
	I feel cooperative toward other classmates	4.50	.66
Social interaction	I strongly collaborate with other classmates	4.25	.90
	The cooperation in the game is helpful to the learning	4.54	.66
	The game supports social interaction between players (chat, etc.)	4.38	1.01
	The game supports communities within the game	4.29	1.12
	The game supports communities outside the game	3.92	1.10
	The game increases my knowledge	4.29	.86
Knowledge improvement	I catch the basic ideas of the knowledge taught	4.38	.77
	I try to apply the knowledge in the game	4.29	.86
	The game motivates the player to integrate the knowledge taught	4.46	.78
	I want to know more about the knowledge taught	4.25	.85

Note. The scale was 5-point Likert-type (5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree).

As Table 1 demonstrates, for nearly all the items, the participants agreed that the digital escape room games played during the implementation were satisfactory in terms of engagement and learning. Even though they were close, only three of the items, which were about providing video or audio auxiliaries that help overcome the challenges, becoming unaware of the surroundings while playing the game and supporting communities outside the game, scored under 4, which meant that the participants were neutral about the effectiveness of the games regarding these items ($M= 3.21, 3.83, 3.92$ respectively). With a Mean score 4.79, the item “Intermediate goals were presented clearly” was scored highest by the participants indicating that nearly all the participants strongly agreed about this item. Similarly, with high mean scores (4.50 to 4.79), goal clarity shines out and indicates that players perceive the game’s objectives to be clear. With means ranging from 4.04 to 4.38, concentration is likewise high. The diversity in feedback scores, which range from 4.00 to 4.38, indicates that people’s views of

its immediacy vary. There is room for improvement as the challenge dimension shows a mixed bag of responses, with poor support for video/audio aids ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.41$). The participants' reports of moderate autonomy ($M = 4.08$) show considerable diversity, indicating conflicting attitudes toward autonomy. Immersion is quite strong, particularly when it comes to engagement ($M = 4.58$). Positive perceptions of social interaction exist, especially for teamwork ($M = 4.50$); nevertheless, there is need for improvement when it comes to community support outside of games ($M = 3.92$). With averages between 4.25 and 4.46 and minimal variability, knowledge improvement is finally confirmed, showing high agreement regarding the game's potential to increase learning.

The Performances of Pre-Service EFL Teachers across the Different Sub-Categories of the eGame Flow Scale

After the descriptive analysis of each item, the sub-dimensions of the scale were analyzed in terms of mean scores and standard deviations, and the results were given in Table 2.

Table 2. *Descriptive Results of the Sub-dimensions of the Scale*

Sub-dimensions	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Concentration	4.17	.71
Goal clarity	4.67	.53
Feedback	4.14	.74
Challenge	4.18	.65
Autonomy	4.10	.86
Immersion	4.19	.77
Social interaction	4.31	.66
Knowledge improvement	4.33	.73

Table 2. highlights that for all the sub-dimensions of the scale, the participants agreed that the games were satisfactory enough in the sense of engagement and learning, with the highest score for the sub-dimension goal clarity ($M=4.67$) and the lowest score for the sub-dimension autonomy ($M=4.10$). Both social interaction ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.66$) and knowledge improvement ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.73$) are highly rated, indicating both pleasant social engagement and successful knowledge enhancement of the games. Feedback is perceived positively in general ($M=4.14$), likewise, concentration ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.71$), immersion ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.77$), and challenge ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.65$) indicate a reasonably focused and engaging experience.

Correlation Analysis of the Sub-Dimensions and Its Influence on the Overall Game Flow Experiences

In order to determine the correlations between the sub-dimensions of the scale, correlation analysis was conducted. The results are introduced in Table 3.

Table 3. *The correlation analysis of the sub-dimensions*

	Concentration	Goal clarity	Feedback	Challenge	Autonomy	Immersion	Social interaction	Knowledge improvement
Concentration	1							
Goal clarity	.532**	1						
Feedback	.641**	.549**	1					
Challenge	.472*	-.012	.414*	1				
Autonomy	.392	.192	.394	.735**	1			
Immersion	.340	.234	.051	.285	.313	1		
Social interaction	.242	-.051	.465*	.412*	.473*	.183	1	
Knowledge improvement	.651**	.134	.551**	.742**	.703**	.167	.404	1

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When Table 3 is analyzed, it is seen that numerous noteworthy correlations are found when the relationships between the sub-dimensions of the scale are analyzed. At the 0.01 and 0.05 levels, there is a positive and significant relationship between concentration and goal clarity, feedback, challenge, and knowledge improvement; the correlation with knowledge improvement is the largest ($r = 0.651$, $p = 0.001$). This implies that there is a corresponding rise in perceived knowledge improvement and engagement with goal clarity and feedback as perceived concentration effectiveness increases. Although it does not exhibit any significant connections with other factors, goal clarity alone has a substantial positive correlation with feedback ($r = 0.549$, $p = 0.005$), suggesting a close relationship between goal clarity and the efficacy of feedback. The results indicate that feedback plays a crucial role in improving knowledge and social interactions. It has substantial positive connections with challenge, social interaction, and knowledge progress. The largest association is observed with knowledge improvement ($r = 0.551$, $p = 0.005$). Challenge has

a strong positive correlation ($p = 0.000$) with both autonomy and knowledge improvement, indicating that higher degrees of difficulty are linked to higher levels of autonomy and better judgments of knowledge. The intimate relationship between autonomy, challenge, and knowledge improvement is highlighted by the substantial correlations between autonomy and knowledge improvement ($r = 0.703$, $p = 0.000$) and challenge ($r = 0.735$, $p = 0.000$). On the other hand, immersion does not exhibit any noteworthy associations with other variables, suggesting that it is not intimately related to the dimensions under investigation. There is a positive correlation between social interaction and both challenges and feedback, indicating that challenges and feedback that are constructive can improve social interactions. Lastly, the majority of the factors show substantial positive relationships with knowledge improvement, especially challenge ($r = 0.742$, $p = 0.000$) and autonomy ($r = 0.703$, $p = 0.000$), supporting the idea that knowledge improvement and both autonomy and challenge are closely related.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to find out the game flow experiences of pre-service EFL teachers in digital escape room games context. For this reason, the participants played these games for four weeks and their perceptions were gathered as data at the end of the game implementation with a game flow scale. On the whole, as an answer to the first two research questions, namely the overall game flow experiences of the participants and their performances across the different sub-categories of the eGame Flow Scale, the results showed that the participants reported a high level of immersion. This implies that the digital escape room games played in this study captivated participants' attention, and they had a high level of flow experience. Other studies in literature produced comparable results with this finding. While some studies focused on digital escape room games and concluded that these games enhanced the flow experiences of the players (Chen et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024), some others reached the same conclusion as a result of other digital-based educational games (Chang et al., 2017; Chen & Mokmin, 2024; Chien et al., 2024; Karimi & Nasouri, 2024).

The results of the study also showed that players thought the digital escape room activities were good for learning and engagement. This finding equals to other previously conducted research in that gamifying supports knowledge improvement (Chen et al., 2023; Chou et al., 2021; Hermanns et al., 2017; Kahyaoğlu Erdoğmuş & Kurt, 2024; Lin & Hou, 2022; Veldkamp et al., 2020; Wang & Enstroem, 2024), and learner involvement (Hermanns et al., 2017; Veldkamp et al., 2020).

The participants of the current research strongly agreed that the aims of the games were obvious. Goal clarity received a high rating, indicating that players were aware of the game's objectives. Additionally, concentration levels

performed well among the participants, as well as the feedback scores. Other studies revealed that the presence or the type of the feedback was an important feature in digital game-based learning activities (Kahyaoğlu Erdoğan & Kurt, 2024). The fact that the participants were satisfied with the feedback of the games used in this study can be seen as an effective factor in the game flow experiences of the participants.

On the other hand, responses to the challenge dimension were inconsistent, especially when it came to the help provided by audio and visual aids, suggesting a lack of support for overcoming barriers. Although perceived moderately, autonomy showed significant heterogeneity, suggesting divergent views on player control. Although support for communities outside of the game indicates potential for growth, social interaction and knowledge improvement also earned positive ratings, indicating both fun collaboration and effective learning. Likewise, Chou et al. (2021) and other related studies proved that collaboration among the participants play an essential role in terms of the effectiveness of escape room games and other digital educational games (Lin & Hou, 2022; Ross et al., 2021; Veldkamp et al., 2020; Vidergor, 2021).

It is an already known factor that, by raising a sense of playfulness (Vidergor, 2021) and making the players become completely absorbed in the experience, a high degree of concentration can boost motivation and increase the likelihood that they will interact meaningfully with the game (Bartlett & Anderson, 2019; Fuentes-Cabrera et al., 2020; Karageorgiou et al., 2019; Macías-Guillén et al., 2021; Moura & Santos, 2019; Schenker, & Kraemer, 2022; Taraldsen et al., 2020; Veldkamp et al., 2020; Voloshynov et al., 2020). In the same manner, the results of the current study showed high level of immersion, concentration, autonomy and involvement among the participants.

As a result of the data analysis, the sub-dimensions' significant relationships were brought to light via correlation analysis to find an answer to the last research question. Accordingly, knowledge improvement and concentration were found to have a strong positive association, indicating that more concentration improves learning results as perceived. Furthermore, there was a strong correlation between goal clarity and feedback, highlighting how crucial specific goals are to providing useful feedback. In the same direction, Chien et al. (2024)'s study concluded the significant effects of the game feedback on learning aids.

Higher difficulty levels encourage more autonomy and learning, as seen by the significant positive correlations challenge showed with both autonomy and knowledge improvement. Immersion, however, did not exhibit any significant correlations with other factors, indicating that it functions independently of the dimensions being studied. Overall, these findings underline the crucial roles of challenge, feedback, and autonomy in promoting learning experiences within the digital escape room context.

Conclusion

Aiming to examine the flow experiences of the pre-service EFL teachers, this study clarifies the usefulness of digital escape room games as captivating teaching resources by emphasizing a number of important participant experience aspects. The data, regarding the overall game flow experiences of the participants and their performances across the different sub-categories of the eGame Flow Scale, suggest that participants typically assess these games positively, with notably high scores for goal clarity and intermediate goals being clearly given. This implies that clearly defined goals are essential for raising player motivation and engagement and enabling a more targeted learning process. Additionally, participants reported high concentration levels, suggesting that the immersive quality of the games efficiently catches attention and creates a suitable learning environment. Maintaining involvement is crucial to improving learning outcomes, as seen by the association between concentration and knowledge growth. High scores for knowledge improvement indicate that participants were also satisfied with the overall learning they had accomplished through the games.

The study, however, also pointed out areas that needed improvement. The challenge dimension yielded inconsistent findings, with the provision of auditory and visual aids receiving a significantly lower score. This suggests that there may be a lack of assistance available to players during challenges, and that more comprehensive resources should be included in upcoming game versions to help players get through difficulties. Furthermore, even while participants' perceptions of autonomy were modest, the range of responses indicates that individuals' experiences varied, indicating the need for more clarification on how player agency is incorporated into gameplay. Positive ratings were given to the social interaction component, particularly for teamwork, suggesting that collaborative features are well-received. Support for communities outside of the game on the other hand, suggests a chance to improve relationships between players outside of the game, which might lead to a more coherent learning environment.

Significant correlations between the game flow sub-dimensions were found using correlation analysis. Clearer goals and improved feedback processing may be supported by focused engagement, as evidenced by the positive correlations found between perceived concentration effectiveness and knowledge improvement, goal clarity, and feedback effectiveness. Additionally, there was a strong correlation between goal clarity and feedback effectiveness, emphasizing the function of feedback in fostering social interaction and knowledge development. Additionally, autonomy and knowledge improvement were positively correlated with challenge, indicating that tasks that are suitably challenging may promote deeper learning and learner independence. Both

challenge and feedback effectiveness were favorably correlated with social interaction, highlighting their potential to improve collaborative learning, even though immersion did not significantly connect with other characteristics. All things considered, challenge, autonomy, and feedback were identified as major factors in knowledge improvement, highlighting their significance in creating successful game-based learning environments.

Overall, the results show that, if certain areas for improvement are addressed, digital escape room games can be useful instruments for raising student engagement and learning. The robust associations seen across diverse dimensions imply that augmenting factors like feedback and challenge may result in more significant educational encounters.

Limitations and Suggestions

It is important to recognize the limitations of this study. First, it is possible that the sample size is too small or unrepresentative to allow conclusions to be applied to various educational settings or populations. Moreover, depending solely on self-reported data may result in bias because participants may exaggerate their involvement and educational opportunities. Furthermore, it is possible that some digital escape room game variations are not included in the unique design, which would limit the results' application to different formats or circumstances. Besides, the use of inferential statistical tests was not possible due to the lack of multiple groups or experimental conditions. Therefore, rather than testing for group differences or predictive effects, the analysis was restricted to investigating at correlational relationships among the flow dimensions. Finally, the study's cross-sectional design limits the capacity to infer causal correlations between the engagement sub-dimensions and learning results. All these limitations create a few suggestions for future researchers. First, to improve the generalizability of results, larger and more varied samples should be used in future studies. Also, by mixing qualitative and quantitative data, a mixed-methods approach could be used to gain a deeper understanding of participant experiences and the variables affecting engagement and learning. Additionally, although this study used correlational analyses to investigate the relationships between game flow dimensions, more thorough testing of predictive models or group differences could be investigated in future research using inferential statistical tests. In addition, examining the possibility of including additional diverse support mechanisms, like improved audio and visual aids, could potentially aid in filling in the gaps found in the challenge dimension. Finally, to provide a more thorough knowledge of the gaming experience, future research could look at the role of immersion and its possible effects on other dimensions. By doing this, educators and game developers can collaborate to maximize the instructional potential of digital games, thereby improving students' educational experiences.

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