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Rendering Dark Humour in Streaming Subtitles: A Case Study of *Dexter*

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Abstract: This paper investigates the rendering of dark humour in pre-prepared interlingual subtitles (English–Romanian) available on Netflix and SkyShowtime. The analysis is based on selected episodes of the American crime drama television series *Dexter* (2006–2013). Using a qualitative research approach, the study first identifies and classifies instances of dark humour in the English source text according to Chiara Bucaria's (2008) typology. It then examines how these instances are translated in the Romanian subtitles provided by Netflix and SkyShowtime, comparing the two versions in order to identify recurring translation strategies and patterns. The quality of the subtitles is subsequently assessed using Jan Pedersen's (2017) FAR Model. His framework makes it possible to determine whether the translation of dark humour affects the audience's viewing experience and comprehension.

Keywords: audiovisual translation, subtitling, streaming platforms, dark humour, subtitling quality assessment

1. Introduction

Audiovisual translation (AVT) has become increasingly important in today's global context, where content that is both audio and visual is transmitted almost instantly across several social media or streaming platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Netflix or SkyShowtime. To cross the linguistic and cultural boundaries, most of the audiovisual products require some form of translation, whether through subtitling, dubbing, voice-over or audio description, to name just a few. In Romania, according to the study *Focus ON – Romania's Digital Pulse 2025: What Media*

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Trends Matter Now, published by the Spark Foundry media agency in 2025, around 34% of the adult population reported that they watch exclusively online content on streaming platforms such as Netflix, HBO Max and SkyShowtime, whereas 47% prefer to combine these with traditional television. The remaining 19% consume only traditional television (Data Intelligence 2025). These numbers suggest not only the shift towards digital media, but also a larger exposure to international audiovisual content. Thus, subtitling represents the primary modality through which Romanian audiences access foreign productions, since both television broadcasters and streaming platforms provide subtitled versions rather than dubbed ones. This raises the question of subtitling quality, measurable in whether the audiovisual content is received and understood as it was intended.

Audiovisual products are inherently polysemiotic, combining multiple channels of communication that interact to create meaning. Scholars such as Delabastita (1989), Gottlieb (2001, 2005), Chiaro (2005), Bucaria (2008), and Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2014) emphasize that meaning in audiovisual texts emerges from the interplay of verbal, visual, and acoustic elements. Dialogue, for example, is often closely linked to characters' facial expressions and gestures, while visual imagery interacts with music and sound effects to convey information and evoke emotional responses. As a result, subtitling involves more than the transfer of spoken language; it requires the mediation of meaning across multiple semiotic modes.

This complexity presents subtitlers with a range of challenges, including technical constraints related to timing, spatial limitations, and reading speed, as well as linguistic and cultural factors that influence the rendering of meaning on screen. Among these challenges, the translation of humour has received considerable scholarly attention. Researchers have highlighted the difficulties involved in transferring humorous content across languages and cultures, particularly when humour relies on linguistic nuances, cultural references, or context-specific knowledge (Attardo 2002; Delabastita 2004; Chiaro 2010; Vandaele 2010; Díaz-Cintas & Remael 2014). The difficulty is even bigger in the case of dark humour, which often relies on sensitive topics such as death, sexual innuendos, violence or illness.

As a significant proportion of the content available on contemporary streaming platforms originates from the Anglo-American cultural sphere, audiences are frequently exposed to dark humour through a wide range of audiovisual productions. Examples include films such as *Fargo* and television series such as *The Sopranos* and *BoJack Horseman*, where dark humour often complements dramatic, criminal, or existential themes. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to describe dark humour as a mainstream genre in itself. Rather, as Bucaria (2008, p. 216) argues, its popularity derives from its recurring presence within non-comedic genres, often in the form of "unexpected quips"—ironic, cynical, or unsettling remarks that interrupt otherwise serious narrative moments.

Romanian audiences encounter this form of humour primarily through subtitled content distributed on streaming platforms, as well as through the widespread

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promotion of Anglo-American productions on social media. Despite its growing visibility, relatively little attention has been paid to the way dark humour is rendered in Romanian subtitles and to the quality of its translation. This raises important questions regarding the strategies employed by subtitlers and the extent to which the humorous and pragmatic effects of the source text are preserved for Romanian viewers.

Despite its prevalence in literary research, existing studies on humour in audiovisual media has tended to focus more on dubbing than on subtitling and mostly on examining the translation of culture specific references from researchers such as Zabalbeascoa (1996), Delabastita (2004), Chiaro (2005), Bucaria (2005, 2008), Dore (2019, 2020). At the same time, as audiences got more and more access to audiovisual content, scholars started to look at the quality of subtitling and at how subtitles are received by their target audiences. This led to the development of several quality assessment models, ranging from the NER model proposed by Pablo Romero-Fresco in 2011 for interlingual respeaking, to Jan Pedersen's FAR model for interlingual subtitling. The latter is the framework for this study. According to Pedersen (2017, 210), the FAR model approaches subtitle quality from the viewer's perspective focusing on how meaning is conveyed (functional equivalence), whether subtitles, respect the target language norms (acceptability) and how easily they can be read on screen (readability).

This article investigates the translation of dark humour in the Romanian subtitles of the first season of the American crime drama series *Dexter* (2006–2013), comparing the versions available on Netflix and SkyShowtime. The first season was selected because it establishes the central themes and narrative dynamics of the series, providing a representative corpus for analysis.

The study evaluates pre-prepared Romanian subtitles as a final product by combining Bucaria's (2008) classification of dark humour with Pedersen's (2017) FAR model for subtitle quality assessment. Specifically, it identifies and classifies instances of dark humour in the source text, examines how they are rendered in Romanian, and assesses their quality in terms of functional equivalence, acceptability, and readability. By adopting a comparative, platform-based approach, the study seeks to contribute to audiovisual translation research and to explore the applicability of the FAR model to humorous discourse. The analysis addresses three main questions: How is dark humour rendered in the Romanian subtitles provided by Netflix and SkyShowtime? To what extent do these subtitles preserve the intended humorous effect while complying with target-language norms and subtitling conventions? Are there significant differences in subtitle quality between the two platforms?

2. Research Design

2.1. Defining Dark Humour

One of the main challenges in studying dark humour lies in the lack of a clear and widely accepted definition of the concept. As Coletta (2003) notes, most definitions originate from literary criticism and are associated with the Black Humour movement

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of the 1960s, which combined comic elements with morbid, tragic, or taboo subjects. However, the term has since been applied to a broad range of humorous forms, including grotesque, macabre, ironic, satirical, and absurd humour (O'Neill 1983). As a result, existing definitions often remain either too broad or insufficiently precise for analytical purposes.

Given this conceptual ambiguity, the present study adopts an operational definition based on Bucaria (2008). Accordingly, dark humour is understood as humour that derives its comic effect from explicit or implicit references to taboo, tragic, or socially sensitive topics, such as death, violence, disability, or sexuality. In *Dexter*, dark humour frequently emerges from the contrast between morally reprehensible acts and the detached, casual, or ironic manner in which they are presented. This effect is particularly evident in the protagonist's inner monologues, where acts of violence are often framed as ordinary or justifiable, creating an incongruity that generates humour.

2.2. Corpus structure

The corpus of this study consists of selected instances of dark humour extracted from all twelve episodes of the first season of *Dexter (2006-2013)*, created by James Manos Jr. According to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb n.d.), as a genre, the series is characterised as "dark comedy, psychological drama, psychological thriller, serial killer", all of which contribute to its distinctive tone.

Set in Miami, the series follows Dexter Morgan, played by Michael C. Hall. The character is described as follows: "He's smart. He's lovable. He's Dexter Morgan, America's favourite serial killer, who spends his days solving crimes and his nights committing them." (IMDb n.d.). He is a forensic bloodstain analyst working for the Miami Metro Police Department who secretly leads a second life as a serial killer. Dexter targets criminals who have escaped legal punishment due to corruption or failures of the justice system in America. Much of the first season is based on the novel *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* by Jeff Lindsay and focuses on Dexter's attempt to manage his public identity and his private violent actions. The killing is rooted in the traumatic experience he had as a child, witnessing the murder of his mother by a chainsaw but he is unaware of this until the end of the season. As a child, he is adopted by police officer Harry Morgan, played by James Remar, who recognises the boy's trauma and violent tendencies and develops a code (later becoming *Harry's Code*) intended to direct Dexter's impulses toward killing only dangerous criminals. Dexter follows the code to not get caught and uses meticulous methods such as wearing gloves, creating isolated killing rooms, dismembering the victims and dumping the bodies in the ocean. To conceal his activities, Dexter works within the criminal justice system, a position that allows him to monitor investigations involving both his victims and other offenders. Throughout the series, he struggles to balance his secret life as a serial killer with the appearance of normality, while gradually developing genuine emotions and meaningful relationships with several characters.

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2.3. Setting up the corpus

Firstly, the source text was established through the transcription of the original English audio using the American Movie Corpus Transcription Conventions proposed by Pierfranca Forchini in 2026. This ensures the accurate representation of spoken language by using speaker identification to dialogues, pauses and punctuation rules (Forchini 2026, 1-4). Using this transcription method allowed for a reliable identification of the verbal dark humour instances and their interaction with the visual and contextual elements in the series. Secondly, the target texts were compiled by transcribing the Romanian subtitles available on Netflix and SkyShowtime, which were accessed through the subscription on the platform. The two versions were treated as separate translation products, each reflecting platform specific rules of production and presentation. While the guidelines for Netflix *Romanian Timed Text Style Guide* are publicly available and offer an insight into the platform's subtitling standards, no equivalent documentation could be identified for SkyShowtime.

The decision to include two streaming platforms is motivated by the assumption that subtitling is influenced not only by linguistic choices, but also by institutional norms and technical constraints. As previous research has shown (Díaz Cintas and Anderman 2009, Romero-Fresco 2011, Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2014 Pedersen 2017), subtitle quality is extensively shaped by guidelines and the production context rather than by a single universal standard. Comparing subtitles from two different platforms makes it possible to observe how dark humour is rendered differently or not within the same language pair. Therefore, any variations between the products are analysed through the FAR model which was fed with the guidelines offered by the subtitling firm in Romania, The Department. They disclosed several professional subtitling recommendations from their translation experiences and made them open access through their blog (The Department 2022).

This is a set of technical, linguistic and functional guidelines which are designed to enhance the viewing experience without disrupting attention, thus aligning with Pedersen's FAR Model and its three dimensions: functional equivalence, acceptability and readability.

From a technical perspective, subtitles are generally limited to a maximum of two lines and are placed at the bottom of the screen (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2021, 20). Depending on the platform, each line contains between 37 to 42 characters, while the duration should be compatible with the average reading speed of adults. In *Dexter*'s case, this means around 17-20 characters per second. Text segmentation should avoid separating articles, prepositions or nouns from verbs, while following the syntactic and semantic rules of the target language.

From a linguistic perspective, *The Department's Guidelines* (2022) recommend the use of natural and grammatically correct Romanian, avoiding overly literal translations while preserving the meaning and communicative intent of the source text. Given the temporal and spatial constraints of subtitling, condensation is encouraged as a key translation strategy. The guidelines also address punctuation, formatting, synchronisation, and consistency. Overall, they reflect established

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subtitling principles that prioritize readability, naturalness, and functionality over literal reproduction (Díaz Cintas & Anderman 2009; Díaz Cintas & Remael 2014; Netflix n.d.).

3. Verbal dark humour in *Dexter*

Chiara Bucaria's (2008) model distinguishes between two major types of dark humour, based on the channels through which the audiovisual content is transmitted: non-verbal and verbal dark humour, with several sub-classes in each of these categories, as can be seen in Table 1. Of these, the present study analyses only instances in the latter group.

Non-verbal Dark Humour	1. Non-verbal visual (NV-VIS)
	2. Non-verbal acoustic (NV-AC)
Verbal Dark Humour	3. Verbal-acoustic (V-AC) a. Purely linguistic V-AC (PL) b. Culture-specific V-AC (CS) c. Linguistic and culture-specific V-AC (PL+CS) d. Non-specific V-AC (Nsp VEH)
	4. Verbal-visual (V-V) a. Verbal humour + visual elements V-V (V+VE) b. Verbal humour + visual anchor V-V (V+VA)

Table 1. Classification of dark humour adapted from Bucaria (2008, 222)

A line was considered dark humour when it contained reference to taboo or transgressive subjects such as death, violence or sexual undertones with a clear form of reframing, based on incongruity. In several cases, Dexter's disturbing actions are presented in a detached and colloquial manner, creating a contrast between behaviour and language that produces the comic effect. Purely linguistic dark humour refers to humour created through wordplay, alliteration, homophony or paronyms, the alteration of idioms or rhetorical instruments such as rhyme without depending on allusions or cultural references (Bucaria 2008, 223). Particular attention was also given to the protagonist's inner monologue, which functions as a narrative device throughout the series and influences the creation of dark humour. Through irony and repeated references to *Harry's Code*, Dexter justifies his own violent tendencies, often transforming them into humorous moments.

The following sections address some of the identified instances of dark humour.

The example below occurs during a crime scene investigation in episode 11 *Truth Be Told*. While examining the dead body of a victim, Vince Masuka (played by C.S. Lee) responds to Debra Morgan's (played by Jennifer Carpenter) question about the identity of the corpse with:

(1) VINCE MASUKA: Ho, ho, ho // another dead ho.

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This V-AC (PL) line contains a wordplay. In the serious context of a murder investigation, Santa Claus's well-known greeting is associated with the slang term "ho", which is the short form of the word referring to the identity of the dead female – she is a sex worker. The comic effect lies in the contrast of the situation, the long pause in speech represented through the double forward slash according to the transcription conventions (Forchini 2026, 3) and lexical and phonetical overlaps of the terms.

Culture-specific dark humour represents instances in which the comic effect involves references from the source culture, for example public figures, television programmes or institutions, but the humour is created because of the incongruity with the scene, rather than from the reference itself (Bucaria 2008, 223). The following example reflects Dexter Morgan's thoughts in episode 2 *Crocodile*, where he finds himself at lunch with his girlfriend Rita Bennet (played by Julie Benz) and his sister Debra Morgan with her new boyfriend. Rita feels insecure because his sister is openly affectionate and she compares their relationship; Dexter remains silent and reflects:

> (2) INTERNAL MONOLOGUE (VO): I can kill a man, dismember his body, and be home for "Letterman" but knowing what to say when my girlfriend's insecure…

The V-AC (CS) humour comes from the contrast between the brutality of the actions described and the popular culture reference to the American chat show *Late Show with David Letterman*. The familiar tone used by the protagonist when speaking of murder and watching television emphasizes the humorous effect of such a daily routine, which the viewers know to be true.

Linguistic and culture-specific dark humour combines elements of both the previously mentioned categories, for instance wordplay with a clear reference to Anglo-American food. However, no clear examples of this category were identified in the sample, but as Bucaria (2008, 223) argues, such cases are harder to come by because of their complex structure and thus harder to translate without omitting something.

The subcategory of non-specific verbally expressed humour (Nsp VEH) includes instances in which the comic effect is created through witty or clever dialogue rather than through cultural or linguistic elements.

> (3) DEXTER: And keep the sex suit on when you talk to the Captain. // It'll help your cause.

This V-AC (Nsp VEH) remark in the pilot episode is said to his sister Debra, while she is trying to get transferred from the Vice department to Homicide and is anxious to speak to Captain Tom Matthews (played by Geoff Pierson). She is wearing the said costume because she is undercover as a sex worker for an ongoing investigation. By referring to her appearance, Dexter jokingly implies that it might influence the decision, and the comic effect comes from the contrast between Debra's professional ambitions and the inappropriate advice she receives from her brother as if it were reasonable.

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Chiara Bucaria (2008, 224) also identifies instances in which verbal dark humour interacts with visual elements forming the fourth category V-V. The spoken utterances are presented alongside the visual and thus are closely interconnected. Here, we have V-V (V+VE) which is "verbal humour and visual element" and V-V (V+VA) as "verbal humour and visual anchor".

The V+VE type involves gestures, objects or facial expressions of the characters that contribute to humour rather than accompanying the verbal message.

> (4) DEXTER: Maybe some sort of promotional gag. // You know, stay the weekend, you get a jar of blood.

This line in episode 10, *Seeing Red*, depends on both the verbal remark and the scene setting as Dexter delivers this while standing among his colleagues at the police station and looking at a jar of blood with a key in it. The absurd idea of receiving such gifts as part of the marketing strategy of the hotel is humorous, because Dexter genuinely believes this, but the effect is emphasized by the shocked reactions of the characters. Without this visual tension, the line would lose part of its comic impact.

Similarly, the last subcategory of verbal dark humour involves visual elements as well: V+VA is the case in which the verbal is completely dependent on the visual for the creation of the humorous effect. The channels become inseparable (Bucaria 2008, 224), as the meaning of the line is linked to what the viewers sees on screen.

> (5) MARÍA LAGUERTA: He does himself the same way he did the hookers. Poetic.

In the last episode of the first season, the police finally catches the killer they have been after from the beginning and, although they believe that he committed suicide, the audience knows that Dexter is the one who is responsible for the murder and positioned the body upside down to drain the blood in the same refrigerated room the killer used for his victims, like a slaughterhouse. Without the visual anchors - the representation of the killer's body and the lieutenants' amused facial expressions - this V+VA would not be humorous at all, but would remain merely an observation.

4. Quality assessment of dark humour subtitling

4.1. Defining the FAR model

The FAR Model was proposed by Jan Pedersen in 2011 in his study *Subtitling Norms for Television* and broadly explained in 2017 in the *Journal of Specialized Translation* as *The FAR model: assessing quality in interlingual subtitling* after several scholars (Romero-Fresco 2011, Díaz Cintas and Remael 2021) raised concerns regarding the quality of the subtitles. Bittner (2011, 77) emphasizes the need for systematic and objective criteria for translation quality assessment with reference to subtitling where cultural and linguistic nuances must be adapted due to the technical constraints of this modality.

Jan Pedersen's FAR quality assessment model proposes a framework for evaluating the quality of interlingual subtitles by focusing on the balance between the fidelity to the source text and the viewing experience. As its name states, this model

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considers three main parameters: functional equivalence, acceptability and readability. Pedersen (2017, 217) introduces these dimensions through a series of practical questions: “Do the subtitles convey speaker meaning?”; “Do the subtitles sound correct and natural in the target language?”; “Can the subtitles be read in a fluent and non-intrusive way?” Functional equivalence handles the accuracy of translation, then acceptability measures the effectiveness of the subtitles for the viewers in terms of language norms, and lastly, readability examines the linguistic consistency and synchronisation of the subtitles on the screen.

Functional equivalence focuses on transfer of meaning. Because subtitles are restricted by space and time limitations, Pedersen (2017, 212) argues that pragmatic equivalence is often more important than literal translation. In other words, subtitles do not need to reproduce every word if the intended meaning is preserved. Two types of errors can be encountered when evaluating this parameter: semantic and stylistic. Semantic errors affect the transmission of meaning itself, while stylistic errors concern tone, register or the communicative effect of the utterance.

In the case of acceptability, the focus shifts from fidelity to fluency and naturalness. Subtitles that seem unnatural or grammatically incorrect disrupt the viewing experience and lead to the breaking of the “contract of illusion” (Romero-Fresco, Pöchhacker 2017, 210). Pedersen (2017, 214) classifies acceptability into grammar errors, spelling errors and errors of idiomaticity, the latter referring to subtitles that fail to sound natural or conventional in the target language.

Readability is connected to the technical side of subtitling. As Pedersen (2017, 215) notes, readability concerns the extent to which subtitles can be processed easily and non-intrusively by viewers. This includes aspects such as segmentation and spotting, punctuation and graphics, as well as reading speed and line length (Pedersen 2017, 215). Although viewers may not consciously notice these technical elements, poorly timed or badly segmented subtitles can quickly affect comprehension and viewing experience.

The FAR model is based on error analysis. Pedersen adopts a penalty system inspired by Romero-Fresco’s NER model, classifying errors as minor, standard or serious depending on their impact on the audience (Romero-Fresco, Pöchhacker 2017, 165). These penalties are closely linked to Romero-Fresco’s concept of the “contract of illusion” (2011, 21), namely the implicit agreement through which viewers accept subtitles as a natural representation of spoken dialogue. The more visible or disruptive an error becomes, the more this illusion is weakened. Minor errors are considered small enough to pass unnoticed unless viewers pay close attention to the subtitles. Standard errors are more visible and can negatively affect the viewing experience, while serious errors distort meaning, interrupt comprehension or undermine the viewer’s trust in the translation. Once this happens, the following subtitles may also be perceived as unreliable, even when no further errors are encountered.

Although the final score is relevant, the feedback and analysis through FAR offers a nuanced understanding of how subtitle choices on different streaming

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platforms preserve the meaning and naturalness of the original dark humour instances.

4.2. The FAR model applied

The following section analyses the selected instances of dark humour from the perspective of the FAR model in the pre-prepared Romanian subtitles of Dexter, season one, on Netflix and SkyShowtime.

To ensure coherence, the examples are organised according to Bucaria's taxonomy of dark humour and in the order indicated in Table 1 (see above), starting with verbal-acoustic and moving towards verbal-visual. Moreover, the lines are presented according to the transcription conventions (Forchini 2026, 1-4) which were stored in an .xlsx format and will be inserted here in the same manner, but as a .txt format table for consistency. For the Romanian versions, back translation (BT) is provided.

4.2.1. V-AC (PL)

This example occurs in the pilot episode during a casual interaction between Dexter and Detective Sue (played by Susie Taylor) at the Miami Metro Police Department, where they work and where Dexter brings doughnuts for his colleagues. As Detective Sue grabs one she jokingly asks:

CHARACTER	ORIGINAL VERSION IN ENGLISH	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON NETFLIX	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON SKYSHOWTIME
DETECTIVE SUE	See you at the next bloodbath?	Pe următoarea baie de sânge ? (On to the next bloodbath?)	Ne vedem la măcelul următor? (See you at the next slaughter?)
DEXTER	Never miss a party.	Nu ratez nicio petrecere. (I never skip a party.)	Nu ratez petrecerile. (I never skip parties.)

Table 2. V-AC (PL) example, episode 1

The humour comes from the incongruity between the normalisation of violence in a professional environment. The term "bloodbath" is usually associated with extreme violence, but here, it is treated as a workplace routine, while Dexter further continues the joke naming it a "party". From the perspective of functional equivalence, the Netflix version, "Pe următoarea baie de sânge?", translates the utterance literally and, although the meaning is clear, the interrogative sentence opened by the preposition "pe" sounds a bit unnatural in Romanian and weakens the humour, which may be interpreted as a minor stylistic error. In this sense, the example supports Pedersen's (2017, 211) argument that pragmatic equivalence is often more effective than literal rendering in subtitling. The SkyShowtime version,

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"Ne vedem la măcelul următor?", adapts the line more naturally and conveys the intended meaning in Romanian. At the same time, both platforms translate Dexter's reply successfully by preserving the lexical contrast between violence and social celebration. In terms of acceptability, both versions are accurate, with no noticeable grammar, spelling or idiomaticity issues. Readability is also handled on both platforms, with no significant segmentation, spotting or reading-speed problems affecting comprehension.

This next instance of dark humour appears in episode 4 *Let's Give the Boy a Hand*, during a crime scene investigation in which Dexter and Angel Batista (played by David Zayas) examine a severed hand placed on a deckchair on a beach in Miami. The visual image creates a disturbing contrast as the calming seaside setting clashes with the brutality of the act. Dexter comments:

CHARACTER	ORIGINAL VERSION IN ENGLISH	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON NETFLIX	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON SKYSHOWTIME
DEXTER	Interesting hand job.	Interesantă labă! (Interesting hand job)	Interesant lucru manual...(Interesting handcraft)
ANGEL BATISTA	That's funny.	Ce amuzant ! (That's funny!)	Amuzant.(Funny.)
DEXTER	It is?	Este? (Isn't it?)	Este? (Isn't it?)

Table 3. V-AC (PL) example, episode 4

The humour comes from the literal use of the term "hand job", where Dexter refers to the manual work that had to be done to mutilate the hand. However, its more frequent meaning carries a sexual innuendo which is reinforced by the actual hand being visible on the screen. Batista immediately recognizes Dexter's comment as a joke, but Dexter remains unaware of the sexual reference (or seems to ignore it), thus amplifying the dark humour.

From the perspective of functional equivalence, the two subtitle versions approach the joke differently. Netflix choses to render the sexual meaning of the term "hand job" thus minimizing the humorous effect that is created by Dexter's innocence and literal professional comment, leaving no place for interpretation. Whereas SkyShowtime preserves the ambiguity of the original line by using the first meaning of a handcraft done by the hands of a killer, which adheres to the intended wordplay.

In terms of acceptability, both versions are grammatically correct and do not have issues related to spelling. However, the use of the slang word "labă" might sound unacceptable to prudish viewers, though there is always the possibility of simply interpreting it as an informal term meaning "big hand" (thus, keeping the subtitler safe from being blamed for using too colloquial language).

The subtitles are well synchronised and easy to process on screen. However, Netflix presents this exchange using single line subtitles consequently, with an

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average reading speed of 10-12 CPS and short display duration, whereas SkyShowtime combines the first two utterances into one and presents them as a dialogue, marking the different speakers with a hyphen for a duration of around 3 seconds. This formatting choice allows the viewers to understand Dexter's unintended joke and Batista's immediate reaction, helping to preserve the incongruity between them.

Table 4 illustrates the difficulty of translating polysemiotic texts, where humour emerges from the verbal along with its interaction with the acoustic, visual and character elements.

The next example of dark humour occurs in episode 8, *Shrink Wrap*, where Dexter desperately tries to reach out to the Ice Truck Killer (Rudy Cooper) as they used to communicate through his murders, but he went into hiding. Dexter posts and reads the message on Craigslist internally:

CHARACTER	ORIGINAL VERSION IN ENGLISH	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON NETFLIX	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON SKYSHOWTIME
INTERNAL MONOLOGUE DEXTER (VO)	"Dear Ken, I'm in pieces."	"Dragă Ken, sunt țăndări." (Dear Ken I'm shattered)	"Dragă Ken, sunt făcută praf." (Dear Ken, I'm a mess.)
INTERNAL MONOLOGUE DEXTER (VO)	"Why the cold shoulder? Love, Barbie."	"De ce mă ignori? Cu dragoste, Barbie." (Why do you ignore me? Love, Barbie.)	"De ce ești așa de rece? Cu dragoste, Barbie." (Why are you so cold? Love, Barbie.)

Table 4. V-AC (PL) example, episode 8

The intertextual wordplay creates humour as this seemingly sentimental message hides violent implications. This utterance carries a cultural reference to the famous Barbie and Ken dolls; however, it cannot be considered a case of V-AC (PL+CS) because of its popularity around the world. In terms of functional equivalence, the Netflix version preserves the idea of a dismembered body which is a recurrent theme in this season. SkyShowtime is idiomatic in Romanian and weakens the humorous because it hides the literal meaning of being in pieces and turns it into being a mess without Ken. A more significant difference appears in the translation of "Why the cold shoulder?". Netflix renders it as „De ce mă ignori?", removing the cold related metaphor entirely and producing a minor semantic error, while SkyShowtime's „De ce ești așa de rece?" preserves both the metaphor and the association with the Ice Truck Killer. Both versions are grammatically correct and natural from the point of view of acceptability. The use of English quotation marks in the Romanian subtitled versions represent a minor error in readability, however this does not affect the intended message which was conveyed successfully.

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4.2.2. V-AC (CS)

This instance of V-AC (CS) dark humour appears in Dexter's internal monologue in the pilot episode as he approaches the first crime scene of the series. While observing the chaotic environment, he compares the homicide scene to an amusement park and refers to it as "Dahmer Land". The humour is created through the opposition between the name of Jeffrey Dahmer, an American serial killer of teen boys, and the Disneyland amusement park. The comic effect depends on both the cultural knowledge of the viewers and on the incongruity between the references.

CHARACTER	ORIGINAL VERSION IN ENGLISH	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON NETFLIX	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON SKYSHOWTIME
INTERNAL MONOLOGUE DEXTER (VO)	There's something strange and disarming about looking at a homicide scene in the daylight of Miami.	E ceva straniu și dezarmant la priveliștea unei scene de omor în lumina zilei din Miami. (There is something strange and disarming about the sight of a murder scene in broad daylight in Miami.)	E cumva bizar și fascinant să vezi locul unei crime la lumina zilei din Miami. (There's something bizarre and fascinating about seeing a crime scene in broad daylight in Miami.)
INTERNAL MONOLOGUE DEXTER (VO)	It makes the most grotesque killings look staged, like you're in a new and daring section of Disney World.	Și cele mai grotești crime par regizate, ca într-o zonă nouă și îndrăzneață din Disney World. (Even the most grotesque crimes seem staged, as if in a new and daring section of Disney World.)	Face ca și cele mai grotești crime să pară înscenate, de parcă te-ai afla într-un nou parc de distracții Disney. (It makes even the most grotesque crimes seem staged, as if you were in a new Disney theme park)
INTERNAL MONOLOGUE DEXTER (VO)	Dahmer Land.	Dahmer Land.	Lumea Criminalilor (Criminals' World)

Table 5. V-AC (CS) example, episode 1

From the perspective of functional equivalence, the Netflix version preserves the original expression, "Dahmer Land", maintaining both the cultural reference and the incongruity, because of the popularity of this serial killer. The SkyShowtime version replaces the line with "Lumea Criminalilor", opting for a general formula. Although the overall meaning is understandable, the culture-specific reference to the serial killer and the association to the amusement park are lost. This may be interpreted as a serious semantic error, since the subtitle removes a central element

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responsible for the humorous effect. In terms of acceptability, both versions are grammatically correct and natural in Romanian, with no significant grammar, spelling or idiomaticity issues. Readability is also handled appropriately on both platforms, with no major segmentation, spotting or reading-speed problems.

This example illustrates how strongly culture-specific dark humour depends on the preservation of the references. Once the cultural association is omitted, much of the ironic and humorous effect disappears with it.

This next instance of V-AC (CS) dark humour appears in Dexter's internal monologue in episode 8, *Shrink Wrap*, while he sits alone in his office at the police station, anxious about the disappearance of the Ice Truck Killer. As he unwraps a pack of snack cookies on screen, he refers to them as "Little Debbies," a well-known American snack brand whose packaging is also visible on the screen, allowing the audience to identify the reference even if they are unfamiliar with the product itself. Humour emerges from the contrast between the banality of comfort food and Dexter's tendency towards violence and murder, turning an ordinary snack into part of his dark psychological routine.

CHARACTER	ORIGINAL VERSION IN ENGLISH	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON NETFLIX	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON SKYSHOWTIME
INTERNAL MONOLOGUE DEXTER (VO)	I need a distraction.	Trebuie să-mi ocup mintea cu altceva. (I need to think about something else.)	Am nevoie să-i atrag atenţia.(I need to get his attention.)
INTERNAL MONOLOGUE DEXTER (VO)	Nothing like some little Debbies and a worthy new adversary to clear my head.	Debbie și un nou adversar vor face minuni cu capul meu (Debbie and a new opponent will work wonders with my head.)	Nişte biscuiţi şi un nou adversar mă vor face să-mi limpezesc mintea. (Some cookies and a new opponent will help me clear my head.)

Table 6. V-AC (CS) example, episode 8

The Netflix version interprets "Debbies" as a person's name in the singular form and viewers may assume Dexter is referring to his sister Debra, making this a standard semantic error within the FAR model. The SkyShowtime version interprets the reference as food and therefore preserves the pragmatic meaning of the scene. However, SkyShowtime introduces a different issue in the preceding line, where the subtitle shifts the action toward a third person rather than reflecting Dexter's own need for distraction. This alters the intended meaning of the utterance and can be considered a serious semantic error. There are no acceptability or readability issues in either of these versions.

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CHARACTER	ORIGINAL VERSION IN ENGLISH	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON NETFLIX	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON SKYSHOWTIME
RUDY COOPER (BRIAN MOSER)	You can't keep him sitting on your shoulder like Jiminy fucking Cricket.	Nu poți continua să-l ții pe umăr, ca pe căcatul de greieraș Jiminy ! (You can't keep carrying him around on your shoulder like that damn Jiminy Cricket!)	Doar nu-ţi stă ca un papagal pe umăr. (It's not like he's sitting on your shoulder like a parrot.)

Table 7. V-AC (CS) example, episode 12

This instance of dark humour in the last episode is classified as V-AC (CS) because it relies on the culture-specific reference to Jiminy Cricket, Disney's Pinocchio character, associated with the idea of conscience. The line appears during a confrontation between Dexter and Rudy Cooper (played by Roby Attal, who is the Ice Truck Killer and turns out to be Dexter's biological brother, Brian Moser). He attempts to convince Dexter to abandon *Harry's Code* and kill his sister Debra. Rudy mocks the idea that Dexter still needs to follow the moral guide imposed by his dead adoptive father.

From the perspective of functional equivalence, the Netflix version preserves the culture-specific reference through "greierașul Jiminy", maintaining the allusion to conscience. The SkyShowtime version replaces the reference with a more generic formulation through explicitation, removing not only the explicit mention of Jiminy Cricket, but also the symbolic association of the cricket. Within the FAR framework, this can be interpreted as a standard semantic error, since the general idea is transmitted, but the humorous and cultural contrast is significantly weakened.

In terms of acceptability, both versions are grammatically correct and natural, with no noticeable grammar or spelling issues. Netflix, however, adopts a slightly stronger slang register in an attempt to compensate for the lack of a direct Romanian equivalent for the intensifier "fucking", while SkyShowtime preserves a more neutral tone at the expense of semantic transfer. Readability is handled effectively on both platforms, with no major segmentation, spotting or reading-speed issues affecting comprehension. A solution could be to preserve both the cultural reference and the metaphorical function of conscience while remaining concise and natural in Romanian, for example: "Doar nu-ți stă pe umăr ca greierașul Jiminy. (It's not like he's sitting on your shoulder like Jiminy Cricket.)". Since the character is recognised by Romanians as „Greierul Jiminy," such a solution would remain accessible to viewers while preserving the intended humorous effect.

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4.2.3. V-AC (Nsp VEH)

CHARACTER	ORIGINAL VERSION IN ENGLISH	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON NETFLIX	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON SKYSHOWTIME
INTERNAL MONOLOGUE DEXTER (VO)	For weeks, I've felt like a student in a master class.	Săptămâni întregi, m-am simțit ca un student la cursul unui maestru.(For weeks, I felt like a student in a master's class.)	Săptămâni întregi, m-am simţit ca un student la cursuri. (For weeks, I felt like a student attending lectures.)
INTERNAL MONOLOGUE DEXTER (VO)	Is it really possible that the master's on the run?	Chiar e posibil ca maestrul să fie pe fugă ? (Could the master really be on the run?)	E posibil ca profesorul meu să fie acum fugar? (Could my teacher really be a fugitive now?)
INTERNAL MONOLOGUE DEXTER (VO)	And even more tragic, does he live in a double-wide?	Și, mai tragic, locuiește într-o casă mobilă ? (And, even more tragic, does he live in a mobile home?)	Și, chiar mai tragic, trăiește într-o rulotă? (And, even more tragic, does he live in a trailer?)

Table 8. V-AC (Nsp VEH) example, episode 7

The example in Table 8 is classified as V-AC (Nsp VEH) and appears in episode 7, *Circle of Friends*, when the police believe they have finally identified the Ice Truck Killer, only to discover that the suspect is merely an impostor seeking attention and notoriety. Humour does not rely on wordplay or culture-specific references, but rather on Dexter's disproportionate emotional reaction to an unimportant detail: where the killer lives. While light and playful music accompanies the scene, Dexter bothered not by the murders themselves, but by the possibility that the real Ice Truck Killer might live in a mobile home. The comic effect emerges from this incongruity of priorities. Dexter appears genuinely disappointed that the killer no longer fits the sophisticated image he had constructed, treating the possible living conditions as more unsettling than the violence associated with him.

From a FAR perspective, both subtitle versions preserve the general humorous mechanism and maintain the contrast between violence and banality. The Netflix version reproduces Dexter's ironic disappointment more closely, while the SkyShowtime version introduces the term „rulotă", which slightly exaggerates the social degradation implied by the original line. However, as Bucaria (2008, 222) argues, this type of dark humour is easier to translate as it does not pose very complex challenges.

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CHARACTER	ORIGINAL VERSION IN ENGLISH	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON NETFLIX	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON SKYSHOWTIME
DEBRA MORGAN	But my boyfriend shows up on your doorstep with a couple of T-bones--	Dar, când prietenul meu îți sună la ușă cu niște T-bone... (But when my boyfriend shows up at your door with some T-bone steaks...)	Dar când iubitul meu îți apare la ușă cu nişte costiţă... (But when my boyfriend shows up at your door with some ribs...)
DEXTER	They were porterhouses.	Erau Porterhouse. (They were Porterhouse steaks.)	Erau cotlete. (They were chops.)
DEBRA MORGAN	Porterhouses, and you end up tossing beers back into the middle of the night.	Porterhouse? Îți petreci seara bând bere cu el. (Porterhouse? You spend the evening drinking beer with him.)	Cotlete? Şi aţi dat bere pe gât în toiul nopţii. (Chops? And you were chugging beer in the middle of the night.)

Table 9. V-AC (Nsp VEH) example, episode 10

The scene takes place in episode 10, *Seeing Red*, during an argument between Dexter and Debra, after he unexpectedly meets Rudy, Debra's boyfriend, without realising that he is in fact the Ice Truck Killer. While Debra attempts to confront Dexter emotionally, he interrupts the discussion to correct the type of steak Rudy brought over, focusing on the distinction with complete seriousness. This instance is classified as V-AC (Nsp VEH), the comic effect coming from Dexter's misplaced priorities and emotional detachment. Instead of responding to the argument, he becomes preoccupied with technicalities and Debra's increasingly frustrated reaction emphasizes the absurdity of the moment.

The Netflix subtitles preserve the term "Porterhouse", maintaining Dexter's obsessive behaviour that generates humour. The SkyShowtime version replaces the reference with "costiţă" and "cotlete", simplifying the culinary distinction and weakening Dexter's correction. Within the FAR framework, this can be interpreted as a standard semantic error, since the general situation remains easy to understand, but part of the humour tied to Dexter's need for accuracy is reduced. Viewers that are familiar with steak related terminology may notice that the substituted terms are not equivalent to a Porterhouse or T-bone steak, which slightly weakens the credibility of the exchange and disrupts the contract of illusion.

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4.2.4. V-V (V+VE)

In V+VE humour, the visual element reinforces the humorous effect created by the dialogue without being dependent on it.

CHARACTER	ORIGINAL VERSION IN ENGLISH	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON NETFLIX	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON SKYSHOWTIME
RUDY COOPER	* Deck the halls with parts of bodies *	La ornat cu părți de stârvuri, (Decorating with pieces of carcasses,)	O, brad frumos! O, brad frumos! (Oh, beautiful Christmas tree! Oh, beautiful Christmas tree!)
RUDY COOPER	* La-da-da-da dum *	Fa-la-la la-la, ba-dum bum bum.	Împodobit cu membre! (Decorated with limbs!)

Table 10. V-V (V+VE) example, episode 11

The scene in episode 11, *Truth Be Told*, shows Rudy Cooper, the Ice Truck Killer, preparing Christmas tree decorations out of dismembered human body parts, while singing a distorted version of the Christmas carol "Deck the Halls." The line "Deck the halls with parts of bodies" creates humour through the grotesque replacement of traditional holiday decorations with mutilated remains, producing a strong contrast between a festive moment and a violent one. The visual presence of the body parts intensifies the absurdity and shock when seeing the scene, thus this instance is classified as V-V (V+VE)

From a FAR point of view, the Netflix version preserves both the Christmas Carol parody and the connection of body parts as Christmas tree decorations. However, the use of the term "stârv" is an unusual lexical choice, as the word is not so common in contemporary Romanian language, which may create a minor error in terms of acceptability. The SkyShowtime version adopts a different strategy, by replacing the original song reference with another Christmas carol more familiar to both Romanian and Anglo-American audiences, while separating the mention of body parts into an independent subtitle. Although this changes the structure of the original joke, it enhances the humorous effect by making the parody more recognisable to the target audience. Both versions are grammatically correct and natural from the point of view of acceptability and readability.

4.2.5. V-V (V+VA)

In the V+VA humour model, the verbal utterance is dependent on the image and does not function without it.

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CHARACTER	ORIGINAL VERSION IN ENGLISH	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON NETFLIX	SUBTITLED VERSION IN ROMANIAN ON SKYSHOWTIME
DEXTER	What are we looking at here?	Ce avem aici ? (What do we have here?)	Ce avem aici? (What do we have here?)
ANGEL BATISTA	I'm thinking two circus clowns dancing.	Parcă ar fi doi clovni care dansează. (It's like watching two clowns dance.)	Eu văd doi clovni dansând. (I see two clowns dancing.)
ANGEL BATISTA	You?	Tu ce zici ? (What do you think?)	Tu? (You?)
DEXTER	No, it looks like a lobster. See the claws?	Arată ca un homar. Vezi cleștii ? (It looks like a lobster. See the claws?)	Nu, arată ca un homar. Îi vezi cleștii? (No, it looks like a lobster.// Can you see its claws?)
ANGEL BATISTA	Why do bloodstains always look like crustaceans to you?	De ce, pentru tine, petele de sânge sunt crustacee ? (Why, to you, bloodstains are crustaceans?)	De ce ţi se tot pare că petele de sânge arată a crustacee? (Why do you keep thinking that bloodstains look like crustaceans?)
DEXTER	I like seafood.	Îmi plac fructele de mare. (I like seafood.)	Îmi plac fructele de mare. (I like seafood.)
ANGEL BATISTA	Rorschach would say you have a hard time relating to others.	Rorschach ar spune că ți-e greu să te acomodezi cu ceilalți. (Rorschach would say that you have a hard time adapting to others.)	Testul Rorschach ar zice că ţi-e greu să interacţionezi cu lumea. (The Rorschach test would suggest that you have a hard time interacting with the world.)
DEXTER	Not as hard as her.	Nu atât de greu ca ea. (Not as hard as her.)	Ea mă întrece. (She outruns me.)

Table 11. V-V (V+VA) example, episode 8

At the beginning of episode 8, *Shrink Wrap*, Dexter and Batista examine unusual blood patterns on a wall shown in close-up shot. As they study the shapes, the two jokingly compare them to familiar figures, turning the scene into a moment of

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light forensic banter. Humour changes abruptly once the camera cuts to the image of a dead woman lying in a bathtub. The final line frames the entire exchange through dark irony, as the playful interpretation of bloodstains combines the reality of a dead person. Without the visual reveal, the joke would lose most of its effect, making this an example of V-V (V+VA) humour.

Both subtitle versions preserve the humorous effect and the contrast between playful conversation and death. The Netflix version maintains both the crustacean comparison and the ironic shift created by the final line. The SkyShowtime version also reproduces the conversation, although the final subtitle, "Ea mă întrece", weakens the comparative structure of "Not as hard as her" and slightly reduces the sharpness of the punchline.

This example illustrates how verbal-visual dark humour depends on the delayed visual recontextualization, supporting Pedersen's argument that subtitle quality involves not only the semantic transfer, but also the attention to synchronization and spotting.

The comparative analysis based on the FAR model shows that both Netflix and SkyShowtime manage to render the dark humour instances, but the approach is different. Netflix tends to stay closer to the original especially in scenes where wordplay or cultural references appear (e.g. Dahmer Land). On the other hand, SkyShowtime uses strategies such as explicitation to create a smoother viewing experience. However, in doing so, the humorous effect is sometimes weakened.

It is worth mentioning that not all categories of dark humour act the same in translation. For example, purely linguistic humour is affected by a minor semantic or stylistic error, and this changes the intended meaning of the joke. Culture-specific humour depends on whether the references were maintained or adapted. In verbal-visual humour, the interaction between the subtitle and the setting on screen is affected by the slightest subtitle shift, and this affects how the viewers interpret the scene.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how instances of dark humour are rendered in the Romanian pre-prepared subtitles available on Netflix and SkyShowtime. The analysis combines a classification of verbal dark humour instances adapted from Bucaria (2008) with the application of the quality assessment FAR model (Pedersen 2017). It identified and classified some instances of dark humour that we considered illustrative in the source text and examined how these are translated into Romanian in terms of functional equivalence, acceptability and readability.

On the one hand, the classification shows that humour in our corpus is constructed through a wide range of mechanisms, from linguistic to cultural, while visual elements also contribute to creating the hilarious effect. This emphasizes the polysemiotic nature of audiovisual content. The most frequent category of dark humour is evidently Nsp VEH, which suggests that the series relies on good lines, irony and incongruity. Similarly, purely linguistic humour was also identified quite

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often, which indicates that wordplay and wording strategies play an important role in the creation of comic effects in *Dexter*. The culture-specific and verbal-visual categories appeared less but this does not diminish the comic impact, as the effect of a cultural reference in a visually anchored pun might produce more laughter.

On the other hand, the streaming platforms managed to transmit the intended humours message in most of the cases in the movie. However, Netflix tends to focus more on fidelity to the source text rather than the experiences for the viewers, whereas SkyShowtimne stresses more the comprehension of the subtitles for an enhanced viewing experience. Even if an utterance was rendered correctly, that does not guarantee the accurate transmission of the humorous effect, according to the results of the application of the FAR model. The most problematic area for both platforms was functional equivalence, especially in the case of purely linguistic or culture-specific dark humour. Acceptability and readability were maintained in general. The interplay between verbal, visual and acoustic is necessary to achieve the humorous effect.

Several limitations of this study must be admitted to. Due to space constraints, the analysis focused only on the first season of *Dexter*. This, however, was enough to identify some categories and patterns of how the two streaming platforms dealt with the dark humour instances in the series under consideration. Nevertheless, a more in-depth analysis of the whole series would reveal additional subtitling solutions and would allow for more solid comparisons between the solutions offered on the two platforms.

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