

Lost Found in Subtitling Culture-bound References in Subtitled YouTube Videos

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Abstract: Translation has always been prone to debate, on the one hand, and an indispensable intercultural activity, on the other. With the advent of technology and state-of-the-art inventions, translation could not help but to be a part of the massive globalization wave. New forms of translation come of age; audiovisual translation, that is. It is essentially associated with technology and media. This paper sheds light on subtitling practice as a type of audiovisual translation, henceforth AVT.

This paper also aims at investigating how subtitling deals with culture-bound references in YouTube videos through manifold heuristic strategies. It highlights the discrepancies of source and target languages, namely in terms of cultural implications, all while keeping in mind the strict norms sine qua non to subtitling practice.

Keywords: audiovisual translation; subtitling; culture-bound references; strategies.

ملخص: لطالما كانت الترجمة محل جدل من جهة، ونشاطا تواصليا ثقافيا لا يمكن الاستغناء عنه من جهة أخرى. ومع الاختراعات المتطورة والتقدم الذي أحرزته التكنولوجيا، أثبتت الترجمة إلا الانضمام لموجة العولمة العارمة، فظهرت أشكال جديدة منها كالترجمة السمعية البصرية التي ترتبط ارتباطا وثيقا بالتكنولوجيا ووسائل الإعلام. ونسلط الضوء في هذا المقال على العنونة باعتبارها نوعا من أنواع الترجمة السمعية البصرية.

ويهدف هذا المقال من جهة أخرى إلى تحري كيفية تعامل العنونة مع الإحالات المرتبطة بالثقافة في فيديوهات يوتيوب من خلال استراتيجيات مختلفة، ويركز على التباينات بين اللغة المصدر واللغة الهدف خاصة فيما يتعلق بالمضامين الثقافية، وذلك طبعا دون نسيان الشروط الصارمة الأساسية لمهنة العنونة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الترجمة السمعية البصرية؛ العنونة؛ الإحالات المرتبطة بالثقافة؛ استراتيجيات

1. Introduction : Translating, as it is, proves to be one of the most difficult intellectual tasks to perform, mainly if one takes into account and targets linguistic or extralinguistic phenomena related to culture. These phenomena go far beyond the letter to a realm of societal attitudes, behaviors and conventions. Despite a plethora of translation theories and translation techniques which one believes would facilitate translation tasks, translators still encounter multiple difficulties and challenges when rendering to the target language (TL) and target culture (TC) certain expressions or concepts that are intrinsically interwoven in the source language (SL) and source culture (SC). The issue seems to be yet even more troublesome for subtitlers due to the multi-faceted nature of subtitling profession and the strict norms governing its practice.

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AVT is associated with media and screens; i.e. all that is audible and visual. AVT has three main forms: dubbing which is popular for soap operas and series, voice-over that is used largely in documentaries and, last but not least, subtitling which is most common for movies. The first two types (dubbing and voice-over) are classified as audio translation and the third type (subtitling) is considered as a visual translation.

Subtitling is both a human and an automated form of translational activity; it merges the talents of an entire team of professionals and the advanced technologies of sophisticated software. Through this study, I will endeavor to see if linguistic culture-bound references can be rendered in subtitling, and if so, what strategies are used in the process.

2. What is Subtitling? According to Diaz-Cintas (2012), subtitling is defined as follows:

... a translation practice that consists of rendering in writing, usually at the bottom of the screen, the translation into a target language of the original dialogue exchanges uttered by different speakers, as well as all other verbal information that appears written on screen (letters, banners, inserts) or is transmitted aurally in the soundtrack (song lyrics, voices off). (p.274)

Linguistically speaking, subtitling can further be divided into two distinct branches (Betz, 2020):

2.1. Intra-linguistic subtitles which include subtitling for the deaf and hard-of-hearing (SDH) and audio description for the blind and the visually impaired; they are the written titles of the verbal exchanges and other ambient sounds in the source material.

2.2. Inter-linguistic subtitles or subtitling proper; are the translation of oral source utterances into written target titles on a screen.

According to Jakobson's (1959) threefold classification of translation, subtitling registers as an *interlingual translation* since it obviously entails a transfer from source language to target language, and as an *intersemiotic translation* in the sense that it involves a transmutation between different sets of semiotic systems; from oral to written and from audio to visual.

In the same arena, Gottlieb (1994) elucidates that while translation and interpretation are one-dimensional horizontal forms of bi-lingual communication, subtitling is a two-dimensional vertical or diagonal form of bi-lingual communication (p.104); that is to say, translation and interpretation are performed within the same mode of expression; from written text to written text or from oral utterance to oral utterance respectively. On the other hand, subtitling is carried out from oral utterance to written text. The common trait is that they all are bi-lingual forms of communication which implies the presence of two languages source and target, and in some less common cases, even more than one target language.

3. Journey to the (Bottom) Center of the Screen!

In the 'silent era' and before having their current image, subtitles started in a different form and with slightly different name; the titles were displayed separately on a black background right after the scene in view; hence, the name 'intertitles' since they were portrayed between the shots or the scenes, not simultaneously at the bottom

of the screen (Betz, 2020). With the advent of the ‘talkies’ and the proliferation of photography and films across the globe, the need for ‘translated dialogues’ became more and more urgent. Great advances have been made thanks to computer technologies, the internet, DVD, and subtitling software.

Subtitling now can be regarded as a form of computer-aided translation (CAT) which is strictly supervised and carefully refined by human intervention.

Some of the most important stages (*Ibid.*) that subtitling practice went through include:

- 1895: Louis Lumière invents the cinematographe leading to the start of the motion picture era.
- Silent movies (famous character: Charlie Chaplin)
- Displaying intertitles between shots.
- 1927: talking movies or “talkies” begin to gain momentum.
- With the presence of voices and intertitles, the need for translation arose specially when distributing movies abroad.
- 1930: Leiv Erikson inserts subtitles for the first time in the filmstrip using the emulsion technique.
- 1988: Laser beams are used in cinema to whiten the emulsion of the film resulting in HD quality.
- With the advent of computer technologies, subtitles are automatically inserted into the AV materials by means of time codes or templates.

4. “Subtitling, Constrained Translation” In the subtitling business, temporal synchrony with the utterances; also called spotting or cueing (Diaz-Cintas, 2012, p.275) is of crucial importance; the subtitles have to be displayed at the same time of the shot and soundtrack, neither before nor after, and they should also stay on the screen for a limited period of time before disappearing to avoid distraction, screen overcrowding and second readings; otherwise, they would spoil the whole watching experience. Diaz-Cintas puts it this way, “the spotting of the dialogue has to mirror the rhythm of the programme and the delivery of the speakers, and be mindful of pauses, interruptions and any other prosodic features that characterize the original speech.” (*Ibid.*).

Space is also a constant impediment to subtitles. Conventionally, only two lines should appear on the screen, and a standard of 70 characters (words + space + punctuation marks) should be portrayed in a span of six seconds. Consequently, this leaves very little room for subtitles to fit in all of the linguistic and non-linguistic content of the AV material. It is, in fact, a double-sided hurdle since two lines are not always enough to accommodate all the original content, and if one exceeds the two lines, it would overcrowd the screen, it would outdo the viewers’ reading capacity, and it would distract them from watching the action on the screen.

In the era of the internet, new practices allow the existence of the two types of subtitles at the very same time; some audiovisual materials display intralingual subtitles (or captions in American English) *i.e.* the description of the dialogue as heard in the source language in parallel with interlingual subtitles *i.e.* the translation of the dialogue in the target language. In case the viewers are polyglots and multilingualism is a part of their cultural identity, other forms allow the exhibition of subtitles in two different target languages so as to cover the linguistic range of the viewers. However,

it is rather unpractical and visually disturbing since the subtitles take much space in the screen and overcrowd the scenes.

5. Subtitling Standards: Karamitroglou (1997) suggests a set of subtitling standards for unifying subtitles across Europe. These standards can be applied to Roman languages such as French and English, and could be projected on to languages like Arabic; however, not much research has been conducted in this particular area to tackle Arabic language peculiarities. Karamitroglou's standards essentially cover the technical aspect of the profession and are sectioned into five main clusters.

5.1. General Aim: Subtitles should be as legible and readable as possible to meet viewers' expectations and cater to their needs.

5.2. Spacial Parameter: A two-liner consisting of no more than 70 characters (counting letters, punctuation marks and space) is the norm in the business. The subtitles should be centered horizontally at the bottom of the screen. For Roman languages, the subtitles are typically in a pale white Arial or Helvetica font, and sometimes, they are introduced in a black box or a grey box so as to be illegible for the viewers in case there is light at the foot of the screen in a particular scene, or in case there are other transcriptions or signs (Karamitroglou, 1994; Diaz-Cintas, 2012,).

With amateur subtitling on the rise, other colors like yellow or green are used in video subtitling on the internet. Some languages, like Japanese, display vertical subtitles on the left side of the screen (Diaz-Cintas, 2012, p.274.). Arabic language displays centered subtitles which read naturally from right to left, and it generally abides by the standards applied to European languages.

5.3. Temporal Parameter: Six seconds is the time allocated for the two lines to be displayed on the screen in order to accommodate to the average viewer's reading abilities. $\frac{1}{4}$ second should be the lapse between the oral utterance and the visual subtitles for it allows the brain to signal the eye to track and process the lines. Subtitles must not stay on the screen for more the two seconds after the end of the utterance to avoid second reading and to be faithful to the original content's rhythm and 'thematic change'.

5.4. Punctuation and Letter Case: Punctuation marks in subtitling generally abide by the same rules in printing. Attached to the last character space afterwards, the dot indicates the end of the sentence while the sequence dots signal a consecutive line in the next shots. Dashes are inserted at the beginning of oral exchanges (dialogue) with a space character afterward, but hyphens are inserted between words with no space insertion before nor after. Question marks and exclamation marks are inserted like in printed material. Round parentheses and square brackets are used when explanatory content is added to the subtitles. Single quotation marks are used to hold alleged information and double quotation marks are used for quoted content. Colons and semicolons, just like in printing, are used to indicate a brief pause. Italics are used for off-screen voices or for foreign language use. Italics within quotation marks are used for off-screen public voice like TV or radio or for song lyrics. Upper case and lower case are used like in printed material. Bold font and underline are not allowed in subtitling.

5.5. Target Text Editing

- Subtitles should opt for two short lines rather than one long line.

- Segmentation of sentences should be at the highest nodes of the syntactic tree.
- Subtitles should seek to synchronize subtitles with utterances as much as possible.
- Omission is inevitable not just for space-and-time constraints, but also to allow the viewer to watch the action on the screen.
- Subtitles should choose syntactic structures that allow meaning conveyance with the least number of characters to avoid unnecessary space consumption in the screen.

If Karamitroglou's standards are more technically inclined, Carroll and Ivarsson (1998) propose a similar less detailed but more comprehensive 'code of good subtitling practice' which is divided into two sections; the first section covers subtitle spotting and translation and the second section deals with technical aspects. The first set urges subtitles to provide good-quality subtitles in terms of translating linguistic and cultural aspects and in terms of faithfulness to the original's rhythmic pace. The second set focuses on font and contouring, subtitle position, number of characters and time adaptation.

6. Subtitling Strategies of Extralinguistic Culture-bound References: Translation wise and generally speaking, Venuti (as cited in Baker, 2005, p.240) claims that the choice of transfer strategy depends significantly on "domestic cultural situations". Accordingly, Pedersen (2005) puts forward a set of subtitling strategies for what he termed *extralinguistic culture-bound references ECR*. These strategies can also apply for linguistic culture-bound references, and they have been classified into two main branches based on Venuti's *foreignization* and *domestication* dichotomy. Pedersen, in his own right, used the expressions '*ST oriented*' to replace foreignization strategies and '*TT oriented*' to refer to domestication strategies (pp.03-09).

6.1. Official Equivalent: Official equivalents are tailor-made solutions to certain translation situations and these solutions are chosen by people in a position of power. Politics, ideologies and high institutions play the 'decision-maker' role here, yet the factors behind the choice of a certain equivalent to the expense of another is a matter of debate and a rich area of research.

6.2. Retention: Retention entails rendering both form and content of the ST as faithfully as possible. The retained ECR is written in italic font or inside quotation marks to make it stand out.

6.3. Specification: This strategy provides supplementary information that is not mentioned in the ST to specify and explain the ST ECR to the target audience. It can occur in two forms:

6.3.1. Explicitation: bringing out the unsaid in the ST like spelling acronyms.

6.3.2. Addition: giving additional content to help the audience see the whole picture in case of connotations or ambiguities.

6.4. Direct Translation: Being in the middle ground between the two extremes (SL oriented translation strategies and TL oriented translation strategies), direct translation endeavors to render the ST ECR's meaning but without addition or omission of information in the TT. It can also occur in two forms:

6.4.1. Calque DT which is a literal and obtrusive translation of the ST ECR in the TT.

6.4.2. Shifted DT introduces minor changes to make the ST ECR less obtrusive for the TT audience.

6.5. Generalization: The generalization strategy consists in generalizing specific source references; it replaces a specific ST ECR with a general word or expression in the TT. Generalization goes from specific to general unlike addition which goes from general to specific.

6.6. Substitution: It implies replacing the ST ECR with a different TT ECR or with a non ECR paraphrase. It has two subcategories:

6.6.1. Cultural substitution which replaces the ST ECR with a different TT ECR which is familiar to the TT audience.

6.6.2. Paraphrase which is a complete rephrasing of the ECR or a creation of a new context-based ECR. Paraphrase is further divided into:

6.6.2.1. Paraphrase with sense transfer i.e. dismissing the ST ECR but preserving then rewording its connotations.

6.6.2.2. Situational paraphrase implies favoring situation to the detriment of meaning. This strategy utterly dismisses the ST ECR, including the meaning, and replaces it with what fits the situation without consideration to the SC.

6.7. Omission: Zero translation of the ST in case of untranslatability, absence of the ST ECR in the TC, or even in case of translator 'laziness'.

In his taxonomy of ECR transfer strategies figure (p.4), Pedersen classifies official equivalent strategy separately from the other strategies claiming that outside factors (higher authorities) influence the end product of TT rather than the translator or the subtitle having the final say in the translation. Retention, specification and direct translation strategies can be said to be ST oriented whereas generalization, substitution and omission are TT oriented. Direct translation takes a middle ground between the two approaches, and omission - albeit a legitimate rendering strategy - is the case of zero translation which means no TT product.

Pedersen goes subsequently to list a number of detailed factors that influence the subtitle's choice of transfer strategy, mainly the TT oriented strategies. These factors vary from textual parameters to paratextual parameters; the former regarding the ST status in the SC and its relation with the TT, TC and other texts; namely, transculturality, extratextuality, generality of reference, intersemiotic redundancy, and co-text, and the latter involving media-specific constraints and paratextual considerations pertaining to broadcasting, TT audience, deadlines and remunerations (pp.10-15).

7. Culture and Culture-bound References: In a linguistic translational milieu, Newmark (1988, p.94) defines culture as "the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression" referring to language as a shared expression tool and a common cultural asset; hence, the inherent bond between language and culture, and consequently, between translation and culture. If language is used to communicate culture among people of the same community, translation is used on a bigger wider scale; to communicate and share a particular culture with people of other communities.

Different cultures may share vaguely some cultural references which they collectively agree to express in their native tongue in a certain way. Bread, for instance, is a consumable food made out of a mixture of ingredients that turn into dough and that is cooked on fire. This is the general universal conception of this

reference. The deeper one goes to the peculiarities of a culture, the more specific and uncommon the reference becomes. In Algeria, and in colloquial languages, bread (the common universal reference) is expressed by terms like *كسرة مطلوع*, *كسرة* each having special ingredients, a special way of preparation, and a special cooking utensil or method, of course all depending on the region. In Syria, bread is termed *رغيف* and in Egypt, it is called *عيش* and so on and so forth depending on the vernacular Arabic of that area. The less peculiar and more universal the cultural reference is, the easier it to translate; however, the more intrinsic and less universal it is, the more difficult it is to translate. Pedersen, in this regard, suggests a term and a definition for non-verbal language phenomena or culture-specific items that are intrinsic to a given community:

Extra linguistic Culture-bound Reference (ECR) is defined as reference that is attempted by means of any culture-bound linguistic expression, which refers to an extra linguistic entity or process, and which is assumed to have a discourse referent that is identifiable to a relevant audience as this referent is within the encyclopedic knowledge of this audience. (2005, p.2)

Culture-specific items are the fruit of societal and linguistic convenience. They reflect shared practices and are a strong symbol of communal acceptance. One might ask, at this point, how can something so personal be conveyed to the public eye?

8. Culture through a Translation/Subtitling Telescope: A talk introduced by Suzan Talhouk in the 2012 TEDx Beirut event featured a conference about Arabic language and the importance of protecting it from extinction as a way of embracing and preserving cultural identity. Simple and heart-felt, Talhouk's talk brought up insinuations about discrimination, colonial and post-colonial scenarios, as well as political and ideological agendas, all of which make a rich discussion matter for another study.

Talhouk tells a story about of an interracial couple where the wife is Lebanese and the husband French. The wife said the expression *'تقبرني'* to her husband which resulted in a myriad of fruitless explanations afterwards. The subtitle, Khalid Marbu, rendered it in round parentheses as "(Literally: I would die for you)". In fact, literally translated, one would say 'you burry me' which has no contextual meaning, nor is it ear pleasing since one might think of murder mysteries or suicidal wishes! However, the meaning is far beyond the literal rending; the expression *'تقبرني'* reflects how much love and devotion one has for the significant other; it implies that one would not want to part from the other, and in case of death - the ultimate unavoidable separation cause - the wife would rather die before her husband; hence, him burying her, not the other way around. This emotional rollercoaster may seem too complicated to understand yet even more complicated to translate, but it is a part of the Lebanese culture and a way for them to verbally communicate their deep love and affection. "(I would die for you)" seems to be the closest way to transfer this concept into English.

Another similar expression heard in wedding vows comes to mind "until death do us part" which suggests that the couple would stay together and share life's ups and downs until one of them passes away, but this expression is context-bound to something else; matrimonial vows that is, and it is not fit for translating the Arabic expression.

The umbrella strategy used by the subtitle can be said to be substitution since he/she replaced the ST CR with a paraphrased TT. As seen above, substitution is divided into two branches: cultural substitution and paraphrase. In this case, the subtitle dismissed

the word 'قبر' and replaced it with the word 'die' meaning that the sub strategy is paraphrase which entails a creation of a new context-based CR (expression of affection). To be even more precise, the subtitle replaced the word 'قبر' in the ST with another word in the TT 'die' while preserving the ST CR connotations (love, devotion, sacrifice) which is paraphrase with sense transfer; the sub category of paraphrase. The transfer of the expression in hand is TT oriented because the subtitle took something so intrinsic to the Lebanese culture and their linguistic genius and endeavored to render it to an English audience according to their way of expression and reasoning, all while preserving as closely and eloquently as possible what would have been otherwise stripped of all beauty and quintessence if rendered verbatim.

A different strategy (or actually a combination of two strategies; a double strategy) can be tracked in an interview shown on and subtitled by 'Winners Team' channel which is dedicated to subtitling motivational speeches delivered by positive influencers around the world. The interview featured Lisa Nichols and her inspiring success story. It displayed both types of subtitling; intralinguistic (in English) and interlinguistic (in Arabic). Lisa Nichols mentioned a certain bank where she used to save her money; *Wells Fargo*. It was rendered initially ولز فارجو which is the sound translation of the English name (borrowing technique in Vinay and Darbelnet's terminology), or retention strategy. Then, the subtitle added extra information to the translation; he/she gave a brief and concise definition of the *Wells Fargo* bank. This information was subtly placed on top of the screen since it was free, and since the foot of the screen was already used for the other English and Arabic subtitles. This positioning is unlikely according to subtitling norms since they clearly depict they be placed at the foot of the screen.

هي شركة خدمات مالية عملاقة أمريكية متعددة الجنسية، ولديها أعمال في مختلف بقاع العالم:
عدد الموظفين: 262.700

The adopted strategy therein is specification; the subtitle provided supplementary information that was not mentioned in the ST. One can spot the efforts deployed by the subtitle to clear all ambiguities for the TT audience who is most likely to not have any background knowledge about the bank. By making this conscious deliberate choice of introducing additional content, the subtitle used the addition strategy which is the second subcategory of specification.

According to Karamitroglou's transfer alternatives of culture-specific linguistic elements, the technique used here is called 'transposition with explanation' where the cultural element is rendered literally then backed up with clarifying content.

One might think that banks, money, investments and the like have nothing to do with culture, but in fact, the bank in this context was a part of the country's major industrial figures, and the name *Wells Fargo* reflects the image of the strong local American economy. Just like *Wells Fargo* mirrors America's image, *Al Baraka* bank for instance mirrors Algeria's image that is built upon the Islamic jurisdiction rules, which in turn is part and parcel of the Algerian identity and culture.

'*Ride or die*' is the colloquial expression that Lisa Nichols used when she was talking about making commitments to others. *Ride or die* is an American colloquial expression which means to overcome difficulties in life together with a partner. It

originates from the biker culture in the USA and expresses their love for adventures and riding freely against all rules and boundaries. *'My ride or die girl'* describes a girlfriend who would challenge all fears and ride with her man to the known (Urban Dictionary.com). The word 'ride' was incorrectly transcribed in the intralingual subtitles as 'right' which could have been generated from a typing mistake. In the context of the interview, Lisa Nichols insured that she will do all that is in her power to keep her promises and fulfill her engagements to people. The subtitle did not translate this expression; instead, he/she merely combined the prior and the subsequent sentences in a flowing motion that did not abrupt the dialogue nor did it show a missing part of the conversation (for people who do not speak English, that is). The strategy used here is omission; the ST CR does not have an equivalent in the Arabic language/culture; thus, the subtitle opted for omission.

In the Arabic culture, people preferred having a relationship with natural elements such as animals. The horse is the best example of man's bound with nature. Horses were associated with nobility, chivalry, bravery and generosity. Even in the present times, horse riding and horse breeding is done by people of high social status. The horse in the American culture can be replaced with motor vehicles (motor bikes, cars, space craft, etc.), and this symbolizes the American (non-native) man's break with nature and love for industry and enginery.

Speaking of motor vehicles, Lisa Nichols mentioned having a car, a brand called *'Ultima'* that she replaced later on with another car. The subtitler rendered the specific brand name with a general word in Arabic 'سيارة' that can refer to any brand for that matter, and in doing so, the TT is more understood and recognizable by the TT audience than the name *'Ultima'*. When replacing a specific ST CR with a general word in the TT, the strategy is generalization. The same strategy is used again for other ST CR: *'pampers'* a diaper brand translated by the general word 'حفاضات' and the colloquial expression *'beanies and weenies'* where *'beanies'* refers to all sorts of canned beans and *'weenies'* to canned sausages. The expression was generalized by the Arabic expression 'طعام معلب' which suggests that Nichols, at a certain point, was leading a poor life deprived of all luxuries including healthy home-made meals. Generalization is a quick-fix option for such cases where the referent is of common daily use in the SC but not in the TC.

9. Conclusion: Through this brief study, I endeavored to investigate whether linguistic culture-bound references could be rendered in subtitling. As Youtube is a large free online source of audiovisual material that is nowadays the first competitor of television, it only makes sense to take some sample videos therein to see how language and culture are communicated and shared. One can notice that subtitling is a very meticulous profession for it abides by numerous standards which are highly restricting namely time-and space constraints. This makes it very difficult for subtitles to translate since the standard itself can be an obstruction. Through this article, one can see that most of the subtitling norms are respected to the exception of minor changes or modifications that are sometimes inevitable and more acceptable specially in video subtitling. As for strategies, be it ST oriented strategies or TT oriented strategies, subtitles and translators - in their own modus operandi - are relentlessly on the quest to find the ultimate context-tailored heuristic strategy or even combination of strategies to create and deliver subtitles and translations that combine the best of both worlds, all while respecting the intricacies and the delicacies of both SC and TC.

To translate culture is to translate the heart, soul, and life experience of a community. Linguistic or extralinguistic culture-bound references may or may not always have their perfect equivalents in other cultures, but translation, in general, and subtitling, in particular, helps us - in the midst of this technological era - to understand and embrace the cultural uniqueness of each community, for the point is not to melt all cultures into one, but to create a beautiful mosaic world of different colors, shapes, and flavors where each culture and each language would shine in its own way.

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