

When Saudis Stop Being Humorous: The Subtitling and Reception of Saudi Dark Humour in *Masameer County*

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Abstract—This study is designed to examine the effect that Netflix English subtitles might have on the way English-speaking viewers receive Saudi dark humour. To achieve this, the researchers analyse Netflix's English subtitling of two episodes of the Saudi adult animation *Masameer County*, which is known for its humorous discussion of sensitive issues in Saudi society. This study hypothesises that, partly due to sociocultural considerations, the humorous elements found in the Saudi animation is more appreciated and understood by Saudis than English speakers. It is also hypothesised that the inaccurate translation of specific humorous elements by the non-Saudi subtitler further aggravates the difficulty English-speaking audiences understanding the animation's dark humour. To assess these hypotheses, the active role of the subtitler is considered. This is achieved by employing the sociological lens of *habitus* developed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. To understand the subtitler's habitus, the subtitler was interviewed to reveal the personal/social factors that affected her translation's decisions regarding specific humorous scenes. The outcome of these decisions is assessed by examining their reception by English-speaking viewers. A questionnaire was conducted with English-speaking viewers asked to watch the two episodes of *Masameer County* under examination. The questionnaire shows that the English-speaking viewers did not receive the Saudi humour with all its sociocultural associations. The findings reveal that the subtitler's habitus exerted powerful effects on her translational choices, which led to a loss of the Saudi humorous sense in the English-speaking viewers.

Index Terms—subtitling, habitus, Dark Humour, *Masameer County*, Culture

I. INTRODUCTION

Adult animation has seen major growth in recent decades. Unlike children's animation, adult-oriented animation confronts serious issues that only adults can handle. One of the main ways adult animations discuss serious issues is through dark humour. Dark humour found in adult animation straddles a line between “funny and offensive” (Habib, 2020). Accordingly, humour in adult animation requires receptive viewers who are equipped with a relevant sociocultural background that enables them to understand and interpret the hidden meanings behind the visual, acoustic, and verbal signs (Al-Momani et al., 2017). This is the approach adopted by the Saudi adult animation *Masameer County*.

Masameer County provides Saudi society with a framework for discussing contentious issues through dark humour. The animation relays sociocultural messages drawn from Saudi realities to criticise unfavourable aspects of society. Malik Nejer, the series' producer, writer, and director said that the animation is mainly designed for Saudi and Arab (not international) audiences, in that a lot of cultural background and awareness of how Saudi society works is required to fully understand and enjoy the whole experience (Al-Farhan, 2017). This means that barriers to sociocultural understanding may emerge where non-Saudi/Arab viewers have to rely on some form of translation to fully understand Saudi humour.

Given the relatively recent release of *Masameer County* on Netflix, English subtitles directed at a global audience were provided by the platform, raising the issue of how this unusual Saudi product might be perceived and received by non-Saudi/Arab viewers due to the significant sociocultural gap between these disparate cultures. In this case, one of the questions worth investigating is the comprehensibility of the Saudi dark humour in *Masameer County*, as relayed through English subtitling.

Moreover, Netflix assigned Muriel Daou, a Lebanese subtitler, to provide English subtitles for *Masameer County* (AVA, 2022). Assigning a Lebanese subtitler to the Saudi animation presents questions as to her own understanding of the dark humour. This is due to the fact that the characters of the animation speak in local Saudi dialects which can be inaccessible even for Arab people (Hajjūz, 2021). This dynamic further complicates the question of if the subtitles manage to convey most of the humorous elements in the series to English-speaking viewers.

II. RESEARCH AIMS

On the basis of these observations, there are two aims in this study:

- (1) To ascertain whether the Lebanese subtitler of *Masameer County* was successful in rendering the humorous effects through the English subtitles she provided.
- (2) To measure English-speaking viewers' level of understanding of the dark humour in two episodes of *Masameer County*.

III. HYPOTHESIS

This study is based on a hypothesis that the inaccurate translation of specific humorous elements in the English subtitles, which may result from the subtitler's habitus, would be reflected in the way sampled viewers understand the animation's dark humour. More precisely, the expectation is that the more successful the rendering of dark humour in English, the higher the levels of understanding of the animation will be as far as humour goes. This leads us to the second hypothesis, that the Saudi dark humour of *Masameer County* will not be fully received by English-speaking viewers who merely rely on the English subtitles, due to its complex, sociocultural associations of Saudi society.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

The existence of a well-established tradition for dark comedy in Saudi Arabia is reflected in the number of TV productions featuring dark humour. Many Saudi TV series that use humour to entertain people aim to present social criticism of Saudi society and deal with sensitive topics such as social, cultural, and religious issues, e.g., *Tash Ma Tash* (No Big Deal) (Saudi Gazette, 2022), *Barakah Meets Barakah* (2016) (Egypt Today, 2017). Recently, *Masameer* presented dark humour successfully. Alkhunaizi (2023) notes that despite the difficulty of doing dark humour well, *Masameer* succeeds and "does it adeptly, portraying a complex message in a clever and light-hearted manner". Although these listed TV productions differ greatly, they share use of dark humour to expose both individual and social flaws.

Researchers considered dark humour as any joke "making fun of situations usually regarded as tragic, such as death, sickness, disability, and extreme violence, or of the people involved or subject to them" (Bucaria, 2008, pp. 218-219). Many others associate dark humour with tackling taboo and sensitive issues. Collings (2015) argues that the "display within joking of subjects that are considered taboo is enough to indicate darkness". The latter definition is more applicable to the case of *Masameer County* in the sense that the animation discusses sensitive issues in Saudi society such as tribalism, gender discrimination, and racism.

In light of this definition, and dark humour's increasing popularity in Saudi TV productions, questions can be raised about the possibility of this kind of humour crossing national and cultural borders. Humour is subjective and "could have specific cultural background and context, which might make it difficult ... to be understood in other cultures" (Alkhunaizi, 2023). From a translational perspective, it could be noted that a considerable amount of literature has been published on the translation of humour. Bucaria (2008) highlights there has been a growing interest in translating humour, particularly in audio-visual media. Because this study is mainly concerned with the subtitling of dark humour from Arabic into English, it is important to mention that there is a shortage of research on translating humour, in general, in the Arab world.

Alharthi (2015) asserts that research on the subtitling of humour is a relatively new field in the Arab world. His research focuses on subtitling humour from English into Arabic. There is only one recent study by Al-Jabri et al. (2023) which investigates subtitling humour from Arabic into English. This lack of studies on subtitling Arabic humour in English highlights the need to shed light not only upon the production of such subtitles, but also their reception by English-speaking viewers. This is the first sociological study that offers a comprehensive discussion of subtitling Arabic dark humour into English, taking into consideration social factors that affect the subtitler's choices, and attempting to understand the reception of the humours sense by English viewers.

Most of the studies on subtitling of humour are descriptive in nature, rather than grounded in empirical study, e.g., Zabalbeascoa (1994); Martínez-Sierra (2006); Bucaria (2008); and Organ (2015). One important aspect the study of humour translation is "the varying degree of reception" (Ibharim et al., 2019, p. 1266). It is noteworthy that all of these studies, except for Bucaria's, examine humour generally, not dark humour. The reception of dark humour through audio-visual translation has been conducted with European languages/contexts, such as Luque (2003) and Bucaria (2005), but to the best of our knowledge, the only study examining Arab audience reception of cultural references in Arabic subtitling of English films is that of Alfaify and Ramos Pinto (2022). This indicates that the field has not yet focused on English-speakers' reception of Arabic, specifically Saudi, dark humour in audio-visual texts (i.e., through subtitling).

V. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Data for the study were collected by watching the second episode *Washingtonia*, and the sixth episode *Latrine of Secrets* with their English subtitles as presented by Netflix. To identify the humorous scenes in the two episodes, the study adopts Abomoati's (2019) approach, which categorises jokes within audio-visual products into: (1) language-restricted jokes (including taboo language, puns, and wordplay) and (2) reference-restricted jokes (including references to knowledge, and culture). The focus of this study is on reference-restricted jokes (i.e., references to culture-bound items). Language-restricted jokes are disregarded.

Culture-specific references "can be exclusively or predominantly visual (an image of a local or national figure, a local dance, pet funerals, baby showers), exclusively verbal or else both visual and verbal in nature" (Chiaro, 2009, p. 156). Bucaria (2008) notes the impossibility of extracting the visual component from a scene with humorous words, as other elements must be considered such as characters' expressions, tone, etc. Therefore, based on Bucaria's (2008) classification of dark humour, this study considers verbal and non-verbal humorous cultural references.

Cultural-humorous scenes refer to jokes involving a reference to someone or something. In order to identify the humorous techniques that the animators of *Masameer County* used to convey cultural messages with humorous effects, the study adopts Long and Graesser's (1988) taxonomy who classified the techniques of humour into 11 categories: (1) irony, (2) satire, (3) sarcasm, (4) overstatement and understatement, (5) self-deprecation, (6) teasing, (7) replies to rhetorical questions, (8) clever replies to serious statements, (9) double entendre (10) transformation of frozen expressions, and (11) puns.

The study also investigates the translation strategies used by the subtitler in subtitling the cultural-humorous scenes drawing on Pedersen's (2005) seven strategies for translating cultural references in audio-visual contexts: (1) official equivalent, (2) retention, (3) specification, (4) direct translation, (5) generalisation, (6) substitution, and (7) omission. These translation strategies for humorous cultural references are effectively used as a comprehensive model of translation strategies within audio-visual contexts (Al-Jabri et al., 2023).

Due to the sociological nature of this study, in its seeking understanding of not only the strategies of the subtitler in subtitling cultural references but also the social and personal factors behind particular translational choices, the study adopts a sociological apparatus of analysis from Bourdieu's theory: habitus. Habitus has proven a fruitful method within translation studies for understanding translators' agency (e.g., Simeoni, 1998; Gouanvic, 2005; Inghilleri, 2003). Habitus is considered a perceptive tool which helps in examining an agent's social settings and internal incorporated dispositions. Gouanvic (2005, p. 158) argues that the changes or restrictions imposed on a source text by a translator are not "a conscious strategic choice but an effect of his or her specific habitus". Habitus describes structured regularities in an individual's past and present experiences and social contexts (i.e., family upbringing and education). It is also structuring, in that it shapes individuals' present and future practices, beliefs, perceptions, and feelings (Maton, 2008). To best understand and explain the translatorial agency of the subtitler, this section details some of her experiences and cultural background to help understand her translation practices from a sociological perspective.

Muriel Daou is a Lebanese translator¹. She lived in Lebanon till 2008. Then, she moved to the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, Al Khobar for eight years before permanently moving to Canada. She holds a bachelor's degree in Translation from the Lebanese University and has worked in the field of translation for 20 years. Although *Masameer County* is not her first audio-visual project, it is the first Saudi product she subtitled. The subtitler's residency in Saudi Arabia could be a contributing factor in being chosen for subtitling this Saudi animation. Nevertheless, it was not an easy task for her. Although Daou is a native speaker of Arabic, her linguistic habitus is not identical with that of Saudi dialects. In the interview, she revealed a striking awareness of the significant difference between the two Arabic dialects, and the impact of this difference on her product; she declared that the local expressions used by the animation characters were the most challenging part of the translation process. This demonstrates that, notwithstanding her residency in Saudi Arabia, she did not become fully proficient in the Saudi Arabic. This can be attributed to two factors; the subtitler only lived in one city and thus was not exposed to different dialects of Saudi society, and she did not have active socialisation with Saudis such that she could refer to them when needed during translation process, as she confirmed in the interview. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the Saudi culture with its varied dialects was not been fully instilled within her habitus. What is expressed by linguistic habitus is not only a language but all the class habitus the user belongs to (Bourdieu, 1991). This is evident in Daou's translatorial agency, particularly the linguistic choices she made during the translation of the project at hand. Supporting examples of this claim are provided in section (VI).

As the study also aims to understand how the product is perceived by end users, a questionnaire was designed to collect data about viewers' reception. Particular attention was paid to the participants' understanding of specific humorous scenes dealing with sociocultural issues in Saudi society. The questionnaire was structured in three parts. The first part consists of five questions about the participants' general background of the Arabic language, Saudi society and culture, and their experience of watching subtitled Arabic series/movies. The second part, which was answered after participants watched the two episodes of *Masameer County* under investigation, contains close-ended questions about their understanding of some of the humorous scenes. In the third part, participants were asked open-ended questions

¹ The information provided in this section was obtained from the subtitler during an interview with her on the 17th of February 2023 for the purpose of the study.

about the English subtitles of specific examples of dark humour, answering with a limited number of words.

Regarding the selection of the participants, 20 English-speaking viewers were chosen by circulating information about this research project among the researchers' social and personal networks in the UK and Saudi Arabia. The researchers motivated participants to participate in this study through rewards; £40 Amazon voucher for residents in the UK, and for those in Saudi Arabia, 200 SR in any Saudi store the participant chooses upon completion of the questionnaire. The participants were asked to watch the two episodes of *Masameer County* without being informed of the focus of the study, to aid the validity and accuracy of the results. Then, they were asked to fill out the web-based questionnaire.

VI. DATA ANALYSIS

This section provides an analysis of the cultural-humorous elements which were mistranslated by the subtitler, and hence affected the target viewers' reception of the humorous aspects of the studied episodes. The questionnaire showed that 70% of the viewers were unsure if Netflix's subtitles of the animation conveyed the intended meaning of the cultural/social references (50% = maybe and 20% = not sure) (see Figure 1).

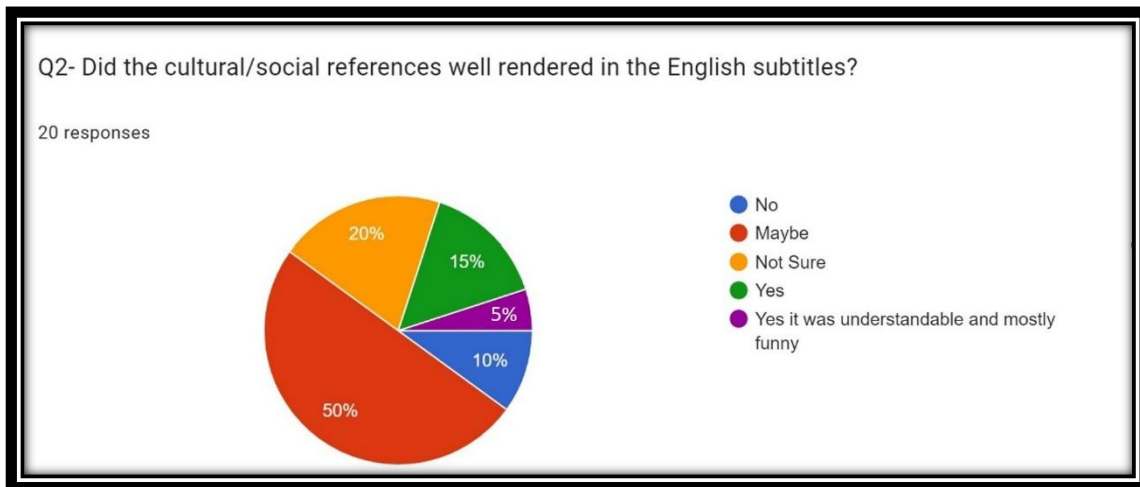


Figure 1. The English Viewers' Responses About the Subtitling of the Cultural/Social References

More specifically, the following question was asked: "What do you think of the English subtitles in these two episodes in general?". Responses indicate that 75% of the participants found the subtitles understandable but had some confusing parts (see Figure 2).

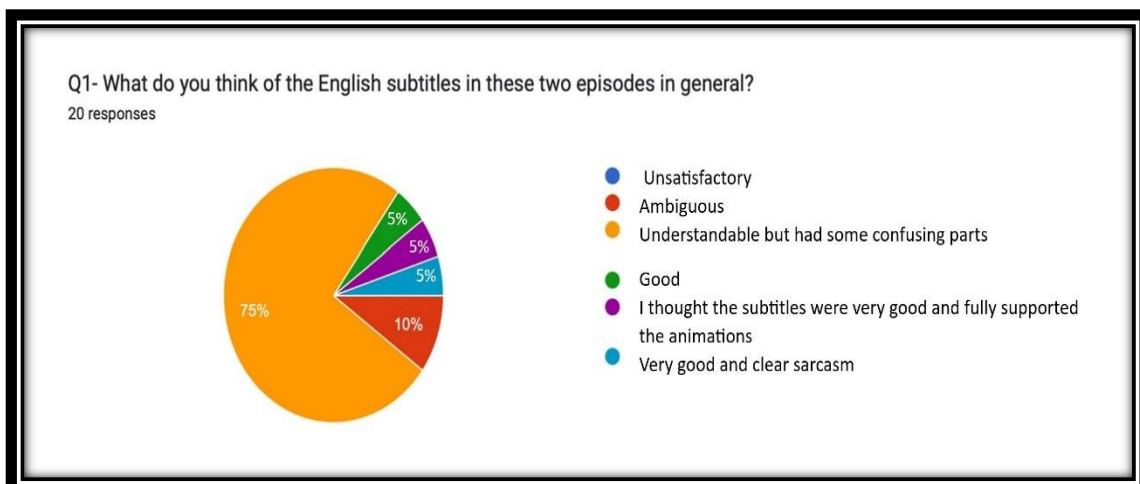


Figure 2. The English Viewers' Responses About the Two Episodes in General

As the figures show, viewers felt that there was something missed in translation. The collected data is classified thematically into two categories: (A) Saudi sociocultural issues, and (B) tribal traditions as presented in the following sections.

A. Saudi Sociocultural Issues

One of the Saudi sociocultural issues humorously tackled in the animation is racism. It is presented through

stereotyping used by the characters as one of the main sources of humour globally (Eades & Alharthi, 2014). In episode two; *Washingtonia*, the characters of *Masameer County* presented racism humorously to discuss it as a Saudi sociocultural issue. In episode 2 (13:08-13:23 min), Khalaf calls a famous Saudi football show to express his rejection of the first performance of popular South Korean band BTS in Saudi Arabia, at King Fahad International Stadium in Riyadh in 2019. Khalaf believes that the Stadium is only dedicated to football. His depicted phone interview presents racism that is still pervasive in Saudi society when he refers to the K-pop band as “Omal Mac” (literally: workers at McDonald’s) as follows:

Example (1):

خلف: كل اللي نحتاجه نتوحد لأجل الساحرة المستديرة، قيل ما ينلحن جدفنا من عمال ماك.
 المذيع: برأيك أن المشكلة لها علاقة بالبرجر؟
 خلف: لا ياسطل عمال ماك طقاقات الكيبوب.

Netflix English subtitles:

Khalaf: We just need to unite for the sake of the bewitching ball. Before we meet our end at the hand of Omal Mac.

The presenter: you think this has to do with burgers?

Khalaf: No, you idiot! Omal Mac, it’s a K-pop band.

Literal Translation:

Khalaf: We just need to unite for the sake of the bewitching ball. Before we meet our end at the hand of McDonald’s workers.

The presenter: you think this has to do with burgers?

Khalaf: No, you idiot! McDonald’s workers, the low-class wedding singers of the K-pop band.

The expression “Omal Mac” is prevalent in Saudi use on social media platforms and everyday language (Ezzeddine, 2023). It shows that some Saudis see people from eastern Asia in a stereotypical image, as if they are one entity and have the same facial features (Ezzeddine, 2023). Hence, Khalaf like some Saudis humorously and contemptuously calls all eastern Asians, including the Korean members of BTS, “Omal Mac” since the majority of McDonald’s workers in Saudi are from south-eastern Asia (Ezzeddine, 2023), conflating the two regions in a disparaging fashion.

Two verbal techniques of humour, double-entendres and irony, are used here. The double-entendre appears in the term “Omal Mac”, which has two meanings; the workers at McDonald’s, or a popular expression used by some Saudis to stereotypically refer to people from East Asia. The humour is revealed when the show host says: “you think this has to do with burgers?” The question is used ironically to expose the superficiality of this racist expression and to mock the practice of racism and its associated sociocultural belief. Non-verbal signs are also used to sarcastically shed light on racism: Khalaf frowns using a loud sharp voice to express his anger and seriousness while making his racist comment. The background music is also very serious, however, in dark comedy animation, such music aims to make the comedy funnier and accentuate the humour (Greiving, 2016). Moreover, the host’s facial gestures are simultaneously used to convey the humour. When he is listening to Khalaf, the host first has a frozen face with raised eyebrows then he keeps one of his eyebrows raised and lowers the other to express his surprise about the nonsense of Khalaf’s comment while asking him the follow-up question. Furthermore, the host’s tone of voice in asking the question, in which he has a fall-rise intonation, shows his uncertainty about the relationship between McDonald’s workers and football. This tone can convey a satirical sense to the audience.

It is apparent that the racist dark humour in this scene stems from understanding its main verbal element “Omal Mac”. Nonetheless, the subtitler was unable to grasp the sociocultural feature of the humour. Consequently, she resorted to transliterating its main verbal component into English as the safest way; she retained the cultural reference as is in the target language, as though it is a proper name (Pedersen, 2005, p. 116). She elaborated on her decision, stating she was unfamiliar with the expression and thought that this was the actual name of the K-pop band. The context did not help her discover the intended meaning, she continued. She partly attributed this mistake to the Arabic transcript provided to her, which did not contain any annotations explaining Saudi-specific references. From a sociological perspective, the transliteration of the phrase “Omal Mac” can be attributed to the subtitler’s habitus. As previously mentioned, she is Lebanese and although she comes from Arabic background, she still cannot grasp all Saudi cultural references since there are great variations between Arab countries in terms of culture, dialects, and traditions. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus here explains the choice of the subtitler.

Accordingly, this failure in subtitling the humorous cultural reference affected the viewers’ reception of the humour. Analysis shows that 90% of the participants (18 participants) were unable to understand what “Omal Mac” refers to. This indeed indicates that the majority of the respondents did not successfully identify the humour. This suggests that the subtitler’s unsuccessful attempt at understanding, and hence translating, the humour led to the target viewers’ inability to realise the darkly humorous content in this scene.

Example (2):

In the same episode (12:22-12:29 min), the audience can also hear the show’s two guests, Abu Fahad and Abdullah (who are fans of Alhilal and Alnassr respectively) involved in a verbal spat with each other. The Hilal-Nassr football rivalry is seen as the biggest rivalry in Saudi professional football. The scene humorously depicts fanaticism as follows:

أبو فهد: ماشاء الله، أنت طلعت فقراوى .
 عبدالله: وانت طلعت طافية.
 أبو فهد: جحفي .
 عبدالله: دقيقة. نيشيمورا .

Netflix English subtitles:

Abu Fahad: Awesome, you're **a fan of the poor club**.

Abdallah: And you're **a fan of the hat club**.

Abu Fahad: **Jahfali**.

Abdallah: Wait. **Nishimura**.

Here humour is achieved verbally when each character is shocked to find out that the other is a fan of the opposing team, and they exchange derogatory nicknames widely used by the two clubs' supporters to annoy their rivals. "Faqrāwī" (literally: the poor club) is a nickname used by Saudi football fans as a derogatory label for Alnassr, after an instance in the club's history when it was not able to match other Saudi clubs in spending to buy players (Alkhulaif, 2022). The second nickname, "Tāqīyah" (literally: the hat club) was coined in the 1950s to refer to Alhilal when in a match they found that the opposing team was wearing the same colours as their team. Instead of asking Alhilal to change its uniform, the players were asked to wear hats to distinguish themselves from the other team's players (Abdulaziz, 2020). Therefore, the nickname "Tāqīyah" is still attached to the club. The last two nicknames refer to popular football figures for Saudi football fans. "Jahfali" refers to Muhammad Jahfali, an Alhilal player best known for scoring a last-minute equalising goal against Alnassr in the 2015 King Cup final, which led to victory for his side (Alnajjar, 2015). Alhilal's fans usually remind Alnassr's of this historical win by mentioning the player's last name. "Nishimura" refers to a Japanese football referee, who adjudicated the 2014 AFC Champions League Final between Alhilal and Western Sydney Wanderers. The match ended by crowning Western Sydney Wanderers AFC champions. In this game, Alhilal claimed that they had three strong appeals for penalties turned down by Nishimura, and demanded an investigation (Saudi Gazette, 2014). The supporters of rival clubs say "Nishimura" to antagonistically remind Alhilal fans of this incident. All these nicknames are presenting the idea of sports fanaticism.

Humour is also achieved through a visual sign; Abdallah reminds himself of Nishimura's name by taking a paper from his pocket during the verbal spat. Not remembering the name of the referee, and yet writing it on a piece of paper and keeping it to be used whenever needed against sports rivals is used to ridicule sports fanaticism as a social phenomenon. Such an action sarcastically represents sports fanaticism, where fans blindly echo slogans mocking opposing teams without necessarily realising what they mean.

Drawing on Pedersen's (2005) model of rendering culture in subtitling, it is clear that the subtitler adopted two different strategies to deal with references in the humour. For the nicknames, she opted for "calque direct translation" – a stringent literal translation which may appear exotic to the target text audience (Pedersen, 2005, p. 117). Although she was sure that "Faqrāwī" refers to Alnassr club, she was unsure what "Tāqīyah" refers to. Nevertheless, she managed to understand from the context that Abdullah was attacking Abu Fahad with this expression. Thus, she directly translated the nicknames as she wanted to preserve the joke by using official names. For Jahfali and Nishimura, the subtitler chose "retention strategy" (Pedersen, 2005, p. 116) as they are proper names. She explained that it was not possible to add any explanation of these names due to technical limitations; the maximum time allowed for a subtitle to appear on screen is 20 frames, according to Netflix's requirements.

The cultural references mentioned in this humour are monocultural, according to Pedersen's degrees of "transculturality" of cultural references (2005, pp. 122-123). They are "less identifiable to the majority of the relevant TT audience than it is to the relevant ST audience" (Pedersen, 2005, p. 123). However, by adopting these strategies, the subtitler had no choice but to depend on the audience's knowledge of Saudi culture, which would help them to know what they are referring to, as she declared in the interview.

Hence, appreciating this example of humour depends on understanding the references made. The questionnaire indicates that an overwhelming number of participants (90% = 18 participants) were unable to understand these references. It also shows that the rest of the participants (10% = 2 participants) thought they had understood the references, but actually did not, as they were unable to explain what these references when asked. They only provided a general answer, such as the guests are insulting each other's clubs. This signals that the English subtitle likely appears humourless because the monocultural references are completely unknown to the majority of the study's viewers. The result here supports Snell-Hornby's (1995, p. 42) alerting of the risks of "overestim[ing] the target- audience's familiarity with the source-language culture", as the subtitler took this decision based on her overestimated assumption of the viewers' familiarity with the Saudi culture.

B. Tribal Traditions

The majority of the Saudi population is ethnically Arab, and descended from the Arabian tribes (Lacroix, 2011). Many aspects of Saudi culture are derived from traditional tribal culture (Evason, 2019). *Masameer County* dedicated episode 6 to humorously criticising some tribal norms and traditions that are seen as outdated in modern times. Findings indicate that the Saudi tribal issues in the episode posed challenges to the Lebanese subtitler during the translation process.

Example (1):

One of the humorous elements related to the Saudi tribal traditions which the subtitler faced difficulty in understanding and translating into English, is the term “As Sulūm”. The term, a thematic keyword in episode 6, refers to tribe-specific norms and traditions; knowledge of and adherence to which are requirements of Saudi Bedouin masculinity (Alqahtani, 2013). It is mentioned at the beginning of the episode as part of a “Raddīah”; a Saudi poetic genre where a poet orally improvises verses (in Bedouin dialect) in tune and a group of people standing behind him repeat what was said until another poet stops them in order to reply in the same style (Global Arabic Encyclopaedia, 1999).

Humour is achieved here by creating an acoustic representation of an abstract idea – tribalism. Symbolically, the Raddīah represents tribalism and shows how a segment of Saudi society still reveres outdated tribal traditions. The Raddīah takes place at the beginning of the ceremony that the episode revolves around, celebrating the reconciliation of an old feud between two tribes. Reciting the verses through Raddīah is meant to grab the viewer’s attention and make fun of the obsolescence of some tribal Sulūm and create a stronger humorous effect. The facial expressions of the participants symbolise their seriousness in obeying the tribal traditions. This is also evident in the third humorous technique used in the scene, which is verbal and is expressed in the verses themselves. The two poets sarcastically praise the tribes’ men as being able to solve the feud, and knowing the traditions of Arabia.

To effectively deliver this humour to viewers, the poetic lines need to be accurately translated, which the English subtitle failed to achieve in one of the main lines (01:26-02:19 min):

[الرجال] اللي تعرف السلوم وما يخونونها.

Netflix English subtitles:

Those born to know camels, and who know no treason.

Literal translation:

Those [men] who know Arabian norms and traditions, and never go against them.

This obvious mistake in translating the term was due to the subtitler’s failure to correctly hear and understand, in Pedersen’s (2005, p. 123) words a “monocultural” reference. The interview with the translator reveals that she was unsure if there was any link between “As Sulūm” and “camels” when she re-watched the episode before the interview. The subtitler admitted that the first time she encountered the term was during the interview. Therefore, she mixed it up during the translation process with a familiar phonetically similar word, “As Asunūm”: meaning the camels’ humps, although the linguistically correct plural of this word is: “Asnimah” not “Asunūm” (Almaany, 2023a). Thus, she thought that she used “shifted direct translation” strategy here (Pedersen, 2005, p. 117). However, she was unable to discover that her translation “camels” does not fit the context in which the line was meant to praise the men’s attributes.

Besides her ignorance of the term and inability to deduce its meaning from the context, the translator attributed the mistake to the transcription on which she heavily relied on during translation. She said: “The Arabic transcription must have had something else that led me to translate that as camels”. She continued to explain that when she was unsure of a word she heard in the animation, she considered the Arabic transcription as her “source of truth” as a native of the Saudi dialect supposedly would have created it, and thus it would serve as a more reliable reference point than what she may have heard.

From a sociological perspective, it could be argued that the subtitler’s choice of translating the term “As Sulūm” as camels can be seen as an effect of her habitus; a non-Saudi cultural. In the interview with the subtitler, she shed light on the challenge of subtitling this series due to the prevalence of colloquialisms spoken by characters. She acknowledged “the difficulties were obviously with the slang and the local expressions”. This statement strongly supports the presented hypothesis about the effects of the subtitler’s habitus on the final product of the subtitling. This, in turn, affects the viewers’ reception of the humorous references.

In response to the question of the clarity of this term, participants highlighted a problem in understanding it in context. As Figure 3 shows, 30% of the viewers (6 participants) indicated that the word “camels” is an incorrect English subtitle, and it affected their overall understanding. Some 25% of the participants (5 participants) were confused but they said they could understand the overall meaning. However, 40% (8 participants) indicated that the word “camels” can be read naturally and thought that the subtitle delivers the meaning. This may indicate that they failed to grasp the word’s nuances and were confused with the context. Accordingly, the humour in this verse could be lost and the audience potentially disconnected.

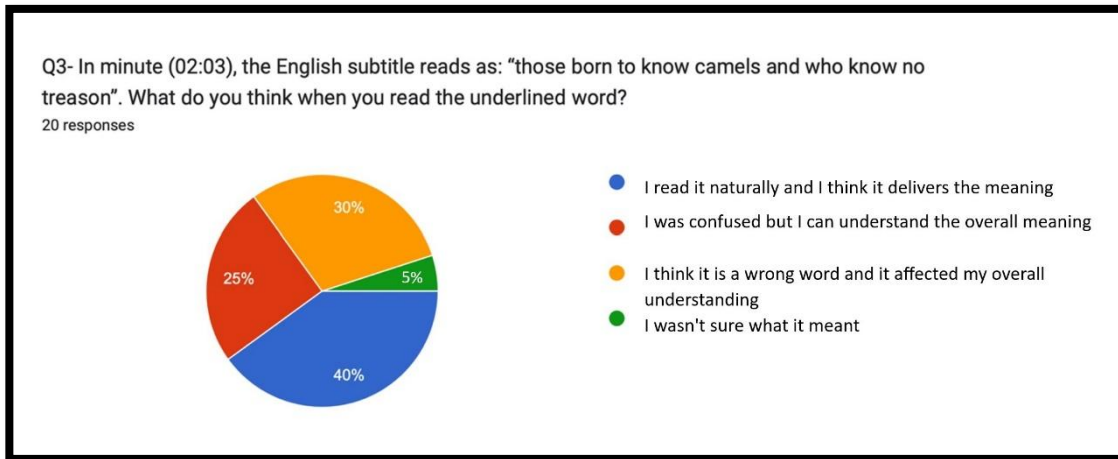


Figure 3. The English Viewers' Responses About the Subtitling of the Term "As Sulūm"

Example (2):

Another scene humorously presents two Saudi tribal expressions which the subtitler failed to understand and translate correctly. The scene lasts for about three minutes (2:30-5:36 min), showing the men of the two tribes eating a celebratory dinner while accidentally overhearing Maneah and Jaheer (the poets) insulting and gossiping about the tribes' men behind their backs, through a microphone gaffe. Two elements of this gossip concern bin Zouaitan and bin Zarooob. When tribesmen overhear the insult about the two, the tribes' sheikhs say the following two sentences addressing the two men (3:50 min and 5:30 min):

اسمع يا ابن زعيطان والله إنك أطيب من جا، ومن غير قصور في باقي الرجال، وابشر بالحق.

Netflix English subtitles:

Listen, bin Zouaitan. You're a good man. Truly. There is no better than you, **in all honesty**.

Literal Translation:

Listen, bin Zouaitan. You're the best among those who attended today, no offence to other men.

I will make it up to you in accordance with our tribal traditions.

تراها جتك يا ابن زاروب ... وابشر بالحق.

Netflix English subtitles:

Fret not, bin Zarooob ... **truth to be told**.

Literal Translation:

I will marry her to you, bin Zarooob. ... **I will make it up to you in accordance with our tribal traditions.**

The phrase "Absher Bi Alhaq" (which apologetically denotes: I will make it up to you in accordance with our tribal traditions) is used in Saudi Arabia when someone makes a mistake against someone else, with the former person or a witness saying it to the latter (Alqahtani, 2013). The second underlined humorous instance in the scene, which is the expression "Tarāhā Jatk", is closely linked to the first one. In the episode, after the characters overhear Maneah and Jaheer through the microphones insulting and bullying bin Zarooob and talking about his intention to marry a girl from the other tribe, the tribe's sheikh promises bin Zarooob that she will marry him by uttering "Tarāhā Jatk", despite her father's confirmation that she is promised to her cousin. This expression denotes the girl is yours and we will make her marry you. It is an ancient tribal expression, said by a girl's father or a tribal elder to a man he chooses as her husband. All this happens without the girl's knowledge, and she will be forced to marry that man.

Both tribal expressions are used as verbal elements of humour. They are sarcastic means of indicating the overdependence of some people on tribal traditions, mocking such beliefs and practices. The former expression shows how the two insulted characters are unable to defend themselves in front of the tribes' men because of the tribal elders' presence. Their faces are then saved by the Sheikhs when they say this well-known expression to them. The latter expression indicates how the sheikh will make amends to bin Zarooob by marrying the girl he wants to him, which provides a vivid example of an outdated tribal tradition in Arabia. Such traditions denigrate women and are seen sexist and objectifying (Alotaibi, 2022).

The verbal humour in this scene is mixed with visual and acoustic elements, which simultaneously appear onscreen and are closely linked to the verbal message, enhancing its dark humour. The facial expressions and body language of bin Zouaitan and bin Zarooob (such as frozen faces, bulging eyes, averting gaze, hanging heads, swallowing saliva, and loss of appetite) humorously show their shock and shame at what they heard, and their inability to defend themselves. Exaggerating the physical features is also humorous in that their facial features are totally different from the surrounding characters as the two look like animals more than humans. Moreover, their moustaches are drawn very thin, symbolising their weakness. The two sheikhs contrastingly have very thick moustaches, which serve as a symbol of their strength. It is widely believed among many Arabs that a long thick moustache symbolises manhood and power

(Harris & Hiltunen, 2014). Furthermore, the two sheikhs are frowning and gesturing with their hands, which get bigger as they speak. All these visuals symbolise power relations, wherein tribal men are the weakest since they are subjects to their tribe's sheikh who represent the power and strength of tribal traditions in some segments of Saudi society. In addition, during the sheikhs' utterance of these expressions, a *rabāb* is heard. The *rabāb* is a medieval Bedouin musical instrument (Britannica, 2023), which humorously signifies the archaic nature of tribal traditions, as it is now considered part of Arabian folk art (Abdulhafiz, 2017). However, the subtitler's failure to convey the accurate meaning of the key verbal elements of the scene in English did not help to establish the intended humour as appears in the ST.

When the subtitler was asked about her translation of "Absher Bi Al_haq", she showed her unawareness of it, and thought that the word "Al_haq" was used in its direct dictionary meaning; honesty (Almaany, 2023b). Hence, after assessing the context from her point of view, she resorted to "shifted direct translation" which makes a cultural reference "more unobtrusive" to the target audience (Pedersen, 2005, p. 117). Although her translation might fit the context, it failed to highlight the tribal dimension of the expression that was the source of the dark humour in the scene.

In addition, the expression "Tarāhā Jatk" is mistranslated by the Lebanese subtitler into English as "Fret not". In the interview, the translator admitted that she did not understand the expression, although she tried to find its equivalent online. Thus, she interpreted it based on the context; that it was used to put the listener's mind at ease. This unsuccessful attempt to understand the concept does not only indicate the translator's lack of knowledge about Saudi culture but also her lack of Saudi sources to consult. Her translation possibly renders the original humoristic intention mundane.

In response to the questions presented to the participants about the clarity of these terms, 95% (19 participants) indicated they seemed to represent literal meanings of "compliment" phrases. A considerable number of the participants were uncertain about whether these cultural/social references were adequately translated into English in the subtitles (50% = maybe, 20% = not sure, and 10% = no). This result is unsurprising if we consider how much this scene is oriented towards sociocultural-specific dark humour.

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present study was designed to assess the extent to which the producer of the subtitles of two episodes of *Masameer County* was successful in the translation of humorous scenes, and how this humour was perceived by the English-speaking viewers. Regarding the first hypothesis, in which a correlation was hypothesised between the subtitler's translation choices and her cultural background (non-Saudi), Bourdieu's analytical tool of habitus proved fruitful in understanding the subtitler's cultural and professional background. Through the use of habitus, it becomes clear that the subtitler comes from a cultural background, which although Arabic, differs greatly from Saudi culture. Most of the justifications she gave for her translational choices to specific humorous expressions ranged from ignorance of Saudi dialects, to an inability to provide explanations due to technical constraints of subtitling (limited time and space).

The study also set out to examine the English-speaking viewers' reception of Saudi dark humour. The hypothesis in which low humorous levels were expected for certain humorous elements in English subtitles of the two episodes was confirmed, with 75% (15 participants) finding the subtitles understandable, but with some confusing parts. Apart from the inaccurate translation of some humorous elements by the subtitler, another important influencing factor was found to be the viewers' limited knowledge of Saudi culture.

The present study provides additional evidence with respect to appreciating humour. The findings suggest that viewers who mainly rely on the English subtitles provided by Netflix are not able to fully enjoy and appreciate the animation. Although participants understood some of the animation's non-verbal humorous signs, their full enjoyment was hindered by inaccurate translations of cultural references. An implication of this is the possibility that subtitling can be a barrier in understanding humour, especially where humour is culture-specific.

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