

Subtitling At the Crossroads: the Subtitle's Context Challenging the Subtitling Practice?

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Abstract

The surge of new audiovisual genres such as reality shows has led to new challenges to subtitlers. New questions such as spotting and the translation of written information on the screen have emerged. This paper aims at highlighting the challenges posed by the complex nature of the subtitle's context to the subtitling practice. It sets to answer the following question: what is the effect of the subtitling strategies of culture bound terms on the quality of subtitle synchronization? It goes through qualitative analysis of authentic examples of subtitles from *The Moment of Truth* and cooking programmes on MBC4 and Fatafeat respectively, based on Pederson's typology (2011). The results showed a high-level of discrepancy between oral and written texts that could be easily detected by the viewers. Significantly, the complex nature of the subtitle's context is an emerging constraint on the subtitling practice.

Keywords: subtitling; technical constraints; linguistic constraints; cultural terms; synchrony

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Résumé

L'essor de nouveaux genres audiovisuels tels que les émissions de télé-réalité a conduit à de nouveaux défis pour les sous-titres. De nouvelles questions telles que le repérage et la traduction d'informations écrites à l'écran sont apparues. Cet article vise à mettre en évidence les défis posés par la nature complexe du contexte du sous-titrage à la pratique du sous-titrage. Il se propose de répondre à la question suivante : quel est l'effet des stratégies de sous-titrage des termes liés à la culture sur la qualité de la synchronisation des sous-titres ? Il passe par une analyse qualitative d'exemples authentiques de sous-titres de *The Moment of Truth* et d'émissions de cuisine sur MBC4 et Fatafeat respectivement, sur la base de la typologie de Pederson (2011). Les résultats ont montré un niveau élevé d'écart entre les textes oraux et écrits qui pouvait être facilement détecté par les téléspectateurs. De manière significative, la nature complexe du contexte du sous-titrage est une contrainte émergente sur la pratique du sous-titrage.

Mots clés: sous-titrage ; contraintes techniques ; contraintes linguistiques ; termes culturels ; synchronie.

ملخص

أدى ظهور أنواع جديدة من البرامج السمعية البصرية كبرامج الواقع إلى ظهور تحديات جديدة للمترجمين، حيث ظهرت تحديات تخص التزامن وترجمة المعلومات المكتوبة على الشاشة. تحاول الدراسة الإجابة على السؤال التالي: ما تأثير استراتيجيات عنونة أو سترجة العبارات الثقافية على نوعية "التزامن" المحصل عليه. تقوم الدراسة بتحليل نوعي لأمثلة حقيقية من برنامج "الحظة الحقيقة" و برامج الطبخ على MBC و Fatafeat على التوالي، اعتمادا على تصنيف بيديرسون (2011). وقد بينت النتائج مستوى عال من عدم الانسجام بين النص الشفاهي والنص المكتوب في هذه البرامج. أما أهم ما توصل إليه البحث فهو أن الطبيعة المعقدة لسباق العنوان هي واحدة من الاكراهات المستجدة للعنونة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عنونة ؛ اكراهات تقنية ؛ اكراهات لغوية ؛ اكراهات ثقافية ؛ تزامن،

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I- Introduction :

Audiovisual translation seems to be one of the most prevalent forms of translation in everyday life in contemporary societies due to its reaching of a high number of people, crossing to other cultures and its immediate reception. Subtitling, in particular, is expected to play a more important role in society as it is a less money and time consuming enterprise than dubbing, for instance (Diaz-Cintas, 2004).

Despite the enormous impact audiovisual translation has on society, little research has been undertaken in the field and subtitling is an under researched topic in translation studies (Abdelaal, 2019). As far as the subtitling of culture-specific terms between English and Arabic is concerned, two recent studies can be cited: Abdelaal (2019) assessing the quality of subtitling culture-specific terms of an English movie into Arabic and Thawabteh et al (2022) assessing the quality of subtitling Arabic profanities of an Arabic movie into English. The results unveiled the strategies used by the subtitlers and the challenges posed to them, which were mainly cultural.

This paper highlights, rather, the challenges posed by the complex nature of the subtitle's context to the subtitling practice. It tries to answer the following question: what is the effect of the subtitling strategies of culture bound terms on the quality of subtitle synchronization? It qualitatively analyzes authentic examples of subtitles, from 'The Moment of Truth' and other cooking programmes on MBC4 and Fatafeat, to highlight their synchrony or non-synchrony with the original text- in both- the oral and the written forms. What is important, here, is the specificity of such a kind of programmes which employ oral language (in the form of a question) in addition to the written script of this question in the original language (in the form of screenshot) and the subtitle (in the bottom of the TV screen): the oral utterance, its written form and the written subtitle, all synchronizing at the same time. This specificity of the audiovisual programme imposes an additional limitation on the subtitling practice.

I.1. What is Subtitling?

Petit (2004, p. 26) defined subtitling as "transpos(ing) spoken dialogue into written text in the form of one or two lines in the bottom of the screen"

In a more explained manner, Cintas (2010, 03) stated:

"subtitling consists in rendering in writing the translation into a TL of the original dialogue exchanges uttered by the different speakers, as well as of allover verbal information that is transmitted visually (letters, banners, inserts) or aurally(lyrics,voicesoff)".

Subtitling is to be seen as a supplement to the original programme, that remains intact (Cintas, 2010, 03).

I. 2. Components of the Audiovisual Programme

The audiovisual message, in fact, has different component ranging from verbal and non verbal information, to expressed and inferred meanings, and to a rise in intonation and gestures accompanying the utterance (Petit, 2004). These components interact to produce a final message. The subtitle in an audiovisual programme is supposed to be an *additive* component that should *preserve* the authenticity of the message and *synchronize* with the AV programme's other basic components: sound and image.

I. 3. Subtitling Constraints

I.3.1. Spatial Constraints

Subtitles are pushed off to the bottom of the screen, unless the physiological conditions of the language or the setting interfere. The maximum number of characters including signs is 39 for Roman languages (35 for the Arabic language) for professional subtitling. Internet subtitling goes far beyond that maximum number due to technical development (Cintas, 2012).

For Cintas (2012), the spatial constraint is the one that shapes the translation process the most, since both the physical limitations of the screen and the good practice of avoiding to obscure the picture must be taken into consideration.

I.3.2. Temporal Constraints

Subtitles should be timed in a way to be synchronous with the utterances. According to Cintas (2012), the synchronization process, also known as spotting, cueing, timing or originating, is the main factor in subtitle appreciation. It has to consider the rhythm of the programme, interruption,...and other prosodic features of the original speech (Cintas, 2012). The maximum exposure time of a two lines subtitle of approximately 80 characters is six seconds, despite the different reading abilities of the audience. The reading speed of the audience can, in fact, be conditioned by vocabulary complexity and the distribution channel with TV catering for lower reading speed audiences; and cinema and DVD catering for higher reading speed audiences.

The temporal constraints derive from four aspects as summarized by Zojer (2011):

- The amount of text to be translated
- The average reading speed of the viewers, which is usually from 150 to 180 words per minute, varies according to the quantity and complexity of the linguistic information, the manner in which the text is presented, the subject matter of the program and the type of visual information.
- The constant interval between subtitles ranges from a maximum of 6 seconds for two lines subtitles (to avoid duplicate reading) to a minimum of 1.5 seconds for the shortest subtitle (to avoid a flashing effect).
- The need for synchronicity.

Due to space and time restrictions, the subtitler makes decisions - on a very selective basis- of what to keep in and what to leave out and this turns him into an editor. According to Zojer (2011, p. 399), The spatial and temporal constraints “place special demands on the subtitler as (s)he has to negotiate the screen space available for the subtitle text, the time available for and between subtitle exposures, the timing of subtitle insertion and removal and the display and format of the subtitles”.

I.3.3 Linguistic Constraints

The lack of research on the specific and complex linguistic/translational issues involved in subtitling is, according to Zojer (2011), due to the fact that the latter has not been yet accepted as a proper translation.

According to Cintas (2012), the subtitle is expected to be semantically adequate to the original dialogue within the confines of the spatial and temporal specifications, and thus it can be reduced. Cintas (2012) named two types of reduction: partial reduction or condensation and total reduction or deletion. As a general rule, subtitlers should keep relevant information and avoid redundancy via considering iconic information. He further added that there is a challenge to reduction which ‘derives from this concurrent presence of the original soundtrack and the subtitles... as any ‘obvious’ discrepancies between oral and written texts could be detected by the viewers’ (Cintas, 2013, p. 277). He suggested, As a solution to this discrepancy, He suggested keeping similar words and following the syntactic structure of the source text.

The subtitle is expected, as well, to be a cohesive unit in itself and coherent with other subtitles. For this, Cintas (2013) proposed structuring subtitles to be semantically and syntactically self-contained.

According to Cintas (2012), there is a surge of new audiovisual genres (with spontaneous rather than ‘prefabricated’ orality) such as reality shows for instance. In these genres, new linguistic intricacies, new questions regarding spotting and the translation of written information on screen might arise, and for which it is inappropriate to apply traditional subtitling standards. Likewise, swear words and taboo expressions are more offensive when written and they tend to be systematically deleted and down-toned in the subtitles (Cintas, 2012). Cintas (2012) thinks that literal renditions are more common to avoid “any clashes between soundtrack/images and written text”.

I.4. Synchronization and the Nature of the AV Programme

The synchronization of the subtitle with the utterance, already conditioned by spatial considerations, can be further complicated by other factors such as the characteristics of the AV programme. Reality shows, like ‘the Moment of Truth’ for instance, are characterized by supplying written questions in the original language on a large screen, which would inevitably coincide with the supplying of the subtitle in the translation on bottom of the screen and the sound/ or the oral reading of the subtitles on the background. Thence, a non adequate rendition or a reduction of an element of the subtitle can be easily detected by the viewers. Likewise, the rendering of a cultural term- be it through literal translation or cultural equivalent- would be detected by the viewers. Put differently, these reality shows employ oral language in the form of questions, the written script of these questions in the original language in the form of screenshots and the subtitle in the bottom of the TV screen. This allows for a greater visibility of the content of the questions: the oral utterances, their written form and the written subtitles, all synchronizing at the same moment. This obviously calls for greater attention to the subtitling strategy being used. Below is a table representing a screen shot from a TV programme: The Moment of Truth.

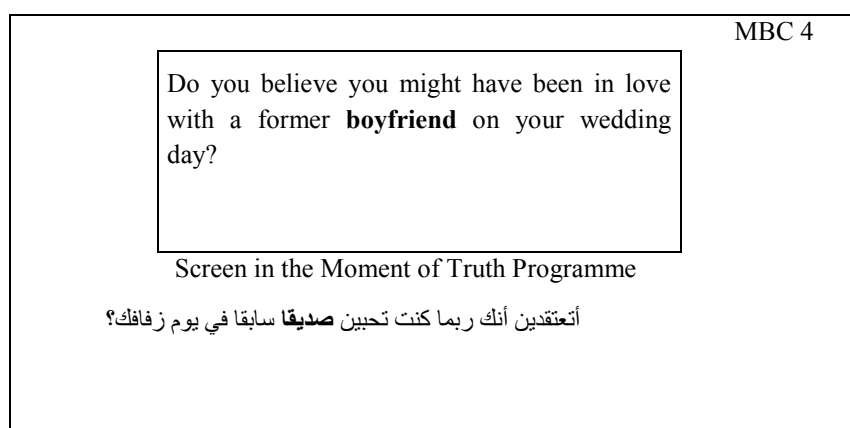


Table 1: A Representation of a Screen Shot of the TV Programme The Moment of Truth.

An added complication arises from the fact that these programmes’ dialogues comprise culture-bound terms, which are very problematic in subtitling.

I.5. Subtitle Synchronization and the Rendering of Cultural References

Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007) use the expression culture-bound terms to refer to cultural references and propose six strategies for translating cultural references or cultural bound terms in subtitles. These strategies are: transposition where ST cultural items are subtitled into equivalent TT cultural concepts, calque or literal translation,

explicitation, cultural adaptation, generalizations and loan. Cintas (2012) summarized the subtitling strategies of cultural references as ranging from “literal renditions” to “complete recreations”. The translation process of cultural references in general, but in subtitling in particular, the translator has to decide between either amending the reference to fit foreign target audiences or leaving it untouched. Spanish subtitlers for instance exemplify the first category; whereas Flemish and Dutch subtitlers exemplify the second category, which becomes more popular in Italian and Spanish, raising issues regarding comprehensibility (Diaz-Cintas & Remael 2007: 205).

Pederson (2005) similarly suggests official equivalent, retention, specification, explicitation, addition, direct translation, generalization, substitution and omission. Pedersen (2011), latter, classified them into ST-oriented strategies which are: retention, specification and direct translation and TT-oriented strategies, which are: generalization, substitution and omission. Nedergaard-Larsen (1993) (as cited in Abdelaal, 2019), for instance, offers strategies ranging from verbatim transfer (through culturally neutral explicitation and paraphrase) to target language adaptation.

According to Zojer, the few studies on cultural references in subtitles are interested in categorizing different translational approaches to specific cultural items. These studies are misleading because they suggest that cultural references in subtitles do not differ from cultural references in texts.

Ramire (2006) in Zojer (2011) questions the possibility of observing any consistency in these strategies and argues that a more pragmatic approach to the study of cultural transfer in audio-visual translation is needed.

For Zojer (2011), due to the technical restrictions (in addition to the fact that spoken language is transcribed into written text, the extreme editing of the original speech and the fact that the subtitle is added on to the picture) the study of cultural references in subtitles should be approached to establish shifts in how cultural references have been translated so far.

In an article Zojer (2011), stated that he “will attempt to describe the special translation processes involved in subtitling by investigating its technical restraints and restrictions which make the translation of cultural references within subtitles particularly challenging”. For Zojer (2011), the trend is of leaving the cultural references untouched. These references could, among other things, measure cultural exchange.

This study aims to assess the effect of the subtitling strategy on the quality of synchronization. Theoretically speaking, TL subtitling strategies are to engender a high level discrepancy. Thus, the research question is what is the effect of the subtitling strategies of culture bound terms in reality shows and other AV programmes on the quality of subtitle synchronization?

Theoretically speaking, TL subtitling strategies might engender a **high level discrepancy** and thus might negatively affect the quality of synchronization; while SL strategies might engender **low level discrepancy** and thus might have positive effects on synchronization.

I.6. Subtitling Quality Assessment

According to Bittner (2011), it is very difficult to assess the quality of translation in general and the subtitles in particular. He mentioned six factors that affect the quality of subtitles, which are: text form, culture, translator, source text (ST), politics and client. He added that translation quality should be viewed in terms of more or less appropriate, from the perspective of its readers or viewers.

In this regard, Gottlieb (2001) argues that to assess the quality of a certain subtitling, the translation of each verbal segment of a film must be analyzed in terms of its stylistic and semantic values.

Pedersen (2017) proposes a quality assessment model which he calls FAR: stands for “Functional equivalence (do the subtitles convey speaker meaning?); Acceptability (do the subtitles sound correct and natural in the target language?); and Readability (can the subtitles be read in a fluent and non-intrusive way?).”(p.210). These are based on an error analysis typology. Errors are classified into ‘minor (can go unnoticed), ‘standard’ (ruin the subtitles) or ‘serious’ errors (affect the subtitles to come), with their respective proposed scores 0.25, 0.5, and 1.

For the purposes of this study, the subtitles are to be assessed according to the quality of subtitle semantic synchronization. A three level scale of discrepancy, based on Pederson’s (2017) error analysis typology: minor discrepancy (unnoticed discrepancy), standard discrepancy (affect the meaning) and serious discrepancy (affect the reaction to the meaning)

II– Methods and Materials :

The selected AV programmes are:

1- An American “game show” on MBC4: The moment of truth (the episode of 29th of August, 2013) which is originally:

‘an [American game show](#) based on the [Colombian Nada más que la verdad](#) format (“Nothing but the Truth”). Contestants answer a series of 21 increasingly personal and embarrassing questions to receive cash prizes’.

[https://www.wikiwand.com/en/The_Moment_of_Truth_\(American_game_show\)](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/The_Moment_of_Truth_(American_game_show))

2- An English cooking programme on Fatafeat: an episode on the ‘Cowboy hash’ حلقة طبخ رعاة البقر and an episode on the ‘Chocolate cloud cake’.

The choice of these programmes for the purposes of the study was for the following reasons:

-First, a personal experience with an English cooking programme on Fatafeat triggered interest in the research. In this programme, I detected a very ‘clear’ discrepancy between the oral, the visual and written texts: as the viewer can hear and see the mentioned ingredient with its subtitle.

-Second, the game show offered a different programme type with the same potential for discrepancy/non discrepancy between the oral, visual and the written text: as the viewer could hear and see simultaneously the original and the subtitled text, providing a very rich material for the research.

-Third, the availability of the subtitled versions on Youtube is an opportunity to investigate this techno-cultural aspect of subtitling.

The procedure used to detect and analyze the data is the following:

1-Watch the selected episodes from the two programmes on Fatafeat and MBC4 respectively and manually detect cultural words.

2- Explore the Arabic subtitles produced by Fatafeat and MBC4 to examine how the cultural words were translated.

3-Identify the kind of discrepancy found between the original text and the subtitle

4-Classify the discrepancy on a three scale level: low level of discrepancy (unnoticed discrepancy), middle-level discrepancy (affect the meaning) and high-level discrepancy (affect the reaction to the meaning) (explained in previous section on Subtitling Quality Assessment).

5-Propose theoretical and /or practical implications for the subtitling practice.

III. Results and discussion:

The First example:

Programme Title	Original oral text	Subtitled text
حلقة طبق رعاة البقر، تقديم أنابيل لانغابين 2013	½ cup of red wine vinegar Min: 02:26	نصف كوب من خل العنب الأحمر

Table 1: the Subtitling of **Red Wine Vinegar**

Western TV channel, based in Dubai- in the episode titled in Arabic:

II- حلقة طبق رعاة البقر، تقديم أنابيل لانغابين 2013-

the chef enumerates ingredients such as 'red wine vinegar' which is rendered in the Arabic subtitle as 'خل العنب الأحمر'

which means in English: 'red grape vinegar'. In this particular case, the word 'wine' was substituted by the word 'grape' giving the viewer the impression that the vinegar is made of 'red grape' and not 'red wine'. Despite the difference between the two types of vinegar, the word 'grape' could in a given way act as a camouflage for the word 'wine', which is prohibited in the middle eastern Islamic culture. Not only the viewers can hear the expression 'red wine vinegar', but they can also see the chef pouring wine from a typical wine bottle. This produces a 'high-level discrepancy' between the oral text and the image of the wine bottle on the one side and the written subtitle in the programme on the other side.

The Second Example:

Programme Title	Original oral text	Subtitled text
Chocolate Cloud Cake- Nigella Bites	It is mostly to be stirred with a little bit of Whisky Min: 01:15	بمزجها مع بعضها ومع القليل من المشروب

Table 2: Subtitling of **Whisky**

In another English cooking programme- in the episode titled: Chocolate Cloud Cake-Nigella Bites- the chef used the direct name "Whisky" which was rendered in Arabic as 'المشروب'. This is another case where the viewers can hear the word whisky and see the typical whisky bottle while reading the word مشروب, which means 'drink'. This produces a 'high-level discrepancy' between the oral text and the image of the Whisky bottle on the one side and the written subtitle in the programme on the other side.

The Third Example:

Programme Title	Original oral text	Subtitled text
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Chocolate Cloud Cake- Nigella Bites	The cake I did for my New Year's Eve last year Min: 02:33	أعددت كعكة البودينغ العام الماضي لتناولها بعد العشاء
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Table 3 Subtitling of **New Year's Eve**

In the same English cooking programme- in the episode titled: Chocolate Cloud Cake- Nigella Bites- the chef talked about making a cake for the “New Year Eve” which was rendered in Arabic as لتناولها بعد العشاء , meaning ‘after dinner’. The specific cultural occasion was replaced by the general time reference ‘after dinner’. This produces a ‘high-level discrepancy’ between the oral text and the written subtitle in the programme.

The Fourth Example:

Programme Title	Original oral text	Subtitled text
Chocolate Cloud Cake- Nigella Bites	With a little bit of Cointreau For this you can use rum ... , the delicious Kahlua Min: 04:55	مع القليل من الشراب يمكن استعمال أي مشروب آخر

Table 4: Subtitling of **Cointreau, Rum and Kahlua**

In the same English cooking programme- in the episode titled: Chocolate Cloud Cake- Nigella Bites- the chef talked about a specific French alcoholic drink “Cointreau” which was rendered in Arabic as الشراب , meaning ‘the drink’. The viewers can hear the word Cointreau and see the typical wine bottle while reading the word الشراب. This produces a ‘high-level discrepancy’ between the oral text and the written subtitle in the programme. Two other types of wine were mentioned “rum” and “kahlua”, which were reduced to ‘any other drink’ in the subtitle.

The Fifth Example

Programme Title	Original oral text	Subtitled text
The Moment of Truth	Do you secretly stay in touch with any boyfriends that your husband does not know about Min: 01:55	هل أنت على اتصال سري بأي من الأصدقاء السابقين دون علم زوجك؟

Table 5: Subtitling of **Boyfriends**

On switching to ‘The Moment of Truth’, an English entertainment programme on MBC4, one of the programmes questions was ' Do you secretly stay in touch with any boyfriends that your husband does not know about '. this question was rendered in Arabic as هل أنت على اتصال سري بأي من الأصدقاء السابقين دون علم زوجك؟ (do you secretly stay in touch with any previous friends that your husband does not know about?). In the Arabic subtitle, the word ‘boyfriend’ was replaced by ‘friend’

because the Arab audience would not accept the notion of having boyfriend in general, and that of a boyfriend of a married woman, specifically. As the viewers can hear the word 'boyfriend' in the original question, and can see the word simultaneously appearing on the screen with the subtitle in Arabic containing the word 'friends' instead, and most importantly can hear the audience yelling at the guest, this produces a complex 'high-level discrepancy': if the viewers miss the discrepancy between 'boyfriend' and 'أصدقاء', then they would not miss the discrepancy between the subtitle أصدقاء and the yelling of the audience since the yelling will not be justified in this case.

The Sixth Example:

Programme Title	Original oral text	Subtitled text
The Moment of Truth	Do you believe you might have been in love with a former boyfriend on your wedding day? Min: 05:26	أتعتقدين أنك ربما كنت تحبين صديقا سابقا في يوم زفافك؟

Table 6: Subtitling of **Boyfriend**

In the same episode of the 'The Moment of Truth', an English entertainment programme on MBC4, another question was 'Do you believe you might have been in love with a former **boyfriend** on your wedding day?'. This question was rendered in Arabic as 'أتعتقدين أنك ربما كنت تحبين صديقا سابقا في يوم زفافك؟' (Do you believe you might have been in love with a former **friend** on your wedding day). In the Arabic subtitle, the word 'boyfriend' was replaced by 'friend'. The Arab audience, in this case, would not accept the idea that woman can think of loving her boyfriend on her wedding day. As the viewers can hear the word 'boyfriend' in the original question simultaneously appearing on the screen with the Arabic subtitle containing the word 'friends' instead, and most importantly can hear the audience yelling at the guest, this produces a complex 'high-level discrepancy': if the viewers miss the discrepancy between 'boyfriend' and 'صديق', then they would not miss the discrepancy between the subtitle and the yelling of the audience since the yelling will not be justified in this case.

The Seventh Example:

Programme Title	Original oral text	Subtitled text
The Moment of Truth	As an adolescent, have you ever taken a nude picture of yourself? Min:	كمراهق, هل سبق أن أخذت صورة لنفسك؟

Table 7: Subtitling of **Boyfriend**

In another episode of the programme, the following question was asked:

As an adolescent, have you ever taken a nude picture of yourself? This question was rendered in the Arabic subtitle as 'كمراهق, هل سبق أن أخذت صورة لنفسك?' (As an adolescent, have you ever taken a picture of yourself). In the Arabic subtitle, the word 'nude' was omitted. The Arab audience, in this case, would not accept the idea that someone takes a 'nude' picture of himself. As the viewers can hear the word 'nude' in the original question simultaneously appearing on the screen with the Arabic subtitle where the

word nude was omitted, and most importantly can hear the audience yelling at the guest, this produces a complex ‘high-level discrepancy’: if the viewers miss the discrepancy between ‘a nude picture’ and صورة, then they would not miss the discrepancy between the subtitle صورة and the yelling of the audience since the yelling will not be justified in this case, as well.

In all these cases, a ‘serious discrepancy’ between the oral and the visual components of the AV programme is noticed.

IV- Conclusion:

In the theoretical discussion of the nature and the basic characteristics of subtitling, as well as the analytical discussion of authentic practices of subtitling in two famous programmes on Fatafeat and MBC4, the real life challenges of subtitling in terms of ‘high-level discrepancy’ between the oral and the visual components of the AV programme are highlighted. Programmes with high visibility of the content such as The Moment of Truth (a reality show where the original written text and the subtitle simultaneously appear on a screen, together with the oral component) and Fatafeat (a cooking programme where the image -a bottle of wine, for instance-and the subtitle appear simultaneously with the oral component) both allow for a high level discrepancy, when TT-oriented strategies are employed. The discussion tried to account for the rendering of cultural references in subtitles from a purely ‘technical’ perspective: the perspective of ‘oral-visual discrepancy’. We would claim that far from the cultural discussions of ‘TT-oriented strategies’ or ‘ST-oriented strategies’ and the role of agency in the subtitling industry, the subtitle presents itself, in these kinds of programmes, as inherently an ‘intercultural communication mode’ par excellence. Further research is called to back up this practical finding.

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