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LEXICAL PROBLEMS IN ARABIC-ENGLISH SUBTITLING**

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The present paper is designed to shed some light on the lexical problems in Arabic-English subtitling as illustrated by the translation output of 15 MA translation Arab students at Al-Quds University for the academic year 2010/2011. The data comprises an Egyptian movie entitled *is-Safara fil-'Imarah* translated as 'The Embassy is in the Building'. The paper reveals that subtitling students are faced with several lexical problems that are attributed not only to the fact that Arabic and English are poles apart in terms of lexis, but they are also akin to the technical dimension, very much prominent in audiovisual translation, e.g. dubbing, voiceover, subtitling, etc. The study shows that the technical aspect has an impact on subtitler's lexical choice, and deleterious effect on communication. The study concludes with some pedagogical implications that will hopefully help subtitling students deal with the problems in question.

Key words: *audiovisual translation, subtitling, lexical problems, technical problems, Arabic, English*

1. Introduction

Translation Studies (henceforth TS) is characterised by interdisciplinarity i.e. it establishes relationships with other fields of knowledge such as social sciences, sociology, linguistics, semiotics, cultural studies, among others. This makes it possible for other disciplines to emerge and even burgeon into an area of study worthy of research in its own right. Audiovisual Translation (henceforth AVT) is a case in point. AVT has attracted attention of translation theorists and practitioners in the past decade. Virtually, AVT has given translational activity a new lease of life. In the words of Orero (2009: 130), "Nowadays audiovisual translation (AVT) is a thriving

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Editor's note: the author states that the university is located in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

field within [TS].” A search query in Translation Studies Bibliography³, a bibliography with more than 20,000 annotated records, returns 255 hits for subtitling in the Title Field, which is likely to be promising.

Unlike literary translation, AVT receives scant attention in most of Arab countries, with only 4 hits for Arabic and subtitling in the Title Field in the same search, though subtitling practices perhaps constitute the bulk of translations from and into Arabic. Gamal (2008: 2) claims: “subtitling was deemed the best option to protect the local film industry from competition. Subtitling also offered a much less labor-intensive, faster and cheaper alternative.” Gamal (ibid: 9) adds that “A clear paradox exists which emphasises the surprising imbalance between the little research on audiovisual translation and its enormous impact on society.”

The present paper examines a subtitling-related problem that subtitling students may be faced with, i.e. lexical choice. In literary translation, lexical items are important in translation activities as Larson (1984: 55; emphasis in the original) argues:

A word is “a bundle” of **meaning components**. The translator needs to be able to analyze the lexical items (words) of the source text in order to be able to translate them. This means being able to “unpack” words in order to show **meaning** that is represented by the lexical **form**.

A close look at the quote above shows that the translator needs to be able to ‘unpack’ words because languages cut linguistic reality differently. Furthermore, we argue, there are technical constraints usually involved in subtitling. It is not sufficient to choose a lexical equivalent in the target culture, but the subtitler should make sure that equivalence goes in harmony with codes of good subtitling.

The distinction between AVT and other forms of translation (e.g., literary translation) is that fidelity is determined by constraints within the ambit of words or languages (Neves 2004: 135). AVT tilts towards ‘communicative effectiveness’ the target audience is often after. In a sense, AVT tends to be more challenging and demanding as Karamitroglou (2000: 104) succinctly

³ Retrieved from <http://www.benjamins.com/online/tsb/> [visited on October 10th, 2011]

puts it: "the number of possible audiovisual translation problems is endless and a list that would account for each one of them can never be finite."

These problems can be of semantic, syntactic, cultural, or lexical nature, as is the case in literary translation, but what makes a difference is the technical constraints which are of paramount importance as to lexical choice.

In what follows, we address lexical problems in Arabic-English subtitling with a particular focus on subtitling standards proposed Karamitroglou (1998) and Schwarz (2002).

2. Technical-related problems

In subtitling, constraints and technical aspects, e.g., spatial parameter or layout should be paid due attention. "Television screens are more limited than film screens and the reduction of the text volume is even greater" (Schwarz 2002; Constraints and technical aspects). In the words of De Linde and Kay (1999: 1-2), "the amount of dialogue has to be reduced to meet the technical conditions of the medium and the reading capacities of non-native language users." One way of reducing the text is the number of characters on the screen. Karamitroglou (1998; Spatial parameter/layout) argues that: "Each subtitle line should allow around 35 characters in order to be able to accommodate a satisfactory portion of the (translated) spoken text and minimise the need for original text reduction and omissions. An increase in the number of characters, attempting to fit over 40 per subtitle line, reduces the legibility of the subtitles because the font size is also inevitably reduced."

It follows that "[a] space in need is a friend indeed" (Thawabteh 2011a: 37) *vis-à-vis* TV screen. "Every single space is highly needed for other communicative purposes, that is, when the subtitle is appropriately and adequately positioned on the screen, the possibility of nonverbal communication becomes high" (ibid). Likewise, Gambier and Gottlieb (2001: 213-214) state that "multi-channel and multicode: [are] made up not only of verbal signs but also of non-verbal signs — such as visible and audible gestures." Orero (2004: 86) argues that "[a] screen adaptation of a 100, 000 word novel may keep only 20, 000 words for dialogue, leaving semantic load

of the remaining 80, 000 words the non-verbal semiotic channels— or to deletion.”

It is worth mentioning here that ‘communicative effectiveness’ should be an ultimate goal insofar as subtitlers are concerned. Channels for communication in a film include “dialogue, music and picture, and — for a smaller part — writing (displays and captions)” (Orero 2004: 86; see also Nedergaard-Larsen 1993: 214). More precisely, four channels are necessary to achieve as much communication as possible, namely (1) the verbal auditory channel, e.g., dialogue, background voices, and sometimes lyrics; (2) the non-verbal auditory channel, e.g., music, natural sound and sound effects; (3) the verbal visual channel, e.g., superimposed titles and written signs on the screen; and (4) the non-verbal visual channel, e.g., picture composition and flow (Baker 1998: 245).

Another way of reducing the text can be found at the level of single letters. Schwarz (2002; 6.4. Fonts and Figures) states “[i]n general, letters are proportional, in other words the letters differ in width. For example, “i”, “l” or “t” are particularly narrow, while “m” and “w” are much wider. Schwarz (ibid) further argues this “can influence the choice of lexicon, as one searches for the shortest synonym with as few wide characters as possible.”

3. Methodology

3.1. Significance of the study

AVT has begun to gain momentum and weight in TS. Compared to the mind-boggling subtitling and dubbing from and into Arabic, AVT has stuttered along the research line in the Arab World (for studies on dubbing, see Athamneh and Zitawi 1999; Zitawi 2003 and 2008 and on subtitling, see Khuddro 2000; Mazid 2006; Gamal 2009; and Thawabteh 2010, 2011a, 2011b and forthcoming). Thus, the present study may be considered significant as it contributes to the esoteric knowledge already exists and may be a point of departure for more potential studies on AVT in the Arab World, that would go on a par with that vast bulk of translation.

3.2. Data used in the study

The main purpose of the study is to investigate the difficulties of subtitling at lexical level from Arabic into English. To pinpoint and bring the problem under discussion into focus, we used a sample of translations made by 15 MA Arab students of Al-Quds University. The data comprise a ten-minute clip from an Egyptian movie entitled *Is-safara fil-'imarah* translated as 'The Embassy is in the Building'. The students watched the clip, and were then asked to provide English subtitles. Six lexical items were chosen to serve for the purpose of the study. First, a transcription of the original dialogue was made. Second, subtitling students' translations were presented along with the number of characters per subtitle line and per lexical item. The students had already taken a minimum of ten translation courses, two of which were Audiovisual Translation courses; thus they have considerable experience of translation theory and practice. To translate the clip, the students used Subtitle Workshop (version: 2.51).

The movie is about Sherif, an Egyptian engineer working for a UAE-based company. He had been engaged in some kinky sexual practices, the last of which was with the manager's wife. Sherif was then fired. Affected by nostalgia for his happy youth in his homeland, Sherif decided to return home after twenty years of absence. When he went to his flat, he was shocked to know that the Embassy of Israel was next door. The building was swarming with embassy security personnel. It was then difficult for Sherif to move in or out of the building. Due to political upheaval in the Middle East as a result of Israeli atrocities against Palestinians since 1948, some militiamen retaliated by storming the Embassy with rockets while he was sleeping with a prostitute. Sherif's rise was then overwhelmed by an all-consuming sense of patriotic duty — that the Embassy of Israel should be immediately closed.

4. Discussion and data analysis

In what follows, we shall give some illustrative examples to see how (un)successful the Arab subtitling students were. In carefully scrutinising

example (1) below, students opted for a number of items to render *ish-shakh'yyāt il-muhimah* (lit. 'important people') as follows:

Example 1:

(1a) 'inta 'ārif sa'adit il-bayh ish-shakh'yyat il-muhimah is-sākna fil man'iga

(1b) You know Sir,⁴the important people who live here. [CPS⁵ 49/CPLI⁶ 19]

(1c) You know Sir,⁴the VIPs who live here. [CPS 38/CPLI 4]

(1d) You know Sir,⁴the influential people who live here. [CPS 53/CPLI 22]

(1e) You know the personages⁴that live in this area. [CPS 50/CPLI 14]

(1f) You know Your Excellency the cream⁴of society who live in this area. [CPS 69/CPLI 20]

In Example 1 above, subtitling students opted for different translations to render *ish-shakh'yyāt il-muhimah* in the Source Language (SL) utterance in 1a, i.e. 'important people' (1b), 'the VIPs' (1c), 'the influential people' (1d), 'the personages' (1e), and 'the cream of society' (1f). In terms of analysis, *shakh'yyāt il-muhimah* implies 'famous', 'influential', and 'important people'. As can be noted, 1b and 1c fail to observe the intended meanings in the SL utterance. The translation in 1d also fails to reflect the shades of meaning of the SL item, as 'influential people' may have negative connotations and is not necessarily important. The choice of 'personages' merits investigation as it can be translated as *shakh'yyāt il-muhimah*, but considering the register of the SL, we come up with another item, i.e., 'personages', which may be thought of as recalcitrant and superfluous in the TL culture. The last rendition of 1f seems to be grotesque. Arguably, the choice for 'VIPs' in (1c) may be said to encapsulate the nuances of the SL item. In addition, 'VIPs' has thinner characters than 'important people' in 1b, for instance whereby 'important' includes the widest character "m". Again, opting for 'VIPs' may be a plausible choice, since the number of characters in the caption is 38, which

⁴ The oblique line "|" ('pipe') means a new subtitle line

⁵ Number of characters per subtitle

⁶ Number of characters per lexical item

is fewest, and the number of characters for the lexical item in question is 4, which is also fewest.

The second lexical item that poses problems for subtitling students *labash* (lit. 'bad people'). Consider Example 2 below:

Example 2:

(2a) *wil-man'iga 'laha labash: I'alaba, wil-jām'a wil-mu'ahrāt*

(2b) and this area is very crowded. I mean, the|university, the students and the demonstrations. [CPS 91/CPLI 12]

(2c) The area includes riff-raffs: the|university, the students and the demonstrations. [CPS 82/CPLI 10]

(2d) The area includes scums: the university,|the students and the demonstrations. [CPS 77/CPLI 5]

(2e) This place includes|repulsive people, indeed. [CPS 45/CPLI 19]

(2f) The area includes riffraff:|the university, students and marches. [CPS 64/CPLI 8]

(2g) The area includes scums:|the university, students and marches. [CPS 62/CPLI 5]

In terms of componential analysis, the Arabic *labash* indicates a group of people who are not respectable. The Figures 1-4 below show word choice the students have opted for. We consult Collins Cobuild 2003; emphasis in the original to make our argument solid.

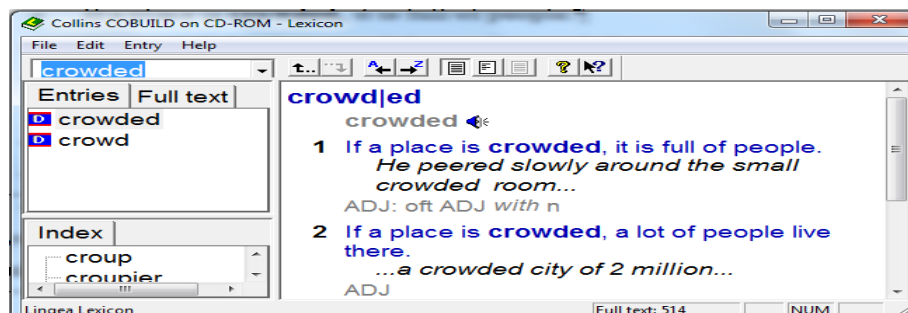


Figure 1: Collins Cobuild definition of 'crowded'

The student's choice for 'very crowded' as Figure 1 above shows, functions in terms of semantic equivalence. However, this choice poses two technical problems, which are ill segmentation and the number of characters (see 2b above, Example 2). Ill segmentation may be a result of the word choice, because 'very crowded' contains 12 characters.

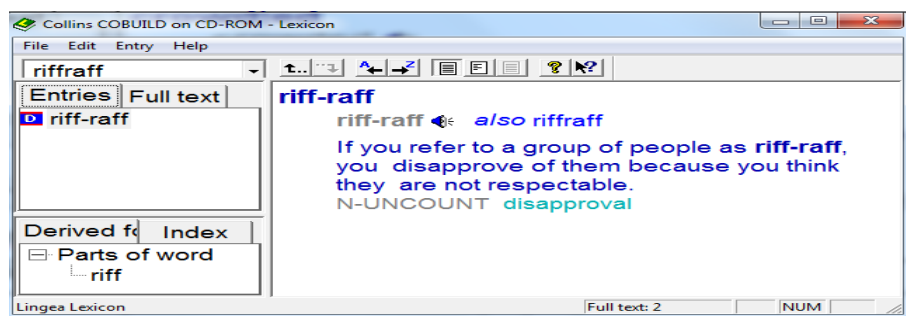


Figure 2: Collins Cobuild definition of 'riff-raff'

However, Figure 2 below offers more options than Figure 1 above. Semantically, 'riff-raff' is more or less semantically and pragmatically equivalent to the Arabic item. Technically, it has fewer characters both per subtitle and per word, and more importantly, Figure 2 offers a spelling alternative (i.e., 'riffraff'), thus saving one extra character on the screen.

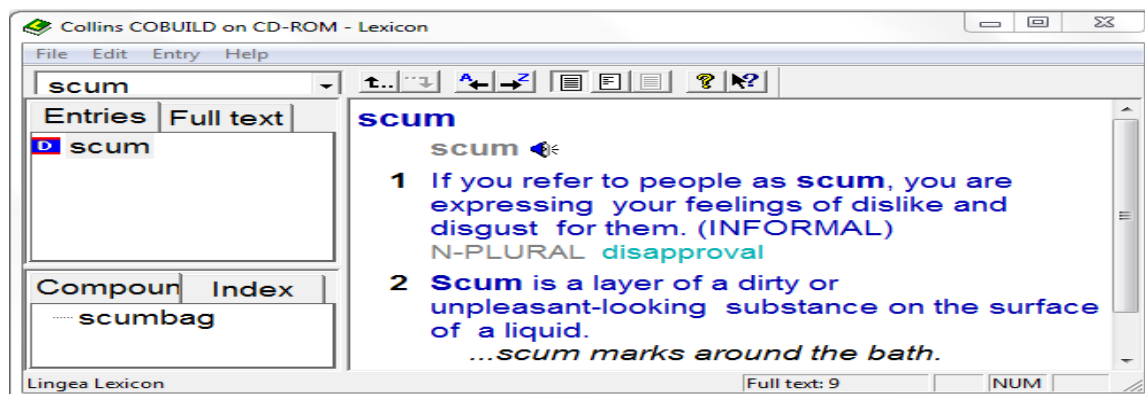


Figure 3: Collins Cobuild definition of 'scum'

Although it contains a wide character, i.e., 'm', the item 'scum' records the fewest characters, with only five characters. It successfully renders the

Arabic item semantically and pragmatically. Due to fewer characters 'scums' contains, there is no problem with segmentation as shown in 2d above.

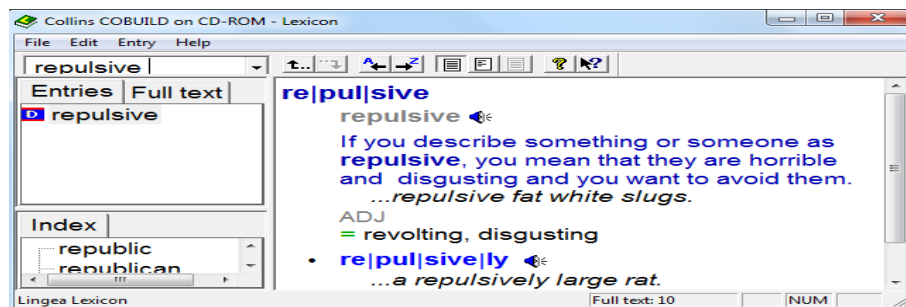


Figure 4: Collins Cobuild definition of 'repulsive'

Figure 4 fails to respect the technical aspect in terms of line-breaks, that verb and object must not be divided (Schwarz 2002); yet it shows the shades of meanings the SL *labash* displays.

All lexemes in Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 are possible equivalents of *labash*, with acute differences in mind. This makes the subtitler's choice even more challenging. Nevertheless, the subtitler should strike a balance, with a special focus on the technical constraints. Perhaps, three choices are more salient than others, namely, 2d, 2f and 2g. In 2e, the subtitling student opts for two subtitles for the Arabic utterance. The number of characters of the subtitle in 2d is 77, with 5 characters for the underlined lexical item. Technically speaking, this subtitle falls within the ambit of subtitling conventions, but is wordy when compared to 2g (62 characters in total and 5 characters for the item). The translation in 2f is also possible, but it is quite different from that in 2c, which is wordy and includes a spelling alternative (i.e., 'riff-raffs' versus 'riffraffs'). The translation in 2b and 2e may not be the right choice as the former is wordy and the latter lacks in SL information.

Example 2 above also shows two lexical choices to render Arabic *wil-mu'ahrāt* (lit. 'demonstrations'), namely 'demonstrations' and 'marches'. As can be noted, both match semantically, but the technical failure is evident in the former, rather than the latter. Using Microsoft Publisher 2003, it is possible to measure the width of lexical

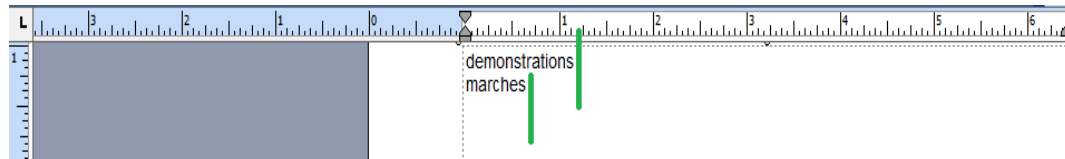


Figure 5: Word measure

items as shown in Figure 5. The discrepancy between the two items is crystal-clear. For more elaboration, consider Example 3 below:

Example 3:

(3a) *mahū il-labash da mish 'āizna yghlis 'alayna*

(3b) I really don't like these riffraff|to annoy me. [CPS 45/CPLI 5]

(3c) really I don't like|these riffraff to disturb me. [CPS 50/CPLI 6]

(3d) I don't really like|these scums to unsettles me. [CPS 49/CPLI 9]

(3f) I really don't like these scums|to upsets me. [CPS 46/CPLI 6]

In this dialogue, the captain felt a deep sense of shame and repugnance towards the people living near the Israeli Embassy, whereby demonstrations have been common in Egypt since Israeli occupation of Palestine. Sherif had been engaged in some kind of sexual debauchery in the UAE and now when he came back home he wanted to continue with this practice. In Example 3 above, the underlined renderings sound natural in English. There is no harm done if the item with the fewest number of characters is chosen, e.g., 'annoy'. The item 'unsettles' seems to be technically questionable. Example 4 below may make the point clearer.

Example 4:

(4a) *'a'il 'ana 'abaibī kthīr wi-y'ibū ywidūni*

(4b) well, I have a lot of friends|who would like to visit me. [CPS 57/CPLI 7]

(4c) well, I have a lot of girlfriends|who would like to visit me. [CPS 61/CPLI 15]

(4d) well, I have many women with whom|I'm having a sexual relationship. [CPS 68/CPLI 51]

In this sequence, Sherif tries to convince the officer responsible for the security of the Israeli Embassy that the security measures are unbearable. Sherif calms the situation down by using the Arabic euphemism *'abaibī* (lit. 'darling') instead of 'sluts'. Pragmatically speaking, it is 4b that respects the intentions of the SL text. It also abides by the subtitling conventions. The translation in 4d is wordy and has sexual connotations hidden by the SL speaker for a purpose. Example 5 below merits close investigation.

Example 5:

(5a) *dūl 'isrā'īlīn/ma hina magar is-safarah il-'isrā'īlyyih*

(5b) - Israelis, don't you get it?|- It is the residence of the Israeli embassy. [CPS 42/CPLI 10]

(5c) - Israelis, don't you get it? -Cause this is the headquarters of the Israeli embassy. [CPS 53/CPLI 16]

(5d) - Israelis, don't you get it?|-Cause this is the HQs of the Israeli embassy. [CPS 47/CPLI 3]

Sherif quarrels in the lift with the Israeli ambassador over the location of the Embassy of Israel, which is in the building where Sherif lives. He did not know the person he was talking to in the lift. Sherif berates the ambassador for the point he made — to accept that he is living next door to the Embassy of Israel. The italicised item *magar* (lit. 'place') in 5a is translated into 'residence', 'headquarters' and 'HQs'. The first does not sound natural, whereas both the second and the third sound more or less natural. Only does 5d abide by the subtitling conventions, with a total subtitle line of 47 characters and 3 characters for the lexical item in question.

Example 6:

(6a) *mumkin tsīb līna bayanatha |*

(6b) May I ask you to leave|her personal information. [CPS 49/CPLI 21]

(6c) May I ask you to leave her personal info. [CPS 41/CPLI 14]

In Example 6 above, *bayanatha* (lit. 'personal details') was translated as 'personal information' and by using a contracted form 'personal info', the last of which does the trick in terms of technical requirements, with a total of 14

characters. It seems plausible to assume that using abbreviations is an outlet for potential technical problems.

Example 7:

(7a) *baga 'ana jay min ākhir id-dūnyyah 'alagi dūl janbi*

(7b) Damnit! I came from a distant place|to find Israelis my neighbour.

[CPS 65/CPLI 9]

(7c) Damnit! I came from a distant place|to find Israelis my neighbor.

[CPS 64/CPLI 8]

The Arabic *janbi* (lit. 'beside') has been successfully rendered into 'neighbour' in 6b and 6d. However, 6c registers fewer characters than 6b because the subtitling student prefers to use American English rather than British English, a strategy that seems to be appropriate for subtitling.

5. Conclusion

The following conclusions can be drawn from the discussion above: (1) the ultimate goal of subtitling is to preserve meaning emanating from textual stretches of language in use with such brevity and naturalness. Viewed thus, subtitling students are between two fires: to capture the SL shades of meanings and to express them with few words; (2) the translator does not simply determine the referential and expressive meaning, but s/he must manipulate the translation in a way that goes in harmony with subtitling constraints; (3) in the TL, subtitling students opted for a translation that is more or less acceptable in a general sense, but it does not follow subtitling conventions at all; (4) subtitling students should reconstruct sentences because of the limited time and space available for each subtitle. Normally "translators have enough space (on the printed page) or time (on the screen) to cut cognitive corners in the translation process-and come up with English clones or calques in the target language" (Thawabteh 2011a: 30); (5) opting for standard abbreviations is likely to save space on the screen. The problem of ill segmentation is expected to emerge; (6) alternative spelling with a hyphen tends to be a space-consuming as a hyphen is a character; (7) the use of American English rather than British seems to save extra characters,

thus giving a chance for more polysemiotic factors to come to the fore and; (8) componential analysis approach for a SL item is highly recommended for the sake of narrowing the lexical gap between the SL and TL on the one hand, and adhering to technical requirements on the other.

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