
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Translating and Subtitling Taboo and Offensive Language into Arabic of some American Movies

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ABSTRACT

Translation expresses thoughts of social groups that are considerably different from one another. It could also be considered as a way of bringing cultures closer, which entails problems related to the way in which cultural elements are translated. There is always difficulty in understanding and translating a foreign text in which many cultural aspects and contexts are imbedded. The process of transferring these cultural aspects of texts necessitates the existence of equivalents (be they exact or near) and corresponding attributes in the Target Language (TL) to guarantee certain credibility and validity of the translation. Taboo words are one of these cultural aspects; they represent a big challenge to translators in the Arab world, as they are not tolerated by most conservative communities in the Arab world. This means that translators of movies (or subtitle producers) are obliged to resort to translating techniques to mitigate the degree of "indecent" while trying simultaneously not to lose the (im)moral and offensive impact of the expressed taboo words. The translation techniques used by movie translators vary from domestication and substitution to utter omission in order to lessen the translation constraints mainly related to religious profanity and moral offensiveness. So, this article attempts to show how translators use the previously mentioned techniques in order to bridge the gap between the original text of the movie and the target product text (subtitle).

KEYWORDS

Audio-visual translation, culture, domestication, taboos, interlingual subtitling

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 December 2023

PUBLISHED: 16 December 2023

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2023.6.12.21

1. Introduction

The translation of offensive and taboo words in subtitling seems to be a delicate issue since it implies making decisions that, in some cases, can offend the sensitivity of the viewers, depending on their culture and level of tolerability. From this cultural point of view, we consider it important to analyze the tools and methodology used to shed light on the way in which these offensive terms are subtitled, i.e. translated from English as a source language (SL) to Arabic as a target language (TL).

On the other hand, to understand the decisions that subtitlers have to take, it is of paramount importance to know some technical restrictions imposed by this mode of translation, also called Audiovisual Translation (AVT), since there is a series of space-time limitations, which force translators/subtitlers to reformulate and condense the original text. Starting from Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) postulated by Toury (1980), and making use of a taxonomy of translation strategies (Díaz Cintas & Ramael, 2007), this article presents a proposal for the analysis of offensive and taboo language subtitling, which accounts for the interference to which the subtitling professional faces and that can provide the researcher with a tool capable of describing the way in which this type of language is transferred to Subtitle. Likewise, said proposal recommends the use of the mixed method or multistrategic (Robson, 2011), since it combines quantitative and qualitative data, which can give rise to more reliable results, taking into account that said information is triangulated.

2. Review of Literature

This section deals with the definition of AVT and subtitling, the challenges or technical specificities and constraints that bind the translator, and some of the most used strategies in movie subtitling.

2.1 Definition of Audiovisual Translation (AVT) and Subtitling

Audio-Visual Translation (AVT) can be defined as those “practices, processes and products that are involved in or result from the transfer of multimodal and multi-media content across languages and/or cultures.” (Gonzales, 2020, p. 30) These multi-media or multimodal texts include language, image, music, color and perspective. We could add to this definition other components like speech, dialogue, monologue and comments (Gambier, 1994, p. 45) , or more technically, follow Chiaro’s definition:

Audiovisual translation is one of several overlapping umbrella terms that include ‘media translation’, ‘multimedia translation’, ‘multimodal translation’ and ‘screen translation’. These different terms all set out to cover the interlingual transfer of verbal language when it is transmitted and accessed both visually and acoustically, usually, but not necessarily, through some kind of electronic device. (Chiaro, 2009, p. 141)

According to Remael (2010, p. 13) Audiovisual translation has experienced various re-naming caused mainly by the expansion and the growing diversity of AVT practice and research. The first terms used were film translation and cinema translation. Yet they did not succeed in including all types of translation like television and DVD. Screen translation sounds more inclusive but includes localization, which is not a form of AVT translation. Adding to that is the fact that screen translation excludes surtitling for the stage. Gambier (1994) and Gottlieb (2001) use another term (Multi) Media translation, which includes translation for the stage and various types of screen translation and media channels used in global and local communication.

In light of what has been said, it seems safe to assume that subtitling is an AVT modality in which there are a series of very concrete conditions that define and limit it since it is subject to space-time technical restrictions and which every subtitler should keep in mind. As a sub-discipline within AVT, subtitling takes care of the transfer of multimedia and multimodal texts from an SL to a TL. Unlike what some people think, subtitling is not only responsible for the translation of film texts but also for a wide range of programs such as series, documentaries, video clips, cartoons, video games, etc.

Today, thanks to technological advances, audiovisual programs are present in numerous media such as cinema, television, DVD, Blu-ray, internet, etc. With the growth of a variety of broadcasting tools and techniques through television, internet platforms, mobile technology and advances in 3D, subtitling has gained a greater presence and recognition and has gained new modalities of accessibility (subtitles for the deaf and audio description, etc.).

The audiovisual text is presented within two channels: auditory and visual. According to Zabalbeascoa (2008), these channels give rise to a series of types of signs such as verbal/audios (words in their oral form), non-verbal audios (other types of sound), visual-verbal (written words) and visual-non-verbal (other types of visual signs). Besides, audiovisual texts are multimodal since their production and interpretation depend on the combination of a variety of semiotic resources (Baldry & Thibault, 2006). Thus, semiotics plays a fundamental role in these texts since language, image, music, color, and perspective are integral parts of the programs that define and contribute to its structure.

In this article, I have opted for following the taxonomy suggested by Diaz Cintas & Ramael (2007) for the different types of subtitles: (a) interlinguistic, in which the transfer is made from a source text (ST) to a meta text (MT). Most of the products presented on DVD and Blu-ray have different language combinations to suit the tastes of the users; (b) intralinguistic, in which the ST is shown in MT, keeping the same language. In these cases, we would be talking about subtitles consumed by learners of foreign languages and subtitles for the deaf, which have some characteristics different from the rest, etc.; (c) bilingual: in which the SL is subtitled in two different languages. These subtitles are typical of international film festivals such as Cannes and, Berlin, etc.

2.2 Technical Specificities

Subtitlers not only take care of the transfer from an ST to an MT but also must be very aware of the temporal and spatial constraints to which subtitling is subject and which prevent a subtitle from using as many characters as the translator thinks are necessary. This is why subtitles can appear on the screen for a minimum of 1 second and a maximum of 6 seconds (D'ydevalle, Rensbergen, & Pollet, 1987) and (Brondeel, 1994). In the audiovisual industry, we talk about the 6-second rule, which states that the standard viewer is able to read and assimilate the information displayed in a 2-line subtitle (about 70 characters in total) in 6 seconds (Díaz Cintas & Ramael, 2007).

2.3 Translation strategies in subtitling

Various authors have formulated taxonomies of subtitling strategies. Yet, it is essential to bear in mind the specificities described above in order to put into operation a series of strategies capable of transferring terms from an ST to an MT. Therefore, for this analysis, we have opted for a combination of strategies elaborated by Díaz Cintas & Remael (2007, pp. 202-207), Pederson (2011) together with the first strategy proposed by Vinay & Darbelnet (2000, pp. 86-88). All the examples shown here have been obtained from subtitles of films directed by Quentin Tarantino: *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) watched on the internet platform Egybest,

2.3.1 Omission

In this strategy, there is no reproduction of the ST ECR by any means in the TT. It is conceivably used more than the other strategies in a reasonable way especially in the case of the limits of the medium. Omission is regarded as the most target-oriented strategy as it stops items that may engender problems from entering the TT in anyway. It is worth mentioning that this strategy must be used in subtitling, given the spatio-temporal limitations of AVT mode. Subtitlers must be aware of the information that can be omitted, given its lesser relevance for the understanding of the message, and that which should be reflected in the subtitles. Examples of omission occur with words, phrases, clauses, and sentences and may include proper nouns, nouns, vocatives, adverbs, conjunctions, etc. An example of omission we see it in Mr Pink's phrase, "I never fucking listen", which translates into "أنا لا أفعل أبداً". Beyond the verbal change, the derogatory element *fucking* is not visible in the subtitle at all. Sometimes, when an omission occurs without apparent technical justification, we could find ourselves faced with cases of ideological manipulation (Díaz Cintas, 2012), as in the case of expressions such as "Jesus Christ!" in which the term "*fucking*" appears in between, but that the subtitler did manipulate through omission to avoid offending a specified number of spectators.

2.3.2 Explicitization

This is a strategy by which a term is specified so that the target culture can access the meaning of the text more clearly. It is used with expressions that need more specific clarifications; sometimes, we speak of hyponymy. For example, in *Reservoir Dogs*, Mr Orange says he was "gonna blow you to hell"; the subtitler opts for the verb "to kill" "قتل" in such a way that without being so specific, he conveys the meaning by means of a hyponym, using fewer characters in the subtitle. However, when a term with a broader meaning is used, we use the hypernym. Lieutenant Aldo Raine, in *Inglorious Basterds*, insults some German soldiers with the term "bratwurst" in "You fucking bratwurst-smelling", which is a type of German fresh sausage, is subtitled as "أبها الفاسدون كريهو الرائحة".

2.3.3 Compensation

Compensation is another very common strategy in subtitling, consisting of the introduction of some term at a moment of the program in which some translation loss. In the case of offensive/taboo terms, compensation is can happen when there is no offensive/taboo term in the dialogue, but the subtitler decides to introduce it to compensate for the emotional charge of the scene. An example of compensation is the one that occurs in different scenes of *Pulp Fiction*; Lance tells Vincent to stop bothering me, but given the tension of the scene, since Mia is in cardiorespiratory arrest, the subtitler decides to compensate that emotional charge through the clause "stop fucking with me".

2.3.4 Literal translation:

Literal translation, also known as word-by-word translation or direct translation, implies a direct translation of a term or expression from SL to ML, maintaining both grammaticality and idiomaticity in that language. This strategy does not imply great stylistic procedures; to cite an example, the recurring term "damn" translated by "اللعة".

2.3.5 Retention:

This strategy encompasses keeping the ST Extra-linguistic Culture-bound Reference (ECR) in the subtitle without any change, even a slight one, to meet the requirements of the TL. Sometimes, it is marked in terms of italics or quotes.

2.3.6 Specification:

This strategy makes the subtitled ECR more specific by adding more information either by completing a name or an acronym (completion) or by adding more semantic content, for example, adding someone's occupation or an evaluative adjective.

2.3.7 Generalization:

This strategy involves substituting an ECR that refers to something specific with something more general. It can be done in terms of a Superordinate term or through a Paraphrase.

2.3.8 Substitution

In this strategy, the ST ECR is eliminated and substituted with one of two things. It is a very common type of explanation in subtitling and is very recurrent when it comes to translating insults through offensive and taboo terms, given the existing differences in terms of forms of insult and talk about taboos between different languages. In this way, examples of substitution are clearly seen in "motherfucker", translated as "وغد", "rat," meaning "traitor", translated as "خائن", etc.

2.3.9 Lexical recreation

This occurs when the character invents a term in the SL and, therefore, it is projected in the ML in the same way. In *Inglourious Basterds*, Lt. Aldo Raine talks about a "doggy doc", which is translated by "الطبيب البيطري", a term that is easily understood in the target language and culture.

2.3.10 Paraphrasing

This is also a strategy whereby a word or linguistic structure is rephrased. Its purpose is to express the idiomatic form of ST. It is at this point where we can emphasize what Venuti (2008) considers as the foreign effect; that is when the MT text is said to be adequate or acceptable and conforms more to the norms of the target culture. A good example of this is a sentence from *Kill Bill* vol. 2 (2004), "Waky Waky, eggs and baky", translated into Arabic as "استيقظي فطورك ينتظرك"

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The practical material used in this study is the source text consisting of all taboo and offensive words from the American movies *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), directed by Quentin Tarantino. Their subtitled version has been recorded from the egyptbest website <https://3.egybest.land/x8/> and subtitled by the website translators since no translator's name or translation company is revealed either at the beginning or at the end of the film. Yet, the name of Ibrahim Taj is shown at the end of the movie as Editor.

The rationale behind choosing these movies is the big number of taboo/offensive words they contain, and thus, they are a good source for investigating subtitling strategies used in translating taboo words in American movies. Taboo and offensive words are chosen as the subject for this paper because they create serious problems for subtitlers in the Arab world as the audience does not tolerate them, especially in a family context, traditions and particular social or religious environment. Normally, taboo words do not add too much to the plot of the movies in general, but in the movies under study, they are substantial because of their huge number and also because they are deeply rooted in the story line to the extent that it may sound deficient without them. In fact, they are one of the major characteristics that define both the director Quentin Tarantino and his characters depth in matters of hyper-realism because one cannot imagine an uneducated scoundrel or criminal speak without using foul, derogatory and taboo language.

Having that in mind, the following research questions seem pertinent:

- What are the most recurrent offensive/taboo language categories?
- What strategies have been used in your transfer from ST to MT?
- In the transfer from ST to MT, has the offensive load and taboo of the original been hardened?
- During the subtitling process, have there been cases of manipulation and/or (self)censorship?

A last phase of research has to be clarified: sampling procedure. In a study of subtitling, we have started by observing the huge amount of data concerning taboo and offensive words; thus, there has been more qualitative oriented data analysis.

3.2 Taboo words in the three movies

Languages are spoken within a specific register and context. Speaking of registration, we refer to "a particular choice of diction or vocabulary regarded as appropriate for a certain topic or social situation" (Hughes, 2006, p. 386). The English language is characterized by a series of marked registers, such as a raised register (using formal, professional and literary structures) and a low register (using colloquial language, like the one used in funny situations, etc.). Murray, in Hughes (2006, p. 387), also shows the different types of registers from formal to informal language.

The movies, in our case, abound with taboo words and obscenities of all types because they were produced for the purpose of exhibiting American gangster or lowlife lifestyles and breaking all social norms. The underlying reason is that all the characters are usually drunk or under the effects of drugs, in addition to being criminals in an environment of filth, crime, prostitution and a variety of sex services and drug dealing. Taboo words vary and range from F-words to religious exclamations. Below is a list containing definitions of the most used taboo words in the movies.

F-word derivatives: Words based on or incorporating the F-word. Examples include "fucker" and "motherfucker".

Scatological terms: Words that have to do with feces, urine and defecation. Examples include "shit", "bullshit".

Religious profanities: Words and expressions that religious people, especially Christians, find profane and blasphemous. Examples include "God damn" and "God damn you".

Religious exclamations: Words and expressions that mention God or other religious figures to add emphasis or express strong emotion. Examples include "God!" "My God!" "Jesus!", "Jesus Christ!"

Anatomical terms: Words referring to parts of the human anatomy, mostly the private parts, and are considered crude. Examples include "ass" and "asshole" "dick".

Mild obscenities: Words used in everyday language but that may be offensive to some. Examples include "damn" "hell," as well as milder forms of anatomical terms like "boobs."

Obscene hand gesture: Holding up the middle finger or using the index and middle finger in an upward motion, thus signifying sexual coitus.

Sexual references: Characters refer to sex, having sex, and using other specific sexual terms like "screw."

Derogatory terms: Words or expressions that are used to denigrate and insult one's racial or ethnic background, gender or sexual orientation: Examples include the N-word, various anti-Semitic terms, and anti-homosexual terms like "faggot".

4. Analysis and Findings

The analysis of the data figured out the use of four strategies in subtitling taboo words in the *Pulp Fiction*, and expected two strategies, namely substitution and omission outweigh the rest mainly because of the types of swearwords in the movie are very obscene and offensive to the extent that using other strategies would have caused a failure for sure. The most decisive factor in choosing strategies was the degree of profanity and offensiveness in taboo as a big number of them is not only profane or taboo but suggest incestuous relations which are something dreadful and abnormal in Arab societies.

4.1 Omission

There are numerous cases in which certain elements are omitted as in fuck!, shit!, what the fuck!, what the hell!, or that are religiously charged like Jesus Christ!, God!. There are different academic and scholarly postulations revolving around "omission" in the treatment of offensive language and taboo words. Ivarsson and Carroll (1998) highlight the difficulty involved in translating these terms, not as words but as expressions of raising the tone or interjections, and they maintain that it is difficult to determine the degree of ordinariness or vulgarity that these terms can have when searching for equivalences in the target culture, especially because of the effect that these terms have in their written form, more than in the oral one. Díaz Cintas (2012) also agrees on the impact caused by vulgar language and sexual references when seen in a group, as in the case of a movie theatre. The impact can be softened when someone reads a book in private, and that impact varies according to culture or nationality. What is evident, however, is that when technical restrictions require omission and condensation, taboo terms and swear words are often toned down or omitted (Díaz Cintas & Rameal, 2007).

In the three movies of this study, hundred and eleven of four hundred and twenty two taboo words were subtitled via this strategy, with a percentage usage that is almost 26 %. For Pederson (2011), omission is the most target-oriented strategy because it omits an item that may be doubtful to enter the TT. Omission, then is among the mostly used strategies in subtitling taboo and offensive words in these movies because these words are completely rejected by Arab societies for the reasons cited above. The word 'fuck', 'fucking' are taboos for Arabs and Muslims who never discuss this topic bluntly, especially in family contexts. While "motherfucker" in some instances, as explained before, suggests incest which is something totally rejected and abhorred by target viewers, so omitting it all at once is mandatory. Additionally, this technique is also used because of some technical intricacies, especially when these words are uttered so fast and repeatedly by actors to the extent that a lot of viewers do not even notice them, and in order to save space in some cases. However, it was used less in comparison to substitution because omitting a big number these would result in an inability to transfer the message.

4.2 Substitution

Eighty six out of one hundred and forty one taboo words were subtitled using the substitution strategy. It represents 61 % of all the strategies used. These words are very profane and religiously forbidden; they could not be subtitled via an equivalent. Consequently, subtitlers chose substitution as a strategy that can make them sound less offensive and obscene via a change in the semantic field all and opting for a term that is less obscene. The semantic change was from ST terms like "motherfucker", "shit", and "fuck" that explicitly refer to incest and excrement to other fields that have to do with human manners and god's curse like 'اللعة', which is a cultural substitution, and 'السافل', which is a situational substitution, or even to objects like the case of 'what the fuck?' which was subtitled as 'ما هذا'. Most taboo words in the movies belong to the field of incest, sex and excrement, which means that subtitlers were obliged to use substitution as a strategy that could mitigate and reduce the profanity of these words by employing mild and sometimes archaic words in Arabic to subtitle them. For example, "motherfucker" was subtitled as 'سافل', 'shit' was subtitled as 'اللعة' and 'fuck' was subtitled also as 'اللعة' and at other times as 'الحقير'. Additionally, omitting them at

all would have created a vacuum in meaning and space. The main goal of subtitling them using these more classical words was to make them sound less profane and offensive, as most viewers are not used to classical Arabic words.

As we all know, the image of the Mother is pure and almost holy for Arabs in general and Muslims, so subtitling a swearword like 'Motherfucker' using a direct strategy would have triggered a big cultural shock that might deter viewers even from watching American movies at all. As a result, employing substitution means that subtitlers are confined by culture and religion, but at the same time, they succeed in coping with these constraints. Additionally, they had been given a set of norms to follow, especially the ones related to not encroaching upon the cultural aspects and principles of Arabs and Muslims.

4.4 Generalization and Direct Translation

These strategy presents only 10 % of the strategies used, as is explained above. The most decisive factor in choosing the subtitling strategy was the degree of profanity and offensiveness. Therefore, opting for general translation here was because the terms subtitled using this strategy are not very profane. For example, subtitling 'little looser' as 'الصغير الفاشل' would not create a shock for viewers.

This is the least used strategy, with only 3 % of the strategies used. According to Pederson (Pederson, 2011), this strategy involves substituting an ECR that refers to something specific with something more general because the taboo words that were specific were generalized via a paraphrase. We can see that paraphrasing made them acceptable. Generalization here sounds like euphemizing taboo words to become accepted by the audience. As a case in point, 'While you make fuck on your wife' which explicitly refers to the act of having sex with one's wife, and which is something people cannot talk about in public. So subtitlers translated it as follows 'زوجتك سرير في أنت و'.

Subtitling it in this way was like killing two birds with one stone. It was euphemized, but at the same time, it kept the act of sex, but this time implicitly.

5. Conclusion

As expected, and as has been proved through this paper's findings, subtitling strategies that decrease the profanity and offensiveness of taboos when subtitling them into Arabic are the mostly used ones, namely substitution and omission. The most crucial and decisive factors influencing, shaping and limiting subtitlers choices are related to the degree of profanity of the taboo words the extent to which the strategy could reduce, mitigate and make them acceptable to an Arabic speaking audience with an Islamic background. Concerning the constraints that face subtitlers, they were mainly cultural, religious and, spatial and time constraints. Taboo words pose a great challenge to subtitlers in the Arab world, and adopting only the strategies used above might question subtitlers' degree of fidelity as they either substitute or omit them at all.

Of course, cultural and religious constraints could also be considered part of the limitations of the study because researchers' cultural background is very decisive in recognizing the scope of translation. In other words, in more open communities, taboo words are somehow tolerated. In contradiction to more conservative communities, the same taboo words are totally unacceptable. The same rule applies to translating channels in the internet or other satellite channels. Further research could highlight the impact of the cultural background on the translation process concerning taboo words. For example, a comparative study could be carried out between translating techniques and procedures between the KSA channel "MBC2" and the Egyptian channel "Nile Cinema". This hypothetical research could come out with more nuances concerning translating strategies and techniques, bearing in mind the highly cultural background differences.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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