

Vittu and *fuck* – tales from a literary coexistence

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Abstract

This article presents a discussion of the functions and translation of swearing in contemporary literature through two cases where English *fuck* and Finnish *vittu* (lit. ‘cunt’) have been coupled. These two swearwords have become conventional translations of each other because of similarities in emotional force, connotations and usage. The cases demonstrate how they can be used to construct an illusion of speech and create meaning, and also provide a fruitful angle to the discussion of risk in translation (Pym 2008).

1. Introduction

In this article, I refer to a marriage of sorts between two swearwords, *fuck* in English and *vittu* in Finnish, and some of the ups and downs the couple encounters in its literary-translational co-existence. First, I will briefly discuss the functions of swearwords in literary writing, then move on to an introduction to the two lexemes, and end with an analysis of two cases of their use. The first is an example of how focus is drawn to a key theme by swearword usage and how this effect is recreated in translation. The example comes from *Ash Wednesday* (2002) by Ethan Hawke and its Finnish translation *Tuhkakeskiviikko* (2004) by Arto Schoderus. The second case shifts attention on the construction of a linguistic and cultural milieu through colloquialisms, more specifically a non-standard spelling of *fuck* and the available translational choices in Finnish. The case is from *Carnival* (2005) by Robert Antoni and its Finnish translation *Karnevaalit* (2005) by Einari Aaltonen.

2. Functions of swearwords and other colloquialisms in literary writing

In literary writing, spoken language is represented and recreated through a variety of means, producing what has been called an *illusion of speech* (e.g. Kalliokoski 1998, Tiittula & Nuolijärvi 2013). The illusion is a compromise, required because

an accurate representation of speech would be a linguistic transcription and render the literary text rather laborious to read, containing unfinished sentences, unintentional mistakes and the like. The illusion is created by what Määttä (2004: 320) calls *non-standard literary dialect* and Suojanen (1993: 140) *artistic literary colloquial language*. It can be anything from highly dialectal to subtly colloquial. Englund Dimitrova (2004: 121) sees a continuum in literary writing where on the one end there is a recognizable regional variant, in the middle sociolects and general colloquial language, and on the other end neutral standard language and finally an elevated style. Englund Dimitrova (ibid.) argues that translations have a tendency of taking a step towards the standard end. Corpus research has provided support for this hypothesis (e.g. Nevalainen 2004).

The major tool for evoking speech in literary writing is the use of colloquialisms. One of the most common types is word choice (Nevalainen 2004: 69, Tiittula & Nuolijärvi 2013: 58), the category to which also swearwords belong. Although based on taboos and subject to a number of restrictions, swearwords are by no means a taboo in contemporary literary writing or translation. Together with other types of colloquialisms, they serve a number of functions. On the macro level, they partake in constructing a socio-geographical milieu, evoking ideas of location, social status and education, as well as of age and gender. These are identifiable to readers through shared cultural knowledge and stereotypes. On the micro level, they serve specific functions such as marking annoyance, surprise and disappointment, in line with many of those in speech. Moreover, they can be used in creating humorous effects, for example through non-standard use of swearing formulas, idiosyncratic or neologistic swearwords or taboo wordplay. They may also be used to attract focus on a key theme (cf. Englund Dimitrova 2004: 125–127).

3. *Vittu and fuck* – a short introduction

The origin of the word *fuck* has been subject to many folk etymological theories. A common theory is that it is an acronym, most popularly for either Fornication Under the Consent of the King or For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge (Sheidlower 1999: xvii). The expert views are perhaps less colourful but more credible: according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the jury is still out but the word has links to certain old West and North Germanic terms for, e.g., striking and copulation, and there may be an underlying Indo-European root meaning ‘to strike’. *Vittu*, on the other hand, is probably an old Scandinavian loan word, as there are similar words in old Norwegian and modern Swedish (Häkkinen 2004, s.v. ‘vittu’). According to Häkkinen (ibid.), the first recorded example of *vittu* in standard

Finnish is from a dictionary from 1787. Although both words are relatively old, they started appearing regularly in literary writing only relatively recently. According to Sheidlower (1999), *fuck* started to become more common in English-language literature in the 1950s and 1960s but still possessed shock value, upset some readers and publishers, and triggered criticism and censorship. In Finnish literature from the same period, a number of works were published that contained swearwords, some similarly criticized for their language, but *vittu* was a rare encounter. From approx. the 1980s, however, its usage increased, and for example in my corpus of non-translated contemporary Finnish fiction (Hjort forthcoming), it is the most popular swearword lexeme (see below).

Vittu and *fuck* both refer to sexuality but they do not refer to the same denotata. To apply Ljung's (2011: 35–44) classification of 'taboo themes' in swearing, *vittu* is a sex organ term as it translates literally into *cunt*, while *fuck* denotes the act of sexual intercourse and thus belongs to the sexual activities group.¹ *Vittu* and *fuck* are arguably both prototypical swearwords in their respective languages. Both commonly arise into public debate, face censorship and are taken as examples of bad language and 'youth decadence'. Despite their controversial nature, or for that particular reason, they are very frequent. This applies also to writing, albeit mostly to informal genres (for corpus-based evidence on *fuck*, see McEnery and Xiao 2003, McEnery 2006: 29–57). In my study (Hjort forthcoming), *vittu* is the most popular swearword lexeme in a corpus of contemporary non-translated fiction, covering 29% of all swearword occurrences, and in my corpus of fiction translated from American English to Finnish, occurrences of the lexeme *vittu* constitute 17% of all swearword occurrences, which makes it the second most popular swearword in the translations after *paska* ('shit').² The popularity of both of these terms is increased by the fact that they have lent themselves to a variety of formations from adverbs and adjectives to verbs, compounds and phrases. For example in Sheidlower (1999), there are hundreds of variations of *fuck*, including *fucking*, *fucker*, *fucking-A*, *fuckfaced*, up to *fuckerware party*. Examples of *vittu*-based expressions include the verbs *vittutaa* ('to be pissed off') and *vittuilla* ('to be nasty to someone'), the adjective *vittumainen* ('nasty'), the compound term of abuse *vittupää* ('fuckhead', lit. 'cunt head'), the adverb *vittusti* ('a lot') and the interjectory phrase *voi vittulan kevät* (something close to 'oh spring of vittu town').

1 The other major themes are religious/supernatural, scatological and the mother theme (Ljung 2011: 35–44).

2 More information and an analysis of the difference will be in Hjort (forthcoming).

Both *vittu* and *fuck* are also considered to be among the strongest³ swearwords in their respective languages. While the question of how to measure the emotive force of a swearword is somewhat problematic and the perceived force of individual instances of usage varies strongly according to context and form (see e.g. Beers Fägersten 2012), language users do seem to share certain ideas of the average force of individual words (for rating studies, see e.g. Jay 1992: 159–194, Millwood-Hargrave 2000). These ideas have translated into, for example, categorical bans on certain lexemes on certain radio and television channels either always or during certain hours (Pinker 2007: 235–236, Hjort 2009). Also, these kinds of general notions seem to serve as preliminary tools for translators in their efforts to convey the various aspects of the items they are translating (Hjort forthcoming). In the above-mentioned questionnaires for translators and laymen, *vittu* got an average score of 3.5 out of 4 for force, and was considered either the strongest or the second strongest of the words listed, depending on the respondent group. Kiuru and Montin's (1991) university student informants similarly rated *vittu* as the second strongest word, with a rating of 2.7 on a scale where 10 marks the lowest and 1 the highest possible score. As for *fuck*, in Millwood-Hargrave (2000), for example, the word placed third (after *cunt* and *motherfucker*), with 71% of all respondents rating it as 'very severe'.

4. *Vittu* and *fuck* in translation

It has been argued and demonstrated in translation studies (Englund-Dimitrova 2005, Chesterman 2011) that translators commonly use the literal translation of a unit as the starting point and first draft in the translation process. The literal translation is then either accepted or rejected. The translation of swearing is a task where the literal translation is typically not accepted, if by literal translation we mean translation based on the denotation of the word in question. This is expected, if swearing is defined as non-literal use of taboo words as it is defined here and in a large number of studies by other scholars working on the topic (e.g. Andersson & Trudgill 1990: 53, Ljung 2006: 36, 2011: 4, Stroh-Wollin 2010: 5, Rathje 2009: 138). In my questionnaire studies with literary and audiovisual translators

3 I prefer to talk about *strength* and *force* instead of, for example, *offensiveness* (cf. e.g. Jay 1992, McEnery 2006) because these terms do not take a stand on whether the context is negative or positive or on how the recipient potentially reacts, but only to language users' general ideas of language. For problems related to the *offensiveness* of stand-alone words, see Beers Fägersten (2012: 8–10).

(Hjort 2006, 2009), the majority of the respondents laid strong emphasis on the idiomatic translation of swearwords and considered literal translations undesirable or irrelevant. While sometimes there are potent literal equivalents for swearing expressions available (for example *hell* and *helvetti* in the English–Finnish language pair), translators state that these relationships are irrelevant or almost irrelevant as compared to the function of the words in the particular context and that they prefer the conventional expressions used to perform that function in the target language (*ibid.*). Swearwords, it can be argued, do not have dictionary equivalents in the traditional sense and their meaning potential (*cf.* Hanks 2013: 66) is very large.

Nevertheless, there are some conventional pairs, and *vittu* and *fuck* have come to be considered as one among translators and other language users because of the similarities explained above. This is exemplified in Hjort (*forthcoming*) where as many as 87.9% of all the occurrences of the lexeme *vittu* in a parallel corpus of Finnish translations and their American English originals were translations of *fuck*. The relationship between *vittu* and *fuck* was also tested by Nyman (2012) in which translation students were given the task to translate Adam Mansbach’s book *Go the Fuck to Sleep*. Around half of the translators translated the key word regularly as *vittu*, while there was much variation in the other options applied. Before the translation task, the students were asked whether they thought there was a particular translation for *fuck*, and almost everyone answered *vittu* (Nyman 2012: 32). Thus there seems to be an underlying norm which posits pressure to use the lexeme *vittu* as the translation of the lexeme *fuck*. With *fuck*, a Finnish translator is thus likely to consider *vittu* as the first option to be accepted or rejected instead of a translation of the denotative meaning. In a sense, then, *vittu* has become the literal translation of *fuck*. Both the existence of a conventional pair and the pressure to apply it is neatly demonstrated by the comments of the literary translator respondents in my questionnaire (Hjort *forthcoming*). One wrote in an open question concerning principles for swearword translation that “*fuck* is not nearly always related to the Finnish *vittu*” and another that “I use *vittu* with care, it is not always the equivalent of *fuck*”.⁴ Here, the translators again refer to the prevalence of function and context over conventional lexeme-to-lexeme-based options and stress that while *vittu* is a potent translation of *fuck*, sometimes a different case can be argued. While this may seem rather obvious there is clearly a motivation behind these statements.

4 The original replies were in Finnish. The translations and italics are mine.

5. Example 1: *Growing up*

In the following extract from Ethan Hawke's *Ash Wednesday*, I argue, we have a rite of passage, a double rite of passage in fact, linked to age and gender, where the swearword *fuck* plays a major role. *Fuck* is used repeatedly and the swearing in the scene consists almost solely of variations of *fuck*. Because of lack of space, I will only give a short version or a description of the Finnish translations here. For the full versions, see Hawke 2004b.

Ash Wednesday is the growth story of a young couple. A young man with commitment issues, Jimmy, leaves his girlfriend, Christy, not ready to give up a life of sex, drugs and whatnot but immediately regrets his decision. Christy, who is pregnant, was abandoned by her mother as a child and raised by a womanizing father. She sets off to travel to her hometown to the other side of the country to meet her past and prepare for motherhood. Jimmy, who likewise had a troublesome childhood, follows after. He proposes to Christy and learns about the baby. The couple decides to get married and they set off on the journey together but they keep hovering back and forth with their decision as the road trip progresses. In the following (1), the couple has stopped at a basketball field, and Jimmy starts telling a lengthy story about his favorite player. Christy is frustrated with his childish enthusiasm. Suddenly, a group of young boys appear and have a battle of words with Jimmy, which ends with one of them challenging him to play for money. Despite Christy's opposition, Jimmy accepts and after the boy returns from getting money, they start playing. During the game, Jimmy seems to rise from the level of the young boy first to a sort of false seniority, then to being a father-like figure to the boy. The scene is several pages long, but here are some key passages. The narrator here is Christy.

- (1) Out from behind the pool house, tramping aggressively over the grass, came that little twerp and his buddy. This time with two more friends, the four of them all moving toward us at a quick clip. We could hear them cackling and cursing. "Let's go," I said. "I hate that kid. He creeps me out." "No, no, no, hold on a second," Jimmy mumbled, looking out. The kid shouted over the barren damp field, still wearing his Michigan State T-shirt, "You said you wanted to play me for a hundred bucks!" His voice sounded like it had changed two days ago. "Maybe you should take out a loan," he added, as he arrived at the playground, throwing down a pile of five twenties at the center of the court, like he thought he was an action hero. "What the fuck is your hang-up, kid? Is your dad the Pop Warner coach or something?" (P. 98)

A reference is made to the cursing of the boys, who are around twelve years old but look older. They have been acting tough, and perhaps to emphasize their juvenile aggressive masculinity and induce in-group membership (a common function of swearing, see e.g. Ljung 2006: 96–97), they swear a lot. *Fuck* is common in this function, as is *vittu*. Christy, who has been portrayed as the more mature one of the couple, believes the adult thing to do is to leave the scene but Jimmy insists on staying. In addition to accepting the challenge, he lowers himself to the level of the kids by assuming their code and starts swearing and insulting. For him, though, *fuck* seems to be part of an adult code, as he later warns the boy of that kind of language in a metalinguistic comment on swearing. He is seeking authority by referring to the boy repeatedly as *kid*, *child* or *scooter*, and at one point refers to the boy's age sarcastically by using certain euphemistic swearwords that are socially acceptable even to little kids' ears: *gosh*, *darn* (p. 104). However, at first Jimmy clearly struggles with his quest for authority, and the boy gets the upper hand with a smart-ass comment.

- (2a) “You ain’t got the money, just say so.” The kid was standing cock-eyed, one shoulder much higher than the other. “I can’t take money off a child.” Jim turned back to me, shaking his head. “Fuck you. I’ll beat you straight up.” “You gotta be careful with that word.” Jim snapped around and walked deliberately over to the boy. “*Fuck you* is a big word.” He stood only a few inches taller than the kid. “*Fuck you* is two words,” the boy said, staring straight up into Jimmy’s eyes while his friends tittered with nervous pleasure. (P. 98–99)
- (2b) “Haista vittu. Jätää odottaa varma häviö.” “Olehan varovainen sen sanan kanssa. [...]” “Haista vittu on iso sana.” [...] ”Haista vittu” on kaksi sanaa”, poika sanoi tuijottaen suoraan Jimmyn silmiin kaveriensä tirskuessa hermostuneina. (P. 126)

This makes Jimmy angry, and he does not earn the boy's respect right away. They continue swearing and insulting in equal measure for a while:

- (3a) “You’re a fuckin’ arrogant little twerp, you know that?” (P. 99)
- (3b) “Vittu mikä röyhkeä pikku tappi sinä olet.” (P. 126)
- (4a) “Come on, motherfucker, shoot for ball, you little faggot.” (P. 100)
- (4b) “No niin, heitä aloituksesta, vitun pikkuhintti.” (127)

Slowly towards the end of the scene, Jimmy starts not only to win the game but also catch up on the reality that the boy is twelve and vulnerable rather than a tough near-adult, and that it would be more appropriate for Jimmy as an adult and father-to-be to be an example for the boy rather than just take pleasure in beating him in his own game. The boy is in tears after having lost the game and his brother's money, and Jim refuses to accept the money or the glory of the win. The swearing changes with the growth of the characters, and the number of *fucks* is reduced. Here, the boy makes one last attempt at toughness by insulting Jimmy, but through tears, and Jimmy ends with one last lesson of politeness, now a more convincing one:

- (5) “Do you realize I’m almost thirty years old? I didn’t kick your ass, I barely beat you. You kicked *my* ass. Let me tell you something. When you’re thirty I pray you won’t be playing little kids for money, OK? In two years you’re gonna be out of my league. I’m the loser. I’m gonna have to go get in my car and explain to my girl why I behaved like a teenager, and I’m gonna have to look at that question myself. You’re still a child, you got that going for you, but trust me you’ll do yourself a lot of favors if you stop being such an arrogant prick.” “Fuck you,” he said, sniveling. [...] “That’s unacceptable. You can’t say that to me.” “Why not?” “Because first off I could shove your head up your rectum. But that’s just the obvious reason. [...] “OK, the real reason, *James*, you don’t talk that way to anybody. ‘Cause if you don’t respect other people it becomes real hard to respect yourself. You hear me?” The kid nodded his head. (P. 107)

Throughout the Finnish version of the scene, the lexeme *fuck* is translated by some form of the lexeme *vittu*. Because of the connotations and forms of usage that *vittu* and *fuck* share, the effect and functions are neatly retained, and *vittu* is able to assume a similar role as a key word in the narrative.

6. Example 2: Caribbean *vittu*

In the novel *Carnival* by Trinidadian-American writer Robert Antoni, *fuck* is used to mark informality and language variety and produces a special translational challenge. The novel is mostly written in Standard English but the dialogue and some of the first-person narrative have certain elements that evoke the English dialects and creoles spoken in the Caribbean. The main characters are university-educated people in their twenties. The markers of colloquial language in their dialogue are not many. One that is used is *fuck* in the non-standard spelling *fock*.

Fock is the most common swearword in the book (41 occurrences), coupled with one occurrence of the standard *fuck* and one *fok*, and a selection of other swearwords. The frequency and contexts of usage suggest that the non-standard version is not intended to create a comical effect, for example, but used in situations and varieties typical to *fuck*.

The age-old dilemma of dialect translation is whether a target culture dialect can satisfactorily portray a source culture dialect because, among other things, of differences in connotations (cf. Tiittula & Nuolijärvi 2013: 242–248). The prevailing norm seems to be to avoid a marked local dialect in the translation and to opt for less marked wide-spread colloquialisms (ibid.). Pym (2008) has argued that translators tend to avoid risks in translation and this may explain some of the patterns found across translations, one of which is translators' tendency to standardize. Pym's theory thus offers one explanation for Englund Dimitrova's (2004: 121) suggestion of translations moving towards the standard on the continuum: a more standard version is the safer choice, a more colloquial the risky approach that might lead to sanctions (such as non-acceptance of translation).

In the case of *vittu* and *Karnevaalit*, not all the options on the continuum are available. As to my knowledge, there is no established regional dialect variant of *vittu* in the Finnish language, and therefore an active choice of not using one is unlikely. Nevertheless, the translator has made a choice to use a larger variety of *vittu* than just the standard version. Like in the original with *fuck*, there are three variants in the translation, but more equally spread. The standard spelling *vittu* appears five times, so very little dialectal standardization takes place in this sense. Two other variants of *vittu* are used. These are *viddu* (5 occurrences) and *vattu* (17 occurrences). *Viddu* is a phonetic variant of *vittu* that has a humorous tone. *Vattu* is a common euphemism for *vittu*. It, too, has comical undertones. It also has a literal meaning, as it is a colloquial term for raspberry. It is created through one of the common ways of forming euphemisms, called remodeling by Allan and Burridge (1991: 15), where a semantically unrelated but similar sounding word is used to replace something. Swearword euphemisms are used as alternatives to forceful taboo expressions, commonly to mollify or to produce a comical effect. Here, the function is an unusual one, to mark dialect. The translator has opted to use *vittu* in some form for most of the variants of *fuck* in the original (68.3%). In addition, six other lexemes and an omission are applied. Most of the six lexemes are quite unmarked and thereby a standardization effect of sorts does take place as well. There is also the interesting choice of *halvattu* (3 occurrences): it is an old and quite mild swearword but it again shares phonetic features with *vittu* and *vattu* and thus might also represent an attempt to create an illusion of dialectal or otherwise non-typical swearing.

The choice to use these exceptional variants is in Pym's (2008) terms risky because they can potentially evoke the stereotypic functions of mollification and humor even when it is not intended. I will end with two examples that illustrate this. In example 6 below, comical connotations find support in the context, where the characters are having a laugh. The expression "focking useless" is translated as a warm-hearted insult, "vidun vasuri" (vidun = genitive of viddu, vasuri = 'left-handed'), spoken among friends.

- (6a) Two of us laughing, cussing each other. "On your right." "Where?" "Focking useless!" P. 244
- (6b) Nauroimme ja sätimme toisiamme. "Siinä oikealla." "Missä?" "Vidun vasuri!" P. 315

In example 7, the situation is quite different. The characters are being threatened by a police officer who fortifies his warning not only with *fock* but also with a racist slur and sexist remark which leave the characters stunned and scared.

- (7a) "And listen here. You ain't the first smooth-talking nigger to wet he prick with a little white pussy. So watch your focking mouth!" P. 231
- (7b) "Ja kuule. Sä et ole ensimmäinen sulavapuheinen nekru, joka juoksee valkoisen tussun perässä. Eli pidä sitä vatun suuta soukemmalla!" 298

Here, the euphemistic *vattu* creates a very different effect than the original *fock*. A euphemism is quite unlikely in a hate speech-ridden threat where no censor is otherwise present. It is also very difficult to read any humor into the situation.

7. Conclusion

The above examples were presented to offer a glimpse into the variety of functions swearwords assume in literary writing, and the meanings they call forth. The first example demonstrated how discourses on masculinity, adulthood and group membership were exploited in a scene where *fuck* had great symbolic value. The second example illustrated the illusion of speech and the challenge of the translation of dialectal items in a situation where the target language lacks immediate counterparts. Swearwords are not "signs of inability to express oneself properly", as the folk linguistic view goes. Quite the contrary, they are a versatile tool for both authors and translators, even if there are risks involved in its application. The secret to the marriage of our couple, *vittu* and *fuck*, is that they do some things best together, some on their own.

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