The Use of Relevance and Euphemisms in Translating Taboo Expressions in the Subtitles of the TV Show "Friends"

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the use of relevance and euphemisms in translating taboo expressions from the TV show "Friends". As well, it explores how the translator deals with the differences between the linguistic and cultural aspects of the source and target languages. Qualitative analysis was employed to achieve the study objectives. The findings of the data analysis suggest that subtitle translators should pay close attention to the cultural and social norms of the target audience and convey precise translations of taboo expressions to ensure the optimal meaning is conveyed accurately. It is worth noting that translation can be an uneasy and nuanced task that requires a deep understanding of both the source and target languages, as well as cultural context and idiomatic expressions. This study contributes to the field of audiovisual translation by shedding light on the challenges and opportunities involved in the translation of taboo expressions.

Keywords: *Subtitle Translation; Taboo Expressions; Euphemisms; Optimal Translation; Irrelevant Translation.*

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate the accuracy of Arabic subtitles in translating the spoken English in the "Friends" TV series. This show is a popular American sitcom that has been televised in many countries across the world. Thus, the subtitle of the show has been a key component of its international distribution. Taboo expressions, on the other hand, are words or phrases that are considered obscene, rude, or culturally unsuitable in the target language and culture. The term 'taboo' was first introduced by Captain James Cook in 1777. It originates from the Tongan language word 'Tapu' which means 'banned' or 'forbidden' (Allan and Burridge, 2006). Taboo expressions are considered social norms because they influence people's conduct in the past, present, and future (Farberow, 1963; Abdul-Majeed, 2016). Over time, the meaning of the term has evolved from 'forbidden or prohibited' to 'offensive' or 'impolite' (Hughes, 2006). For Culpeper (2005), taboo words is classified within positive impoliteness in which the hearer's positive face is damaged (Bousfield, 2008; Mohammed & Abbas, 2015; Kadhum & Abbas, 2020).

Audiovisual Translation (AVT) has two divisions: subtitle translation and dubbing translation (González, 2019). In this paper, the subtitle translation is our main concern. It requires the expression of two different social-cultural backgrounds and situational contexts, and thus

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the context of the movie or series must be identical to the translated context (Malenova, 2015). The translator should consider the relevance between emotions, social, historical, cultural, and background factors and the target language's context as well (Cui-ping & Xue-li, 2015). This means that RT should be the foundation for translation processes, as Gutt (1990) confirms that translation and interpreting are simply acts of communication, with the only difference being that the two texts are in different languages (Stroińska & Drzazga, 2018). According to Gutt (1991), Relevance Theory (RT) has a strong implication for translation, in which humans use inference to convey their messages, and the listener, in turn, is supposed to infer the speaker's intended information from the utterance. In translation, there are two processes that followed by translators before interpreting any texts: the source language (SL) and the target language (TL). It means that translation uses TL to rearrange SL. Therefore, subtitle translation uses one language to convey another language, and the translator tries to make the translated texts similar to the original ones (Cui-ping & Xue-li, 2015). For Sperber and Wilson (1986), RT is based on the assumption that human cognition is geared towards the hearer's search for relevance (the maximization of relevance) (cited in Abdulmajeed & Abed, 2021).

There are two principles in this theory: the cognitive principle and the communicative principle. The first is related to cognition, and the second to the interpretation of utterance (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). According to the cognitive principle of relevance, the input is more relevant when it needs more cognitive effects, and it is less relevant when there is more mental effort (Forceville, 1996; Noh, 2000; Wilson, 2009; Simms, 2009). Sperber and Wilson (2004) made a distinction between two models of communication: a code model and an inferential model. Perry (2015: 25) states that "communication will be successful when the addressee recognizes those intentions." Sperber and Wilson (1995: 260) explained the communicative principle as "every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance". For optimal relevance, the listener should get the intended meaning of the speaker with less mental effort and with more contextual effects (Al-Hindawi & Abdulmajeed 2016; anonymized, 2019). Context here refers to the assumptions or background knowledge about the world and is a psychological construct that is a subset of the hearer (Wilson and Rose, 1997). The hearer chooses the most relevant context to process the message, where the message in the communicative event must be known by the sender as a possible context when it is effectively received by the hearer (Gordon, 2009:13). Gutt (2000) made a distinction between direct and indirect translation. The first one does not require indicating the context of the source texts; yet, the second one needs the readers to be familiar with the context of the source texts to explain it (Stroińska & Drzazga, 2018).

Another important topic is tackled in this study, which is euphemism. When the speaker wants to decrease or replace taboo terms, he employs euphemism, which has a good emotional impact on the listener's thinking; hence, the speaker employs it as a language bridge to indirectness (anonymized, Hasan & Sabti, 2022). Williams (1975) suggested some euphemistic strategies, which are then developed by Al-Adwan (2005) into three:

i. **Widening**: replacing the inappropriate words with more general words, or less offensive.
ii. **Implication**: having a traditional connotation while also implying a unique interpretation.
iii. **Omission**: removing a word from the subtitle considered highly offensive or face threatening (Wu & Wan, 2021).

In this study, these three strategies were adopted, besides the three classifications of relevance theory:

I.   **Optimal Translation:** the goal of optimal translation is to accurately translate the source text's meaning taking into account linguistic and cultural variations.
II. **Relevant Translation:** it strives to maintain the intent of the original message while making the translation acceptable and meaningful.
III. **Irrelevant Translation**: it deviates significantly from the original text, which leading to confusion or misrepresentation (anonymized, 2017).

Several studies have been conducted to analyze the use euphemistic strategies and relevance in subtitling taboo expressions. For example, Thawabteh (2012); Al-Adwan (2015); Pratama (2016); Wu & Wan (2021); Al-Yasin and Rabab'ah (2019); Abdelaal and Al Sarhani (2021); Zagood, Almazrouei, Alnaqbi and Almheiri (2022); and Chen (2022).

Research Method

The first season of this TV show "Friends" is being used in this study. It is first aired on September 22, 1994, which contains 24 episodes. The subtitles were taken from seven episodes (1, 2, 5, 9, 14, 22 and 23), the rest episodes repeated the same taboo expressions. Friends became one of the most watched television programs of all time after receiving acclaim during its airtime. The TV series "Friends" meets the standards set by Hatim and Mason (1997): a well viewed feature film that stresses interpersonal pragmatics and include verbal interaction scenes. It also has excellent subtitles (Cheng, 2019); therefore, it fits the purpose of this research. The Arabic translation chosen in this article is done by Egybest team. The researchers retrieved the instances of taboo words from different episodes and neglect the repeated ones, and they classified them according to sex-related and inappropriate terms. Finally, they analyzed the results and drew conclusions. This study hypothesized that translating subtitle expressions in the TV show "Friends" might differ from the original dialogue due to the cultural and linguistic sensitivity in handling taboo expressions. In addition, the use of euphemisms and optimal relevance in translating taboo expressions can help avoid offensive or inappropriate language in the TL. The three euphemisms strategies were adopted (widening, implication and omission), besides the three classifications of relevance theory: optimal translation (the right translation according to the target audience), relevant translation (the expected translation) and irrelevant translation (the incorrect translation).

Results & Discussion

The study examines the subtitle translations of "Friends" and analyzes how the translator has dealt with relevance and taboo expressions, and how he used euphemism strategies to reduce them. It investigates the impact of using these strategies on the translated text and the expected translation. As well, it tries to show the handling of culturally sensitive or offensive words in translation, ensuring relevance and meaningfulness for the target audience. The qualitative approach was used to improve the hypothesis. The taboo expressions in translated dialogues had been collected in this table:

Table (1): Translating Taboo Expressions into Arabic in the TV Show "Friend".

No.	Original Text	Translated text into Arabic	Expected translation
Episode1	It's just two people going out to dinner and- not <u>having sex</u>.	انه مجرد اثنين ستتاولان العشاء سوياً	انهما مجرد اثنين سيتناولا العشاء سوية ولن <u>يمارسا الحب</u>.
	I am totally <u>naked</u>.	واجد نفسي هناك	كنت <u>عاريا بالكامل</u>.
	I wanna <u>kill myself</u>	اانني اختنق.	يجعلني اود <u>قتل نفسي</u>.
	she was <u>a lesbian</u>.	انها مريضة نفسياً.	انها <u>مثلية</u>.
	I wish I was a <u>lesbian</u>.	اتمنى ان اكون مريضاً نفسياً.	اتمنى ان اكون <u>شخصا شاذ</u>.
	with Paul the <u>Wine Guy.</u>	مع "بول" رجل المشروبات.	مع بول "<u>ساقي الخمر</u>" او "<u>رجل الخمر</u>"
	This was Carol's favorite <u>beer</u>.	كان ذلك الشراب المفضل ل "كارول".	كان ذلك نوع <u>البير</u> المفضل لدى كارول
	you <u>are making love</u> with your socks on	عن لبس الجوارب.	عن <u>ممارسة الحب</u> وانت ترتدي الجوارب
	<u>You had sex</u>, didn't you?	not translated	<u>اقمت علاقة</u>, اليس كذلك؟
	'To get you into bed'	لتذهبي معه كي يستغلك.	<u>ليقيم علاقة معك</u>
	My mom had just <u>killed herself</u>	امي توفت.	امي <u>قتلت</u> نفسها
Episode2	Are we still talking about <u>sex</u>?	الا زلنا نتحدث عن الجنس؟	الا زلنا نتحدث عن <u>ممارسة الجنس</u>؟
Epsiode5	Ugly <u>Naked</u> Guy	رجل قبيح	الرجل القبيح <u>العاري</u>
Episdoe9	V.D	not translated.	مصاب <u>بمرض جنسي</u>
	was I busting my ass?	not translated.	أقحم <u>مؤخرتي</u> في كل شيء؟ (أي أقحم نفسي في كل شيء؟
Episode14	I <u>can't go</u> when I'm nervous.	لااستطيع الذهاب.	لااستطيع <u>قضاء حاجتي</u>
Episode22	anything particularly... <u>saucy</u>?	افعل شيئا ساخنا.	شيء معين ...او <u>بذيء</u>
Epsiode23	<u>Lesbian Lover Day</u>.	يعرف الجميع من تكون.	يوم المحبة للاشخاص <u>المثليين</u>
	ex-husband or a <u>lesbian.</u>	زوجها السابق	شريكتها <u>المثلية</u>

Based on the table (1), it seems that the translations are not accurate and do not match the expected translations in many cases. It is worth to note that that the process of translating any text can be an uneasy and nuanced task that needs a deep understanding of both the SL and TL, also cultural context and idiomatic expressions, as it is shown below:

1**. Monica**: It's just two people going out to dinner and- not <u>having sex.</u>

مونيكا: انه مجرد اثنين ستتاولان العشاء سويا[anah mujarad athnayn yatanawalan aleasha' swyaan]

In the given translation, Monica is describing a scenario in which two individuals are going out to dinner, while making it clear that there are no plans to engage in sexual activity. In the Arabic version of the phrase, the translator did not give the right translation in this sentence, he just translated the first part, " It's just two people going out to dinner," and removed "not having sex." For Arab audience, it is better to neglect this part because this kind of words are

considered taboo and not used in an obvious way. The relevant translation should be " انهما مجرد اثنين سيتناولا العشاء سوية ولن يمارسا الحب" [ainhuma mujarad aithnayn sayatanawala aleisha' sawiatan walan yumarisa alhuba]. However, the suggested translation in the video was the optimal one because it follows a euphemistic approach. Applying this approach here is definitely appropriate culturally because open discussion of sensitive topics (like sex) is considered taboo in Arab societies.

2. **Chandler**: I am totally <u>naked</u>.

شاندلر: واجد نفسي هناك[wajid nafsi hunak].

The original text is direct and clear in English. Conveying this word into Arabic directly and explicitly would remain the literal meaning, still in some cultural circumstances, it might be viewed as being too blunt. For this reason, the word "naked" has not been translated, the translator opted for a euphemistic or indirect approach by using, "I found myself there." The optimal translation should be "كنت عاريا بالكامل." [kunt earian bialkamil]. According to the context, the given subtitle was relevant to Arabic-speaking audience. However, "I found myself there" is totally irrelevant or not very close to the expected translation because the translated text does not capture the humor and surprise in the original English dialogue when using culturally appropriate phrase rather than explicit one.

3. **Joey**: I wanna <u>kill</u> myself.

جوي: انني اختنق[anani aikhtaniqa].

The translation balances emotional context and seriousness while ensuring cultural and linguistic appropriateness for an Arabic-speaking audience, considering the statement's gravity and delivering intended emotional impact. The word "kill" has not been translated literally, but instead the intended meaning was given as "It's suffocating." The relevant translation should be "يجعلني اود قتل نفسي." [yajealuni awud qatl nafsiun]. Still, the given translation is the optimal one because he had given the implied meaning here. In another words, it effectively conveys the intended meaning, balancing humor and cultural sensitivity, despite not directly translating.

4. **Joey**: She was <u>a lesbian</u>.

جوي: أنها مريضة نفسياً [Anaha maridat nfsyaan.]

In this context, Joey seems to be discussing someone's sexual orientation. In order to translate it appropriately, the translator needs to find a word that is close to original meaning. Here, "lesbian" is translated as "psychotic". The relevant translation should be "*أنها مثلية*"[*anuha mithlia*], and it is the most optimal one because "psychotic" is not the same as "lesbian." For this reason, the given translation is irrelevant here. However, the translator tried to replace the inappropriate word with a more general word. It is possible that this mistake resulted from a misunderstanding of the word or an attempt to use a less offensive term.

5. **Joey**: with Paul the <u>Wine Guy.</u>

جوي: مع "بول" رجل المشروبات[mae "bul" rajul almashrubat].

In this context, the word "wine guy" refers to a person who has a keen interest in wine. The word "wine guy" should be translated as "ساقي الخمر" [saqi alkhamr] or "رجل الخمر" [rajul alkhamr], but the translator gave another option, which almost has the same meaning indirectly because the word "مشروبات" [mashrubat] has different meanings in Arabic as "water", "juices",

"wine", etc. Whilst, the two suggested translated words give the exact meaning, which are inappropriate or irrelevant for the intended audiences. Thus, the given translation here is the optimal one because the translator substitute the offensive word with a more general or less offensive word. Also, it is culturally neutral and appropriate for a large audience, capturing the essence of the "wine guy" without emphasizing alcohol.

6. **Rachel**: You <u>making love with</u> your socks on

ريتشل: عن لبس الجوارب [ean labs aljawarib].

Rachel used "making love" to refer to engaging in sexual activity, and the translator deleted it to convey the same meaning in a subtle and polite manner. The word "making love" was skipped most time when translating the contexts. It should be translated as "يقيم علاقة" [yuqim ealaqatan], but the translator preferred omitting the translation of such words, as V.D, my ass, naked, sex, etc. It may cause effect on understanding the text or the real meaning that the writer wanted to convey; however, the translator managed to translate the text without them. In another words, avoiding explicit or sensitive phrasing is a frequent approach in translation, especially when working with culturally sensitive information. Translators balance conveying original text meaning and tone with cultural norms, sensitivities, and audience expectations. They may omit or find alternative translations for sensitive expression to ensure understanding without offense.

The study analyzed translation strategies, managed taboo phrases, assessed their effects, and revealed the challenges of subtitling for Arabic-speaking audience. Based on the data analysis, the given translations in the episodes are mostly optimal considering the cultural and social norms of the Arab audience; however, they are not always accurate or relevant to the original text. The translator chose to skip the taboo expressions or used an inappropriate translations that may have an impact on the understanding of the context, still this way of translating the texts might be fit to the Arab audience. One of the irrelevant translations is "lesbian", which is translated as "psychotic", and others are skipped, as "making love" or "not having sex". Thus, it is very significant to take into consideration the intended audience and the context when decoding the original text and try to achieve both relevance and accuracy in the process of translating anything.

Overall, the findings of the data analysis suggest that subtitle translators should pay close attention to cultural and social norms of the target audience and convey precise translations of taboo expressions to ensure the optimal meaning is conveyed accurately. It is worth to note that that the translation can be an uneasy and nuanced task that needs a deep understanding of both the SL and TL, also cultural context and idiomatic expressions. Without proper training and expertise in translation, there can be errors and inaccuracies in the translation output. This study shows that certain taboo expressions in the TV show "Friends" posed challenges for subtitle translation; besides, certain cultural references required careful consideration in subtitle translation. Therefore, cultural restriction compelled the translator to transform the original text due to some definite background knowledge, which are a part of a source culture and can be understood by default.

Conclusion

The study examined the subtitle translations of "Friends" and analyzed how the translator dealt

with relevance and taboo expressions, and how he used euphemism strategies to reduce them. The use of euphemisms and optimal relevance in translating these expressions can help avoid offensive or inappropriate language in the TL. In this research, the translations of taboo expressions do not match the expected translations in most cases, but they are mostly optimal considering the cultural and social norms of the Arab audience. One of the difficulties that faced the translators was omitting a word or an expression from the subtitle that was considered highly offensive or face-threatening, such as "having sex". For this reason, the translator chose to omit these expressions or use inappropriate ones, which may not have the same sense of humor in the SL but are more relevant to the audience. Another challenge is substituting the offensive word with a more general or less offensive word, as happens with the word "Wine Guy". The third difficulty is having a traditional connotation while also implying a unique interpretation, as in the translation of the word "kill". Therefore, it is very important to take into consideration the intended audience and the context when decoding the original text and try to achieve both relevance and accuracy in the process of translating anything.

The findings of the study highlighted the importance of considering the cultural and linguistic context of the target audience and the need for creative and flexible translation strategies that can effectively convey the meaning and cultural significance of relevance and taboo expressions. It is worth noting that translation can be an uneasy and nuanced task that requires a deep understanding of both the SL and TL, as well as cultural context and idiomatic expressions. The study contributes to the field of audiovisual translation by shedding light on the challenges and opportunities involved in the translation of such expressions in subtitles using Relevance Theory and Euphemism Strategies.

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