

# ***It's Mermazing! Mermaiding Slang: Wordplay and Translation from American English into Brazilian Portuguese***

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper, mermaiding slang, present in the American series MerPeople, is analysed as containing stylistically marked vocabulary, mainly wordplays, created through lexical blends. Following such analysis, I intend to investigate how mermaiding-related terms and phrases were transposed into Brazilian Portuguese subtitles. For that, my discussion briefly presents issues related to language varieties, the main word-formation processes used in the production of wordplays, and the main strategies adopted to translate them. Due to the inherent characteristics of that type of slang and wordplay, I also touch on creativity and humour. My results revealed that only a small percentage of the source language wordplays were transposed as such in the target language, confirming, among other things, that this type of translation is difficult and challenging. Yet, for results in Brazilian Portuguese considered below expectation, suggestions will be offered, bearing in mind that translators should possibly reproduce the wordplays in the target language since they characterise mermaiding slang.*

**Keywords:** Slang, Wordplay, Lexical Blend, Translation, Reproduction.

## **Introduction**

Like any other Netflix subscriber, I usually get to know the streaming platform's newest releases whenever I access it. Once, I chanced upon a show that caught my eye: *MerPeople*, a four-episode docuseries about mermaiding (Almeida, 2023)<sup>1</sup>. Still in Episode One, I could realise that I knew nothing of the theme and that

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<sup>1</sup> Broadcast in Brazil as *Sereias e Tritões* ("Mermaids and Tritons").

mermaiding enthusiasts used a very specific vocabulary, such as “merworld”, “merjob”, and other sea-related terms and phrases, like “seaster” and “for shore”, among others. My curiosity about their translation into Portuguese was aroused, so I turned on the captions in that language to immediately realise that comparing the original lines with the corresponding subtitles would result in an inciting investigation. Thus, in this paper, I intend to analyse how such vocabulary has been “built”, how the translator(s) of the series dealt with it in Brazilian Portuguese (BP), and to offer suggestions for solutions considered below expectation.

The mermaiding-related lexicon will be treated as slang, and based on the few examples above, wordplays (WPs), one of the main sources of inspiration for creating such terminology, will also be discussed. This way, my incursions into theory will address issues related to linguistic variations, mechanisms employed to generate WPs, and strategies adopted to translate them. To explore such contents, I will resort to the ideas of Delabastita (1996), Gottlieb (1997), Pym (2000), Tagnin (2005), Lewandowski (2010), Giorgadze (2014), Renner (2015), Baliaeva (2019), and Brezolin (2020), among others.

Before I move to methodological and theoretical issues, mermaiding deserves some attention.

Mermaiding “is the practice of wearing a mermaid tail and swimming in it” (Gilbert, 2020), or “the art and practice in which people dress up like mermaids, which includes wearing the fishtail that the mythical creatures are known to have, and swim around a body of water, often performing an aquatic show in front of an audience” (Lee, 2023).

Mermaiding enthusiasts organise “conventions, festivals, and competitions for mermaids to participate in” (Gilbert, 2020), and those are important events for meeting people interested in that practice.

The reasons why people, both young and old, men and women, boys and girls, choose to be mermaids are many: 1. exercise. It can be a great body cardio workout, 2. sport. It involves “a combination of technical swimming skills, acrobatic figures, breath holding,

artistry, and mermaid tail costumes” (Gilbert, 2020); and 3. it can also be a great mental health cleanse. “It’s scientifically proven that water is calming and relaxing to humans. mental health” (Mareena, 2021). It is “a therapeutic activity” that makes you feel more confident, increases your self-esteem, and relieves everyday stress (Gilbert, 2020; Mareena, 2021), among other benefits.

People can also become professional mermaids, a real job like any other, making money “as mermaid performers, often in aquariums, kids’ birthday parties, and high-end events” or “as a mermaid instructor” (Gilbert, 2020). “Many of the mermaids featured in *MerPeople* range from professional singers trying to find themselves to activists wanting to bring a new sense of diversity to the community to enthusiasts who simply love what they do” (Lee, 2023).

Besides a lot of time and effort, money is also “required to make being a professional mermaid a reality”, since professional mermaids must invest in tails, “special equipment, insurances, certifications, accessories” as well as “an accountant, a website, and advertising” (Gilbert, 2020).

Although mermaiding became more popular around the 2010s, “an Australian woman named Annette Kellerman” — actress, writer and professional swimmer — had been “the first to swim in a mermaid tail around the 1920s”, and to appear in many films and shows (Gilbert, 2020; Mareena, 2021; Giles, 2022). In the 1940s, the first underwater theatre was opened in Weeki Wachee Springs (Florida, USA), and “(m)ermaid shows began in 1947”. “Modern mermaids are a far cry from Kellerman and her skintight black bathing suit. They now have ornate and extremely detailed costumes with realistic textures and looks” (Giles, 2022). As late as the 2010s, mermaid tails were made by the so-called “mermaid pioneers”, who were some of the first women “to build their own businesses as professional mermaids”. Nowadays, “there are plenty of companies that sell mermaid tails” and “mermaid swimming is becoming more accessible to the public and conferences and festivals have started” (Gilbert 2020). The world of mermaiding, as already seen, also includes its own vocabulary, the major issue of this paper. It is worth mentioning that articles and blogs, like the ones I have just cited,

abound on the internet; however, until the writing of this paper, academic articles exploring mermaiding lingo and its translation were not found.

Next, I present the methodology used to collect the mermaiding vocabulary analysed here.

## Dataset

The data collected for analysis and comparison were extracted from the four episodes of *MerPeople* (Almeida, 2023) launched in Brazil by Netflix<sup>2</sup>, in May 2023. As the transcripts of the docuseries were not available at the time of writing this paper, a corpus could not be compiled and processed through text analysis applications<sup>3</sup>; consequently, mermaiding terms were manually obtained during my watching the episodes in their original version using closed captions in American English (AE), alternating it with subtitles in BP. My search revealed 33 mermaiding-related lexical items subdivided into 28 single terms: dolphinitely, fin, fin-alist, finperial, fintastic, mer, merfolk, merjob, merm, merma, mermama, mer-mom, mermaid, mermaiding, merman, mermazing, merpeople, merperson, mer-son, mersona, mersonality, merstory, mertivational, mertographer, mervert, merworld, seaster and to mer, and into five phrases and interjections: For shore!, Sea you later!; Shello!, Turtley! and What the fish!. Although “merfolk”, “merpeople”, and “merperson” could be found in a bilingual dictionary (Infopédia)<sup>4</sup>, as *criaturas aquáticas* (aquatic creatures), *tritões* or *sereias* (tritons or mermaids), and *tritão* or *sereia* (triton or mermaid), respectively, they will also be part of my comparative analysis.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81473715?trackId=255824129>.

<sup>3</sup> My searches for the docuseries transcripts included the following websites: 8Flix - <https://8flix.com/>; Forever Dreaming Transcripts - <https://transcripts.foreverdreaming.org/>; Simply Scripts - [https://www.simplyscripts.com/tv\\_all.html](https://www.simplyscripts.com/tv_all.html); Subs like Script - <https://subslikescript.com/>, and TV Show Transcripts - <https://tvshowtranscripts.ourboard.org/>; unfortunately, my attempts were unsuccessful.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.infopedia.pt/dicionarios/ingles-portugues/>

Next, I present the theoretical framework I will use for analysis and comparison of the data gathered.

## **Theoretical Background**

As already mentioned, the data for analysis was collected through the captions made available by the streaming platform, so the main characteristics of subtitling will be briefly presented and emphasis will be placed on linguistic variations, slang and mermaiding slang.

## **A Brief Overview on Subtitling**

Nowadays, audiovisual translation (AVT) — “the umbrella term used to refer to the translation of programs in which the verbal dimension is only one of the many shaping the communication process” (Diaz Cintas, 2010, p. 344) — encompasses a series of modes<sup>5</sup> other than dubbing and subtitling, the most common and popular ones.

Subtitling, of interest here, refers to the mode that transforms oral output into written output; that is, it “consists in rendering in writing the translation into a TL of the original dialogue exchanges uttered by the different speakers, as well as of all other verbal information that is transmitted visually (letters, banners, inserts) or aurally (lyrics, voices off)” (Diaz Cintas, 2010, p. 344). Subtitling, among other AVT modes, is closely associated with time and space constraints, demanding from translators and/or subtitlers linguistic and technological knowledge to make the written text coincide with the original dialogue and other sounds, as well as to compress, reword, and adapt speech so that it can remain on the screen time enough for viewers to read it, among other requirements, such as space limitations.

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<sup>5</sup> Modes may include subtitling for the stage; subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH); live subtitling with speech recognition; fansubbing and fandubbing; audio description (AD) for the blind; video game localization, just to mention a few (Remael 2010).

## Linguistic variations

Reaching a consensus over how to name and define varieties of a language is not an easy task. As Lewandowisk (2010) has put it, anyone willing to discuss the many varieties of a language will face a terminological problem, which “may stem from the fact that social varieties are in flux”, and this “can be exemplified by the co-occurrence of such concepts as a *variant*, (*social*) *variety*, (*social*) *dialect*, *special language*, *style*, *code*, *sublanguage*, *slang*, *cant*, *argot*, *jargon*, and possibly a few others” (p. 60, emphasis in original). To my understanding, since the mermaiding-related vocabulary is solely lexically-oriented, and as such, not sufficient to represent a nonstandard language or a sublanguage, a more realistic classification for it is slang, as it has already been suggested. However, that leads me to touch on some of the concepts above and others that bear some similarity, namely: anti-language, argot, cant, jargon, secret language, and slang.

All those concepts are of great concern to Sociolinguistics: “the study of the characteristics of language varieties, the characteristics of their functions, and the characteristics of their speakers as these three constantly interact, change and change one another within a speech community” (Rosida & Losi, 2022, p. 363). Those varieties — anti-language, argot, cant, jargon, secret language, and slang — will be presented according to the *A Dictionary of Sociolinguistics* (2004).

Anti-language usually refers to a “type of language used by social subcultures, such as prisoners, youth gang members, members of counter-cultural movements, such as ‘hippies’ or ‘Rastas’”, one of its traits, for example, is giving new meanings to existing words (Swann et al., 2004, p. 11, emphasis in original). Argot is characterised by “a set of words and phrases used by a particular social group, usually for reasons of secrecy”, and often “associated with criminals, street gangs or other subcultural groups who need to protect themselves from outsiders” (p. 14). Cant refers to a “set of special words and phrases associated with a particular social group — usually a subcultural group which needs to maintain secrecy from outsiders” (p. 32). Jargon is normally associated with “(t)echnical or other specialist vocabulary used within a certain social group —

most frequently a professional or special interest group — and that may not be understood by outsiders” (p. 157). Secret language is considered “a language variety used within a social group to maintain secrecy from outsiders” (p. 273). Slang — “usually seen as a set of informal and colloquial words and phrases used within particular social groups”— is “often regarded as a counter-language, adopted in opposition to ‘mainstream’ values” (p. 281, emphasis in original).

As far as similarity is concerned, it is possible to say that all those varieties are used by particular social groups. Some of the varieties, anti-language, and argot, for instance, may have a derogatory status since they are associated with outlaw groups. Others, like cant and secret language, are generally used by groups who need to keep secrecy or to protect themselves from outsiders, a situation that raises some suspicion, in some way, implying a negative overtone. Jargon, in turn, shows some neutrality if compared with other varieties, by simply delimiting a semantic field used by a certain group of professionals. Slang seems to be the variety that exhibits the most positive connotation even when used in opposition to well-established, dominant values. I will return to this point in the next subsection.

## **Mermaiding slang**

In general terms, I am aligned with most of the definitions above; however, as slang is “(v)ariously defined” (Swann et al., 2004, p. 281), I do not share the views that some authors adopt, like the ones by Spears (1982), for example. According to him, slang is not suitable for formal matters, flourishes in nonliterate affairs, changes meaning or form rapidly, is often used by the young, and is avoided when speaking to people of higher status, among other traits. To my understanding, these characteristics do not seem to describe the mermaiding-related lexicon. My impression throughout the series’ four episodes was that the use of mermaiding terms was, first, not restricted to informal situations only; second, was employed by people of different genders, ages, professions, social classes, and so forth, and no sort of discrimination regarding levels of instruction could be noticed. I must agree that slang has repeatedly been

associated with short-lived vocabulary; however, in the case of mermaiding slang, it has come to stay, considering that, for example, “(m)ermaiding is becoming popular all over the world”<sup>6</sup>. Consequently, its vocabulary tends to be more used and to expand, as new items might be incorporated into it.

It could be observed, if, on the one hand, slang may be seen negatively, mainly because of terminological disarray and its generalised association with suspicious subcultures; on the other, it can be viewed, to start with, as important and necessary for members to indicate membership in, and integrity of, social groups, and this seems to represent one of the functions of mermaiding slang. So, developing a particular way of speaking among mermaiding enthusiasts may be a means for forging the identity of the group, creating a special bond among its members, and providing the maintenance of a community that shares common interests. Unlike what happens with other language varieties, jargon, for instance, which is used to facilitate professional communication, but also to exclude non-members, mermaiding vocabulary, in turn, as it usually employs intelligible words and phrases, it welcomes no-members. Still unlike other varieties, anti-language, for instance, which may be viewed as an example of resistance to standard powerful language(s), mermaiding slang coexists with standard language, maintaining solidarity within the group without causing social distance with people outside it. As mermaiding terms are normally creative and amusing, they are inviting, instead.

Types of slang, like mermaiding, bring up another issue for discussion: neologism. According to Klitgård, neologism refers to a newly coined word that is new to a language. Lexical innovation encompasses “a variety of morphological processes such as derivation, compounding, semantic change, functional shifts, initialisms, borrowings, back-formations, blends and coinings”, among others. For Klitgård (2018), however, neologism is a misleading term since only very few new words may be considered as actual innovations; for her, “only blends and coinings are true neologisms” (p. 238). This way, as mermaiding slang is basically

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<sup>6</sup> <https://blog.finfunmermaid.com/2019/04/02/what-to-expect-at-a-mermaid-meetup/>



built through lexical blends, mermaiding vocabulary may be a clear example of neologism; and as lexical blends may be considered a type of wordplay, mermaiding terms and phrases may be clear examples of wordplay. For this reason, mermaiding lexical items will be analysed applying the general mechanisms used to create word plays and strategies adopted to translate them, topics that will be dealt with along my analysis in the next section.

## Analysis and Results

For analysing the mermaiding terms collected, WP is here defined as: “any clever and creative manipulation through the confrontation of meaning and forms of one or two words, or of multi-word combinations, capable of causing, in readers/listeners/viewers, a primary reaction of surprise; subsequently, bringing about amusing, comic, critical, dramatic, humorous, satirical, and other effects” (Brezolin, 2020, p. 214)<sup>7</sup>. As it will be seen, WPs confronting multi-word combinations usually are generated through mechanisms other than those used to generate WPs based on two words, for example. Next, I start with the mermaiding terms generated through WPs based on two words, using particularly lexical blends.

Lexical blends usually refer to the act of combining two or more words into one by clipping, overlapping, and interposition, or their combination, among other word-formation processes (Renner, 2015; Balieava, 2019). My data for analysis (Table 1) have been classified according to some of the categories of lexical blends discussed by Renner (2015) and Baliaeva (2019).

categories	WP and source words
the beginning of one source word is combined with the other entire source	merfolk = <b>mer</b> maid + <b>folk</b> merjob = <b>mer</b> maid + <b>job</b> mermama = <b>mer</b> maid + <b>mama</b> mer-mom = <b>mer</b> maid + <b>mom</b>

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<sup>7</sup> Other definitions of wordplay can be encountered in MacArthur (1992); Delabastita (1996); Veisbergs (1997); Moon (1998); Langlotz (2006), as well as Arnaud, Maniez & Renner (2015), for example.

word	merman = <b>mer</b> maid + <b>man</b> merpeople = <b>mer</b> maid + <b>people</b> merperson = <b>mer</b> maid + <b>person</b> mer-son = <b>mer</b> maid + <b>son</b> merworld = <b>mer</b> maid + <b>world</b>
the beginning of one source word is concatenated with the ending of the other source word	merstory = <b>mer</b> maid + <b>history</b> mertivational = <b>mer</b> maid + <b>motivational</b> mertographer = <b>mer</b> maid + <b>photographer</b>
the beginning of one source word is mixed with the ending of the other source word with overlapping material	merma = <b>mer</b> ( <b>ma</b> )id + ma( <b>ma</b> ) mermazing = <b>mer</b> ( <b>ma</b> )id + a( <b>ma</b> )zing mersona = <b>m</b> ( <b>er</b> )maid + p( <b>er</b> )sona mersonality + <b>m</b> ( <b>er</b> )maid + p( <b>er</b> )sonality mervert = <b>m</b> ( <b>er</b> )maid + p( <b>er</b> )vert
one entire source word is blended with the ending of the other source word	finperial = <b>fin</b> + <b>imperial</b> fintastic = <b>fin</b> + <b>fantastic</b> seaster = <b>sea</b> + <b>sister</b>
the source words overlap so that the first word is entirely preserved in the blend	dolphinitely = <b>dolphin</b> + <b>definitely</b>
the source words overlap so that both are entirely preserved	fin-alist = <b>fin</b> + <b>finalist</b> shello = <b>shell</b> + <b>hello</b>

Table 1- Mermaiding Slang Terms and Lexical Blend Categories

From Table 1, it is possible to notice that all the terms have been formed by the most common mechanisms to generate lexical blends, that is, by using the different segments of one or both source words through either clipping, overlapping, interposition, or their combination.

By the way, there is nothing new in mermaiding terms and lexical blends, since “mermaid” proper, from the etymological point of view, resulted from a blending. Originally, *meremayde*, “maid of the sea”, was formed by Middle English “mere” (sea, lake) and “mayden, meiden” (maid)<sup>8</sup>. As it will be seen, “mere”, transformed into “mer”, has become a very common particle in creating mermaiding vocabulary.

Considering the terms above, it can also be noticed that the particle “mer” was used in more than 85% of the WPs, representing, this way, a highly productive segment. As such, it admits innumerable similar potential constructions, ensuring, in this case, a remarkable level of consistency throughout the series. Its prolific property, however, may make translating them more challenging.

There were also three cases of clipping, which did not result in WPs: “mer” alone, used as “mermaid” or “merman”, the verb “to mer”, “to really feel like a mermaid or merman”, and “merm”, “used for person”.

Semantically, most of the terms were constructed with “mer” and the others were produced with a small number of words related to the ocean (“dolphin”, “fin”, “fish”, “shore”, “sea” and “shell”). Even so, such a small number prompted considerable creative constructions, ensuring, again, consistency through a specific semantic field.

Now, I present types of WPs other than those produced with lexical blends. The WPs in three of the phrases collected - “for **shore**”, “**sea** you later”, and “what the **fish**” - made use of substitution by referring to “for **sure**”, “**see** you later”, and “what the **fuck**”, respectively. Substitution is one of Veisbergs’ (1997) structural modifications, which also include addition, insertion, allusion, and ellipsis (not discussed here). Again, the lexical choices to create the play on words gave semantic coherence and consistency to the text, since sea-related vocabulary was also used.

It is worth mentioning that structural transformations are typical of WPs involving multi-word combinations, whereas, lexical blends,

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.etymonline.com/word/mermaid>

and other mechanisms, like homography<sup>9</sup>, and derivation, for example, may be used to create WPs based on two words.

Accordingly, among other types of WPs, there was an instance of homography (different sounds, but identical spellings) where “fin”<sup>10</sup> /fin/, was used at the end of the series as *fīn* /fē/ (end in French). There was a case of derivation in which “turtle”, after receiving the suffix -y, “turtley”, was transformed into an adjective and used in the place of “surely”.

So, considering that mermaiding slang is mostly built through lexical blendings and other word-formation processes, and as such, closely related to neologism and wordplay, two other concepts must be addressed: creativity and humour. Neologisms and wordplays are usually imaginative and novel constructions, and, depending on the result, they may also be humorous.

From the psychological perspective, creativity “encompasses the ability to discover new and original ideas, connections, and solutions to problems”<sup>11</sup>; “the ability to generate, create, or discover new ideas, solutions, and possibilities”<sup>12</sup>, and “the ability to produce or develop original work, theories, techniques, or thoughts”<sup>13</sup>. These definitions give rise to some important inferences as far as text production and translation are concerned. As an ability, creativity may be seen as a quality that can be acquired, developed, and not as something divine or serendipitous. It means that writers and translators, for instance, must work hard and continuously to produce ingenious works of excellence and high quality. Yet, creativity also implies the idea of finding solutions to a problem,

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<sup>9</sup> For homography, and other similar mechanisms, see Delabastita (1996); Tagnin (2005); Giorgadze (2014), and Brezolin (2020), for example.

<sup>10</sup> “... the membranous appendage extending from the body of a fish or other aquatic animal, used for propelling, steering, or balancing the body in the water.” (<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/fin>)

<sup>11</sup> Psychology Today. Creativity. Retrieved: June 10, 2021. Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/creativity>

<sup>12</sup> Lumen – Introduction to Psychology (2021): Creativity. Retrieved: June 10, 2021. Available at: <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/waymaker-psychology/chapter/reading-creativity>

<sup>13</sup> APA Dictionary Of Psychology. Creativity. Retrieved: June 10, 2021. Available at: <https://dictionary.apa.org/creativity>

nothing new to translators since translation is usually seen as a problem-solving activity. And, naturally, creativity means producing, or discovering new and original ideas, coincidentally, it is what normally occurs when the rendering of neologisms and wordplays is involved.

Wordplays have repeatedly been associated with humour (MacArthur, 1992; Veisbergs, 1997; Moon, 1998; Arnaud et al., 2015, for example). The type of humour contained in wordplays may be explained through the idea of incongruity (Morreall, 1983), for instance. According to the author, “(w)herever there is a principle to be violated or regularity to be upset, there is room for incongruity and so for humour” (p. 82). Normally, as people see, understand, and interact with the world following some patterns, whenever one is broken, it gives rise to incongruity since things are no longer consistent with people's view of things. On the linguistic level, incongruous situations arise from unexpected, illogical, and/or inappropriate contexts when speakers of a language make deliberate constructions such as imitations of dialects, wordplays, or jokes, for example, which, in turn, involve the violation or manipulation of some pattern associated with phonology, graphology, syntax and/or semantics (Morreall, 1983).

Such linguistic manipulations, therefore, may be considered humorous, because, as per Koestler, “(t)he sudden bisociation of a mental event with two habitually incompatible matrices results in an abrupt transfer of the train of thought from one associative context to another”. When that sudden bisociation is perceived, its unexpectedness, its illogic, or its inappropriateness may be responsible for the creation of humour, as “(t)he emotive charge which the narrative carried cannot be so transferred owing to its greater inertia and persistence; discarded by reason, the tension finds its outlet in laughter” (Koestler, 1964, p. 59).

Although there is a widespread tendency to consider wordplays humorous, “I prefer to prioritize the inherent (and maybe undeniable) feature of manipulation of a conventionalized linguistic structure, which, by defeating the expectation of addressees, may produce a wordplay, not necessarily and primarily intended for causing a comic effect, but an initial effect of surprise. This initial

effect may, then, produce subsequent effects of humor, criticism, and so on, depending on how addressees interpret the manipulated linguistic structure and its environment” (Brezolin, 2020, p. 214).

Next, I turn to translation issues involved in the rendering of mermaid slang.

When it comes to the translation of slang, the elegant paper “Translating Linguistic Variation: Parody and the Creation of Authenticity” (Pym, 2000) can be of help. The author discusses the idea that translators, especially when rendering linguistic variations, should struggle for authenticity. To reach that, “one need only judiciously sprinkle the text with elements that should remain relatively unknown to the target receiver, and the unknown is common to all cultures” (Pym, 2000, p. 73). Correspondingly, I believe, then, that translations of that nature should sound authentic and realistic, since, in some cases, what the reader/hearer usually finds is a caricatural version of a dialect, for example, which may be amusing, but, perhaps, not convincing, and as such, it may convey the impression that the result is forced, artificial. The same goes for the translation of slang, for, if the specific lexicon of a social group in one language cannot find its correspondent in another, the translator must, at least, come up with a realistic product. Sometimes, the translator will have to be as creative as the producer of the source text was. This seems to be the case when the translation of mermaiding slang is on the spot. As already seen, the necessity of creativity on the part of the translator arises from the simple fact that mermaiding slang is mostly invented through WPs.

In view of that, slang, in general terms, should ideally be translated as slang, and naturally not as any slang, but as the slang representative of a similar social group of the source-language culture or reality. As in the case of mermaiding slang in AE, it should be translated into the slang used by mermaiding enthusiasts in Brazil. However, my searches for such slang returned no satisfactory results. In AE, on the contrary, I found out: 1. a list of mermaid slang of a TV series (*Mermaid High*)<sup>14</sup>, with more than 50

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt15745348/>

terms (Fandom, 2023)<sup>15</sup>, and 2. *Mermish*, “a curious language that was specifically adapted” for Merpeople to use underwater”, first appearing in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (Fandom, 2023a).

Now, as far as the transposition of AE mermaiding slang into other languages is concerned, especially by considering it as a particular special type of vocabulary, mainly constructed through WPs, its rendering, consequently, is closely associated with the translation of WPs. In this respect, the ideas of Delabastita (1996) and Gottlieb (1997) can be useful.

Delabastita (1996, p. 133-134) suggests the following strategies: “1) pun into pun; 2) pun into non-pun; 3) pun into related rhetorical device; 4) pun into zero; 5) pun s.t. = pun t.t.; 6) non-pun into pun; 7) zero into pun, and 8) editorial techniques”, for use in a wide variety of texts, and Gottlieb (1997, p. 210), in turn, makes suggestions specifically for subtitled material, his strategies include: “1) “rendered verbatim, with or without humorous effect; 2) adapted to the local setting, to maintain humorous effect; 3) c) replaced by non-wordplay; 4) not rendered, using the space for neighbouring dialogue, and 5) inserted in different textual positions, where the target language renders it possible”.

Both groups of strategies are important for translators; however, in the case of the WPs contained in mermaiding slang, only a combination of Delabastita’s strategy (1) and Gottlieb’s strategy (2) seems to account for the result expected from such type of translated material. In strategy (2), Gottlieb recommends that the WP be adapted to the local setting, to preserve the humorous effect, as WPs, in general, are considered as overtly or covertly humorous. I agree with that, but a caveat is needed here: in the case of mermaiding slang WPs, they must be adapted to the local setting, to preserve their “amusing” effect, not necessarily humorous. All in all, when transposing that type of slang into other languages, a translator must find a pragmatic translation (Baker, 1992), or a pragmatic solution: one that translates WPs as WPs and that serves the same function as that of the source-language slang.

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<sup>15</sup> The list is shown in Appendix 1.

Even so, some of the works exploring the translation of slang in subtitles that I consulted (Faisal, 2017; Sukmaningrum & Setyorini, 2017, and Harahap & Lubis, 2021) were unanimous to report that, instead of a pragmatic solution; in general, translators mostly opted for strategies containing a more general word strategy, a more neutral/less expressive word, paraphrases using related/unrelated words, and even omission. To my understanding, the use of such strategies (other than a pragmatic solution) ends up concealing the characteristics or identity of a group represented in a movie, series, and so on.

I present, now, how the WPs contained in the mermaiding slang in the series were transposed into BP. In Table 2, the source language occurrence is followed by the respective rendering in BP and indicates whether WP was replaced by WP or not.

Source-language occurrence	Target-language solution	Was WP replaced by WP?
dolphinitely	<i>golfintivamente</i>	Yes.
fin (as the end)	<i>fin</i>	Not translated.
fin-alist	<i>finalista</i>	No.
finperial	<i>imperial</i>	No.
fintastic	<i>peixetástico</i>	Yes.
For shore!	<i>Mar é claro!</i>	Yes.
merfolk	<i>tritões</i>	No.
merjob	<i>emprego de sereia</i>	No.
merma	<i>sereia mãe</i>	No.
mermama	<i>sereia mãe</i>	No.
mer-mom	<i>sereia mãe</i>	No.
mermazing	<i>espetacumar</i>	Yes.
merpeople	<i>sereias e tritões</i>	No.
mermperson	<i>omitted</i>	No.
mer-son	<i>filho-tritão</i>	No.
mersona	<i>persona</i>	No.
mersonality	<i>personalidade</i>	No.



merstory	<i>história de sereia</i>	No.
mertivational	<i>sereia motivacional</i>	No.
mertographer	<i>fotógrafo</i>	No.
mervert	<i>sereia-pervertido</i>	No.
merworld	<i>mundo sereia</i>	No.
Sea later!	<i>Até mar!</i>	Yes.
seaster	<i>irmã sereia</i>	No.
Shello!	<i>Shello!</i>	borrowing
Turtley!	<i>Concha Certeza!</i>	Yes.
What the fish!	<i>Que peixe é esse?</i>	No.

Table 2- Mermaiding Slang Based on WPs in AE and their Respective Renderings into BP

The data above reveals that, out of the 27 WPs contained in the terms and phrases in AE, only 6 (22%) were translated into WPs in BP. This result is relatively predictable since translating WPs is known to be difficult and challenging; therefore, translating mermaiding-related WPs becomes even more difficult and challenging. In most of the cases WPs were transposed into non-WPs in BP, the terms, in general, resulted in literal translations of one of the source words that prompted the WP in AE. For example, for “fin-alist”, formed by “fin” and “finalist”, only the latter was retrieved in BP (*finalista*), the same occurred with “mertographer”, formed by “mermaid” and “photographer”, out of which, only the latter, *fotógrafo* in BP, was recovered. In both cases and others like those, the playfulness of the constructions disappeared.

As to the translation of the phrases, three of them made use of substitution, one of Veisbergs’ (1997) strategies: *Mar é claro!*, and *Até mar!*, originally, *Mas é claro!*/(“But of course!”), and *Até mais!*/(“Till later”); in both cases, a replacement was made through *mar* (“sea”), a very appropriate choice, considering the context of mermaiding slang, and *Concha certeza!*/(“shell” + “certainty”), which refers to *Com certeza!*/(“With certainty”), here substitution counted on the phonological similarity of *com* and the beginning of

*concha*; in the three instances, paronymy (slight differences in both sound and spelling) was used. And *Que peixe é esse?*/(“What fish is this?”), a literal translation in BP, which suggests nothing else but that, and as such, no wordplay was generated.

Some of the difficulty encountered in translating mermaiding slang, as it happens with other types of texts, is obviously related to the peculiarities of the languages involved. For example, if “mermaid” is clipped, the particle “mer”, as already mentioned, may give rise to several constructions that sound natural and convincing. While *sereia*, “mermaid” in BP, when syllabicated (*se + rei + a*), results in three syllables that, if used in isolation, no longer retrieve the idea of mermaid. Even if two of the syllables are used, *serei-*, still so, the idea of mermaid is lost. In such cases, translators must keep their distance from the *prima facie* translation of some source-language words and invest in as many synonyms as possible (if there are) as well as in etymological and mythological research, as is the case here. For example, “mermaid” in BP may be *sereia* or *sirena*; the adjective related to *sereia* is *sirênico*, from *siren* in Latin, like “sirenic” or “sirenical” in English; let alone, the countless terms that may be collected from encyclopaedic entries about mythology, and sea-related vocabulary. This way, translators may work with a wider range of options to think of solutions in the target language, like some of the suggestions I will present.

Next, I show the terms and phrases as they appeared in the BP subtitles. First, I discuss the WPs transposed as WPs, considering that they were appropriate solutions, although other suggestions will also be offered. They are:

- *golfinhamente* (**golfinho** + **definitivamente**)/(“dolphin” + “definitely”)<sup>16</sup>: my suggestion > *delfinhamente* (**delfim** + **definitivamente**), *golfinho* and *delfim* (“dolphin”) are synonymous, however, the former seems to be more commonly used in BP; coincidentally the same word-formation process could be applied in both languages;

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<sup>16</sup> For reasons of space limitations, the word-formation processes will not be discussed since the indication in bold type is self-explanatory.

- *peixetástico* (**peixe** + **fantástico**)/("fish" + "fantastic"): my suggestion > *ondástico* (**onda** + **fantástico**)/("wave" + "fantastic");
- *Mar é claro!* ("Sea, of course!"): my suggestion > *Natunralmente!* (**Naturalemt** + **atum**)/("Naturally" + "tuna", something like "Natunally");
- *espetacumar* (**espetacular** + **mar**): my suggestion > *maré-vilhoso* (**maré** + **maravilhoso**)/(tide + marvelous);
- *Até mar!* ("so" + "sea", referring to "so long"/"sea long"): my suggestion > *Atum logo!* ("tuna" + "later", as in "till later"), or *Peitchao!* (**peixe** + **tchao**)/("fish" + "bye");
- *Concha certeza!* (implying *com certeza* "certainly"): my suggestions > *Trutamente!* (**truta** + **certamente**)/("trout" + "certainly"), and *Raialmente!* (**raia** + **realmente**)/("ray" + "really");

Now, the WPs transposed into non-WPs are presented, for such cases, I will also propose suggestions:

- "fin", used as "The end", considering the French word, *Fin*: my suggestion > *Deu fim* (something like "It's over" in En), based on *delfim*, mentioned above. The mechanism used is homophony, identical sounds, but different spellings (/dɛw'fi/);
- "fin-alist": my suggestion > *golfinalista* (**golfinho** + **finalista**)/("dolphin" + "finalist");
- "finperial": my suggestion > *sirenimperial* (**sirena** + **imperial**)/("siren" + "imperial"), and *golfinperial* (**golfinho** + **imperial**)/("dolphin" + "imperial");
- "merfolk": my suggestions > *tritões* ("tritons"), and *tritoneses* (triton + -nese), based on suffix -ese (of, relating to, or originating in a certain place or country);
- "merjob": my suggestion > *sereísta* (**sereia** + **-ista**)/("siren" + "-ist"), based on the suffix -ist used to refer to one that adheres to a practice or lifestyle, in this case, one that adheres to mermaiding;
- "merma", "mermama" and "mer-mom": my suggestions > *siremae* (**sirena** + **mãe**)/("siren" + "mother"); however, *sereia-mãe* ("mermaid" + "mother") seems to be an appropriate compound due its expressive force;
- "mermperson" and "merpeople": my suggestions > *sereia/sereio* and *sereias/sereios*; respectively, or *tritonês* ("tritonese")/*tritoneses* ("tritonese");

- “mer-son”: my suggestion > *golfilho* (*golfinho* + *filho*)/ (dolphin + son), or *sirenfilho* (*sirena* + *filho*)/ (“siren” + “son”);
- “mersona” and “mersonality”: my suggestions > *persona sirênica*/ (“sirenic persona”) and *personalidade sirênica*/ (“sirenic personality”);
- “merstory”: my suggestion > *sirenistória* (*sirena* + *história*)/ (“siren” + “history”);
- “mertivational”: my suggestion > *sirenotivacional* (*sirena* + *motivacional*)/ (“siren” + “motivational”);
- “mertographer”: my suggestion > *botógrafo* (*boto* + *fotógrafo*), *boto* is a large, river dolphin native to the Amazon, and is an animal associated to the Brazilian folklore, thus, more than appropriate for the mermaiding context;
- “mervert”: my suggestion > *sirenopervertido* (*sirena* + *pervertido*)/ (“siren” + “pervert”);
- “merworld”: my suggestion > *sireniverso* (*sirena* + *universo*)/ (siren + universe);
- “seaster”: my suggestion > *sirenirmã* (*sirena* + *irmã*)/ (“siren” + “sister”);
- “Shello!”: my suggestions > *Olá-gosta!* (*olá* + *lagosta*)/ (“hello” + “lobster”), and *Oi-stra!* (*oi* + *ostra*)/ (“hi” + “oyster”), and
- “What the fish!”: my suggestion > *Que mer-luza!* (*merluza* is a fish, “hake” in En), and the interjection finds its inspiration in *Que mer-da!* (“What a shit!”). Normally, just by uttering the beginning of the word (*mer-*), one can infer what it implies, something like “Oh, sh...”.

As it can be observed, most of the WPs in AE could be transposed into WPs in BP. Due to the difficulty in finding more appropriate results, other strategies had to be adopted. “Merfolk”, “merpeople”, and “merperson”, for instance, had to be rendered into non-WPs, as *tritoneses/ tritonês*, applying derivation on the word *tritão* (“merman”), solutions that may also be considered as neologisms. For others, the only mechanism that occurred to me was to literally translate the source words (that inspired the WP) and use a mermaid-related adjective to accompany them; for example, “mersona” and “mersonality” were transposed as *persona sirênica* and *personalidade sirênica*, based on the adjective *sirênico*/ (“sirenic”).

Both resulted in collocations that also sound like neologisms in BP. To my understanding, suggestions like those are preferable to “literal” translations that retrieve only one of the source words forming the blends.

For better viewing, Table 3 shows the mermaiding slang based on WPs in AE and their respective suggestions in BP. The solutions found in BP subtitles are also included.

<b>Source-language occurrence</b>	<b>Target-language suggestions</b>
dolphinitely	<i>golfinitivamente, delfinitivamente</i>
fin (as the end)	<i>deu Fim</i>
fin-alist	<i>golfinalista</i>
finperial	<i>sireimperial, golfimperial</i>
fintastic	<i>peixetástico, ondástico</i>
For shore!	<i>Mar é claro!, Natumralmnte!</i>
merfolk	<i>tritões; tritoneses</i>
merjob	<i>sereísta</i>
merma/mermama/mer-mom/	<i>sereia-mãe, siremãe</i>
mermazing	<i>espetacumar, maré-vilhoso</i>
merpeople	<i>sereias e tritões, tritoneses</i>
mermperson	<i>tritonês</i>
mer-son	<i>golfilho</i>
mersona	<i>persona sirênica</i>
mersonality	<i>personalidade sirênica</i>
merstory	<i>sirenistória</i>
mertivational	<i>sirenotivacional</i>
mertographer	<i>botógrafo</i>
mervert	<i>sirenopervertido</i>
merworld	<i>sireniverso</i>
Sea later!	<i>Até mar!; Atum logo!; Peitchao!</i>
seaster	<i>sinenirmã</i>
Shello!	<i>Olágosta! Oistra!</i>

Turtley!	<i>Concha certeza!, Trutamente! Raialmente!</i>
What the fish!	<i>Que mer-luza!</i>

Table 3- Mermaiding Slang Based on WPs in AE and Respective Suggestions in BP

Now, considering all those suggestions from the creative point of view, I resort to Kussmaul (1991), whose ideas about creativity and translation may be useful. For him, creativity “can only be defined by including the creative product. The creative product must be both novel and useful, it must contain an element of surprise, but also must fulfil certain needs, it must be singular or at least unusual, but at the same time must fit in with reality” (Kussmaul, 1991, p. 92). Correspondingly, if the source-language WPs are compared with the WPs suggested in BP (Table 3), it is possible to say that they are creative, novel, and surprising, as WPs should be. Apart from that, the WPs suggested in BP also fulfil a need, that is, viewers of the subtitled docuseries, in this case, must encounter a type of vocabulary that can be representative of mermaiding enthusiasts.

Like any other work of translation, the suggestions offered here in BP may not be considered up to the mark by some “critics on duty”. Despite the material to be translated, as already mentioned, translators never work under perfect conditions, and no matter how creative they attempt to be, no one can win over the idiosyncrasies of a language. Consequently, Brazilian viewers might find those suggestions odd at first sight, mainly owing to their status of singularity and novelty, an impression that the source-language viewers, probably, might have had, too.

When subtitles involve peculiar terms and phrases, they are of concern to me. First, no matter how diligent translators might have “racked their brains” to come up with creative and, presumably appropriate, solutions, because, before captions are made available in the video stream, they will have to be approved by the service commissioner (film producer, subtitling director). In some cases, translators must adjust or change subtitles to conform to in-house norms. Second, such peculiar terms and phrases may divert viewers’ attention away from the scenes playing on the screen, or viewers

might not have enough time to read and process very creative constructions. In the latter case, if viewers are watching a movie/a series at home, they have the chance to rewind it and watch a scene again. In general, subtitled material, like other modes of translation, will always be subject to criticism, approval, or even rejection from someone involved in its process or its result.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I analysed how mermaiding slang present in an American series was built and how the translator(s) dealt with it in BP subtitles. My findings revealed that mermaiding slang in AE is mostly based on neologisms, more specifically on WPs, involving the manipulation of either multi-word combinations or two words. WPs using multi-word combinations are generally produced through the substitution of one of its components, while WPs using two words are mostly created through lexical blendings, and other word-formation processes, such as homography and derivation, for instance. I would like to point out that those investigating content in dubbed or subtitled material may encounter a particular difficulty: the unavailability of transcripts/screenplays for consultation, a situation that prevents researchers from adopting more sophisticated methodological procedures, such as corpus analysis using specific software, for example.

As regards the translation of the WPS contained in mermaiding slang, only 22% of them were transposed into WPs in the BP subtitles. That result reinforces the widespread idea that this type of rendering is difficult and challenging; however, as could be seen, my suggestions increased that result by 70%. My suggestions should not be deemed as prescriptive, since more and better solutions can always be obtained. Furthermore, it would be unfair to hold the translator(s) accountable for that result without knowing under what conditions he/they had worked, especially those related to time. As it is known, the deadline is the villain in every translator's commission. The translation of texts containing creative language normally requires much more time than other types of texts.

Another point of concern when translating WPs, in general, is that, depending on their type, they may pass unnoticed. Probably,

this would never occur with mermaiding slang since it is promptly and easily noticeable by viewers. Yet, if mermaiding slang is an amusing way of speaking that identifies a social group depicted in a TV series, it would be a crime to ignore or efface it from the subtitles, in this case. Furthermore, owing to the traits of mermaiding slang, the study of its vocabulary may be an appropriate didactic resource to explore translation students' linguistic and metalinguistic awareness.

In conclusion, if translators must render stylistically marked vocabulary, like wordplays, generated by creative lexical blends, as those discussed here, these inventive constructions should be (re)produced in the target language, abiding by its particularities and potentialities in a way comparable to the way the author produced them in the source language, in both cases, always respecting the uniqueness (potentialities and limitations) of the languages involved.

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## Appendix 1

### Mermaid High Slang list<sup>17</sup>

1. Apiers (appears)
2. Beach (Beat)
3. Bermuda Love Triangle (a play on the Bermuda Triangle location and love triangle)
4. Crabby (Cranky)
5. Cyndi Purpoise (Cyndi Lauper)

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<sup>17</sup> [https://mermaid-high.fandom.com/wiki/Mermaid\\_High\\_Slang](https://mermaid-high.fandom.com/wiki/Mermaid_High_Slang).

6. Fin and Out Burder (In and Out Burger)
7. Fin-Crowd (In-Crowd)
8. Finship (Friendship)
9. Finstagram (Instagram)
10. Fintastic (Fantastic)
11. Fishies (Besties)
12. Fishionista (Fashionista)
13. Flippin' (Trippin')
14. For shore (For sure)
15. Gillfriends (Girlfriends)
16. Girls (gills)
17. Gorge (Underwater "Gorge" and a play on Gorgeous)
18. h2OMG (omg)
19. Jawsome (Awesome)
20. Jingle Tails (Jingle Bells)
21. Kelp (Help)
22. Kriller, Krilling (killer, killing)
23. Louis Zuitton (Louis Vuitton)
24. Meraoke (Karaoke)
25. Merdrama
26. Merfriends, Gillfriends (Best friends)
27. Mermaid Christmas (Merry Christmas)
28. Mermazing (amazing)
29. Merm's the word (Mum's the word)
30. Namerste (Namaste)
31. Out-of-sand (out-of-hand)
32. Pier-Leader (Cheer-leader)
33. Popped a Tail
34. Reefferishments (Refreshments)
35. Sanding Ovation (Standing Ovation)
36. Sea (see)
37. Seacret (Secret)
38. Sealicious, Sealish (Delicious, Delish)
39. Sealon (Salon)
40. Seariously (seriously)
41. Shellebrate (Celebrate)
42. Shellfie (Selfie)
43. Shellfish (selfish)
44. Shello (Hello)

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45. Shellphone (Phone)
46. Shore Thing (Sure Thing)
47. Sofishticated (sophisticated)
48. Squidding (Kidding)
49. Tail Next Time (Till' Next Time)
50. Tailbiting Drama
51. Tailed it (Nailed it)
52. Tails in the air (Hands in the air)
53. Tropic Like It's Hot! (Drop It Like It's Hot)
54. Vitamin Sea (Vitamin C)
55. Water are we waiting for (What are we waiting for)
56. We're Mermaid for this (We're made for this)
57. You fin? (You in?)

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Adauri Brezolin holds a doctoral degree in English Language from the University of São Paulo, Brazil. He taught translation in university-level programs for more than 30 years. Nowadays, he is a freelance translator and an independent researcher, interested in translation didactics, idiomaticity, conventionality, terminology, Corpus Linguistics, and the translation of wordplays.

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