

Linguistic, Cultural and Technical Problems in English-Arabic Subtitling

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Abstract

The present paper is designed to shed light on the intricacies of English-Arabic subtitling. The data comprises a video clip of an interview with Mr. Galloway conducted by the Sky News TV station. The sample of the study consists of twenty MA translation students enrolled in the second semester of the academic year 2008/2009 at Al-Quds University. The paper reveals that subtitling students are faced with several linguistic, cultural and technical problems which may jeopardise communication, thought to be crucial for target audience. The study concludes with some pedagogical implications that will hopefully help subtitling students deal with the problems in question.

Key Words: *audiovisual translation, subtitling, linguistic problems, cultural problems, technical problems*

Introduction

With the advent of digital era, Audiovisual Translation (AVT) has begun in earnest all over the world with an increasing audience, albeit its most common forms (e.g., subtitling, dubbing, etc.) have been the general ruck of debate and research. Very much replete with myriads of linguistic, technical, semiotic, cultural problems and so forth, the job of audiovisual translator has largely been viewed as challenging and demanding. Thus, argues Karamitroglou (2000: 104) “the number of possible audiovisual translation problems is endless and a list that would account for each one of them can never be finite”, and the beauties of the original text are due to evaporate as such (Tytler 1790: 20). As a consequence, “no one has ever come away from a foreign film admiring the translation, [inasmuch as] all of us have, at one time or another, left a movie theat[re] wanting to kill the translator” (Nornes 1999: 17; see also Gamal 2009: 4). When subtitles are appreciated, however, Nornes claims, “it is only a desire for reciprocal violence, a revenge for the text in the face of its corruption” (ibid).

Suffice it to say, being a sagacious translator is not a panacea for solving the ‘everlasting’ number of subtitling problems, for not only these can be linguistic or cultural as is the case with literary translation, but also technical. On the differences between literary translation and AVT, Neves (2004: 135) writes:

In audiovisual translation the problems which arise are somewhat similar to those of literary translation with the extra stress that the fidelity factor is dictated by constraints that lie beyond words or languages. Whereas in written translation fidelity lies in two extreme points, the source-text or the target-text, in audiovisual translation fidelity is particularly due to an audience that [...] is in need of communicative effectiveness, rather than in search of artistic effect-as

is the case in literary translation- or of exact equivalence- as happens with technical translation.

In this, ‘communicative effectiveness’ should be an ultimate goal insofar as subtitlers are concerned, and it can be achieved by means of different channels. According to Baker (1998: 245), these channels include: (1) the verbal auditory channel, e.g., dialogue, background voices, and sometimes lyrics; (2) the non-verbal auditory channel, e.g., music, natural sound and sound effects; (3) the verbal visual channel, e.g., superimposed titles and written signs on the screen; and (4) the non-verbal visual channel, e.g., picture composition and flow.

Viewed as a technology-laden process, subtitling requires that, alongside linguistic and cultural competence, a fully fledged subtitler should be a ‘whiz-kid’ computer expert so that technical constraints, of which AVT is full, can be handled. Georgakopoulou (2009: 30-31), however, believes that, subtitlers can work from templates (i.e. word documents with timecodes) whereby “the subtitling process has been split into two distinct tasks. The timing of a film or audiovisual programme is made by English native speakers who produce a unique timed subtitle file in English, that is, a file where all the in and out times have been decided.”

Arabic-English Subtitling Problems

In the Arab World audiovisual programmes (e.g., sitcoms, documentaries, soap operas, TV series, cartoons, etc.) diversify mainly via two different forms of AVT— subtitling and dubbing. But ‘which is the preferred form?’ is a question still not answered properly. Generally speaking, subtitling may be more common than dubbing, although in the past few years, the dubbing of foreign prime time TV series into Arabic, namely from Spanish, and most recently from Turkish (e.g., *Kurtlar Vadisi Pusu*)¹ has begun to gain momentum and weight. “For languages like Arabic, for example, which many can understand but relatively few can read, revoicing offers the opportunity to the masses to enjoy TV without effort” (Volmar as cited in Karamitroglou 2000: 132). For Volmar, subtitling is still preferable for “several governments of countries with large Arabic-speaking populations see in subtitling a means for encouraging the masses to learn to read and write” (ibid), a point with which Gamal (2009: 2) agrees— “the nascent Egyptian film industry, keenly aware of the competition coming from Hollywood, opted not to dub American films for fear of killing off the local industry”. Likewise, Karamitroglou sees dubbing as a threat to film industry: “In Egypt in 1947, local film directors, actors and producers protested against the dubbing of American and other films into Arabic and called upon the Ministry of Social Affairs to pass a law that would forbid the release of dubbed foreign films.” (Motion Picture Herald as cited in Karamitroglou 2000: 132).

Dubbing will be beyond the scope of the present study which will address itself only to subtitling problems (for more details on the problems of dubbing, see Athamneh and Zitawi 1999; Zitawi 2003; and Zitawi 2008). In terms of the problems involved in subtitling into Arabic, Gamal (2008: 5-6) conducts a study to see the viewers’ perception of subtitling. He concludes that: (1) television language Televese is too stiff; (2) deletion appears to be a prominent strategy; (3) swear words are too clichéd; (4) cultural images are mistranslated; (5) translation of film titles is too liberal; (6) the language of subtitling is becoming a genre; (7) mistakes are always to be expected; (8) the font used in subtitles is too small and subtitles are too fast to read; (9) spotting is a major source of irritation; and (10) white colour of subtitles is unhelpful.

Insofar as subtitling from Arabic into English is concerned, Bahaa-Eddin (2006) identifies major subtitling problems which include (1) literal translation; (2) insensitivity to context; (3) ungrammatical; (4) unnatural or inaccurate translations; (5) treatment of foul language and; (6) unnecessary formality.

Subtitle Programmes² for Arabic

The rise of technology and software localisation industry has contributed to the future health of desperate languages like Arabic. De Bortoli and Ortiz-Sotomayor (2009: 191) argue that “there is nothing inherently American or even Western about Internet use, as evidenced by the latest estimates for Internet users by language growth stating [...] Arabic by 2062% between 2000 and 2008.”³

One of the customised free pieces of software able to work with Arabic is Subtitle Workshop (version: 2.51). The software introduces some features⁴ that cater for Arabic, for example, keeping order of lines when reverse text is used and presenting right-to-left format, among other things. Yet, one of the deficiencies of the software is its inability to deal with diacritics, usually considered distinctive features in Arabic. The software in question counts most of the diacritics as if they were characters, which gives rise to spatial constraints problems and poses ambiguity as will be shown later (other deficiencies will be discussed later in this paper).

Nevertheless, the special linguistic characteristics of Arabic may be conducive to the obedience of standard subtitling conventions. First, “the elision of short vowels and the use of superscripts in Arabic [...] all help to conserve space on screen” (De Linde and Kay 1999: 6). For instance, the five-character Arabic item⁵ *li’šhada* (lit. ‘to see’) displays the distinctive *hamza* [’] used in a superscript manner, i.e., positioned at a certain distance above the character, that is, [’š]. Indeed, inserting the *hamza* helps to distinguish the item from the undiacriticised six-character *lā šhid* (lit. ‘no honey’). Secondly, the lower script *hamza* in *’ilā* (lit. ‘to’) for instance, saves more space and serves as a distinctive feature in Arabic, too. Finally, “the letters of a single word can work with joined-up by ‘ligatures’ or cursive script” (Thawabteh 2007: 187), and again, this can save space on the screen.

Academisation of Subtitling

It is perhaps true that Translation Studies, as an established field of study, has gained ground in the Arab World in the past few decades, notwithstanding translation has been known and practised since time immemorial. But AVT practices can still be described as a retrograde step in the advancement of the discipline. In what follows, we shall examine the humble research on AVT in relation to Arabic and the existing subtitler training programmes in three Arab universities.

To start with, Gamal (2009: 3) states that the “audiovisual translation was neither taught nor considered a specialisation of translation studies” (see also Khuddro 2000). This explains the very few academic papers published in peer-reviewed translation journals. A search in *Meta*⁶ (a prestigious translation journal) returns 19 publications with the word ‘Arabic’ in the title, none of which has touched on AVT as an object of study. Another search in BITRA⁷ returns one article on AVT with the word ‘Arabic’ in the title, two on subtitling and no article on dubbing and voice-over.

Academically, only in 1995 was “[t]he first course in screen translation [...] launched at the American University in Cairo [...], and remains today the only such training program[me] in the country” (Gamal 2008: *ibid*). In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, AVT is almost unheard of, and according to Thawabteh (*forthcoming*), it is nothing to write home about. Only in 2007 was AVT introduced in academic circles, and it seems to be promising to date. AVT is now taught on the fringe of Al-Quds University— one of two Palestinian universities⁸ which offer master’s degree in translation and interpreting. Here, two fully fledged postgraduate courses on audiovisual translation are offered to qualify students for relatively embryonic market demand for translation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. To ensure sound subtitling practices from the very beginning, and to ensure subtitler training programmes of good quality, students are provided with maximal training on the use of technology (see also Thawabteh 2009). It should be noted, however, that although considered the first training programme for subtitlers with such academic-theoretical education, there is ‘helter-skelter’ existence of vocational training in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. In Jordan, a new undergraduate elective course entitled Translating Films and Documentaries is offered by Department of Translation at Yarmouk University, established in 2008/2009.⁹ It ensues, therefore, that AVT is still not recognised as an independent discipline in the Arab World.

Methodology

The main purpose of the present study is to investigate the difficulties of subtitling from English into Arabic. The data consists of a ten-minute clip from an interview with Mr. Galloway¹⁰ broadcast by Sky News TV station. Mr. Galloway takes on the station because of its biased coverage of Israel, Lebanon and Palestine. The interview was then transcribed for the sake of the present study. To pinpoint and bring the problem under discussion into focus, a sample of 20 MA translation students from Al-Quds University was chosen. The students were taking AVT course required for obtaining a master’s degree in Translation and Interpreting. Other course requirements include converting video files into formats which can fit the software in question, a project on translating a 30-minute audiovisual material (e.g., sitcoms, documentaries, movies, etc.) and burning it to a CD or DVD using different burning programmes, among many other things. The students watched the clip, and then they were asked to subtitle it into Arabic. To translate the clip in question, the students used Subtitle Workshop (version: 2.51). All the students have already taken a minimum of ten translation courses, thus have considerable experience of translation theory and practice.

Data Analysis

We shall go over the problems of subtitling with which Arab subtitling students are faced, with a fine-tooth comb. For the sake of the study, a taxonomy of the problems is suggested in terms of linguistic, cultural and technical dimensions.

Linguistic Problems

Needless to say that linguistic problems constitute a challenge for the translator, and such challenge becomes even enormous as for the subtitler due to the additional technical constraints. The effects of these on the language used in subtitling process would be incalculable, e.g., syntax, lexical choice, collocations, idioms and so forth. In order to

corroborate and diversify our argument, let us discuss different linguistic problems, with some illustrative examples to see how easy or difficult the subtitling students' task was in pursuit of optimal subtitling.

Tag-Question Tag questions are common in spoken English (see Quirk et al. 1985). The fixed Arabic grammatical structure *'alaysa kaḏālik* ('isn't it so?') has the same function as that of English (Kharma and Hajjaj 1989). Moreover, Arabic "prefers positive or negative oriented questions to realise the function of a tag question" (Aziz 1989: 256). Aziz succinctly put it: "[p]ositive oriented questions are realised by using the particle followed immediately the element which is the focus of polarity" (ibid: 254). By contrast, "negative questions have negative orientation, [and] such questions may have additional meanings of surprise, displeasure, etc." (ibid: 255). Consider (1) below:

- (1) Right ...you put your finger on the button, didn't you?
laqad waḏa'ta yadaka 'ala al-jurḥi 'alaysa kaḏālik?
Back-Translation (BT): ¹¹ You put your hand on the wound, isn't it?

In carefully scrutinising (1) above, the tag question with a falling tone was made by the interviewer with an eye to confirmation of what the interviewee (Mr. Galloway) has already said— "The Hezbollah are a part of the Lebanese Resistance who are trying to drive, having successfully driven most Israelis from their land in 2000". As can also be observed, the subtitling student caters for tag question by using *'alaysa kaḏālik*, notably with very few characters, thus observing space-related constraints. The subtitling student has successfully rendered the semantic import of the tag, with 36 characters in total. Nevertheless, a tentative *'awaḏa'ta yadaka 'ala al-jurḥi?* (lit. 'Did you put your hand on the wound?') in which positive oriented question is used, can be suggested, for it expresses the English tag question and most importantly, it uses fewer characters (22 characters in total) than in (1), thus the possibility for brevity and clarity, highly required for reading speed and comprehensibility by target viewers.

Exclamatives The English exclamatory sentence in (2) below can be expressed in Arabic by using the exclamatory particle *mā* (lit. 'what') followed by a verb of admiration, or imperative form plus *bī* (lit. 'with'), or *yā lahu/yā laha min*¹² (lit. 'what a ...!').

- (2) What a preposterous way to introduce an item! What a preposterous first question!
'innaha ṭarīqatun saxīfatun 'an tuqadimi hāḏihi il-faqrah wa saxīfun 'ayḏan 'an tuṭraḥī hāḏa as-suāl.
BT: Indeed, this is an absurd way to introduce an item!| What an absurd first question!¹³

The Arabic subtitle, totalling 67 characters, sounds more or less natural as it displays the communicative thrust of the English utterance, i.e., exclamative which can be rendered to something like:

- A. mā 'as-sxafaha min ṭarīqatin li-tuqadīmi hāḏihi il-faqra wa hāḏa as-suāl?
(lit. 'What a truly absurd way to introduce this item and this question!')
B. yā laha min ṭarīqatin saxīfatin li-tuqadīmi hāḏihi il-faqra wa hāḏa as-suāl?

(lit. ‘What a truly absurd way to introduce this item and this question?’)

As can be observed in (A) and (B), the economy of word use is crystal-clear and goes in harmony with what Munday (2009: 155) states: “[S]ubtitling requires dialogues to be condensed in order for them to fit into short captions which appear on the screen that can only be left on display for a limited time.” The use of *mā* in (A) and *yā laha min* (an alternative form for *yā lahu min* but here inflicted for gender) in (B) has a total of 52 and 54 characters respectively.

Discoursal Problems The ultimate goal of translation is to preserve meaning, emanating from textual stretches of language in use. Viewed thus, there is a semiotic interaction of various signs within the boundaries of a text, thought to be of paramount importance for imbibing an utterance the best way possible. Such interaction according to Hatim and Mason (1997: 223), paves the way for “a dimension of context which regulates the relationship of texts or parts of texts to each other as signs.” The discourse-related problems are that “the ST and TT readers experience reality differently and hence lies the difficulty of establishing texts coherence in such a way that would meet the expectations of the TT readers” (Thawabteh 2007: 12), and that “in establishing the text coherence, the translator does not simply determine the referential and expressive meaning, but must also detect and manipulate implicature” (Emery 2004: 151). To illustrate discoursal problems, take (2) above in which a concatenation of micro-signs is used with a view to making exclamation. In the TL, however, the subtitling student opted for a translation that is more or less argumentative, killing the SL discoursal thrust stone-dead.

Noun Coordination Tannen (as cited in Orero 2008: 7) says that “while Western texts normally hinge on temporal unity and linear causality, in Semitic languages – such as Arabic – texts are constructed and developed ‘following a complex series of parallel constructions’.” Whilst English allows coordination of nouns, Arabic prefers pronoun retention whereby third person masculine/feminine pronominal suffix be attached to the verb. Consider (3) below:

(3) Israel has been invading and occupying Lebanon.

’Isrā’īl kanat taghzu wa tahtalu Lubnān .

BT: Israel was invading| and occupying Lebanon.

We may argue that the translation in (3) is a kind of linguistic interference contagion into Arabic. The structure in question is not Arabic, but rather an English one. Tentatively, *lā tyzālu ’Isrā’īl taghzu Lubnān wa tahtalu* (lit. ‘Israel has been invading Lebanon and occupying it’) is more potential than the watered-down translation in (3) above.

Homophones This is particularly problematic for some subtitling students who have a bad grasp of an item, probably as a result of SL unclear articulation; it is then a problem of aural comprehension. Georgakopoulou (2009: 31) highlights that “[w]hen the mother tongue of the subtitler is not English, there can be potential problems in understanding the source language, especially slang and colloquialisms, which require an affinity with the spoken language that can only really be acquired by living in the country where the language is spoken.” As for the current study, it seems that the subtitling students are unable to make use of the context of situation considered as a major determinant of the degree of the flow of communication in a text. To explain this, consider (4) and (5) below:

(4) I had to dash to the maternity hospital to see giving birth, from a mass demonstration in London against the Israeli invasion and occupation of Lebanon.

'd-ṭrartu liḏahābi 'la al-lmašfa hayṪu sādftu muzahratan 'aqīmat min qibal hamās ḏidda al-iḥtilāli wa al-hujūmi il-'Isrā'īlī 'ala Lubnān.

BT: I had to go to the hospital| where I came across a demonstration organised by Hamas¹⁴ against the Israeli occupation| and invasion of Lebanon.

(5) Joining me now a man not known for sitting on the fence...

Junni rajulun lā yaštahru bil-wqūfi 'ala il-ḥiyyad

BT: Johnny is a man not known for supporting any side.

In the sequence of verbal sparring between the interviewer and interviewee, the subtitling student has come a cropper in distinguishing phonemic contrast in (4) above, i.e., 'Hamas' [hamās], a Palestinian Resistance Movement, and 'a mass' [aymās], 'large'. These seem to be activated when either is heard; therefore, the whole translation is uninterpretable. The Arabic subtitle shows some historical fallacies; firstly, Hamas went on a demonstration against Israeli's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 although its foundation was five years later and secondly, Hamas members, though considered in many countries as terrorists, are free to go on a demonstration against Israel even in London. Neither is true. Similarly, in (5) above, the subtitling student fails to absorb 'Join me', and comes out with 'Johnny' in the translation output, quite far beyond the SL intended meaning.

Idioms Idioms have special characteristics, and hence they pose problems to translators and (even more indubitable baffling problems) to subtitlers. According to Kharma and Hajjaj (1989: 72-75), "[a]n idiom is a fixed phrase [...] whose meaning cannot be predicted from a knowledge of the meaning of the individual words." In terms of the strategy that might be employed in translating idioms, Orero distinguishes emulation not uncommon in literary translation from that in subtitling.

Due to the limited time and space available for each subtitle, a factor which forces subtitlers to reconstruct sentences, unlike literary and dubbing translators. Normally these translators have enough space (on the printed page) or time (on the screen) to cut cognitive corners in the translation process—and come up with English clones or calques in the target language (Orero 2004: 91-2).

In (6) below which is similar to (5) above, but used here to explain a totally different point, the subtitling student tries to analyse the idiomatic expression 'to sit on the fence' into its constituent elements, giving rise to grotesque literal translation.

(6) Joining me now a man not known for sitting on the fence...

yandmu 'ilayyna alān rajulun yatwājad 'inda as-siyyāji.

BT: Joining me now a man at the fence.

Due to the fact that idioms are considered as a vehicle for intercultural communication, it is arguably true that the avoidance of translating them is likely to give rise to unnatural renderings in the TL culture. Thus, the subtitler can opt for formal and/or functional equivalence in a general sense. In (6) above, formal equivalence (which brings about

anomalous translation) does not fit whereas functional equivalence, something like *yandmu 'ilayna alān rajulun| lā yaštahru bil-wqūfi 'ala il-ḥiyyad* (lit. 'joining me now a man not known for supporting any side') can do the trick (see Baker 1992: 71-78 for details on the strategies for translating idioms and Abd-el-Kareem 2010 for strategies of translating idioms in Arabic-English subtitling).

Syntax Georgakopoulou (2009: 23) states that "[t]he simpler and more commonly used the syntactic structure of a subtitle, the least effort needed to decipher its meaning." One of the problems found in the data is mistranslation that can be attributed to the SL complex syntax, resulting in incomprehensibility on the part of the subjects. The intended message as illustrated in (7) below is distorted:

(7) You've just been carrying a report: "Ten Israeli soldiers on the border getting ready to invade Lebanon," and you ask us to mourn that operation as if there were some kind of war crime!

mā ziltum tanqulīna lana taqrīran li 10 mina al-junūdi il-'Isrā'īlīna| 'ala al-ḥudūdi yasta'dūna li-ijtiāhi Lubnān Ōma taṭlubū mina 'an nasstankira haḏihi al-'amalayyih| 'ala 'naha jarīmata ḥarb.

BT: You've just been carrying a report about ten Israeli soldiers| on the border getting ready to invade Lebanon, and you ask us to condemn that operation| as war crime!

What a tangle the subtitling student had got himself/herself in? Mr. Galloway gallantly responded to the interviewer who pursues that the war waged against Lebanon was justified because Hizbullah had committed war crime in killing and kidnapping some Israelis on the Israeli-Lebanon border. The Arabic subtitle, however, shows that the war against Lebanon *per se* is a crime which is far beyond the intended meaning of the SL.

Collocation Collocations refer to "a phenomenon in language whereby a lexical item tends to keep company with other words. It is a lexical relation of occurrence that binds words together with varying degrees of strength" (Bahumaid 2006: 133). In a nutshell, the source of difficulty lies in collocability across languages, or in the words of Kharma and Hajjaj (1989: 67) "each language appears to have its own collocation patterns" (see also Bahumaid *ibid*: 136). To illustrate the point, consider (8) below:

(8) You've just been carrying a report...

mā zilti ṭhmilīna taqrīran ...

BT: You've just been holding a report ...

Obviously, the underlined SL collocation has been rendered formally giving rise to unnatural Arabic—*ṭhmilīna taqrīran* (lit. 'holding a report'). Opting for literal translation "is perhaps the 'worst' procedure because it ignores the context in which the collocation is used" (*ibid*: 145-6). An alternative translation can be suggested by using a synonym or near-synonym (*ibid*), something like *tanqulīna taqrīran* (lit. 'transferring a report'), which is, technically, falls within the ambit of spatial paradigm.

Transliteration Transliteration involves naturalisation at the sound level where SL spelling and pronunciation are converted into a given language (see Catford 1965: 66). The difficulty

of transliteration is probably due to the differences in the sound and writing systems between Arabic and English, two language pairs with noticeable linguistic remoteness. For instance, two varieties of vowels exist in Arabic— long and short. In the same vein, Aziz (1983: 83) points out that “[t]ransliteration of English proper nouns —indeed, of foreign proper nouns in general —is at present characterised by inconsistency, which often results in misunderstanding and confusion.” The reason beyond that, Aziz (ibid) further argues, is due to the fact that “[t]ranslators often regard transliteration of foreign proper nouns as an unimportant part of their task, which does not merit much thinking.” To appreciate the problem of transliteration, consider the following examples in which the study items are in bold type:

(9) A very good evening, good morning rather to you Mr. **Galloway**.

msāu’ il-xayir ‘aw bil’ahra| sabahu il-xayir sayid Qālāwī

BT: Good evening or rather good morning Mr. Galloway.

(10) Can I ask you about a report that is in today’s **Sunday** Telegraph?

hal bi’imkani suāluka ‘an it-taqrīr il-laḏī nušira| al-lyawm fi is-Sundāy Tilighrāf.

BT: Can I ask you about a report that is published today in Sunday Telegraph?

In (9) and (10) above, the subtitling student seems to have failed to distinguish neutral vowel sounds in Galloway and Sunday; rather he/she opted for Arabic long vowel sounds. Technically, *Ghalawā* and *is-Sundi* (with various transliteration systems in mind) rather than *Gālāwī* and *is-Sundāy* seem to be an option, for they save more characters on the screen, and probably facilitate reading by TL viewers.

Diacritisation In Arabic, the consonants are represented in writing while the making of vowels using diacritics (written Arabic without certain orthographic symbols) is optional. Some diacritics, however, are crucial for automatic speech recognition. Three main types of diacritics may be presented, namely vowel diacritics which may include *hamza*, nunation diacritics used to mark nominal indefiniteness and the *šadda*, placed above the letter.

The problem of subtitling apropos diacritics has to do particularly with spatial constraints, that is, some diacritical marks are presented at a certain distance below, above or inside the consonants, and hence they are characters-like, i.e., they are counted characters. Consider the following example:

(A) ḏ-ṭartu liḏahābi ‘la al-lmašfa li’šhada mīlādaha.

BT: I had to go to the hospital see giving birth.

(B) ḏ-ṭart liḏahāb la al-lmašfa lā šhid mīlādaha.

BT: I had to go to the hospital, no honey, her birth.

Whilst the free-diacritics subtitle in (B) totals 38 characters, the diacritised subtitle in (A) has 44 characters. Nevertheless, the lack of diacritics makes reading on the screen a bit difficult, for the use of diacritics facilitates reading comprehension. For example, in (B), the undiacritised item *lā šhid* (lit. ‘no honey’) poses ambiguity, or, at least, hinders reading comprehension on the part of the TL viewers who need to further deduce the meaning from the context of situation (i.e., the auditory and the visual channels), a task which seems to be difficult in subtitling for the typical time for a subtitle to appear on the screen is strictly short.

Tenses and Aspects It is oft-repeated truism that Arabic and English are remotely unrelated languages and is so being the case, the problem of equivalence arises (see Nida 1964, Perez 1993, among others). The translator can then hardly provide an infallible translation since translation is looked at as ‘a rip-off of the original’ (Thawabteh 2008, The Concept of Equivalence), or as “an x-ray, not a Xerox” (Barnstone 1993: 271). Tenses and aspects are problematic in translation as Arabic cut up linguistic reality in a way different from that of English. English present perfect is a case in point. It “does not have a well-defined counterpart in Arabic that can cover all the meanings covered by it” (Kharma and Hajaj 1989: 159), hence arises the difficulty in English-Arabic translation. Consider the translation of present perfect continuous in (11) below:

(11) Israel has been invading and occupying Lebanon all of my 24 years of my daughter’s life.

’Isrā’īl hiya al-latī taghzu wa tahtalu Lubnān ṭīlat ‘umr ’ibnati wal-bālghatu 24 sana.

BT: Israel was invading and occupying Lebanon| all of my 24 years of my daughter’s life.

As can be observed in (11), the English present perfect continuous has been rendered into imperfect Arabic, embedded in a relative clause. Typically, English present perfect continuous is expressed in Arabic by using *lā yzāl/lum yazal* (inflected for gender) (lit. ‘still’) + simple present form of the verb (see Farghal and Shunnaq 1999). With subtitling conventions in mind, the SL utterance in (11) can then be subtitled into something like:

lā tyzāl ’Isrā’īl taghzu Lubnān wa tahtaluhu ṭīlat ‘umr ’ibnati wal-bālghatu 24 sanah.

(lit. ‘Israel has been invading Lebanon and occupying it all of my 24 years of my daughter’s life’).

Culture-Related Problems

Most translation difficulties are more germane to cultural disparities between language pairs than to linguistic discrepancies. Cultural gap has always “produced the most far-reaching misunderstandings among readers” (Nida and Reyburn 1981: 2). As for languages with little cultural affinity, e.g., Arabic and English, the difficulties and problems increase considerably. By way of illustration, translating culture-loaded idiomatic expressions can be problematic as is the case with idioms that are parts of proverbs. For instance, English “March many weathers” can be functionally translated into *āḍār ’bu sabī’ Ṭaljāt kbār marah šmaysah w-marah mṭār w-marh mgagāt iš-šinār* (lit. ‘March is the month of seven heavy snows, capricious weathers and time when birds sing’). Such a translation is, on the one hand, technically problematic subtitling-wise for it is wordy, and poses a question of equivalency on the other. To illustrate the point, consider (12) below:

(12) The Respect MP for Bethnal Green is in our Central London studios.

sa’ādat an-nāib ‘an BiṬnal Ghrīn hwa alān fī istūdyuhatina fī Lundan.

BT: Your Excellency, Deputy for Bethnal Green is in our Central London studios.

Undoubtedly, the SL utterance is rich in culture-specifics, e.g., ‘Respect’, ‘MP’ and ‘Bethnal Green’ which have been translated into *sa’ādat* (lit. ‘Your/His Excellency’), *an-nāib* (lit. ‘Deputy’) and *BiṬnal Ghrīn* (lit. ‘Bethnal Green’) respectively. First, ‘Respect’ is a general

term used to express politeness or honour towards someone considered to be important. However, and more specifically, the expressions ‘Your/His Excellency’ are used “when you are addressing or referring to officials of very high rank, for example ambassadors or governors” (Collins Cobuild 2002). Second, an MP in Britain “is a person who has been elected to represent the people from a particular area in the House of Commons. MP is an abbreviation for ‘Member of Parliament’ whereas ‘Deputy’ is used “[i]n some parliaments or law-making bodies [for] the elected members” (ibid). The disparity between the SL and the TL speaks for itself. Finally, ‘Bethnal Green’, with all the connotations it involves (e.g., London Borough of Tower Hamlets, East End of London etc.) is no exception. To elaborate more on culture specificity, take the following example:

(13) You don’t give a damn! You don’t even know about the Palestinian families! You don’t even know that they exist! Tell me the name of one member of the seven members of the same family swatted on the beach in Gaza by an Israeli warship!

’anti lā tahtami ’anti lā ta’rifi ’an il-’ālati| il-falastīnyyah ’anti lā ta’rifina ’an ’anaha ’aslan| mawjūdah ’axbirīnī bi’ismi fardin mina al-’ālati| l-lati gadat jara’ gasifi as-safinati il-isralyyiah.

BT: Who cares? You don’t even know about the Palestinian families! You don’t even know that they exist! Tell me the name of one member of the seven members of the same family passed way on the beach in Gaza by an Israeli warship.

Prior to this exchange, Mr. Galloway was faced with a barrage of angry questions from the interviewer, thus turned out to an embittered interviewee. As a consequence, Mr. Galloway is no longer using formal honorific language towards her, thus informal and rude formula “don’t give a damn” for emphasising carelessness is opted for. The subtitling student softens the SL tone and produces nothing but a neutral semantic equivalent *lā tahtami* (lit. ‘doesn’t care’), which fails to achieve the degree of pragmatics of the English idiom. Moreover, the English dysphemistic expression ‘swatted’ is used by the text producer for a rhetorical purpose, that is, devaluation of Palestinian lives. Instead, the translator employed euphemistic expression *gadat* (lit. ‘passed away’), which will distort the SL intended message.

Technical-Related Problems

De Linde and Kay (1999: 1-2) argue that “the amount of dialogue has to be reduced to meet the technical conditions of the medium and the reading capacities of non-native language users.” Bearing this in mind, the subtitler’s task exceeds mere translation activity to include technical side, with all that aggro. In what follows, we shall investigate these problems and difficulties.

Typeface and Distribution A sans-serif typeface is preferable to a serif typeface, “since the visual complexity added to the latter results in a decrease in the legibility of the subtitled text” (Karamitroglou 1998, Spatial Parameter). For Karamitroglou (ibid; emphasis in original), “[t]ypefaces like Helvetica and Arial are qualified. Proportional distribution rather than Monospace distribution (usually used on typewriters) saves the space required to fit the desired 35 characters into a subtitle line.” By the same token, Schwarz (2002, Fonts and Figures; emphasis in original) says: “[t]he fonts used in sub-titles are often not of fixed width, as is the case with Courier.” It ensues, therefore, that the use of font with a sans-serif typeface would be typical of well-established subtitle on the screen.

As for Arabic, Subtitle Workshop (version 2.5) uses fonts that can be classified in terms of font legibility versus font illegibility. Legible fonts are characteristic of sans-serifed typeface with ‘proportional distribution’ and may include Tunga, Akhbar MT, Deco Type Naskh, MS Sans Serif, Faris Simple Bold, Arabic Transparent, Deco Type Naskh Special, Traditional Arabic and Simplified Arabic, etc. On the other hand, illegible fonts may include highly serified fonts e.g., Andalus, Courier New, PT Bold Arch, Kufi, Arabic Typesetting, Deco Type Thulth, Diwani Letter, among others. By and large, the use of these fonts can be language-specific as is the case with Farsi which is used in Persian and Urdu (some of the languages which use Arabic alphabet), thus the potential use of Farsi in the translation into these two languages. To appreciate the difference between sans-serif typeface and serif typeface, consider Figure 1 in which the students opted for different fonts to translate *kayfa tubrira da‘maka li hizbillāh wa qāidiha aš-šayx hasan Naṣrullah?* (lit. ‘How can you justify your support for Hizbollah and its leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrullah?’).

| | |
|---|---|
| A | كيف تبرر دعمك لحزب الله وقائده الشيخ حسن نصرالله؟ |
| B | كيف تبرر دعمك لحزب الله وقائده الشيخ حسن نصرالله؟ |
| C | كيف تبرر دعمك لحزب الله وقائده الشيخ حسن نصرالله؟ |
| D | كيف تبرر دعمك لحزب الله وقائده الشيخ حسن نصرالله؟ |
| E | كيف تبرر دعمك لحزب الله وقائده الشيخ حسن نصرالله؟ |
| F | كيف تبرر دعمك لحزب الله وقائده الشيخ حسن نصرالله؟ |
| G | كيف تبرر دعمك لحزب الله وقائده الشيخ حسن نصرالله؟ |

Figure 1: Students’ Choice of Arabic Fonts

As Figure 1 shows, the font selection by students goes respectively as follows: (A) Arabic Transparent; (B) DecoType Naskh Special; (C) Andalus; (D) PT Bold Arch; (E) Courier New; (F) Diwani Letter; and (G) Farisi Simple Bold. As can be observed (A) and (B) seems to be most felicitous subtitles whereas the subtitles in (C), (D), (E), (F) and (G) seems to be unobtrusive on the screen, with (D) seems to be only suitable for graffiti-scrawled house, rather than screen translation. Viewers are expected to exert much effort to recognise letters, words and sentences, thereby losing sight of the spirit of the SL intended message. In terms of visual representation, some fonts are easier to recognise than others. For example, (B) is more accessible than (F) and (G) which further need an educated audience.

Due to the fact that Arabic is cursive in nature, the fonts used in subtitles are often not of fixed width as shown in Figure 2. The word *da‘maka* (lit. ‘your support’; right column) and *hasan* (lit. ‘Hassan’; left column) are taken to illustrate the point.



Figure 2: Width of different fonts for two study items— *da‘maka* and *ḥasan*

The words in Figure 2 differ in width: the last letter ‘ك’ in ‘دعماك’ *da‘maka* in E (right column) is not proportional to other letters and lies beyond the hypothetical vertical lines drawn for the sake of illustration. The word ‘حسن’ *ḥasan* in F (left column) is about two millimeters far from the limit and *da‘maka* in G is one millimeter from the right limit. It ensues therefore that the subtitler is recommended to select a ‘condensed legible font’, e.g., Arabic Transparent as in A rather than Courier New as in E or illegible Diwani Letter in F, though it appears to be condensed.

Ill-Segmentation The fact that “on screen texts are read far less efficiently than printed texts” (Orero 2004: 151) makes segmentation an important factor for subtitling. “Even appropriate line breaks within a single subtitle can facilitate comprehension and increase reading speed if segmentation is done into noun or verb phrases, rather than smaller units of a sentence or clause” (Georgakopolou 2009: 24). Hence, arbitrarily broken subtitles are harmful for subtitle quality. Good segmentation is usually based on the production of neat syntactic and/or semantic units. On his part, Díaz-Cintas (2008: 60) states that “spotting and segmentation can also contribute to rendering the prosodic feel of a passage”. Consider the following examples:

(14) How can you justify your support for Hizbollah and its leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrullah?
 ’wadu ’an tubrira lana sababa da‘maka limunẓamati hizbi| il-lāh wa qāidiha smaḥiti iṣ-ṣayx Naṣrullah

BT: How can you justify your support for Hizbo| llah and its leader His Excellency Sheikh Hassan Nasrullah?

(15) The Hezbollah are a part of the Lebanese National Resistance.
 ’ina hizba allāh juzun min al-muqāwamati il-waṭanyyiah| il-lubnaniyyiah.

BT: The Hezbollah are a part of the Lebanese National| Resistance.

(16) ... who are kidnapped by Israel under the term of their illegal occupation of Lebanon.
 al-laḏīna ixtaṭafathum ’Isrā’īl minā| āraḏīhi tahta ḏarī’ati il-’iḥtilāl ghayr iṣ-ṣar’ai li-Lubnān .

BT: ... who are kidnapped by Israel| under the term of their illegal occupation of Lebanon.

(17) Israel has been invading and occupying Lebanon all of my 24 years of my daughter's life.

Laqad wāṣalat 'Isrā'il ghzwaha wa-| 'ihṭilāliha li-Lubnān 'ala madā 24 'āman wahwa 'umru ibnati.

BT: Israel has been invading and| occupying Lebanon all of my 24 years of my daughter's life.

In (14), the proper names should go together either in one-line subtitle or two-line subtitle so that the viewer can keep watching up. The subtitling student breaks *ḥizbi il-lāh* ('Hizbollah') into two items, i.e. *ḥizb* and *il-lāh* across the two-line subtitle. This might complicate the viewers' ability to read and comprehend the on-screen subtitles. In (15), the subtitling student made a decision to segment at the end of superfluous *waṭanyyah*, possibly complicating the job of the TL viewers, thus keeping a unit with semantic load is easy to read and comprehend as is the case in institutional integration, e.g. 'Hizbollah'. In (16), the hanging Arabic preposition might be "distractive", to use Chiaro et al's term (2008: 218). Finally, in (17), Arabic coordinating conjunction *wa* ('and') is split from noun phrase *'ihṭilāliha li-Lubnān* (lit. 'occupying of Lebanon'). In this respect, Chiaro et al. (ibid: 216) states that "determiner-head or pre-modifier-head splitting in noun phrases should [...] be reduced to a minimum."

Space Superfluity 'A space in need is a friend indeed' can be true for professional subtitlers. Every single space is highly needed for other communicative purposes, that is, when the subtitle is appropriately and adequately positioned on the screen, the possibility of nonverbal communication becomes high; the otherwise may cause serious alignment problems, and hence potential breakdown in communication. Consider (18) below:

(18) If there were some kind of war crime!

wa||ka||naha||j||arīmatu||h||arb.

BT: As if there was kind of war crime

In (18) above, the Show symbol ('||') displays unnecessary space which possibly irritates the reading speed of the TL viewers, and may cause alignment problems as is also shown in the Arabic subtitle (Figure 3 below).



Figure 3: Subtitle with superfluous spaces

However, the same subtitle is provided as shown in Figure 4 below, but with no superfluous spaces, thus paving the way for more potential comprehensibility.



Figure 4: Subtitle without superfluous spaces

Background It goes without saying that in subtitling a number of semiotic webs e.g., visual, auditory etc. adds to the overall meaning. The background should be transparent enough, lest it covers part of the scene. In Figure 5 below, the subtitling student seems to pay no attention to set the salient background, causing visual disturbances and blurred vision.

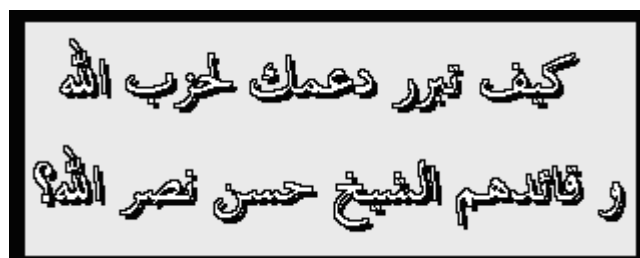


Figure 5: Opaque Background

Numbers for Letters A point yet to be explained is to reduce the text volume by means of using numbers in lieu of letter numbers whereby “lengthy word can be reduced to merely two characters” (Schwarz 2002, Fonts and Figures). Take (19) below:

(19) Israel has been invading and occupying Lebanon all of my 24 years of my daughter’s life.

’ina ’Isrā’īl mā zālat tahtilu Lubnān ṭwāl ’umri ’ibnati al-baligh arba’in wa ’iššrīna ‘āman.

BT: Israel is still occupying Lebanon all of my daughter’s life who is twenty four years.

The underlined TL letter numbers are too lengthy and Arabic numerals should be used because they are “easier to read” (Chen 2004: 119).

Short Line First Text distribution on the screen is of important as it eases legibility for the target viewers. In terms of subtitling conventions, short line may come first followed by longer one (see Schwarz 2002). Consider (20) below:

(20)

w’anti taṭlubīna minī ’an ’nduba tilka il-‘amalyyah
kma law kanat hnaka naw’un min jraim il-ḥarb

In (20), it is clear that such uneven subtitle seems to be difficult to read on account of ill-distribution. What follows is more or less well-distributed:

w’anti tatlubīna minī
’an ’nduba tilka il-‘amalyyah kma law kanat hnaka naw’un min jraim il-ḥarb

Synchronisation The norm was to synchronise the subtitles with the speech at the outset of AVT (see Ivarsson and Carroll 1998: 72). However, the norm has now changed as Karamitroglou (1998, Leading-in Time) remarks:

A simultaneously presented subtitle is premature, surprises the eye with its flash and confuses the brain for about 1/2 a second, while its attention oscillates

between the inserted subtitled text and the spoken linguistic material, not realising where it should focus.

Instead, Karamitroglou argues that the leading-in time should go in harmony with the beginning of the utterance (ibid). However, a one-fourth delay of a second later should be made “since tests have indicated that the brain needs 1/4 of a second to process the advent of spoken linguistic material and guide the eye towards the bottom of the screen anticipating the subtitle” (ibid). As for lagging-out time, Karamitroglou (ibid) also explains:

Subtitles should not be left on the image for more than two seconds after the end of the utterance, even if no other utterance is initiated in these two seconds. This is because subtitles are supposed to transfer the spoken text as faithfully as possible, in terms of both content and time of presentation and a longer lagging-out time would generate feelings of distrust toward the (quality of the) subtitles, since the viewers would start reflecting that what they have read might not have actually corresponded to what had been said, at the time it had been said.

As far as the sample of the study is concerned, most subtitling students encounter mis-synchronisation problems although they have been practicing subtitling of various movies, documentaries, interviews etc. for a considerable amount of time. As can be noted from the Show and Hide times in Table 1 below, the problem of synchronisation differences is clear. The students seem to have been unable to keep up with Mr. Galloway speaking in brogue.

| Subtitle | Show/Hide Time | Duration | Ch |
|---|-----------------------------|--------------|----|
| yandmu 'ilayna alān rajulun yatwājad 'inda as-siyyāḥ wa hwa y'ārīd 'ijtiyāḥ al-'irāq. | [00:00:06,070-00:00:07,691] | 00:00:01,621 | 60 |
| wa hwa y'ārīd 'ijtiyāḥ al-'irāq. | [00:00:08,323-00:00:10,788] | 00:00:02,465 | 23 |
| yandmu 'ilayna alān rajulun lā yaštahiru bil-wqūfi 'ala il- hiyād. | [00:00:10,971-00:00:13,029] | 00:00:04,000 | 48 |
| yandmu 'ilayna alān rajulun lā yaštahiru bil-wqūfi 'ala il- hiyād. | [00:00:10,971-00:00:13,029] | 00:00:02,765 | 49 |
| ḥayṪ 'arāḍa al-ghazwa 'ala il- 'irāq bišida. | [00:00:13,489-00:00:16,228] | 00:00:02,987 | 30 |

Table 1: Sync Differences in Students' Subtitling

The duration in subtitles (1), (4) and (5) is far less from typical time allowed for subtitle display on the screen— 3-6 seconds. This can be a reason beyond synchronisation problems in students' subtitling. A segment was left untranslated in (2). Perhaps, only subtitle (3) ensures synchrony with both the image and the dialogue.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

We should take cognisance of the fact that AVT is a discipline that is still need to be streamlined in the Arab World. Attempts are made to give subtitling students a jump-start at

American University, Yarmouk University and Al-Quds University, but the lifeline to job market is questionable, particularly in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

The foregoing analysis has shown that subtitling problems can be linguistic, cultural and/or technical as far as the current study is concerned. The task of the subtitler is fraught with peculiar perils. The sample of the study encounters several linguistic, cultural and technical problems, some of which are common to those addressed by Gamal (2008), e.g., deletion, font, etc. In order to ensure a subtitler-training programmes of good quality, (1) trainers should pay due attention to technical dimension so that synchronisation, segmentation problems, among others, can be reduced to a minimum; (2) subtitling students should be aware of how to deal with technological progress as the translator should not only be seen as bilingual and/or bicultural, but as 'translator plus' i.e., capable of keeping up with technology, among other things; (3) "the subtitle file is read by a native speaker without watching the video. This allows for easier identification of incoherence and mistakes in spellings or punctuation in the subtitle" (Orero 2004: 10); (4) the subtitling students seem to have been faced with discourse-related problems, perhaps due to nature of Subtitle Workshop interface which might distract the subtitlers' attention from focusing on the content of their translation. Obviously, there seems to be little room for the subtitling students to revise their translation by means of changing the Subtitle Workshop interface into video preview mode. Arguably, the problem of discourse can technically be solved by utilising video preview mode in the Movie menu whereby the screen disappears, and the subtitlers can read the whole translation smoothly. This would enable the subtitlers to spot cases of incoherent translations, spelling mistakes, format problems and synch mistakes; (5) the script is of paramount importance for the subtitlers to solve homophone problem. Möller (as cited in Schwarz 2002, Preparatory Stage) says: "[the] script can facilitate comprehension of the dialogue in the case of poor sound SL dialogue quality (particularly with older films) or unclear articulation." Interestingly, some scripts, like the one used in the present study, can be googled; (6) diacritics are crucial for speech recognition without which a breakdown in communication is expected; (7) salient transliteration is likely to come up with subtitles easy to read and comprehend, hence due attention to translator training on transliteration should be paid; (8) AVT should be in today's syllabus "because of its didactic potential, as an example of an exercise in translation" (Varela 2002: 2). Varela further argues, "it helps to develop creativity, [and] it quickly gives an insight into the margins of freedom that the translator has at his or her disposal" (ibid).

Notes:

1 Translated into Arabic as *Wadi al-Diab*, this popular Turkish TV series (part 3) was shown on Abu Dhabi TV in 2009.

2 Of which is Subtitle Workshop (version: 2.51) a subtitle programme which is available at: <<http://www.urusoft.net/download.php?id=sw>>. [Online] [cit. 30-11-2008].

3 Information available at: <www.internetworldstats.com/stats/.htm> (Cited in De Bortoli and Ortiz-Sotomayor 2009). [Online] [cit. 12-02-2010].

4 Available from 'The Subtitle Workshop Manual Subtitle Workshop (version: 2.51)'.

5 Characters are counted according to original Arabic rather than transcription.

6 Available online at: <http://www.erudit.org/recherche/meta/> [cit. 18-07-2010].

7. Available online at: http://aplicacionesua.cpd.ua.es/tra_int/usu/buscar.asp?idioma=en [cit. 18-07-2010].

8 The other Palestinian university is an-Najjah University.

9 Information about this undergraduate translation programme is available online at: <http://www.yu.edu.jo/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=138&Itemid=316>. [Online] [cit. 29-11-2009].

10 The interview is available online at: <<http://www.georgegalloway.com/>>. [Online] [cit. 30-09-2009].

11 BT is used where necessary to expound the TL subtitles (Arabic).

12 Other forms are possible as this form is inflicted for gender.

13 In this paper, an oblique line “|” (‘pipe’) represents a new subtitle line.

14 Hamas is an acronym of Islamic Resistance Movement, founded in 1987 by Sheikh Ahmad Yasin. Its ideology has been to resist against the Israeli occupation of Palestine which has been played up as an issue central to all Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims. From Hamas’s viewpoint, Jihad has become incumbent upon all Muslims. Self-scarifying Palestinian Jihad groups and freedom fighters have launched numerous bomb attacks in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, now known as the State of Israel.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank MA translation students at Al-Quds University for cooperation and fruitful in-class discussions which helped to bring the present article into being.

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In *SKASE Journal of Translation and Interpretation* [online]. 2011, vol. 5, no. 1 [cit. 2011-03-28]. Available on web page <http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/JTI05/pdf_doc/02.pdf>. ISSN 1336-7811.