Arabic Fan subtitles on YouTube: Extra linguistic cultural references in stand-up comedy clips

Dr. Hani Elayyan
American University of the Middle East- Kuwait
Hani.Elayyan@aum.edu.kw
iD **0000-0002-4934-079X**
Dr. Adi Fejzic
University Dzemal Bijedic- Mostar Bosnia and Herzegovina
adifejzic@gmail.com
iD **0000-0002-9341-6309**

Abstract *This paper examines the phenomenon of Arabic fansubtitling of Western stand-up comedy through a sample of fifteen clips found on YouTube to evaluate how fansubtitlers approach the extra-linguistic cultural references in the clips. In this textual analysis of the sample clips, we identify some of the techniques most commonly used in rendering the extra-linguistic cultural references such as retention of the original reference, omission, or literal translation. We conclude that literal translation is the most common problem in rendering the meaning of cultural references. To help the viewer interact with the clips, we recommend keeping the original reference and providing a short explication which would often give the viewers the best experience of the clip and the cultural knowledge contained in it. This paper argues that despite the problems with the quality of some of the subtitles they produce, fansubtitlers are changing the profession of translation. Some have developed creative ways to explain the cultural references using pictures, animations, and glossary lists. Moreover, they contribute to the globalization of Western culture, but at the same time reshape the discourse around these clips by integrating them within local debates about politics, social customs, and ethics. Those clips emerge as sites where viewers contend with identity and their place in the world.*
Keywords: *Arabic fansubtitles- Audio-visual translation-culture and Translation-Subtitling.*

الملخص: تهدف هذه الدراسة الى تقصي ظاهره ترجمه الهواه للمقاطع الكوميديه الغربيه ونشرها على مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي كمثل يو تيوب. وقد اظهر التحليل النصي لخمسه عشر مقطعا كوميديا ان المترجمين كثيرا ما يواجهون صعوبات في ترجمه المفاهيم الثقافية الخاصة ببلد او حضارة ما، ولذلك كثيرا ما يلجؤون الى حذف هذه المصطلحات او الاحتفاظ بها باللغة

Corresponding author : Hani Elayyan

الإنجليزية او ترجمتها حرفيا، والأخيرة هي الأكثر شيوعا. يوصي الباحثون بالاحتفاظ بالمصطلح الاصلي مع توضيحه بعباره مقتضبه تمكن المشاهد من فهم الموضوع ولكن دون التضحية بأصاله الاختلاف الثقافي. وعلى الرغم من بعض الضعف في جوده الترجمة الا ان المترجمين الهواه يلعبون دورا محوريا في جعل الثقافة الغربيه سهله المنال لدى العرب الذين لا يتقنون الإنجليزية، وطرقهم في الترجمة تتحدى الأعراف والقوالب الجامدة من خلال تطوير وسائل جديده كإدخال الصور او الرسوم المتحركة او قوائم التعريفات، وكل ذلك يسهم في اثراء الثقافة وربط المواضيع الكوميديه بحياة الناس. ان المقاطع المترجمة المتداولة تصبح موضعا لمحاوله فهم الهوية الثقافية ومكان الثقافة العربية بين ثقافات العالم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المترجمين الهواة، الترجمة السمعية والبصرية، الترجمة والثقافة. الترجمة العربية في مجال الكوميديا والاعلام المرْئي.

1. Introduction

Since the advent of content-sharing websites such as YouTube, as well as messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Arab viewers have embarked on sharing comic video clips from films, sitcoms, and stand-up comedy shows. Some fans took it upon themselves to subtitle theses clips and post them on their YouTube channels as a way of attracting traffic to their websites, promoting certain ideas, and, potentially, monetizing by reaching a certain numbers of subscribers to their channels which would lure advertisers or secure monetary reward from YouTube itself.

Like professional subtitlers, fansubtitlers are faced with linguistic and cultural challenges in their mission to render the chosen clips in Arabic subtitles. One particular area of difficulty is the translation of culturally bound references. In this paper, we examine the strategies fan- subtitlers use in translating culturally bound references. We argue that fansubtitlers tend to use similar strategies in translation to those used by professional subtitlers and that they practice self-censorship when translating controversial topics.

Typically, the mistakes occurring in their translations are a result of literal translation and omissions because they lack resources such as transcripts of movies and shows. In addition, the genre of stand-up comedy is even more challenging than sitcoms and movies because it usually has no or very little visual clues to explain culturally bound references. In this paper we explore a number of questions: What are the challenges that face fansubtitlers when they translate stand-up comedy? How do fansubtitlers address the specific cultural references in the source text? How does the original text change when it is translated into Arabic? And, finally, how are fansubtitlers changing the field through their contributions?

2. Difficulties in translating culture-specific references: humor as an example

Humor, and especially stand-up comedy, poses a challenge to translators and fansubtitlers because of linguistic and cultural reasons. In comedy, language is used to create a humorous effect often by disrupting the normal communicative function of language. According to incongruity theory, a comedian builds up a case based on a normal and "logical" line of events, only to turn it upside down in the punch line. This gap between expectation and reality creates the comic effect. However, if the viewers or listeners miss the punch line, they will not get the humor (Arvo Kirkmann, 2006: 33).

Humor puts the burden of deciphering the message on the readers/ viewers. Eleni Antonopoulou (2004) points out that reader participation is necessary if humorous effect is to be felt (247) and adds that this participation "demands effort, the pay-off of which is an increased self-esteem, joy, and aesthetic pleasure"(245). We would add that if, on the other hand, the reader fails to get what the audience is laughing about, they will feel frustrated and would lose confidence in the subtitles.

The linguistic particularities of a language make the job of translating jokes and humor extremely difficult. Attardo divided jokes to verbal and referential ones. (qtd. in Kirkmann, 2006: 40). Kirkmann argues that because verbal jokes are based on phonic or syntactic ambiguity or alliteration, *"they are translatable only incidentally and exceptionally"*. Mohammad Thawabteh (2011: 29-30) concurs and points out that homophones, for example, are a special source of confusion for Arab subtitlers.

Diaz Cintas (2009: 127) argues that when presenting homophony, film makers will usually have an element on the screen in order to give a clue to the audience that a word is being used in a pun. He (ibid.) gives an example from *Friends*, a famous American sitcom. At the beginning of one episode, Rachel complains to her friends about her itchy eye, but she refuses to go the eye doctor. Her friends make fun of her by asking her if she remembered the song, "Me, Myself, and I." Both Monica and Ross poke at their eyes while they are uttering the word "I" thus drawing attention to the pun on the word. Stand-up comedy, however, has a minimalistic visual aspect, since it consists mainly of the comedian standing alone on stage, and as a result, there are no visual clues to help the viewers "see" the play on words. Thus, the subtitler will have to attempt to translate the pun or, more often than not, omit it completely. Because omission is the most common strategy, we will not discuss verbal jokes in this paper.

The other type of jokes that Attardo has identified are referential jokes which are based on "the meaning of the elements of the text" but also "make a reference to the phonological realization of the text" (qtd. In Kirkmann, 2006: 40). While referential jokes are translatable, they still pose a challenge to fansubtitlers. In the following section, we discuss some of the issues associated with referential jokes in humor in general, and stand-up comedy in particular.

2.1 Referential humor and cultural knowledge

Unlike the cognitive school which focuses on incongruity in the text itself, the social school of humor is concerned with phenomena such as "hostility, aggression, superiority, triumph, derision, and disparagement" (Veiga, 2009:159). Comedy according to this school always refers to the world; it always laughs at someone or some phenomenon and thus creates a sense of superiority in the audience towards the people or cultures that are the target of the joke. Because comedy refers to the world, the audience needs to recognize references to the source-text culture including other texts, people, traditions, and several other elements. Scholars have described the relationship between a humorous text or performance and the world in different ways.

The referential aspect of performances has been referred to as culture specific references (Ranzato, 2017:53) and unfamiliar allusive PNs (Antonopoulou, 2004: 220). However, the most comprehensive discussion of the issue occurs in Leppihalme (1997) and Jan Pedersen (2011). Leppihalme (1997) describes allusions as "one type of culture-

bound elements in a text…expected to convey a meaning that goes beyond the mere words used" (Preface). Lepihalme (1997) argues that intertextuality and allusions strengthen the text and bring a "suggestion of universality, a heightening of emotion, a desire to imply that there is something about a situation or a character in the alluding context that is more important than the reader would otherwise assume" (Ch. 3). If used ironically, allusion, she elaborates further, could mean the opposite and would imply that the situation is not as important or as significant as the situation or character alluded to. In any case, not understanding an allusion or a reference would immensely hamper the audience's effort to comprehend the text (Ch.3).

In his chapter "*When Do You Go for Benevolent Intervention?*", Pedersen (2010:73) elaborates on the concept of ECRs and subdivides them into three types: infracultural, monocultural, and transcultural. For Pedersen, transcultural elements do not cause the subtitler any trouble because they are well- known in both source and target cultures. Neither do infracultural references pose challenges because since they are not known to everyone in the source culture, the producers of a movie or a comedian would aid the viewers to make sure that they get the meaning through the context or the co-text (ibid.: 74). These infracultural references could include specialized gadgets or particular localities that are known to part of the audience only (ibid.:73). The third area, namely monocultural, often poses the most profound challenge to subtitlers. Because these references are within the encyclopaedic knowledge of the majority of people in the source culture, they would be taken for granted and no effort would be made to explain them within the context of the performance. However, because the foreign viewers lack knowledge of these ECRs, the onus will be on the translator to make these references intelligible (ibid.:74).

When translating ECRs, the first obstacle that a subtitlers faces is to identify which allusions are transcultural, monocultural or infracultural. If subtitlers choose to explain a transcultural allusion, they would come across as condescending. In one of the clips we have studied, a fansubtitler chooses to explain to Arab audiences who Nelson Mandela was (Kevin Hart). If the fansubtitler had done a Google search of Mandela in Arabic, he would have discovered that any explanation would be gratuitous. However, if a clip referred to Mandela by his nickname, Madiba, an explanation would be in order. The specific strategies of intervention will be discussed in a later part, but here we are more concerned with some general theoretical issues.

Once a fansubtitler identifies ECRs, the next step would be to decide whether the terms should be brought to the realm of what is familiar to the reader/viewer or if the viewer should be moved in the direction of the source culture. This is the dichotomy of "domestication" and "foreignisation" in Venuti's terminology (Diaz-Cintas, 2009: 151). In other words, should the translators try to explain the reference in its own context or should they rather find an equivalent in the target culture? Carra (2009: 141) seems to advocate

for the latter and argues that a translator has to *"come up with another text that tries to recreate in the target audience the same effect that was intended for the source audience"*. We believe the word "intended" is problematic because the translator has no way to check intentions and can only see some of the common understandings of the source text which could be interpreted differently by various audiences.

Irene Ranzato (2017: 55), on the other hand, calls for care when interfering in explaining and allusion or ECR because *"the reader should laugh at the original joke, not the translator's"*. Pedersen (2010: 77) in his turn points out that in Scandinavian countries, there has been a shift in translators" attitude who now mostly agree on keeping the original references rather than replacing them with target culture nouns or references which is ethically questionable. In a questionnaire designed to gauge readers' views on unfamiliar noun phrases, Antonopoulou (2004: 222) found out that the respondents consulted preferred texts where PNs were preserved while at the same time declaring unfamiliarity with their referents.

2.2 Challenges facing Arab fansubtitlers in particular

In addition to cultural references, Arab subtitlers encounter a number of technical and linguistic challenges. In Arab media subtitling, not dubbing, has been the method of choice to introduce foreign movies to Arab audiences. Bahaa-Eddin Mazid (2006: 83) argues that subtitles were chosen because of economic pressures since subtitling is technically less demanding than dubbing. Additionally, dubbing would have threatened the budding film industry in Egypt. Mazid (2006:84) adds that using subtitles solved the problem of which variety of Arabic to use. It rendered the use of standard Arabic more acceptable since a conversation spoken in standard Arabic would sound unbelievable but a written one would be tolerated. Of course, dubbing has become more common nowadays, especially with Mexican, Indian, and Turkish soap operas, but movies and TV shows have not caught up yet with this trend.

Subtitlers across different languages face linguistic, cultural, and technical difficulties, including censorship (Thawabteh, 2011: 29). Yeo Yell Rull et al. (2016:378) report that in Malay translations of American films, the issue of censorship, whether by the government or self-imposed, leads to omissions, especially of sexual references and profane language. Arabs translators, who also work in a conservative environment, have to take account of censorship.

The translators also need to work within the limitations of time and space. The limited ability of viewers to speed read the subtitles while following the visual input means that, fundamentally, subtitles are *"partial written representation of a translation of the dialogues and text on screen"* (Pedersen, 2017: 215). Thus, translators need to make decisions about what to keep and what to omit in order to give the viewer the best rendition possible of the original text.

In addition to cultural and technical challenges, there are language-specific issues in subtitles. Thawabteh (2011:33) points out some of the linguistic issues that face Arabic subtitlers such as tag questions, verb tense, exclamative, etc. However, he (ibid.) rightly points out that: *"most translation difficulties are more germane to cultural disparities between language pairs than to linguistic discrepancies"*. Kristina Taivalkoski-Shilov concurs that cultural issues remain a main source of difficulty, even when the source and

target cultures are close, such as the rap culture in the United States and other countries, as the cultural references would still refer to American civilization (257-8).

Despite these difficulties, the work of the fansubtitlers is usually on par with other professional translators. Rachele Antonini et al., (2017:7) point out in their book that the distinction between professional and fan- subtitlers is not as strict as some in the profession deem it to be. Just like their professional counterparts, fansubtitlers follow a "*a code of ethics* and *standards of practice*". It is true they do not have the same prestige that professionals have, but that does not make the job they do less important. Even the idea that they do not get paid is not strictly true, as they get compensated in other ways through advertising or subscribers.

In a study of the contributions of K-Pop fans into the subtitling of the works, Angela Cruz, Yuri Seo, and Itir Binay (2019) argue that fansubtitlers played a crucial role in changing the balance of international pop culture by enabling cultures from the periphery to achieve popularity across the world. While the movement of cultural artefacts in our study is in the more traditional direction from center to periphery, the fansubtitlers still play a significant role in using the Western cultural products to engage in local issues such as freedom of speech. For although no American viewer would wonder about the margin of freedom these comedians have in attacking presidents and other powerful figures, Middle Eastern viewers and commentators often marvel at that issue.

3. Methodology and Data Collection
3.1 Data Collection

The data was collected through Arabic language search for stand-up comedy clips on YouTube. The channels of fansubtitlers were also checked for more links, as well as the suggestions made by the search too. Next, a careful textual analysis of the fansubtutitles was conducted, with a special attention to fansubtitles that contained culturally bound references, or Extra Linguistic References. Special attention was paid to fansubtitles that contained proper nouns or Western cultural concepts. A decision whether a reference was infracultural or not was made by the researchers, one of whom speaks Arabic and the other does not, in order to decide which concepts would be familiar to Arab viewers.

3.2 The Fansubtitlers

The fansubtitlers in the samples have attracted hundreds of thousands and sometimes millions of views of the clips, which makes their paratextual additions to the original videos very powerful contributions. However, the presence of their work is transient as many clips get removed and accounts get terminated due to copy right infringements. The legal troubles probably explain why although we have contacted the fansubtitlers who are referred to here, none of them has responded to our questions. The bios they provide on their pages do not mention their qualifications of whether they have had any professional training in the field of translation.

Some of the fansubtitlers are young people who seem to enjoy comedy and Western culture in general and attempt to share it with the viewers. For example, one fansubtitler by the name of Dojana Qasho, has 267,840 views so far. He has posted a video of himself singing an English song while playing the guitar.

Many of the fansubtitlers have ideological motivations. For example, one of George Carlin's clips is subtitled by "Arabian Socialist" who has 1,835,884 views for all videos. There is another channel called "The Egyptian Free Thinker" which also promotes videos that criticize capitalism, religious fundamentalism, and other ideologies. Jordan Communist Party also posted videos by Carlin. These ideological fansubtitlers seem to be motivated by an interest in thematic issues, and they chose comedy as a means of reaching a wider audience.

Yet, there is a third group of subtitlers who approach the videoclips as an exercise in learning English. For example, one channel called "Better in Arabic" posts videos with subtitles and vocabulary lists at the end of each video" (Kevin Hart, 2007). Another channel called "AJ WorlD" went a step further by inserting in the video of Jim Carey footage from movies that he refers to in his jokes.

The most popular comedians with subtitled clips are ethnic Americans with or without roots in the Middle East, especially if they have toured the region. For example, Ahmed Ahmed (Egyptian- American), Maz Jobrani (Iranian-American), and Gabriel Iglesias (Mexican-American),). Comedians who are critical of America command a good following, especially among left-leaning websites. For instance, George Carlin is favored by critics of America and capitalism. In addition to these groups, African American comedians such as Kevin Hart and Dave Chappelle are also in vogue. We have not found any subtitles of female stand-up comedians though, nor some of the mainstream comedians such as Jerry Seinfeld.

3.3 Strategies in Dealing with Cultural References

The subtitlers employ several standard strategies to convey the meaning of ECRs, and linguists have different terms for them, some quite technical. Elini Antonoplou (2004) reviews several major taxonomies starting with Vinay and Darbelnet's taxonomy (1958), Ivir (1987), Leppihalme's (1994), Leppihalme's (2001, 2011), Gottlieb (2009), Pedersen (2005), Diaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 87-83) then presents a more detailed taxonomy which comprises 11 categories.

Leppihalme (1997) argues that a translator can deal with cultural references by three major techniques: retaining them, replacing them, or omitting them. She elaborates that within each category there are subcategories, but they do not change the technique. For example, the translator can keep a reference as is, or maybe adjust it to the way it is referred to in the local culture, but that still means retention. On the other hand, replacing can take several forms. A translator can replace a reference with another from the SL that is better known in the TL. If that is not possible, then the writer could choose to use an equivalent reference from the TL. Omission could take several forms. For example, the reference is omitted but the meaning is transferred to a common noun. Or, alternatively, the reference is omitted completely (Ch.4).

4. Results and Discussion

In the following discussion, we will examine the use of the above mentioned strategies in a number of subtitled clips posted by several fansubtitlers. Some of the videos are no longer available on the channels where they have first appeared, but they are still on YouTube having been appropriated by other channels. In each discussion, we will

present the context of the phrase, the original text, the Arabic translation, and the back translation into English. We will highlight the strategy used in each clip. We will evaluate the choices made by the fansubtitlers in each case.

4.1 Retention of the original ECR
4.1.1 Retaining the ECR as is

---

[1] Maz Jobrani (2017), "I Come in Peace Tour"
Context: Maz Joubrani talks about stereotypes of Middle Eastern people in America, that they are not seen as normal human beings who dance and laugh.
Original: When I did the Axis of Evil comedy tour and came on Comedy Central, I went online to see what people were saying about it. I ended up on the Sean Hanety website which is a conservative website. And one guy wrote to another, "I didn't know these people laugh".
Subtitles :

لما قمت بالعرض axis of evil وظهر بعد ذلك فيcomedy central ودخلت في النت لأرى ماذا يقول

الناس عن ذلك وانتهى بي المطاف على موقعٍ Sean Hannityوشخص كتب لشخص اخر: انا لم أكن اعلم

ان هؤلاء الناس ضحكوا.

Backtranslation: When I did *Axis of Evil* show and it appeared on Comedy Central, I went online to see what people say about that. I ended up on Sean Hannity website. One person commented, "I did not know these people laugh.".
The fansubtitler decided to keep the original in Latin alphabet, perhaps to enable the viewers to check out the websites. There is no explanation of what "Comedy Central" is or who "Sean Hannity" is, but the speaker could guess that the former is some kind of TV channel and that the latter is a person not enamored of Middle Easterners.

---

[2] George Carlin (2013), "You are All Diseased"
Context: In this clip, George Carlin describes what he would like to do to macho men and other alpha males
Original: You throw them in a big arena- a big 25-acre arena and you just let them beat the s**t out of each other for 24 hours nonstop, no food, no water, just whisky and PCP.

وترميهم في منطقه قذره، في حلبه قذره، وتدعهم يضربون بعضهم ضربا مبرحا لمده أربع وعشرون ساعة

دون توقف، بدون غذاء او ماء، فقط الويسكي والبي سي بيز

Back translation: [And You throw them in a dirty area, a dirty arena, and let them beat one another harshly for 24 hours nonstop, without food or water, just whisky and PCP.
In this rant by Carlin about white muscular men, he wants to put them in a fight while they are on alcohol and hallucinogenic drug PCP. The translator transcribes the name of the drug in Arabic. Because it is not a very well -known drug, adding an explicating phrase would be better choices. On the other hand, the fact that it is conjoined with

---

"whisky" could be some indication that the word refers to an alcoholic drink or some drug.

---

[3] George Carlin (2013), "You are All Diseased"
Context: This is a rant about parenting and how parents are spoiling their children by giving them everything they want.
 "Everybody loves their children. Doesn't make you special. John Wayne Gacy loved his children, Got them right out in the yard, near the garage."

الجميع يحبون اطفالهم. هذا لا يجعلك مميزا. جون واين غاسي أحب اطفاله. ووضعهم بالساحة في الخارج قريبا من الجراج.

Back translation: [Everybody loves their children. That does not make you special. John Wayne Gacy loved his children. He put them outside in the yard close to the garage.]
The translator kept the original reference although the name of **John Wayne Gacy,** a serial killer who murdered more than 33 teenage boys, is not familiar to most Arab viewers. The translator could have aided the viewer by adding the phrase, a serial killer, after the name. Another technique to pique the viewers' interest is to say he "buried" them instead of "put" them in the yard. In this case, the viewers would get that this "love" is not real but rather poignant. Consequently, they might be interested in checking the reference.

---

[4] *George Carlin(2013),* جورج كارلين - اين تختفي الأشياء *(Where do Things Go?)*
 Context: George Carlin speaks about what people do when they lose things:
Original: "Hey, who stole my collection of used bandages? And they also got away with my nude pictures of Ernest Borgnine."

من سرق مجموعتي للضمادات المستخدمة. وسرقوا ايضا صوره "ارنست بورنان" وهو عاري.

Back translation: Who stole my collection of used bandages? They also stole Ernest Borgnine's nude.
The translator retains the name of the actor, who was a minor American actor not particularly known for his good looks. Keeping the name would encourage the viewers to look him up. The fact that the picture is mentioned in the context of an item that is utterly useless and disgusting (used bandages) signals to the viewers that Ernest Borgnine's nude is of no aesthetic value.

---

[5] Dave Cahpplle (2019), subtitles by Abdulrhman CK5
Context: Chappelle describes how a limousine driver left him in the ghetto at 3:00am
Original: "He pulled in front of an oldy rickety building. It looked like a project. I've never been there before and I wasn't sure it was a project.".

لم يقل شي، اوقف السيارة امام مبنى قديم على وشك السقوط، بدى كالمشروع، لم أكن هناك من قبل لم أكن متأكد إذا كان مشروعا

Back translation: [He did not say anything. He stopped his car in front of an old building. It looked like a project. I have never been there before. I was not sure it was a project.
The fansubtitler kept the word "project" as is, but it does not mean the general sense of the word. An explicating phrase such as "government housing for the poor" would help the viewer understand this meaning-laden cultural reference that is usually associated with, but not limited to, African-American populations living in poor houses provided by the government. Such places are often hotbeds of violence.

4.1.2   *Keeping the original ECR by translating its component parts literally*
This, of course, is a mistake in the translation but it occurs frequently, especially with brand names and obscure cultural references.

---

[6] George Carlin You Are All part 2 George Carlin ن جميعنا مرضى مترجم**(2013) George Carlin**
Diseased
Context: George Carlin speaks of aspects of American culture that he disproves of. In this part, he speaks of white people who imitate African-American music and dance
Original: "And you know what, I think if white people are going to burn down black churches, then black people ought to burn down the House of Blues."

ظني في الناس البيض سوف يحترقون بأسفل كنيسه سوداء، ثم الاشخاص السود سوف يحترقون أسفل بيت الزرق؟

Back translation: [I believe if white people are going to burn under a black church, then black people will burn under **the house of the blue**(people)
In addition to mistakenly using "burn" as an intransitive verb, this translation explains "blues" as a color rather than a musical genre. The phrase "house of the blue" is translated word for word, but the meaning is not clear to the viewers who are not aware of these music clubs.

---

[7] George Carlin You Are All part2 **George Carlin** ن جميعنا مرضى مترجم **(2013), George Carlin [7]**

Diseased

Context: George Carlin continues to criticize white people who play blues music although nothing in their lives calls for being sad or depressed.

Original: "What the f**k do white people have to be blue about**? Banana Republic** ran out of khakis?"

ما الذي يربط البيض بموسيقى بلو وهل جمهوريه الموز نفذ منها الكاكيز

Back translation: What connects people to blue [sic] music, and did Banana Republic run out of khakis

The fansubtitler translated Banana Republic literally, rather than keep it as a brand name. The word "khakis" is retained as is in Arabic, although this term is not very common among Arab viewers. Adding the word "pants" would not only help explicate the word khakis, but it would also assist the viewer in guessing that Banana Republic is a clothing brand.

4.1.3   Retaining the original ECR with the addition of a short explicating phrase

This technique sounds helpful since it aids the viewers in getting an idea, even if vague, about the noun phrase. Then it would be up to them to look it up or just be content with an approximate understanding of the phrase.

---

[8] Maz Jobrani (2009), "Moz [sic] Jobrani Craig Ferguson Very Funny, subtitles
Context: Jobrani says how unconvincing George W. Bush's performance is on TV
Original: "Every time George Bush appears on TV, I wait for Ashton Kutcher to run out and be like, 'you all have been punk'd.'"

كل مره هو على التلفاز انتظر اشتون كوتشر"=مقدم برنامج كميرا خفيه" ليخبرنا باننا خدعنا.

Back translation: [Every time he is on TV I am waiting for Ashton Kutcher**"= the presenter of Hidden Camera**" to come out and say, " you have been tricked.]

The explicating phrase here is helpful since most viewers are familiar with prank shows, but maybe not with the names of hosts. Thus the explicating phrase makes the connection and enables the viewers to understand the comedian's incredulity about the presidency of George Bush. It is noteworthy that the fansubtitler used the TL term, "hidden camera" to refer to the program, rather than the unfamiliar term "Punk'd."

---

[9] Elon Gold (2016), Big Black Woman

Context: In this clip, Elon Gold tells of being shushed at a Barnes and Noble, and that he wished he would turn into a big black woman who stood up to the other person:

Original: "And what did I do? I backed down, I backed down. I wasn't in a Clark Kent mode. Who am I kidding, I wasn't as cool as Clark Kent. I was a nebbishy, Woody Alleny Clark Kent.

وماذا فعلت انا؟ لقد تراجعت، لم أكن مثل كلارك كينت **(ممثل مثل دور سوبرمان)** ولم أكن رائع مثل كلارك كينت انا كنت مثل كلارك كينت المنهزم.

Back translation: And what did I do? I wasn't like Clark Kent (**an actor who played the role of Superman**) and I was not as marvelous as Clark Kent. I was more like the defeated Clark Kent).

The fansubtitler added an explicating phrase. The explanation is not correct, since Clark Kent was Superman's alter ego, but it at least points the reader to Superman as the cultural reference. However, the reference to Woody Allen is omitted.

4.1.4   Retaining the ECR with a Long Explicating Phrase or Footnote

This technique adds to the load that the audience has to deal with, without offering a lot of value to the experience. Sticking with a short phrase of often a superior choice.

---

[10] Dave Chappelle (2019), المتحولين جنسياً - ديف شابيل (**Transsexuals**)

Context: Dave Chappelle is speaking of people who have identity crisis because of gender or race

Original: "It's like that black white b***h that's in the news all the time, Rachel Dolezal, she's a white woman".

مثل تلك المرآه البيضاء السوداء التي تذيع الاخبار طوال الوقت رايتشل دولزال

Note in yellow font above the name : رايتشل دولزال فنانة و رسامه و ناشطه حقوقيه بيضاء

Back translation: Like that white- black woman who read the news all the time, Rachel Dolezal

Note above the name: Rachel Dolezal is an artist, a painter, and a white civil rights activist.

The explicating phrase here does not add to the viewer's understanding. The fact that Chappelle says she was white-black indicates that there was an issue. An explanation would serve the viewer better if it showed that she was born white but claimed to be black.

---

[11] Louis C.K[1] (2019)

Context: Louis C.K. describes how he thought about giving his seat in first class to a soldier but never did so

Original: "I see soldiers fly all the time because this is how they get to the war. They fly on a s***y airline. You think that they get to go on a cool green airplane with a red light, go-go-go; no they just go to Delta and wait in line."

اعتقد انهم يركبون الطائرات الحربية وعندما يضيء الضوء الاحمر يصرخ قائدهم "اقفز، اقفز، اقفز"؟ لا انهم يستخدمون شركات الطيران المدنية**.**

Back translation: Do you think they get to ride on military airplanes, and when the red light goes on their commander yells, "Go, go, go"? No, they just use civilian aviation companies.]

The fansubtitlers removed the specific reference to Delta airlines and replaced it with a common noun. This change takes away from the specific reference to the airline. There might be a subtext here that is lost, since Delta forces are a special force within the US army. This veiled reference is lost.

---

[12] Gabriel Iglesias (2017)

ستاند أب كوميدي مترجم | فلافي وعن تجربته بزيارة السعوديه مش حتقدر تغمض عينيك

(Fluffy Speaks of His Visit to Saudi Arabia)

Context: In this clip, Gabriel Iglesias describes his visit to Saudi Arabia to perform for a prince:

Original: "They had three Lincoln navigator SUVs waiting for us. There is three comedians and there is three cars."

كان لديهم ثلاث سيارات رياضيه تنتظرنا. هناك ثلاث رجال وثلاث سيارات**.**

Back translation: They had three sport cars waiting for us. There were three men and three cars]

The fansubtitler replaced the Three Lincoln Navigators with three sport cars. The SUVs are not strictly sport cars. In addition, the make of the cars which is American could contribute to showing that the prince is Americanized, even before meeting him. The sheer size of the big cars also emphasizes the luxury of having three cars. The translator also changed "three comedians" to "three men." Although the change is not huge, but the image of many clowns getting into one car is a common comic routine, so these associations are lost with the term "men.".

---

[1] This clip has been removed from YouTube because the account was terminated.

---

[13] Maz Joubrani (2017), ستاند آب كوميدي- الإرهاب الذي أبحث عنه ماز جبراني (**Maz Joubrani, The Terrorism I look for, Stand-up Comedy)**

Context: Maz Jobrani speaks about how Middle Easterners are always blamed for terrorist attacks:

Original: "Like there was a blackout in New York a few years ago and the news came on TV, "there is a blackout; terrorists might have been involved." And then a week later" Sorry, it looks like it is just Enron."

حدث انقطاع في الكهرباء قبل بضع سنوات في نيويورك فأعلنوا في نشره الاخبار "من المرجح ان انقطاع الكهرباء عمل ارهابي"

وبعد بضع اسابيع أعلنوا "نحن نتأسف حصل عطل في المولد فقط".

Back translation: [a blackout happened in New York a few years ago. They came on the news and announced that "the blackout is likely a terrorist attack." After a few weeks the announced "We're sorry; it is just a generator breakdown."]

The fansubtitler replaced Enron with "generator." Although the meaning is still there, mentioning a name of a company would immerse the viewer in the culture of the place, unlike a general reference to electrical equipment. The viewers would sympathize, especially if they have had problems with their local companies.

4.1.5 Replacing the ECR with a more specific one (Hyponym)

This technique is not common. We have found one example relating to the use of the term, "Middle East"

---

[14] Maz Jobrani (2013), الكوميدي ماز جبراني يتحدث عن الشرق الأوسط (Comedian Maz Jobrani Speaks about the Middle East)

Context: Maz Jobrani in Doha talking about different ways of greeting in the Middle East. The subtitles are in Gulf dialect.

Original: "Ladies and Gentlemen of the Middle East: Here is a serious issue. When we see each other, when we say hello, how many kisses are we going to do?"

يا عيال الخليج.. تفضلوا هالقضيه هذي. لما نتقابل ونسلم على بعض، كم مره لازم نبوس بعض؟

Back Translation: [People of the Gulf, here is a serious issue for you. When we meet and greet one another, how many times do we need to kiss each other?]

This piece is translated in Arabian Gulf dialect, so it is no surprise that the fansubtitler chose to refer to the Middle East as Gulf, a smaller group that is part of the larger Middle East.

4.2. Omission

Omission is common, especially if there are more than one reference in a line. The fansubtitlers drop at least one.

4.2.1 Omitting the term while transferring the meaning to a general term

---

[15] George Carlin (2012) جورج كارلين - ما بعد الموت **(After Death)**

Context: George Carlin ridicules some beliefs in the dead being able to help the living

Original: "So now according to this theory, these two people go to heaven, and they start helping their living four children; helping them with everything they need, helping them with their science projects with **their SAT scores**."

لذا الان.. وفقا لهذه النظرية سيذهب هذان الشخصان الى السماء، ويبدئون في مساعده ابنائهم الأربعة الاحياء، يساعدونهم في كل ما يحتاجونه. يساعدونهم في مشاريعهم العلمية، وفي اختبارات القبول للجامعة.

Back translation: [So now, according to this theory, these two people will go to heaven, and they will start helping their four living children. They will help them with everything they need: with their science projects and university admission tests.
Changing SAT to the general term does not affect the meaning, but because SAT is well-known, the specific meaning would give the audience a sense of the serious job the dead parents have.

---

part 2 George Carlin You جورج كارلين جميعنا مرضى مترجم **, (2013) George Carlin [16]**

Are All Diseased

Context: Carlin speaks of people's fear of infection and how being too cleanly harms their immune system. He, on the other hand, does not observe strict personal hygiene which results in a stronger immune system.

Original: "So when my white blood cells are on patrol, keeping order in my blood stream, seeking out strangers and undesirables, if they see any, any, suspicious looking germs of any kind, they do not f*** around. They whip out the weapon, they wax the mother f****and deposit the unlucky mother f**** into my colon, into my colon. There is no nonsense, **no Miranda warning**."

لذا عندما يكون الدماء البيضاء في دوريه لتحافظ على النظام في مجرى الدم، وتبحث عن الغرباء والبؤساء، إذا شاهدت اي منهم، اي جسم مشبوه او جراثيم من اي نوع فهم لا يتهاونون، انهم يخرجون الأسلحة ويمحوا هذه الاشياء اللعينة، ويتخلصوا من الثيء الغير محظوظ مباشره في القولون. بالقولون انهم لا يمزحون. لا يوجد انذارات.

Back translation: [So when my white blood is on patrol to keep the order in my blood stream, and look for strangers and miserable ones, if they see any of them, any suspicious object or germs of any kind, they do not take it easy. They take out their weapons and wipe out the damn things. They deposit the unlucky thing directly into the colons. In the colons. They do not kid around. There are no warnings.]
The translator here chose to remove Miranda warning, despite the fact that the phrase continues the metaphor of a police patrol protecting the bloodstream. While the term itself is not familiar to Arab viewers, the more common phrase "reading you your rights" is familiar since it is heard a lot in movies.

4.2.2 Omitting the ECR completely without transferring the meaning to another phrase

---

[17] Bill Bur (2013), بيل بار: توقف عن الجماع (Bill Bur: Stop Copulating)

Context: In this clip, Bill Burr describes how easy it is to get away with a crime in China thanks to overpopulation. Someone can mug a person than stand behind him. The victim would say:

Original: "Dude, someone just took my wallet. Dude! He's right over there. Dude, he's got black hair, he is 5.5", He's dressed like he's in **Reservoir Dogs**, he's right over there.

انه هناك... انه هناك. شعره اسود... وطوله 5,5 قدم... انه هناك والرجل المسروق يصرخ: أحدهم سرق
محفظتي

Back translation: And the victim shouts, "Someone stole my wallet. He's over there. His hair is black. He's 5.5'. He's there.

The fansubtitler removed the reference to Reservoir Dogs, a crime film where the five main characters are all dressed up in dark suits and wear sunglasses. Keeping the original, however, could prompt the viewer to check the movie out.

---

5. Conclusion

Fansubtitlers occupy a liminal space between Arab and Western cultures. They can achieve success and attract hundreds of thousands of views only to have their accounts terminated later on because of copyright infringements. Their clips are transient yet very attractive to the viewers. Even when social media accounts are terminated, the clips resurface in other channels. This state of transience makes the academic study of fansubtitles challenging but rewarding at the same time. The roles that fansubtitlers play as cultural translators cannot be overstated.

The fansubtitlers sometimes spark controversy, albeit unintentional, through the choices they make of certain terms and concepts. For example, a fansubtitler provoked many comments when he used the literal translation of "The Persian Gulf." Many commentators objected to the term, and argued that it should be translated as the "Arabian Gulf." However, others pointed out that it was the name known in the ST (George Carlin- The Concept of War, Online: https://www. youtube.com/ watch?v= EHc J0 fl5L9Q).

For many Arab viewers, fansubtitlers provide a window to another culture. The mistakes they make in subtitling are typical, but some of them have been innovating and introducing new methods of filling in the cultural gap that official TV channels can learn from. While this is a qualitative study of the clips, there is a lot of room for quantitative research and analysis of how viewers interpret the clips. Surveys that rate viewers' perceptions of what is funny and what is not would shed light on the strategies that work best for Arab audiences and would help provide subtitlers in general with some guidelines on how to deal with cultural references. Such studies would also help us understand attitudes towards Western cultures among Arab youth.

In general, fansubtitlers have been helping Arab viewers stay informed about the stand-up genre, especially the representation of Arabs and Muslims in these shows. They inadvertently stir up discussions of freedom of speech and democracy, as many of the clips show comedians making fun of politicians and powerful people. Moreover, some fansubtitlers, thanks to the freedom from institutional restrictions that are usually imposed by Arab TV network, are experimenting with creative ways of subtitling. As a result, they are slowly changing the field and facilitating access to shows and programs not readily available to the general public but only to paying subscribers to movie channels and streaming services.

References

[1] Antonini, R., et al. (Eds.) (2017), Non-professional Interpreting and Translation: state of the art and future of an emerging field of research, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

[2] Antonopulou, E. (2004)? Humor theory and translation research: proper names in humorous discourse, *Humour 17 (3),* 219-255.

[3] Bur, Bill. (2013), بيل بار: توقف عن الجماع [Bill Bur: Stop Copulating]. Trans. Slm129, Available Online at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpWeXoW6ZWg, Retrieved on: 15 April 2020.

[4] Carlin, G. (2012) جورج كارلين - ما بعد الموت [George Carlin: After Death]. Trans. Shafea3, Available Online at: https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=mi2L 6ouhWl4&amp= &list= PL3dMCtXoe6d G2aK48xcNdO5ATv5uSTKfV&amp=&index=16, Retrieved on: 10 April 2020.

[5] ------ (2012), جورج كارلين - مفهوم الحرب [George Carlin: The Concept of War]. Trans. Shafea3, Available Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHcJ0fl5L9Q.

[6] ------ (2013)اين تختفي الأشياء - جورج كارلين [George Carlin: Where Do Things Go?] Trans. Shafea3, Available Online: www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVRKD VE43vE&list =PLTCYA dP6G 8C BX 2gnbF-qx_avr2c5PnE&index=87, Retrieved on : 10 April 2020.

[7] ------ (2013) جورج كارلين جميعنا مرضى مترجم part2 [George Carlin You Are All Diseased]. Trans. Arabian Socialist, Available Online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43XuZ-Mmi_o (fear of germs), Retrieved on: 5 April 2020.

[8] ------ (2013), جورج كارلين جميعنا مرضى مترجم part3 [George Carlin: You Are All Diseased] Trans. Arabian Socialist, Available Online at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyX4FRLA9lU, Retrieved on 15 April 2020.

[9] Carey, J. (2018), تحدي الضحك المستحيل مع جيم كاري! مترجم عربي [Impossible Laughing Challenge with Jim Carey Trans. AJ WorlD, Available Online at: www.youtube.com/ watch?v=z0S9yXBZP7c, Retrieved on: 2 April 2020.

[10] Carra, N. (2009), Translating humour: the dubbing of Bridget Jones's Diary into

Spanish.' In Diaz-Cintas, (Ed.) *New* Trends in Audiovisual Translation, 133-141.

[11] Chappelle, D. (2019**),** ديف شابيل - المتحولين جنسياً, Trans. Translate Corner , Available Online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAhCS4G-O8o, Retrieved on 20 April 2020.

[12] C.K., L. (2019), أنا شخص سيء - لويس سي كاي ستاند اب مترجم, Louis C. K.Trans. Yazeed01, Available Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQi4JNqTkv4 , Retrieved on 23 April 2020.

[13] Diaz-Cintas, J. (2009a), Audiovisual translation: an overview of its potential, In Diaz-Cintas, J.(ed.) *New Trends in Audiovisual Translation, Buffalo; NY: Multilingual Matters,* 1-18.

[14] ------ (2009b), *New Trends in Audiovisual Translation,* Buffalo; NY: Multilingual Matters.

[15] Gil, M. (2009), Dubbing the Simpsons in Spain: a case study, In Diaz-Cintas J.(ed.) *New Trends in Audiovisual Translation*, Buffalo; NY: Multilingual Matters, 142 -157.

[16] Gold, E. (2016), Elon Gold, Big Black Woman. Trans, FCB ABODY, Available Online   at   : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpGZsz_S9ko&list=PLlBIlGF5jyEoXt47n-A8S4GYi-fMlgB2Z, Retrieved on 7 April 2020.

[17] Hart, K. (2017), كيفن هارت و ابنه الضعيف **(مضحك جدا)** مقابلة لوبيز[Kevin Hart and his Weak Son (Very Funny) Lopez Interview]. Trans. Better in Arabic, Available Online at: **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55uQ3BOEbJMRetrieved on 9 April 2020.**

[18] Iglesias, G. (2017), ستاند أب كوميدي مترجم | فلافي وعن اجربته بزيارة السعودية مش حتقدر تغمض عينيك, Translated Stand-Up Comedy: Fluffy Speaks of his Visit to Saudi Arabia, You Will not Even Blink]. Trans**.** نويفبل LBVE, Available Online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= adB82qvMeo4, Retrieved on 23 April 2020.

[19] Jiménez-Crespo, M.A. (2017), *Crowdsourcing and Online Collaborative Translations: expanding the limits of translation studies*, Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

[20] Jobrani, M. (2017), I come in peace tour, Trans. Didou Alex, Available Online at : https:// www.youtube.com/watch?v=zm3M-XEUL1s, Retrieved on 20 April 2020.

[21] ------ (2009), Moz[sic] Jobrani Craig Ferguson Very Funny, Trans. Dojanah Qasho, Available Online at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2xSnw6_mrw, Retrieved on 27 April 2020.

[22] ------ (2017), ماز جبراني-الإرهاب الذي أبحث عنه -ستاند آب كوميدي, Trans. the Translator Channel, Available Online at:, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBPq-75EZ5I, Retrieved on 27 April 2020.

[23] ------ (2013), الكوميدي ماز جبراني يتحدث عن الشرق الأوسط, Trans. tarjma13, Available Online at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pi1fEqqLxfU, Retrieved on :27 April 2020.

[24] Kirkmann, A. (2006), Contemporary linguistic theories of humour, *Folklore (*33),

Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum, 27-58.

[25] Leppihalme, R. (1997), Culture bumps: An empirical approach to *the translation of allusions*, Cleve don: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

[26] Mazid, B. (2006), Arabic subtitles on English movies: some linguistic, ideological and pedagogic issues, International *Journal of Arabic-English Studies 7(1),* 81-100.

[27] Pedersen, J. (2017a), The FAR model: assessing quality in interlingual subtitling, *The Journal of Specialized Translation (28),* 210-229.

[28] ------ (2011b), *Subtitling Norms for Television: an exploration focusing on extralinguistic cultural reference,* Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

[29] ------ (2010c), When do you go for benevolent intervention? how subtitlers determine the need for cultural mediation, In J. Díaz Cintas, A. Matamala & J. Neves (Eds.), *New Insights into Audiovisual Translation and Media Accessibility,* Amsterdam, Rodopi, 67-80.

[30] Ranzato, I. (2017), Translating Culture Specific References on Television: the case of dubbing, London: Routledge.

[31] Sanderson, J. (2009), Strategies for the dubbing of puns with one visual semantic Layer, In J. Diaz-Cintas (ed.) *New Trends in Audiovisual Translation.* Buffalo; NY: Multilingual Matters,123-132.

[32] Taivalkoski-Shilov, K. (2008), Subtitling 8 Mile in three languages Translation problems and translator licence*, Target 20 (2),* 249–274.

[33] Thawabteh, M.A. (2011), Linguistic, cultural and technical problems in English-Arabic subtitling, *SKASE Journal of Translation and Interpretation 5(1),* 24-44. Available online : http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/JTI05/pdf_doc/02.pdf

[34] Veiga, M. (2009, The translation of audiovisual humour in just a few words, In J. Diaz-Cintas (ed.). *New Trends in Audiovisual Translation.* Buffalo; NY: Multilingual Matters, 158-175.

[35] Yeo, Y. R., Siti-Munirah I. & Yuen, C. (2016), Malay subtitles of sexual references and profane language of English films, *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities 11(2),* 370-386.