

## FROM POLITICAL FILTER TO COMMERCIAL HABITUS: THE DIACHRONIC EVOLUTION OF CENSORSHIP IN ROMANIAN AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION

Laura Elena VULPOIU

“Vasile Goldiș” Western University of Arad, Romania

Daniel DEJICA

Politehnica University Timișoara, Romania

**Abstract:** This article investigates the transformation of censorship mechanisms in Romanian audiovisual translation (AVT). The study moves from the overt state-controlled ideological manipulation of the communist era to the subtle commercial and linguistic self-censorship of the post-1989 market. Based on historical records and translation accounts, it identifies a systematic "ideological filter" that targeted religious terminology and Western imagery. The research is based on a diachronic approach, which bridges the gap between rudimentary manual subtitling—characterized by a "muffled" voice under totalitarianism—and modern digital practices. It documents how the historical legacy of political restriction has mutated into modern corporate norms and cultural "habitus". The historical approach and longitudinal view show how translation may serve as a support for changing orders of social domination.

**Keywords:** Romanian AVT, constraints in AVT, censorship, ideology and translation, subtitling practices

### 1. Introduction

It is our conception that the study of the evolution of audiovisual translation (AVT) in the Romanian context may be used to observe the mechanisms of ideological control and cultural transition. Within Translation Studies (TS), AVT is recognized both as a technical linguistic transfer and as an instrument of ideological struggle where the constraints of the medium meet the pressures of the socio-political environment (Díaz-Cintas, 2012). The research problem addressed in this discussion centers on the evolution of censorship mechanisms as they transition from the overt, state-mandated "political filters" (Vulpoiu, 2019: 18-20; Billiani, 2017) characteristic of a totalitarian regime to the more subtle, pervasive forms of "commercial self-censorship" (Vulpoiu, 2019: 40-46) found in a globalized, democratic market. By examining the trajectory of Romanian media from the restrictive decades of the 20th century to the digital present (Dejica, Hansen, Sandrini, Para 2016; Dejica, Eugeni, Dejica-Cartis, 2020), this analysis aims to map the mutation of power structures and their direct impact on the translational product.

From a historical and theoretical perspective, it is possible to understand how translation serves as a support for changing orders of social domination. According to Lefevere (1992), the translator may be seen as an agent operating within a system of constraints that dictate what is representable and what must remain silent. In the Romanian case, this system was historically governed by censorship and the ideological mandates of the communist apparatus, which systematically altered or omitted references to Western prosperity and religious values (Vulpoiu, 2019). The events following 1989 witnessed a transition from restriction to commercial practice, where

market demands and corporate brand guidelines influenced or created new linguistic and cultural norms.

This article claims that the historical legacy of the censored mind continues to inform modern professional standards and that it generates a diachronic link between past and present practices. The study documents a transition in a post-Soviet space, where the move from political to economic restriction reveals much about the resilience of certain translational habits. To analyze archival records alongside modern commercial subtitles we used a descriptive-comparative method. The longitudinal perspective helped us view how the Romanian subtitling tradition was shaped by, and eventually adapted to, these shifting ideological filters. In this context, translation is seen as a dynamic process (Dejica and Dejica-Cartis, 2020) of negotiation between the original text, the expectations of the target audience, and the invisible touch of the socio-political authority.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the intersection of translation, power, and social practice (Bourdieu, 1977; Lefevere, 1992; Baker 2018). In the context of audiovisual translation in Romania, Lefevere's (1992) theory provides a means for examining how ideological and economic forces act as "patrons" that regulate the production of translated texts. These patrons, whether they are the state organs of a totalitarian regime or the corporate entities of a market economy, exert control through the enforcement of specific poetic and ideological standards. Within this framework, the translator functions as a "rewriter" whose output is conditioned by the need to conform to the social and political constraints. In the Romanian case, the transition from state patronage to market-driven patronage illustrates how the muffled voice of the past was not the result of individual choice but a requirement for cultural survival (Vulpoiu, 2013; Vulpoiu, 2016).

Complementing this perspective, the concept of "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1977) allows for an understanding of the internalized dispositions that guide the translator's decisions. The translational habitus in Romania was developed during decades of strict state oversight, and the act of censorship resulted in the creation of translation strategies based on translator's self-regulation. Such translation strategies turned gradually into rules and even norms, and persist even today, manifesting in the modern era as a tendency toward linguistic refining or the avoidance of taboo registers. The habitus thus acts as a link between the overall changes in Romanian society and the specific linguistic choices made during the subtitling process. From this perspective, the translator may be seen as a social agent who influenced the way in which historical constraints are turned into modern professional norms.

Furthermore, the study characterizes audiovisual translation as a specialized form of "constrained translation" where the technical limitations of the medium intersect with ideological mandates (Fawcett, 1998). Unlike other forms of traditional translation, AVT is subject to strict spatial and temporal requirements that often force omissions or condensations, providing a convenient technical "alibi" for ideological manipulation. The theoretical model proposed here distinguishes between overt censorship, such as the systematic removal of religious references, and the more nuanced forms of "ideological adaptation" where the target text is harmonized with the cultural expectations of the recipient society. This framework establishes that the evolution of Romanian AVT

represents a progression toward freedom and a sophisticated mutation of the filters through which foreign cultural products are mediated and consumed (Vulpoi, 2013).

### 3. Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is based on a descriptive-comparative approach, specifically designed to analyze the shifts in audiovisual translation (AVT) practices across different political and economic epochs in Romania. Following the descriptive translation studies (DTS) paradigm, the research focuses on the target-oriented nature of translated products, seeking to identify the norms that governed the translation process during the transition from a state-controlled media environment to a decentralized market. The primary corpus for the historical analysis consists of archival records from the national broadcaster, Televiziunea Română (TVR – the Romanian state television), alongside documented accounts of clandestine translation practices during the late twentieth century. These sources offered ground to identify the specific political filters applied to foreign cinematographic works before 1989.

For the qualitative analysis, the translation shifts were mapped (in particular omissions, substitutions, and additions) and compared so that they may offer an image of the translator's choices during the totalitarian era and during the modern commercial market. This comparative method allows for the identification of ideological markers within the text, such as the systematic refining of religious or political terminology that challenged the socialist doctrine (Vulpoi, 2019). This longitudinal and historical perspective shows how the constraints of the past changed into the professional expectations of the present.

Some of the results of a socio-professional survey conducted among Romanian audiovisual translators and industry stakeholders, specifically those dealing with the translational habitus, also provided empirical evidence for the study and revealed the degree to which modern practitioners perceive their work as being influenced by commercial or linguistic self-censorship.

We believe that the findings based on this dual approach may be relevant for the actual professional reality of the Romanian AVT landscape.

### 4. The Totalitarian Era: The "Political Filter"

As shown in a wider study (Vulpoi, 2019) the totalitarian era in Romania was characterized by a rigid system of institutional control that transformed audiovisual translation into an instrument of state propaganda. At the heart of this mechanism was a so-called censorship commission. It operated under the direct oversight of the "Securitate" and the ideological departments of the Communist Party. The primary function of this apparatus was to ensure that any foreign audiovisual product entering the national space was thoroughly "sanitized" to align with socialist realism and the cult of personality surrounding the leadership. This process of political filtering was complex. It usually involved deleting scenes and a systematic linguistic intervention where the translated subtitles became a site of ideological re-education. The socio-professional survey revealed that the translators and editors at Televiziunea Română (TVR) were forced to operate within a narrow margin of maneuver, where a single inadequate word could have led to professional sanctions or state investigation.

The specific mechanisms of this filter were most visible in the systematic lexical sanitization of foreign scripts. References to religious life—including common

invocations of "God," "Church," or "Miracles"—were consistently replaced with secular, materialist terminology or entirely omitted to reflect the state's atheist doctrine. In addition, the filter targeted any visual or verbal representation of Western prosperity that might contradict the narrative of socialist progress. Scenes depicting luxury goods, political freedoms, or even basic consumer abundance were often eliminated or condensed to weaken the original's impact. This resulted in a situation in which the Romanian audience experienced a distorted reality and an altered cultural experience of the Western world.

Despite this institutional pressure, the totalitarian era witnessed the emergence of "clandestine" translation as a form of cultural resistance. Well known examples include the underground circulation of Western films on VHS tapes, translated by figures such as Irina Margareta Nistor. Such translations usually provided a raw, often unpolished, but ideologically unfiltered version of the original content.

This duality, the official, censored subtitle and the underground spoken translation, a form of voice-over, illustrate the translation practices of the past era, and is an example of how translation can simultaneously serve as a tool for state-mandated silence and a medium for linguistic and cultural subversion.

### **5. The Transition and the "Commercial Habitus"**

After the events of 1989, the translation constraints did not disappear entirely. The transition period was characterized by the emergence of numerous private television stations and by the importation of foreign content. Gradually, as the market matured, the "political filter" of the totalitarian era was replaced by what can be defined as a "commercial habitus". The new landscape was governed by the economic interests of broadcasting companies and the "global brand guidelines" of international distributors. In this context, which characterizes the present-day AVT in Romania, and in many other democratic countries, the translator operates under the patronage of commercial entities. As opposed to the period before 1989, their main aim is the maximization of audience reach and the avoidance of any content that might jeopardize advertising revenue or corporate reputation (Vulpoiu, 2019).

In this contemporary environment, the mechanisms of control have shifted from external institutional oversight to internalized "self-censorship". Modern Romanian audiovisual translators must navigate a complex landscape of "political correctness" and linguistic standardization. Our study indicated that while the state no longer dictates the removal of religious or political themes, translators often proactively sanitize "taboo" registers, such as vulgarity or culturally sensitive slang, to align with the perceived conservative expectations of the Romanian public or the specific editorial policies of the client. This "commercial self-censorship" functions as an adaptive strategy within the translator's habitus and it ensures professional viability in a competitive and precarious labor market. The pressure of "quality control" in the modern era is thus less about ideological purity and more about the technical and stylistic "neutralization" of the text to suit a broad, heterogeneous audience (Vulpoiu, 2019).

Furthermore, the modern era has introduced new technological and legislative constraints that shape the translational product. The professional profile of the Romanian translator (Dejica, D and A. Dejica-Cartis, 2020) is now defined by the need to balance high-speed production with adherence to strict digital formatting standards. Despite the shift to democracy, the legislative framework, such as the various proposals to mandate

dubbing for nationalistic reasons, continues to pose a potential threat to the established "subtitling tradition". However, the commercial habitus has proven resilient, and the lower costs associated with subtitling and the deep-seated cultural preference for original soundtracks have consolidated subtitling as the dominant modality. The modern constraint is therefore characterized by a "triple pressure": the linguistic accuracy of the source text, the ideological safety of the target text, and the economic efficiency required by the industry.

## 6. Discussion

Comparing the two periods, we may notice that even if the agents of control have shifted from the political to the economic sphere, there are still "filters" in Romanian AVT. Before 1989, under a totalitarian regime, the manipulation of the text was a top-down, vertical process. Then, the state functioned as a censor, prioritizing ideological purity over communicative fidelity. In contrast, after 1989, during the modern commercial era, the pressure operates horizontally, driven by the market, and the constraints are internalized by the translator. This shift illustrates a mutation in the exercise of power: the muffled voice of the past was the result of external coercion, whereas the "neutralized" voice of the present is often a byproduct of the professional habitus and the economic state of the industry.

An important point of comparison lies in the treatment of "otherness" and cultural taboos. During the communist period, foreignness was viewed as a potential ideological threat, and it necessitated the systematic removal of religious and capitalistic markers. In the contemporary market, "otherness" is managed through the lens of political correctness and commercial safety. While the motivations differ—one being the preservation of a political doctrine and the other the preservation of market share—the translational result is frequently the same: a target text that is more conservative and "polished" than its source. This suggests that the Romanian translator, whether operating in 1980 or 2026, continues to act as a cultural gatekeeper who must balance the authenticity of the original work against the rigid expectations of the prevailing patronage.

The comparison also highlights the role of technology as both a facilitator and a constraint. The rudimentary tools of the past allowed for a certain "human error" or even subtle acts of subversion that were difficult to monitor in real-time. Modern digital tools, however, impose a strict technical standardization that leaves little room for individual variation. The "commercial habitus" is now reinforced by software that ensures uniformity across titles, effectively automating some of the functions previously performed by the censorship commission. The Romanian case demonstrates that the evolution of AVT is a trajectory from explicit political intervention to an implicit, technologically mediated form of control, where the "freedom" of the post-1989 era is tempered by the invisible dictates of global media consumption.

## 7. Conclusion

The study of the diachronic evolution of censorship in Romanian audiovisual translation confirms that the act of linguistic mediation is bound to the structures of power. From the institutionalized "political filters" of the totalitarian era to the "commercial habitus" of the globalized market, the Romanian subtitler has consistently operated within a system of

constraints that prioritize the expectations of the patron over the absolute fidelity to the source text.

The transition from the muffled voice of the communist period to the "neutralized" voice of the modern era does may be seen as the end of censorship, but in fact it is a mutation into internalized professional norms and economic necessities. The historical legacy of the "censored mind" has proved resilient, and it manifests today as a form of self-regulation that ensures cultural and commercial safety in a competitive and changing landscape.

Ultimately, the Romanian case provides a model for understanding how translation serves as a barometer for socio-political change. The failure of legislative attempts to impose dubbing and the continued dominance of subtitling underscore a unique form of cultural identity, where the "authentic" sound of the foreign is valued and is simultaneously subject to a localized linguistic "sanitization". As the industry moves further into the digital age, the pressures of technological standardization and political correctness continue to redefine the boundaries of AVT. These continuous shifts highlight the role of the translator as a professional who is confronted with issues of ideological and economic authority, and at the same time, who tries to make sure that the final product remains within the permissible limits of the contemporary habitus.

## References

1. Baker, M. 2018. *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account* (2nd ed.). London/New York: Routledge.
2. Billiani, F. (ed.) 2007. *Modes of Censorship and Translation: National Contexts and Diverse Media*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.
3. Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
4. Dejica, D. & A. Dejica-Cartis. 2020. 'The Multidimensional Translator. Roles and Responsibilities' in Dejica, Daniel & Carlo Eugeni, Anca Dejica-Cartis (eds.). *Translation Studies and Information Technology - New Pathways for Researchers, Teachers and Professionals*. Timișoara: Editura Politehnica, Translation Studies Series. pp. 45-57.
5. Dejica, D. & C. Eugeni, A. Dejica-Cartis (eds.) 2020. *Translation Studies and Information Technology - New Pathways for Researchers, Teachers and Professionals*. Timișoara: Editura Politehnica, Translation Studies Series.
6. Dejica, D. & G. Hansen, P. Sandrini, I. Para (eds.) 2016. *Language in the Digital Era. Challenges and Perspectives*. Warsaw/Berlin: DeGruyter.
7. Díaz-Cintas, J., (ed.) 2012, 'The Manipulation of Audiovisual Translation', Special issue of *Meta* 57 (2).
8. Fawcett, P. 1998. "Ideology and Translation." In M. Baker (Ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (pp. 106-111). London/New York: Routledge.
9. Vulpoiu, E. L., 'Discourse, Translator, Censorship', in *Discourse and Communicative Interaction*, Iasi: Politehnum, pp. 205–218.
10. Vulpoiu, E. L. 2019. *La traducción audiovisual y el perfil del traductor audiovisual en Rumanía*. Timisoara: Editura Politehnica.