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## **The intralingual subtitling of *The Wire*: Changes of style and substance**

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines the effects of the omissions made in the intralingual subtitling of the cult TV series *The Wire*, building on previous research. By extracting the English subtitles from the DVD and comparing them to the audio dialogue, I ascertain which features are omitted from the subtitles. A qualitative analysis reveals that the omission of features that contribute to interpersonal meaning has a cumulative effect on the representation of characters and their relationships. Furthermore, the subtitles frequently omit spatial information, which is shown to be key in constructing the nuanced hierarchical structure of the institutions and their players. The qualitative findings are supported by a quantitative analysis of the correlations between the cuts and their effects. It is argued that because interpersonal relations and social structures are so intrinsic to *The Wire*'s message, the ideational meaning of the subtitled text suffers. The results are pertinent to the ongoing debate on the merits of verbatim versus edited subtitles, and point to the need for stylistic considerations to be implemented into subtitling practice.*

**Keywords:** audiovisual translation; characterisation; intralingual subtitling; power; stylistics

### **1 Introduction**

This study aims to analyse the discrepancies between the audio dialogue of *The Wire* (2002–2008) and the English subtitles from the DVD version of the HBO series (Simon 2008b). In intralingual subtitling (e.g. English to English), there is a debate over the benefits of verbatim

versus edited subtitles (e.g. Romero-Fresco 2009; Szarkowska *et al.* 2016); this is particularly pertinent to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHOH) community, who aspire to the same access to audiovisual products as the hearing community – a right which is often understood as requiring verbatim subtitles. While the English subtitles of *The Wire* are pertinent to the DHOH community, they are also significant for two additional reasons: (1) as Toolan (2011) attests, many native English-speaking viewers resort to using the subtitles to aid comprehension of the characters' Baltimore dialect; and (2) *The Wire* was not an instant hit when aired but rather a slow-growing success, meaning many viewers watched the show on DVD or streamed through providers such as Netflix, rather than when it was first broadcast. The show was seen by only four million viewers when it aired in the US, and just 70,000 when it first aired in the UK on the pay-to-view FX channel. However, the DVD box set of all five seasons was on Amazon's Top 50 list in the UK as of 2009 (Curtis 2009). Therefore, the English subtitles are both more necessary and more accessible to most viewers of *The Wire* than they might be for other television shows.

This study follows on from recent investigations into the effects of intralingual subtitling strategies on characterisation in TV drama (McIntyre and Walker 2013; McIntyre and Lugea 2015; McIntyre 2018). However, it here also examines the subtitles' representation of character roles in the text's social structure. I argue that the characters in *The Wire* are inextricable from the social structures to which they belong, and that their dialogue is steeped not only in characterisation cues, but also in cues to social structure, depicted so astutely in this television series. The subtitles of *The Wire*'s dialogue must be attentive to these cues in order to accurately represent the style of the text.

I begin in the next section by describing the series, its focus and the critical reception it has received. Then, in Section 3, I describe the craft of subtitling, the constraints which govern the subtitling process, and the theoretical and practical approaches to the activity in

recent decades. In Section 4, the methodological steps are outlined, from the data selection to its categorisation. In Section 5, the results of the analysis are presented and discussed.

## 2 *The Wire*

HBO's television series *The Wire* was first aired in the US in June 2002, and its five seasons were transmitted over six years, slowly earning a cult following in the US and beyond. Each of the five seasons deals with a different aspect of urbanity in Baltimore. The series depicts the daily struggles of the underclass, drug dealers, junkies, as well as the police, dockers, journalists, teachers and politicians that populate Baltimore. *The Wire*'s incredible achievement is in the way it portrays the interplay between individual urban Americans and their inextricability from the (often brutal) capitalist system, be that the illicit drug trade or the legitimate institutions, often drawing parallels between both sides of the law. According to David Simon (2008a), co-creator of the series, *The Wire* is essentially about the relationship between the individual and institutions in contemporary neo-liberal America. The series stands out as one that breaks from the ideological norms of other US crime television shows, and does so by foregrounding the relationship between characters and their institutional roles. Characters on both sides of the law are always portrayed as subject to the systems to which they belong. Thus, the interplay between the characters' individual struggles, choices and moral battles, and the 'system' at large, places characterisation at the heart of what the series does best. This article aims to examine the representation of character in *The Wire*'s subtitles with regard to how their language use contributes to the power relations and social structures in the text.

In many senses, the 'prefabricated orality' which Chaume (2003, quoted in Fernández *et al.* 2014) identifies as characteristic of dramatic dialogue is much more 'real' in *The Wire* than in most TV dramas. The producers' decision to include non-professionals from

Baltimore in the cast alongside professional actors adds to the show's realism and the accurate portrayal of the Baltimore dialect, Baltimorese. This dialect, which shares many features with African-American Vernacular (Trotta and Blyahher 2011), is used by characters of different races, classes and on both sides of the law, reinforcing the commonality between these groups.

However, the use of Baltimorese has also proved an interpretative hindrance for many hearing viewers of the show. As Kelly (2009: 4) notes, '[t]he often impenetrable accents and highly specific colloquial vernacular make no concessions to the average viewer but instead demand their attention and commitment'. It is this cognitive demand on the viewer of *The Wire* that leads some people to switch off and others to become hooked on decoding the 'involvingly incomprehensible' (Toolan 2011: 161) dialogue. So what keeps viewers' attention, despite the comprehension difficulties? Kozloff (2000: 215) has argued that this kind of 'linguistic opacity' is characteristic of gangster movie dialogue and that the frustration that viewers experience in understanding dialogue in this genre is an integral 'part of their aesthetic'.

Furthermore, Toolan also comments on 'the verbal flair of the characterisation' (2011: 176), forged through the use of tools such as extended metaphor. For example, in one scene in the first season, Bodie, a low-level drug dealer, is taught the rules of chess by one of his superiors, and the parallelism between the hierarchy of chess and the drug game is made clear. Four seasons later, Bodie is betrayed by his gang and captured by the police, which prompts him to liken himself to a 'pawn-bitch'. This example typifies the interplay between dialect, character and social structure that *The Wire* captures so uniquely.

David Simon makes no amenities for those who just want to watch an individual episode, saying 'fuck the casual viewer' (Simon 2008a), and he hopes viewers learn from the show: 'as they go along, they'll understand more and more, and maybe by the end they'll

understand most if not all of it' (cited in Burkeman 2009). As such, the demands on complete attention from viewers makes *The Wire* more conducive to viewing on DVD, where audiences have access to additional facilities, such as the intralingual subtitles studied here.

### **3 Subtitling**

The globalisation of popular culture, the explosion of the mass media market and increased access to audiovisual entertainment in the last few decades have meant that subtitles are increasingly significant in the consumption of culture and audiovisual texts. Díaz Cintas and Remael note that, '[w]ith the arrival of DVD it is clear that not only is professional practice changing but the very essence of subtitling and the conventions applied are also in flux' (2007: 139). They go on to describe new innovative strategies in interlingual (translated) subtitles for the DVD medium, where 'subtitling for DVD appears to be breaking old taboos and offering a wide range of new opportunities' (2007: 141). Nevertheless, subtitling strategy has generally remained the same for many decades now, and outmoded limits on what is deemed possible are still widely in use in subtitling training and practice, as described in Section 3.1 below. In Section 3.2, I examine what tends to be omitted in subtitling and challenge the assumption that certain linguistic elements are 'redundant'.

#### **3.1 Practical constraints**

In transferring language from the spoken to the written mode, subtitlers have to balance the intersemiotic transference of meaning within some very tight spatio-temporal parameters. Viewers who have access to both the auditory and visual channels will notice that a portion of the dialogue is either condensed or cut. De Linde and Kay (1999: 11) claim that as the average reading speed of adults is approximately 66% of the average speaking speed, each subtitle must be reduced by around one third. Their study, which surveyed various genres of

television programmes, found that subtitles contain an average of 43% less text than the original dialogue, suggesting that reductionism may be applied more than is necessary.

One of the reasons for linguistic reduction is spatial constraints, as the width of the screen dictates that ‘a subtitle will have some 32 to 41 characters per line in a maximum of 2 lines’ (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 9). In another limitation, the practice of keeping subtitles on-screen during a shot change (known as ‘overlapping’) is said to cause viewers to re-read the subtitles (Luyken *et al.* 1991), and consequently, this practice is advised against in subtitling guidelines (Independent Television Commission 1999; Ofcom 2006). Despite recent empirical research that suggests shot changes do *not* induce re-reading (Szarkowska *et al.* 2013), overlapping is generally avoided and fast-paced scenes with many successive shot changes are subject to additional cuts.

Another factor is the length of time it takes for the average viewer to read the text. Of course, this is difficult to ascertain when reading speeds differ between viewers and across media. While 150–180 words per minute is traditionally the assumed comfortable reading rate, in subtitling (Luyken *et al.* 1991) the upper end of this range is increasingly the norm in DVD and cinema subtitles, with some subtitling companies applying even higher rates, as modern audiences are assumed to be more skilled consumers of multimodal audiovisual texts (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007; Ramos Pinto 2013). In traditional subtitling practice, the ‘six-second rule’ (see d’Ydewalle *et al.* 1987; Brondeel 1994) states that an average viewer can read two full lines of subtitled text (approximately 74 characters) in six seconds. Although this rule is still widely taught and adhered to, Díaz Cintas and Remael remark that ‘[t]his calculation implies a rather low reading speed of some 140 to 150 words per minute or 2.5 words per second’ (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 97). Indeed, several studies have shown that viewers are actually capable of processing more information than subtitlers assume (Caffrey 2009; Künzli and Ehrensberger-Dow 2011), with quicker subtitling rates and

verbatim, rather than edited, subtitles actually aiding comprehension in some viewers (Szarkowska *et al.* 2016). Furthermore, it has also been demonstrated that ‘the greater the number of words in one subtitle, the less time is then spent reading each one of these words. That is, viewers need proportionally more time to read short subtitles than long ones’ (Ivarsson and Carroll 1998: 64). This would seem to suggest that some omissions made in subtitling are not as necessary as once presumed.

### 3.2 *Lost in translation*

In an earlier work on subtitles that remains influential among subtitlers-in-training, Reid remarks that ‘[t]he shortening of the text for subtitling purposes is nothing more than deciding what is padding and what is vital information’ (Reid 1987: 28). This begs the question of how subtitlers are to know which is which. Despite acknowledgements that a great deal of linguistic skill is necessary to be able to decide what must be cut (Luyken *et al.* 1991: 55; Gottlieb 1994: 101), there is no suggestion as to how to determine what is essential and what can be cut. This problem is common in subtitling research, with only cursory attempts at accounting for the stylistic effects of what is left on the cutting room floor.

In the subtitling literature certain elements of spoken language are consistently deemed omissible, such as discourse markers (de Linde and Kay 1999: 4) and hedges (e.g. ‘I think’), both of which Henrik Gottlieb, a linguistics scholar who is influential in subtitling theory and practice, deems ‘redundant’ (Gottlieb 1994: 112). However, while such items may not be informative in terms of propositional content, they reveal information about characters’ stance toward the propositional content, their attitudes and relationships – in short, they carry personal and social informational load. Even in a more recent chapter, titled ‘The linguistics of subtitling’, Díaz Cintas and Remael write that sentential tags and phrasal modifiers such as adjectives and verbs ‘are also obvious candidates for deletion precisely



because they do no more than modify the information’ (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 163). Thus the ‘information’ is given precedence over subtle characterisation cues and social markers in the style of speaking. It is also notable that the linguistic elements that contribute towards the plot are evaluated over those that may contribute to characterisation, as ‘[p]hatic words also tend to disappear from subtitles because they do not – strictly speaking – advance the action’ (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 164).

Several scholars who have analysed subtitling strategies and tendencies have observed that interpersonal information is most commonly omitted in the transposition of dialogue to subtitles (Gottlieb 1992; Kovačić 1992; de Linde 1995). As explained by Halliday, the interpersonal function of language is the way in which language is used in social and personal interaction, and it is expressed through markers of modality, person, attitude and expressive lexical items or stylistic organisation of vocabulary. Another strand of Hallidayan metafunctional meaning is the ideational function of language, which is the ‘communication of experience’ (Halliday 1976: 25) and is manifest in those linguistic elements which convey experiential information, as in verb processes, tense, and lexical content. According to Halliday, ‘[t]hese two broad macro-functions of the adult language, the ideational and the interpersonal, together determine a large part of the meaning potential of the clause’ (Halliday 1976: 25). Nevertheless, linguistic elements that carry ideational information are deemed more important in subtitling theory and consequently preserved in subtitling practice. Díaz Cintas and Remael are particularly attentive to common linguistic strategies in subtitling practices and their observations on the commonplace dismissal of interpersonal information are worth quoting at length:

Interpersonal elements that may signal power relations between interlocutors and thereby establish character tend to bite the dust too. Examples are:

greetings, interjections, vocatives, formulas of courtesy, etc. Even some repetitions can be seen to fall under this heading, mainly when they express hesitation. Not only do such interpersonal features contribute little to propositional content in the strict sense, formally they also occupy a somewhat isolated position, at the beginning of a sentence, for instance, or between commas. (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 165)

The authors continue by describing how the omission of formulaic expressions of politeness, discourse markers, hesitations, false starts do ‘not matter much’ (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 165). They do, however, go on to speculate as to ‘[w]hether omitting such interpersonal elements is always the best choice’ (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 166) and they advocate respecting ‘characters’ manner of speaking, not only the content of their interventions Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 187). Quite rightly, they observe that the relevance of stylistic features varies according to each text and context of translation. The problem is that when subtitlers are advised that interpersonal information constitutes the ‘padding’, there is a danger that indiscriminate deletion of such information can have negative and drastic effects on the characterisation and social structure of a text.

In a summary of ideological issues surrounding subtitling at the end of their monograph, Díaz Cintas and Remael raise two important issues that concern us here. Firstly, they point out that ‘the very tendency of subtitling to develop a [...] disregard for interactional signals from dialogue exchanges may have to be challenged. What if linguistic variation becomes more and more of an integral part of the message of films and documentaries? (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 231). In Section 2 above, I described how linguistic variation is indeed an integral part of *The Wire*’s message and the viewer’s experience. With a text such as this, it is vital that the subtitles translate that message and

experience. Further, Díaz Cintas and Remael speculate that ‘[c]hanges in register and style may render films more homogenous, and changes that affect character representation ultimately affect the message of the film, i.e the content that is subtitling’s priority’ (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 200). This is a very significant point, in that systematic disregard for interpersonal and stylistic features can eventually lead to a failure to convey the macro-ideational message of a text. In this study, my hypothesis is that if subtitlers apply the usual methods to *The Wire* and interpersonal meaning is systematically omitted, the social value of interpersonal information in the dialogue will be altered, along with the social structure of the setting and ultimately the ideational meaning of the text.

## **4 Methodology**

### ***4.1 Data collection and mark-up***

I chose to use the English subtitles from the first episode of *The Wire*, called ‘The target’, which was used as a pilot episode to convince HBO to back the series (Busfield and Owen 2009: 16). For reasons of space, in this article I focus solely on the dialogue and its translation into written subtitles, but it must be acknowledged that other multimodal aspects of the text (e.g. characters’ expressions and movement, shots and angles etc.) contribute towards the meaning-making potential of the discourse. Following the example of previous studies (McIntyre and Walker 2013; McIntyre and Lugea 2015), I isolated the subtitles from the DVD using SubRip software, which automatically compiles all of the subtitles in an MS Word document, numbered. The total number of subtitles in this 50-minute episode is 883, a small dataset admittedly, but one which allows for complementary qualitative and quantitative analyses. I then watched the episode closely several times, noting discrepancies between the spoken dialogue and the subtitles.

Each discrepancy between the audio dialogue and the subtitle was categorised as being either an ‘omission’, a ‘condensation’, an ‘addition’, a ‘swap’ or an ‘orthographical change’. The first three categories are taken from subtitling theorists (Gottlieb 1992; Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007) and the last two are labels I formulated in response to changes observed in the data. An ‘omission’ is a deleted element; a ‘condensation’ is a reduction (e.g. from a complex to a simple verb phrase); an ‘addition’ is an added element; a ‘swap’ is the exchange of one word for another within the same word class; and an ‘orthographical change’ is a spelling that represents the speech in a way that is not consistent with other representations of the same lexeme (e.g. an unsystematic spelling of ‘going to’ as ‘gonna’). Table 1 presents examples of each subtitling strategy, alongside the frequency for each change strategy and their percentage of the total changes.

**<INSERT Table 1. Frequency and percentage of subtitling change strategies>**

The findings in Table 1 show that in the 883 subtitles, there were 322 changes, meaning that 36.5% of the subtitles did not correspond with the audio dialogue. Clearly, this means that only a minority of the subtitles undergo a change, but I argue in Section 5 that the consistency of particular *kinds* of changes could yield a meaningful effect. The vast majority of changes wrought in the subtitling of ‘The target’ are deletions (76.1%), with condensations coming in second (21.4%). The frequencies of the remaining change strategies – orthographic, swaps and additions – are negligible. Because of the proliferation of omissions in the subtitling, deletions and condensations are the changes I focus on in the analysis in Section 5.

The MS Word document of subtitles from episode one of *The Wire* was marked up, using a transcription method established in previous research (McIntyre and Walker 2013;

McIntyre and Lugea 2015). This involves the use of square brackets to indicate deleted elements and underlining to indicate added elements (see extract in Appendix 1). Once the entire document was marked up, I listed every change on an Excel spreadsheet and patterns began to emerge that would contribute to the qualitative analysis (see Section 5.1) and also determine the specific variables to be used in entering the data in IBM SPSS Statistics (hereafter SPSS), as outlined in the next section.

#### **4.2 Entering qualitative language data in SPSS**

Each change in the subtitles was logged in SPSS as a ‘case’ on the vertical axis, and the ‘variables’ for each change/case were recorded on the horizontal axis. The first set of variables included identification information, such as the subtitle number, the scene in which it took place, the name of character whose dialogue was modified, the strategy used in making the change (see Section 4.1 above) and the exact word or phrase that was lost or added.

The next step in categorising the variables for each change in the subtitles was to categorise what was lost or added in the subtitle. To this end, I employed Culpeper’s (2001) cognitive stylistic model of characterisation, and focused particularly on the linguistic cues he lists that implicitly depict the *social* role of the character: lexis, syntax, surge features, social markers and dialect (for a helpful breakdown of characterisation cues see McIntyre and Walker 2013; McIntyre and Lugea 2015). The other variables I chose are principally made up of word class and include noun, pronoun, modifier, verb, adverb(ial), conjunction and interjection. Sometimes, a single change (an SPSS ‘case’) affects several variables; for example, subtitle number 225 cuts ‘Yo, stop playing’, which constitutes a single case and single row in SPSS, yet the variables ‘interjection’, ‘imperative’ and ‘whole turn’ are activated. I entered this in SPSS by inserting the number 1 in the columns for each of these

variables. The other, un-activated, variables would be designated a 0. This method allows for the quantification of the qualitative data.

The *yo* example above is indicative of one of many pragmatic particles that is used in the naturalistic urban vernacular in *The Wire*. Culpeper (2001) borrowed Taavitsainen's term 'surge feature' to describe outbursts of emotion that include exclamation, swearing and pragmatic particles, all of which contribute to our perception of characters (Taavitsainen 1997: 219–220, cited in Culpeper 2001: 190). While this may have worked for Culpeper's research into Shakespearean characters' surge features, my data constitutes a very naturalistic representation of contemporary dialogue and therefore contains many features found in natural speech.

As such, I preferred to divide 'surge features' into four distinct variables: 'discourse markers', 'stance markers', 'interjections' and 'taboo language'. I adopt a rather narrow definition of discourse markers as 'sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk', based on Schiffrin's seminal work on the topic (Schiffrin 1987: 31). For example, *now* can be used as a discourse marker to organise and orientate the flow of discourse. Among 'stance markers' I include markers of all kinds of modality and evidentiality, as well as overt expression of attitude, feelings, judgement or commitment concerning the propositional content of the message (following Ochs 1989). As such, some discourse markers are also categorised as stance markers, insofar as they organise the discourse (a textual function) as well as the speaker's stance towards the proposition therein (an interpersonal function); a clear example is *I'm sayin'*. Those features categorised as interjections fulfill Cuenca's (2000) conative and expressive functions, where they are used to express feelings and produce an effect on the listener (e.g. *yo* used emphatically as an appeal for understanding). It should be noted that my variable 'taboo language' includes milder (e.g. *goddam*) as well as stronger swear words (e.g. *motherfucker*).

As well as marking the changes for the linguistic elements that had been cut or added, I recorded the kind of meaning the change had an effect upon. This would firstly allow for a qualitative analysis of the effect of the changes in the subtitle on the text's meaning, and later allow for a statistical analysis of correlation between kinds of changes and kinds of meaning. Three of these categories were drawn from Hallidayan metafunctions: interpersonal, ideational and textual meaning (Halliday 1976; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). By recording which of the three metafunctions has been altered in my data, the results here can contribute to research into the translation of metafunctions in subtitling (see Section 3.2 above). To this end, I identified whether each change in the subtitles (as noted above, a 'case' in SPSS) affected ideational, interpersonal and/or textual meaning, by inserting the number 1 in one or more of these variables – those that were not altered remained at 0. As Halliday (1976) explains, the three metafunctions overlap and one cannot extricate one from the other definitively; as such, one change could affect more than one kind of metafunctional meaning.

As dialect is such a key social marker, used by interlocutors to consolidate in-group membership, I made this another variable, which again was marked with the number 1 each time it was affected by the subtitling. For the same reasons, when the change altered the register of the discourse, which of course affects the adherence to social norms of formality, I marked the variable 'register' with the number 1. Since the principal aim of this study is to discover whether the power relations are altered in the subtitling, I made this the final variable and marked it with the number 1 when such relations were altered by a change in the subtitles.

There were 36 variables in total, spanning across the horizontal axis in SPSS, and they can be grouped into four main areas, shown in Table 2 below.

The first column of the table shows the variables that were used to categorise identification information for each change in the subtitles. The second and third columns in Table 2 show the variables that were marked '1' when an element was cut or added; for example, in the case of condensations, a noun phrase reduced to a pronoun. It is clear that the omissions from subtitles fell into numerous categories, from greetings to imperatives, whereas not so many kinds of linguistic elements were added to the subtitles. The fourth column shows the kind of meaning that could be altered, which as stated above could include any combination of the six kinds listed, dependent on the interpretation. Each time a variable was fulfilled by a single case, it was marked with the number 1; otherwise, it remained at 0.

**<INSERT Table 2. SPSS variables in four main groupings>**

The organisation of the 36 variables into four groups would later allow for the quantitative analysis of correlation between the groups. Based on patterns that began to emerge from the text, I wish to answer the following research questions using quantitative methods:

*Q1. Which linguistic elements are cut and/or condensed most in the subtitling of this episode of The Wire?*

*Q2. Are there any correlations between the linguistic element cut and the effect on metafunctional meaning in the edited subtitles?*

*Q3. Are there any correlations between the omitted linguistic elements and the effect on dialect, register or power structures in the edited subtitles?*

## **5. Results and analysis**



In this section, I set out the results of my study of the English subtitles of the first episode of *The Wire*. Section 5.1 consists of a detailed qualitative analysis of one scene in the episode, which typifies the subtitling strategies in general and my analysis of the episode as a whole. This qualitative analysis will generate some impressions that can then be tested for statistical significance in Section 5.2.

### **5.1 Qualitative analysis**

For the purposes of demonstrating how I qualitatively analysed the episode of *The Wire*, I focus here on one particular scene where there are examples of many of the features that were omitted from the subtitling of the episode as a whole. The scene takes place near the end of the first episode in the police station, and is a meeting between detectives who have been assigned on a detail to examine the Barksdale drug gang. The meeting is led by Lieutenant Daniels, and the State Prosecutor is present. Detective McNulty has been assigned to this detail because he is the person who told the judge about the Barksdale Gang's unchecked activities on the streets of Baltimore, and his leak had prompted the judge to demand the police look into it. As he has spoken out of turn, and landed his police colleagues and superiors in trouble, he is the brunt of some ill-feeling, from Daniels especially. Daniels wants the assignment to be over as quickly as possible just wants to fulfil the brief; he does not really care about getting to the root of the problem. McNulty, on the other hand, wants to do the job properly and cares enough to think that police work should make a difference. The scene is crucial to the entire first series, as the police assignment turns out not to be a quick fix and the 'wire' tap of the drug gang that gives the series its name allows viewers and police alike to listen in on the Baltimore underworld. The marked-up subtitles from this short scene can be found in Appendix 1, where deleted elements are in square brackets, added elements are underlined and all changes are in bold typeface.

Discourse markers are frequently touted as prime candidates for omissions in subtitles, as discussed in Section 3.2. In the scene analysed here, the relatively formal setting of the official meeting means that there are not many discourse markers or interjections in the dialogue to begin with, but a couple can be used to illustrate their social import here. Lieutenant Daniels reasserts his power and control over the meeting after McNulty has been insubordinate again (in subtitle 749). The State Prosecutor is about to leave, asking to be contacted when the police have decided how ‘they’re playing it’. In the dialogue, Daniels affirms ‘[Oh], we know how we’re playing it’, using the interjection *oh* to create a textual link between his utterance and the prosecutor’s, strengthened by the formal parallelism between the two. The deletion of ‘Oh’ loses some of this textual function and, more importantly, to the detriment of the interpersonal function, we lose the mock nonchalance with which *oh* is used, which reveals a sarcasm and force in Daniels’ tone. Four subtitles later, when Daniels has re-orientated the agenda of the meeting towards the outcome that he wants and – as Lieutenant – has the power to order, he uses the discourse marker *now* to settle the matter:

753 00:49:49,053 --> 00:49:52,181

**[Now]** As things heat up, I’ll **[go to the deputy  
and]** get us more manpower...

754 00:49:52,290 --> 00:49:54,019

but this case is not going to sprawl.

The omission of *now* here loses the mounting sense of Daniels’s regaining of control and reassertion of his power over the dynamic of the scene. It could certainly be argued that

Daniels's sarcasm, force and powerful tone is evident through the aural and visual modes, rendering the textual representation of interjections and discourse markers redundant. I only want to point out the value and function of these elements in the exchange, as an example of how they may be worthy of inclusion in the subtitles (see also McIntyre and Lugea 2015). It is also worth stressing that the cumulative effect of omitting these elements is detrimental to the overall interpersonal meaning and representation of power relations in the text.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier in this same scene, many of the modifiers that Daniels used in his description of the police work to be carried out are omitted. These include 'any' (subtitle 751), 'some' (subtitles 721 and 723) and 'no problem' (subtitle 723). Although phrasal modifiers may be 'obvious candidates for deletion' in subtitling (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 163), the effect here is to downplay Daniels's limited expectations on the efficacy of police work, a key feature in the scene. The same effect is achieved by the condensation of several complex verb phrases, as in '[Keep gathering] Gather string til we [can] find a way in' (subtitle 730), where the first verb phrase loses aspectual information to little effect, and the second verb phrase loses the modal auxiliary and the hint of possibility from Daniels's utterance.

Another frequently omitted aspect of the dialogue in this scene is spatial information, in the form of prepositional phrases, spatial adverbs and adjectives. It is interesting how frequently spatial information plays a part in representing the social structure of the text. For example, the omission of the spatial adjective '[low-level] people' (subtitle 723) and the prepositional phrase '[anyone else above the street]' (subtitle 725) diminishes a sense of the hierarchical nature of the drug gang. Furthermore, by omitting the prepositional phrase from 'They['ve] got everyone [in the terraces] running scared' (subtitle 727), we lose a sense of the reach of the drug gang's power; without this qualification, their terror has no boundary. McNulty expresses near-admiration for the drug gang when he says '[They're deep.] They're organised' (subtitle 727), yet the omission of the first copular clause loses the marked use of

the spatial adjective ‘deep’ to represent to drug gang’s far-reaching power and control in West Baltimore. As well as the idiosyncratic lexical choice, which may be a dialectal feature and certainly contributes towards speaker style, we lose the parallelism that reinforces McNulty’s high regard for the drug gang’s power and his emphasis on the need for a police detail that does not underestimate this.

Several other omissions of spatial information also have an effect on the representation of the power relations internal to the police and judicial system. A distinction is made at the outset between the police and the State Attorney’s office, when Major Daniels promises to copy in the state attorney’s ‘[people *down the hall*]’ (subtitle 717), an element that is cut from the subtitles, losing the spatial distinction between the two divisions in the same building. Later, spatial elements are also cut from the State Attorney’s lines: ‘[Seems to me] you all could’ve had this fight [between yourselves] before calling [in] the State’s Attorney’s office’ (subtitle 736). The omission of the adverbs *between* and *in* blur the spatial and institutional distinctions between different groups within the justice system. The cumulative effect of these omissions is a less nuanced representation of the complex institutions at the heart of *The Wire*.

The omission of spatial information can also have an effect on relations at the character level, such as when Daniels is reasserting his authority at the end of the scene and declares that ‘Detectives McNulty and Santangelo are going [back down] to the hall’ (subtitle 751); in this subtitle the adverbial phrase *back down* is replaced with the preposition *to*, thus losing a sense of the subordinates being punished and ‘put back in their place’. But this change also alters the meaning of the utterance. The subtitle suggests that ‘the hall’ is the destination, rather than the means by which the detectives will return to their station. In this instance, the subtitling strategy is a condensation that loses a spatial adverbial, gains a

preposition and has an effect on interpersonal meaning, ideational meaning and power relations.

Certain changes in the subtitles also have an effect on the dialect used by the characters. In the state attorney's utterance quoted above (subtitle 736), she uses the non-standard third person plural *y'all*, which is represented in full in the subtitles as 'you all'. I recorded this as an orthographic change, which has an effect on the representation of dialect. In another example from this scene, McNulty's non-standard verb phrase 'they got' omits the auxiliary *have*, but this is added to the subtitle (subtitle 727), again having an effect on the characters' use of dialect. As Fernández *et al.* (2014) suggest, capturing non-standard features in subtitles can be mistaken for misspelling by viewers, but McNulty's elision does not appear markedly misspelt and actually saves precious space; consistent choices like this throughout the episode and series may misrepresent the characters' identities and their place in society.

This micro-level qualitative analysis of one scene has demonstrated that the omission of interpersonal and certain ideational information has a detrimental effect on the socio-political meaning of the text; however, the next stage of the analysis is to investigate whether the patterns that emerge from this qualitative analysis are supported quantitatively.

## **5.2 Quantitative analysis**

As discussed in Section 2.3, previous studies have identified interpersonal meaning as the least carried over element in the transposition from the audio channel to subtitles. In order to identify if there are any correlations between the linguistic elements omitted and the effect on meaning, I subjected the data to Pearson Correlation analyses, which is appropriate because my data matches three critical assumptions: that the variables are continuous (being frequencies activated by the number of occurrences in the subtitle changes); that there are no

outliers; and that the scatterplot is both linear and homoscedastic. Using SPSS, I compared all the variables against each other and the Pearson Correlation coefficient was calculated automatically. The correlation coefficient is a number that summarises the direction and degree (closeness) of linear relations between two variables. The results are between -1 and +1 and the further the value is from zero the stronger the relationship between two variables. In Table 3, only the statistically significant correlation coefficients are listed. . A correlation coefficient between 0 and 1 indicates a positive relationship (i.e. as one variable increases so does the other) and the opposite holds for a negative relationship.

<INSERT HERE: Table 3>

The results in the first column of Table 3 show that many of the elements that have been cut hold a negative correlation with ideational meaning. This may suggest that the subtitlers of *The Wire* follow the popular subtitling strategy of only deleting those features which do not carry a heavy ideational meaning potential. The omission of repetitious elements shows a negative correlation with ideational meaning, which stands to reason given that the deletion of a repeated word or phrase does not affect the content of the message, just the emphasis the speaker puts on it.

The second column in the table shows the omitted elements that are correlated with interpersonal meaning. As shown through the qualitative analysis, the loss of discourse markers, stance markers and interjections positively correlates with a change to interpersonal meaning. The quantitative analysis also reveals a statistically significant relationship between the omission of these features and the interpersonal meaning of the text. Interjections are shown to be the omitted feature that statistically has the greatest positive correlation with interpersonal meaning. This may be partly due to the proliferation of the interjection *yo* in the

dialogue of this episode and its frequent omission in the subtitles. The omission of adjectives has a negative correlation with interpersonal meaning, which signals that adjectives may not serve a significant interpersonal function.

The third column shows the omitted features that correlate with textual meaning, including interjections and whole turns. It stands to reason that the omission of features that help to organise discourse turns would correlate with textual meaning. It is interesting that textual meaning was correlated with ideational meaning, and I suggest that this may be because the omission of whole turns contributed to a loss in both kinds of meaning, ideational and textual, leading the two metafunctions to be positively aligned.

Moving from metafunctional meaning to register in the fourth column, omission of the imperative, the vocative and taboo words is correlated with this element, as each of these features signals levels of formality in the discourse situation. Register is also positively correlated with the use of dialect, as by altering the expression of dialect in the subtitles, the level of formality may also be affected. The fifth column shows that omitting nouns, taboo words and vocatives have a statistically significant correlation with the expression of dialect, which is in turn highly and positively correlated with interpersonal meaning. The results also show that changes to dialect have a negative correlation with ideational meaning, indicating that although omitting dialectal features may affect the expression of register and interpersonal meaning, it did not alter ideational meaning.

The penultimate column reveals that the omitted features which have the most statistically significant correlation with power relations in the text are imperatives, tag questions, vocatives and verbs. While imperatives and tag questions are used by speakers to have a perlocutionary effect on their addressees, vocatives signal relationships between characters. The frequent omission of modal auxiliaries in the simplification of verb phrases meant that this variable is also statistically significant. As demonstrated through the

qualitative analysis of one scene in Section 5.1, spatial adverbs and prepositions can have an effect on power relations, and this is supported by the results of the Pearson Correlation analysis. Furthermore, the results in Table 3 show that there is a positive correlation between a change in the power relations and interpersonal *and* ideational meaning. This means that when the power relations are affected, so too are the interpersonal and ideational meaning of the text. This result confirms my hypothesis that if the cues to interpersonal meaning are reduced from the dialogue, the cumulative effect will be to alter the interpersonal relations between the characters and ultimately the ideational meaning of the text.

Principal components analysis (PCA) is a technique for visualizing high dimensional data and for data pre-processing. Discussing its utility for linguistic research, Baayen (2008: 120) describes PCA as ‘working with a reduced set of dimensions, ordered by how much variability they account for’, which can show us more clearly which of the principal components are responsible for variance (see Hoover 2007 for PCA in stylometric analysis). The various kinds of meaning that were affected in the subtitling of this episode of *The Wire* were subject to a PCA analysis to see if there were significant interrelationships. Figure 1 shows the results of the PCA; correlated variables are either close or diametrically opposite (for negative correlations) and independent variables form a right angle with the origin.

<INSERT Figure 1. Principal Components Analysis (PCA) of the effects of omissions on the subtitles>

From Figure 1 it is clear that ideational meaning and interpersonal meaning are independent variables and are not closely related. That is, the changes that the subtitles wrought on interpersonal meaning do not correlate with ideational meaning. However, ideational meaning and power relations *are* related, showing that changes to the ideational



meaning do have a link to changes in the power relations of the text. As such, what was observed through qualitative analysis of one scene in Section 5.1 is corroborated here in the quantitative analysis of the whole episode.

## **6 Conclusions**

The findings here support previous research that interpersonal meaning suffers most from the omissions made in subtitling, and this has been proven through in-depth qualitative and quantitative analyses. Through the micro-level qualitative analysis and the Pearson Correlation analysis it has been demonstrated that surge features (such as discourse markers, stance markers and interjections) do have a statistically significant correlation with the interpersonal meaning expressed in a text and thus on the character relations. As argued by McIntyre and Lugea (2015), consistently omitting features such as discourse markers cannot but alter the character dynamic in a drama. The results showed us that dialect and register were closely correlated both with each other and with interpersonal meaning. However, omissions in the subtitling that alter these three variables did not tend to alter the ideational content of the text.

An interesting result was that spatial information – as expressed through prepositions and adverbs – has a correlation with the ideational meaning of the text, as well as with the power dynamic. The data discussed in the qualitative analysis showed how many of these features created nuanced physical structures, reflecting the hierarchical structures of the institutions and the society. Furthermore, the Pearson Correlation analysis revealed that when the power relations were affected, so too were the interpersonal and ideational meanings of the text. The result confirmed my hypothesis that at some point interpersonal meaning becomes more than just ‘padding’ and contributes to the ideational meaning of the text – in this case, the complexity of the power relations in *The Wire*. Of course this corroborates with

Halliday's insistence that the three kinds of meaning are inextricable, and although we see this inextricability manifest in the results here, it is not taken into account in subtitling that consistently omits interpersonal meaning. Eventually, this strategy systematically affects the other kinds of meaning and alters the meaning of the text in specific ways. Nowhere is this more noticeable than in a text such as *The Wire*, where ideational content is deliberately incomprehensible and the naturalistic dialogue is peppered with interpersonal elements that serve as clues to the complex social structure of the text.

### **6.1 Limitations and implications for future research**

There are several limitations to this study, which could form the starting point for future research. This study examined edited subtitles in one episode of *The Wire* only; in order to assess the metafunctional meaning of the episode as a whole, a verbatim transcript would also need to be included and, of course, subjected to different kinds of statistical analyses.

Alternatively, as McIntyre (2018) shows, corpus methods can be effectively used to uncover patterns in subtitling strategies across large stretches of text. Future research could encompass more data from *The Wire* or other dramas where power and social structure are key (e.g. develop Sorlin's [2016] pragma-stylistic study of the US series *House of Cards* [2013–]). Further research is needed to ascertain whether viewers, of various kinds, would appreciate stylistically sensitive subtitling and, indeed, whether it is practicable given spatio-temporal constraints.

For my own reasons of space, this study has focused solely on verbal cues and their intralingual translation to subtitles. However, as audiovisual translation researchers well know, 'the visual text that runs together with the verbal text in audiovisual translation serves as a tremendous help for the audience' (Chaume 2004: 854). Bearing in mind the importance of other semiotic channels, future research could helpfully consider the multimodal elements

that contribute to our understanding of characters and their place in the social structure of *The Wire*.

Finally, a further avenue for investigation is to ascertain whether the effects of the omissions that I have identified here by way of linguistic analysis are just as evident to ordinary viewers. Empirical research investigating the reception of subtitles is vital to ascertain how the end user processes the text and whether the retention of certain dialogue features can indeed improve viewers' appreciation of the style of the text. Indeed, some recent empirical research to this effect (e.g. Ramos Pinto 2013) is already demonstrating that the retention of dialectal and interpersonal information does affect the viewers' perceptions of characters and social structures. Through the analyses carried out in this paper, I have demonstrated that these elements can be key in the meaning potential of a text such as *The Wire*. It is hoped that this study and future research can contribute towards improved – stylistically sensitive – subtitling practices.

## **Appendix 1**

716. 00:48:05,016 --> 00:48:08,247

For now, we'll work out of Narcotics,  
with Kima keeping the file.

717. 00:48:08,353 --> 00:48:11,447

We'll copy everything to Ronnie  
at the courthouse and your people [**down the hall**].

718. 00:48:11,556 --> 00:48:12,523

Fine with us.

719. 00:48:12,624 --> 00:48:15,457

McNulty and Santangelo will work [**back**]  
on [**some of**] the open murders...

720. 00:48:15,560 --> 00:48:17,152

see if anything can be manufactured [**there**].

721. 00:48:17,262 --> 00:48:20,288

Kim and my people will [**start doing**] **do**  
[**some**] hand-to-hand stuff in the Terrace.

722. 00:48:20,398 --> 00:48:21,729

Buy-bust, quick and dirty.

723. 00:48:21,833 --> 00:48:24,825

We put [**some**] years over top of  
some of these [**low-level**] people, we'll roll a few [**no problem**].

724. 00:48:24,936 --> 00:48:27,370

You're not gonna get  
Avon Barksdale or Stringer Bell...

725. 00:48:27,472 --> 00:48:29,906

or anyone else above the street,  
not on street rips.

726. 00:48:30,008 --> 00:48:32,169

-You don't know that.

-These guys are good.

727. 00:48:32,277 --> 00:48:35,440

They're deep [**they're**] **and** organized.

They've got everyone [**in the terraces**] running scared.

728. 00:48:35,547 --> 00:48:36,741

What do you suggest?

729. 00:48:37,081 --> 00:48:39,948

Surveillance teams,

DNRs, asset investigation.

730. 00:48:40,051 --> 00:48:42,144

Keep gathering string

till we can find a way in.

731. 00:48:42,253 --> 00:48:45,518

Either a wired CI or a Title III.

That's what makes this case.

732. 00:48:45,623 --> 00:48:47,420

Is that what you told the judge?

733. 00:48:48,126 --> 00:48:51,493

Okay, so I'm an asshole for that.

But I'm right about this much.

734. 00:48:52,997 --> 00:48:55,989

No mics, no wires.

We do this fast and clean and simple.

735. 00:48:56,100 --> 00:48:57,567

Then you don't do it at all.

**[-What the f-]**

736. 00:48:57,969 --> 00:49:02,702

Seems to me you all could've had this fight **[between yourselves]**  
before calling **[in]** the State's Attorney's office.

737. 00:49:03,208 --> 00:49:06,666

Let me ask you something.

What do we know about Avon Barksdale?

738. 00:49:07,145 --> 00:49:08,442

What do we know?

739. 00:49:08,913 --> 00:49:11,973

[Yea,] The guy's owned

all of Franklin Terrace for a year.

740. 00:49:12,350 --> 00:49:15,945

What do we have on him right now?

A DOB? A sheet?

741. 00:49:16,221 --> 00:49:17,586

A B of I photo?

742. 00:49:18,156 --> 00:49:20,124

We don't even have

a fucking photo of the guy.

743. 00:49:20,225 --> 00:49:21,419

Gimme a break, Jimmy.

744. 00:49:21,993 --> 00:49:25,292

Two days ago no one on this fucking floor

knew this mope's name.

745. 00:49:25,396 --> 00:49:27,364

Now he's some kinda criminal mastermind.

746. 00:49:27,465 --> 00:49:30,923

Shit, I say we go down to the Terrace  
and fuck some people up.

747. 00:49:32,637 --> 00:49:35,629

You all don't need a prosecutor,  
you need a fucking referee.

748. 00:49:35,740 --> 00:49:38,038

When you know how  
you're playing this, give a yell.

749. 00:49:38,142 --> 00:49:39,734

**[Oh]** We know how we're playing it.

750. 00:49:39,944 --> 00:49:42,310

My people are going down  
to do some hand-to-hands.

751. 00:49:42,413 --> 00:49:46,577

Detectives McNulty and Santangelo are  
going **[back down]** to the hall to review **[any]** old murder files...



752. 00:49:46,684 --> 00:49:48,948

and try to manufacture a fresh prosecution.

753. 00:49:49,053 --> 00:49:52,181

[Now] As things heat up, I'll go to the deputy

and get us more manpower...

754. 00:49:52,290 --> 00:49:54,019

but this case is not going to sprawl.

755. 00:49:54,125 --> 00:49:57,060

A month from now,

we're all gonna be back at our day jobs.

### Note

- 1 In this episode, there is another instance whereby the omission of a discourse marker (and a parallel structure) affect textual meaning on a macro-level. Eighteen minutes into the episode, detective McNulty chides his colleague Bunk for taking on a murder case when it was not his turn, saying 'This'll teach you to give a fuck, when it aint your turn [to give a fuck]'. Towards the end of the episode, Bunk echoes McNulty's earlier words back to him, saying '[See,] there you go giving a fuck, when it aint your turn to give a fuck'. The parallelism is lost between the two utterances because the first subtitle omitted the non-finite clause, and because the second subtitle omitted the discourse marker *see*, which Bunk uses to remind McNulty of his earlier words. Thus, these elements can work on a macro-cohesive level to build long-scale interpersonal

relationships between the characters and to reinforce the series' representation of the dysfunctional judicial system.

### **About the author**

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## Figures and Tables

Change Strategy and Example	Frequency	%
<b>orthographic</b> <i>That's the price that  you were <u>going to</u> [gonna] quote me?</i>	2	0.6
<b>swap</b> <i>If we [had] <u>get</u> ten shots at this guy...</i>	1	0.3
<b>addition</b> <i>You <u>'re</u> up in New York on this?</i>	5	1.6
<b>condensation</b> <i>Detectives McNulty and Santangelo are  going [back down] <u>to</u> the hall to</i>	69	21.4
<b>deletion</b> <i>Then you don't do it at all.  [-What the f-]</i>	245	76.1
TOTAL CHANGES	322 in 883 subs:	36.5%

**Table 1:** Frequency and percentage of subtitling change strategies

<b>Identification Details</b>	<b>Item cut</b>	<b>Item added</b>	<b>Meaning effected</b>
Subtitle code	adverbial	conjunction	interpersonal
Scene number	discourse marker	prounoun	ideational
Character name	greeting	verb	textual
Change strategy	interrogative	preposition	dialect
Exact word/phrase cut	tag question	adverb	power relations
Exact word/phrase added	imperative		register
	interjection		
	preposition		
	noun (phrase)		
	pronoun		
	repetitious element		
	spatial adverb		
	stance marker		
	taboo language		
	verb		
	vocative		
	conjunction		

**Table 2:** SPSS variables in four main groupings



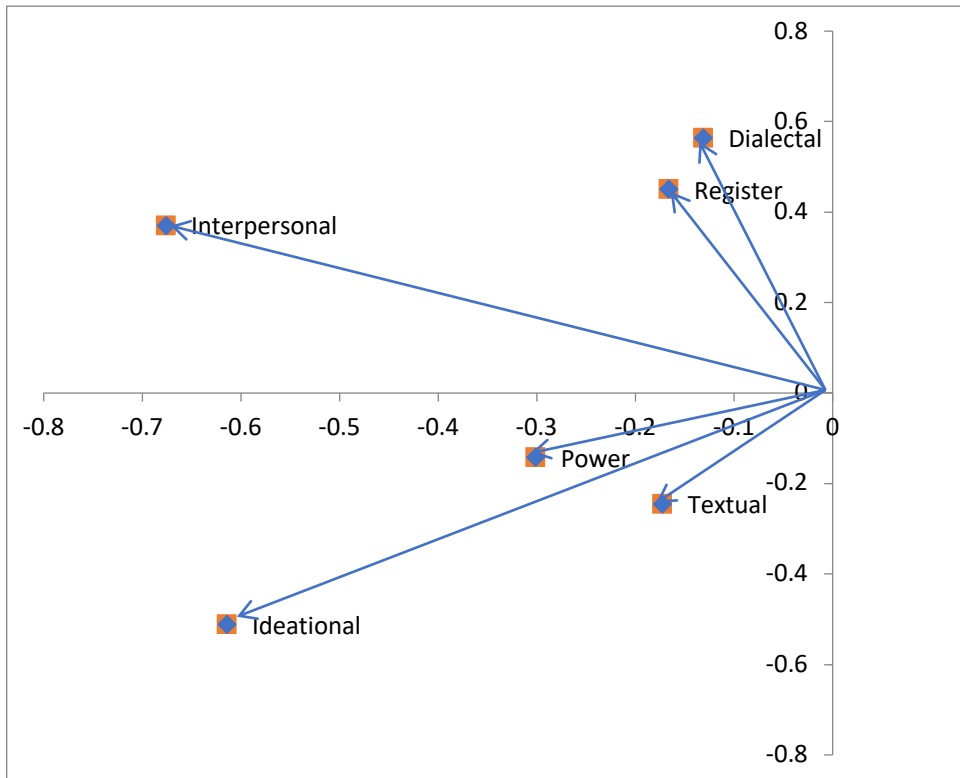
Meaning:	Ideational	Interpersonal	Textual	Register	Power relations	Dialect						
Element cut, in order of significance in relation to meaning affected	<i>Repetitious element</i>	-.243**	Adjective	-.224**	Whole turn	.407**	Dialect	.308**	Imperative	.234**	Register	.308**
							Imperative	.121*				
	<i>Dialectal item</i>	-.226**	Interjection	.171**	Interjection	.172**	Taboo word	.300**	Interpersonal meaning	.197**	Vocative	.280**
	<i>Adjective</i>	-.224**	Discourse marker	.142*	Ideational meaning	.117*	Vocative	.142**	Preposition	.177**	Taboo word	.246**
	<i>Greeting</i>	-.211**	Stance marker	.129*			<i>Spatial adverb</i>	-.115*	Vocative	.146**	Ideational meaning	-.226**
	Whole turn	.158**							spatial adverb	.132*	Interpersonal meaning	.174**
	<i>Vocative</i>	-.157**							verb	.129*	Noun	.130*
	<i>Pronoun</i>	-.128*							ideational meaning	.127*		
Noun	.120*							tag question	.124*			

										<i>repetitious</i>	-.111*		
										<i>element</i>			

**Table 3:** Pearson Correlation Analysis: Correlation between element cut and meaning changes

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)



**Figure 1:** Principal components analysis (PCA) of the effects of omissions on the subtitles