

Egypt's audiovisual translation scene

Muhammad Y. Gamal

May, 2008. The rise of Arab satellite broadcasting in the 1990s has helped catapult Arab and Egyptian media production to new heights. Yet the massive increase in the number of satellite channels and the hours of broadcasting has relied, to a large extent, on imported programs and translation was its main vehicle either through subtitling or dubbing.

This paper traces the rise of the audiovisual translation (AVT) industry in Egypt and provides an insight into the main issues that characterize work from and into Arabic. Simply put, AVT is concerned with translation on screen. From film subtitling to television broadcasts, mobile phone applications to ATM screens, the number of AVT translation projects is on the rise as technology continues to expand the scope of applications. AVT projects tend to differ from text-based translation in that they are usually the written interpretation of a spoken message; AVT projects are shorter, transient and more constrained in space and time. The literature on AVT has been up till now devoid of reference to Arabic in general and to Egyptian practice in particular. This study contributes to the emerging scholarly literature on AVT, which has yet to fully come to grips with the much greater diversity of programming, from localized advertisements to reality programming, that translators work with made possible by the satellite broadcasting revolution of the 1990s.

Current debates focus on the quality of the translation on screen, the training of subtitlers and the development of subtitling norms that best suit the local viewership. As the applications of audiovisual translation increase with the opportunities made possible by digital technology, AVT studies seek to engage not only translation scholars, linguists and sociologists but also the cinema industry, broadcasting and the advertisement

industries as well. Wherever there is a bilingual message on screen all these industries should stop and think: how does the message come across on the screen?

Cinema arrives in Egypt

Cinema took hold early in Egypt. The country built its first purpose-built cinema house as early as 1907. Cinematic production began with experimental films and the Treasures of Tutankhamen, discovered in 1922, were among the early themes. The first Egyptian silent film was produced in 1927. Five years later, in 1932, Egypt had its first talkie and first subtitled film, *Children of the Rich*. The first Egyptian presence on the international scene was at the Venice Film Festival in 1936. By the time American talkies started to arrive in Egypt in the early thirties, the country already had a strong dramatic arts base developed through the active theatre movement in Egypt and the existence of several theatrical troupes and acting schools.

Naturally, foreign films had to be *subtitled* into Arabic and like many places in the world early experimentations with subtitling were awkward if not painful.ⁱ Although dubbing technology was available at the time, subtitling was deemed the best option to protect the local film industry from competition. Subtitling also offered a much less labor-intensive, faster and cheaper alternative. Egypt had the equivalent of the Japanese *Benshi*ⁱⁱ in the form of the multitalented *Mefahemati* (interpreter) who commented, explained and acted out silent films.ⁱⁱⁱ The Japanese *Benshi* like the Egyptian *Mefahemati* was an essential part of the silent film experience as he was the mouthpiece of the actors. The “silent film interpreter” stood at the back of the movie theater and basically “interpreted” the scene to the audience. The beginning of modern Egyptian subtitling is undeniably attributed to the effort and hard work of Anis Ebaid who was to dominate the audiovisual scene in Egypt for almost forty years. The phrase “Subtitled in the studios of Anis Ebaid” appeared on almost every foreign film screened in Egypt and other Arab countries between 1944 and the 1989.

The choice for subtitling

Although dubbing American films was an option, particularly with voice and acting talent available in Egypt at the time, the thought was not entertained.^{iv} The technical superiority of the Hollywood-made films, the sophistication of their cinematography and well-developed screen writing meant that local films in Egypt would have to “translate” their themes and plots. Dubbing was deemed too dangerous to the fledgling cinema industry in Egypt – an industry which was to have far reaching implications for the entire Arab world. In addition to the economic factors of subtitling, the speed with which new American films were subtitled meant that distributors would also cash in on the Egyptian market. Films were subtitled in Cairo then copied for distribution in other capital cities in the region.

The emerging Egyptian cinema industry, coupled with increasing legislation, helped shape the standard of audiovisual translation in Egypt. Thus the strict laws on dealing with sex, foul language, blasphemy and violence were established. In subtitling foreign films into Arabic, the European technique of having two lines positioned at the bottom of the screen was followed. However, what sets Egyptian subtitling standards apart is the genre of language employed; the written Arabic that appears on a screen soon developed characteristics of its own. Censorship played a significant role in this. First, the film censor general would determine whether a film would be released into the local market before it was subtitled.^v The emerging subtitling industry worked closely with the censorship office applying the rules it imposed on foreign films particularly to the language of subtitling. No explicit sexual language, no blasphemous reference to the Almighty, prophets or revealed books and no swear words were allowed. Thus the language of subtitling appearing on screens emerged as a genre *sui generis*. This issue was to become more noticeable with the advent of television and with it a growing body of viewer criticism.

The advent of television and “Televese”

When Egyptian television began broadcasting in Cairo in 1960, a new era of audiovisual translation began. Initially, audio-visual translation was dominated by the Anis Ebaid Company until Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU) developed its

own center. However, the legacy of Anis Ebaid has been far reaching and the influence it had on the Egyptian tradition of audio-visual translation was indelibly established. The experience of Anis Ebaid in Egypt has not been examined and apart from scattered articles on the company, no authoritative account has been made to document the emergence of the subtitling tradition that was to shape AVT in Egypt and most of the Arab countries.

As television increased the dose of subtitled programs, a new genre of on-screen language or *Televese* came along. The new AVT centre at the Egyptian television (and indeed the work of Anis Ebaid) entrenched the feeling that television has its own language. Further, film genres such as westerns, detective, comedy and thrillers had their own terminology. As most of the foreign programs were imported from the United States, attention turned to three major issues: language, sex and violence. Thus swear words had to be sanitized, sexual references deleted and blasphemous references expunged. The way subtitlers dealt with this triad of taboos, relied on certain lexical items and syntax that was odd and stilted. Not only is the spoken foreign language translated into *written* Arabic but also the spoken dialogue was *read* in a form of language that was not only formal but also refined. This process led to the dilution of cultural concepts as in the case of the “bar” being translated into the archaic word *hana*, “slut” into *ahira* and the four letter words into ‘*alayka al-la’na*. All these Arabic expressions belong to a refined albeit archaic register not used in contemporary literature. This led to the perception that it is a language of its own and soon became the source of anecdotes on the street and newspapers alike.

For instance, children and particularly teens tend to repeat the sanitized swear words such as *waghd* for “bastard,” *ahira* for “slut” and *qatt* for “never.” Thus *televese* became almost a genre known for its own peculiar lexis and usage on screen. These low frequency words of subtitling, which are not used much in the modern language, are also coupled with errors which have become synonymous with subtitling. For instance, the dotting of Arabic letters is not strict; the subtitles are not always centered, disappear on white backgrounds, change too fast and at times are too small to read. Quite often, columnists in major newspapers refer to ambiguity or misinterpretation of meaning as an error akin to subtitling. A sports writer deplored the “usual” defending mistakes of a

leading Cairo soccer team, likening them to the “repeated and expected errors one finds in every subtitled film”^{vi}

Reception studies

As more foreign programs are subtitled and broadcast on Egyptian television, articles on this form of translation have proliferated in newspapers and magazines. The volume of the feedback attests to the viewers’ perception of and opinion on the quality of subtitling. This is significant for both the television industry and the translation profession in Egypt for two reasons:

First, in the absence of any known formal study or examination by ERTU of viewers’ reception of subtitled programs, the existing “literature,” though journalistic, forms a body of opinion that deserves to be examined. Second, as the translation profession in Egypt does not usually debate audiovisual translation at its conferences or publications, the *journalistic* literature appears to be a significant source for research on two principal issues in subtitling: access and quality. Further, the collection of clippings provides a diachronic examination of viewer perception over a period of time that has witnessed major political, technological and cultural change. The study, the first of its kind in Arabic, also casts light on the change in viewers’ perception and taste.

A study of newspaper and magazine clippings on subtitling published mostly in Egypt and other Arab countries between 1980-2004 points to viewer’s criticisms of subtitling foreign programs into Arabic.^{vii} The collection covers different modes of audio-visual translation including subtitling, dubbing, re-narration and voice-over, and deals with the linguistic and technical aspects of audio-visual translation. The opinions expressed were written by film critics, film festival managers, journalists, students, viewers and writers. The study found out that viewers were very critical of the following (not in any special order):

- 1- Television language ‘*Televese*’ is too stiff.
- 2- Deletion appears to be a prominent strategy
- 3- Swear words are too clichéd.

- 4- Cultural images are mistranslated
- 5- Translation of film titles is too liberal
- 6- Language of subtitling is becoming a genre.
- 7- Mistakes are always to be expected.
- 8- Subtitles are too small and too fast to read
- 9- Spotting is a major source of irritation
- 10- White color of subtitles is unhelpful

A considerable number of the comments were made by bilingual people who could have watched the programs without resorting to the subtitling.^{viii} Indeed most of them wanted to “kill the translator” and some wanted to play “spot the error game”^{ix} or simply to discover that “the most blatant commercial productions are usually accompanied by the worst translations onscreen.”^x

However, the study is significant as it sheds light on translation *into* Arabic which hitherto has been the dominant direction of audio-visual translation. Until 2002, very little work has been done in the other direction: Egyptian Arabic into foreign languages. The situation changed with the emerging DVD industry, producing a steady number of Egyptian and later North African films in DVD format with English and French subtitling. The ten viewer comments listed above can be divided into two categories: the first seven are linguistic, while the last three are technical. Strikingly, all of these linguistic comments share a common thread: the concern with and difficulties presented by *diglossia*, the phenomenon where a language is said to have two varieties.^{xi}

Arabic diglossia and the Egyptian dialect

Arabic is a diglossic language in the sense that two different varieties of the language exist side by side. The variety used for formal purposes such as announcements, speeches, conferences, literature, exams, the press, etc is called *Fusha*. The other variety is the colloquial which is the domain of everyday use and is referred to as *Ammeyia*. Arabic translators deal mostly with *Fusha*. Translation students are trained mostly in texts that are written in the higher variety of Arabic. *Fusha* is the domain of politics,

economics, the sciences, arts and technology which form the bulk of their work after graduation. Likewise, interpreters work with Fusha, at the spoken level, in the same fields. Ammeyia is never studied for its own sake by native speakers of Arabic. Nor do translators specialize in the colloquial variety even if they are required to work on translating children's literature, comic books, comedy shows or even TV commercials where the colloquial would be the more appropriate variety of Arabic. Preference goes almost always to Fusha. With globalization affecting more and more aspects of Arab and Egyptian life, more audio-visual translation into Arabic is being carried out not in the formal and refined variety of Arabic, but in the language of the man in the street. While Arabic television commercials, print advertisements and children's cartoons are increasingly produced in Ammeyia, foreign audiovisual materials are almost universally rendered into Fusha.^{xii}

Over the past nine decades the Egyptian dialect has been developing and spreading in a way not matched by any other dialect of Arabic. Pop songs, music in the second decade of the twentieth century, theatre activities in Alexandria and Cairo in the twenties, talking films (1932), the introduction of Radio Cairo (1934) and the emergence of Egyptian singers such as Muhammad Abdel Wahab and Om Kalthoum in the thirties and forties who capitalized on the advances of radio, cinema, and vinyl records ensured the prominence of Egyptian dialect in the Arab cultural scene which continues till today. That lead, which enshrined the local dialect of Cairo as the *lingua franca* of the Middle East, was further cemented by the launch of the radio station *Voice of the Arabs* in 1953 and the millions of Egyptians working in Arab countries. The local dialect of Cairo spread at almost all levels in schools, hospitals, universities, on building sites as well as in market places.^{xiii}

The Egyptian dialect has long held a dominant position in the arts across the Arab world. Actors and singers seeking stardom know that success is guaranteed if they perform well in the Egyptian market. When they sing or act in Egypt they always do so in the dialect of Cairo. Throughout the history of Egyptian cinema, Iraqis, Syrians, Palestinians, Lebanese, Sudanese, Tunisian and Algerian singers and actors perfected the Egyptian dialect and helped in "localizing" it back in their respective homes. The high output of Egyptian cinema and the special attention to comedy also helped popularize the

dialect. Egyptian comedy, whether in films or TV series, has always been a staple diet on Arab television particularly during Ramadan. Today, Arabic-speakers from Abu Dhabi to Tangiers have developed a phrase that reveals the entrenched Egyptian dialect: “As *Egyptians would say...*” which tends to help driving a point home or placing the required emphasis on a particular issue. Quite often, in Arabic-speaking communities abroad such as in Australia, when Arabic-speakers get stuck for a word or when the local dialects prove too much of a barrier, speakers simply resort to ‘Egyptian Arabic.’

Dubbing and dialects

Though subtitling has been established as the preferred mode of film translation in Egypt, attempts at dubbing were also made. It is interesting to observe that the dubbing of feature films is done in Fusha not in Ammeyia. This may be attributed to the mechanism of translating the film script into Arabic, which as a written text would be translated into Fusha. Translators, and indeed distributors, work with Fusha and tend not to think of the possibility of translating the film/TV drama “written script” into Ammeyia. This may have also been one of the reasons why dubbing did not take root in Egypt; it sounds odd to hear familiar voices speaking in Fusha while the action and the faces on screen show a totally different culture.

In the late sixties, Soviet and Polish war movies were dubbed into Fusha. They were referred to as the “war movies” and were dubbed into Fusha with “foreign” voices that spoke Arabic very well, albeit with a Russian accent. In the nineties, however, *telenovelas* from Mexico and Brazil were dubbed into Arabic by a Lebanese company and shown on Egyptian television.^{xiv} These dubbed programs, known in the Middle East as the “Mexican series,” received different degrees of approval in Egypt. The long tradition of having foreign TV series subtitled was not to be easily replaced by the sentimentality of the new comer from Mexico. Essentially, voice talent in Lebanese dialect betrayed the “foreign” Mexican faces and were a source of confusion. Egyptian viewers are not accustomed to hearing other dialects of Arabic. Though Egyptian films, and more recently TV drama, host and *tolerate* one or two actors from other Arabic dialects, an entire program in a dialect other than Egyptian would probably prove too

much for the local taste. Indeed, the popularity of non-Egyptian TV drama is almost non-existent in Egypt. This is not to deny Syrian TV drama its deserving place, which increasingly has become a serious competitor to Egyptian TV production, but also a staple diet in other parts of the Middle East particularly in the Gulf.

Recently, there are some signs that Fusha's grip on dubbing into Arabic may be weakening. American sit-coms, the likes of *Friends*, are localized into Arabic by the Media City in Dubai and shown on Arabic satellite channels. To produce a local version the Egyptian dialect appeared to be the immediate choice for the Cairo dialect lends itself to comedy. The study of Egyptian Arabic is an area that so far only non-Egyptian singers and actors take seriously and "invest" in studying its lexis, semantics, syntax and phonology. Yet it is also a significant area in AVT as more international companies are translating their advertisements into Arabic by issuing multiple versions in regional Arabic dialects. Academic study has yet to catch up with the growing presence of Ammeyia, particularly the Egyptian dialect, in AVT in the Arab world.

It is insightful to observe that the majority of children's cartoons in the Arab world, particularly in the Gulf, are dubbed into Egyptian Ammeyia. The association of Egyptian dialect and comedy is undeniable as attested by the popularity of Egyptian films in the Arab world from Morocco to Qatar. However, Syrian voice talent is preferred in the re-narration of documentaries or in historical films when Fusha is employed for better command of Fusha and flawless pronunciation.

The birth of AVT in Egypt

Until 1990, most of the audiovisual translation in Egypt was confined to subtitling, and a few dubbings of foreign films and television programs *into* Arabic. This explains the low status of AVT at academic institutions, the high public dissatisfaction with the quality of subtitling, limited employment opportunities in AVT, the small number of private AVT companies and the almost unheard of need to subtitle Egyptian films into a foreign language. Most of the postgraduate research in "film translation" focused on the linguistic aspects of "translation," such as the treatment of foul language, Americanisms and foreign cultural references into Arabic; most of this research remains

unpublished. There were no stand-alone subtitling machines that could be acquired by individuals and of course no such software programs. The personal computer was still in its infancy with very limited hard disk capacity and was mainly used as a word processor.

The digital revolution of the mid-1990s which meant the commercialization of the internet, the emergence of localization, versioning, multimedia, powerful computers and satellite technology made audiovisual translation a growth industry. The advent of Arab cable television in 1991 (MBC), the launch of Egypt's telecommunications satellite Nilesat and the emergence of powerful satellite channels like Al Jazeera (1996) heralded an explosion of satellite channels in Egypt and the entire Arab world. As of February 2008, Arab viewers have more than 500 channels to choose from. Among these are the state-owned channels which assume an international face showcasing the country to the outside world. Thus, Egypt's international network NileTV broadcasts programs in three languages, English, French and Hebrew and subtitles its programs into English and French.

The increasing number of terrestrial channels created the need for more programs to broadcast. This in turn created a demand for more subtitled programs, more subtitlers and subtitling companies. Suddenly, the scope of subtitling programs into Arabic exceeded feature films, TV series and documentaries to include reality TV shows, game shows, sit-coms, sports, world events and interviews. Today, it is not uncommon to hear of translators working on subtitling projects, of subtitling and multimedia agencies, of Arabic software programs being commercially affordable and of websites with forums dedicated to subtitling Japanese anime and other foreign films. The first course in screen translation was launched at the American University in Cairo in 1995, and remains today the only such training program in the country. By 2000, fan subbing began to take shape and though the activity remains "hi-tech" and "fun" rather than a rigorous professional pursuit the practice nonetheless has contributed to the emergence of an AVT culture among the young in Egypt. To date, fan subtitling in Egypt has not been examined and the sites now numerous; they offer solutions both technical and linguistic. And though they are mostly childish, if not nerdish, they know what they are doing technically, and readily experiment with mixing Fusha with Ammeyia. However, when the oldest and

biggest fan-subbing site went too far by experimenting and putting sexual language on screen and not observing the unwritten laws of subtitling, the site was closed down.^{xv}

The subtitling experience of the private satellite and particularly the so-called “international” channels such as Nile TV and Al Masrieya merit a closer examination. As most of these channels outsource the subtitling of their programs, the quality of the subtitling suggests that a generalist translator was likely recruited to do “text-based translation” with little experience in or no regard to the medium on which the translation will be used. Experience shows that most TV channels, private AVT centers including the biggest company in Egypt *Anis Ebaid and Sons*, are careful, if not cagey, about their modus operandi, hardware, internal manuals, recruitment policy, training opportunities and even the rate of pay. While this could suggest that the commercial scene is strong and will correct itself through market forces, it is also indicative that the AVT profession lags behind the AVT industry.^{xvi}

Egyptian films on DVD

Digital technology gave Egyptian cinema a big boost with the commercialization of the Digital Versatile Disk (DVD). However the DVD’s full potential of having the same film subtitled into 32 languages^{xvii} (up to 40 languages according to Carroll) on the same disc were not capitalized on.^{xviii} All Egyptian films have subtitles in only two languages, English and French. This is despite the many translation departments at Egyptian universities where Chinese, Persian, German, Japanese, Korean, Spanish and Russian are taught. Although the decision not to subtitle into other languages is undoubtedly commercially based, the fact remains that the technology has not been employed to promote one of the major Egyptian industries.

Despite the limited number of the subtitled languages, DVDs have given Egyptian cinema a rare opportunity to market itself through the release of the earlier films of one of its prominent movie stars, Omar Sharif.^{xix} In 1962, Sharif made his debut in international cinema with *Lawrence of Arabia* and later reached his zenith with his Oscar-winning performance in *Dr Zhivago* (1965). However, Sharif had been an established actor in his home country for nearly a decade prior, acting in Arabic. The fact that he had appeared in

21 films prior to *Lawrence of Arabia*, has remained largely unrecognized in the West for almost 45 years. Progressively, his twenty-one Egyptian Arabic films are being produced on DVD to add to his repertoire of films in English, French and Italian.^{xx} The subtitling of Omar Sharif films into English provides potential for more research in AVT. In Sharif's case, the subtitler is dealing with a special actor whose status requires special attention, in addition to the linguistic and cultural elements peculiar to film translation. Both Mera and Norns agree that famous producers require special attention when subtitling their films.^{xxi} In subtitling Sharif's Egyptian films into English, it is insightful to see how the actor's 'native tongue' comes out when everyone is watching Omar acting in a 'foreign' film.

Similarly, films based on Naguib Mahfouz's writings are now becoming available on DVD. Over the past twenty years, the number of research degrees based on the examination of Naguib Mahfouz in translation has been on the increase. Though much has been written on translating Mahfouz's novels, very little has been written on the subtitling of his films. The difficulty in subtitling a Naguib Mahfouz film stems from the fact that the subtitler has to be aware of the special nexus between text and image. Mahfouz's ability to describe and empower his characters has been taken to the screen by some very capable producers.^{xxii} Mahfouz's employment of the Cairene dialect is a particular source of challenge for subtitlers who, though fluent in *Ammeyia*, may find it troublesome applying the reductive strategies of subtitling. Increasingly Mahfouz's films are being released on DVD and the examination of their subtitling will undoubtedly add new dimensions to the literature on AVT and the academic scrutiny of subtitling Egyptian dialect into English and French.^{xxiii} The lack of academic study of and professional training in AVT tend to deprive subtitlers of invaluable techniques that would add to their repertoire of translation skills and ultimately enhance the quality of subtitling. The acute shortage of professional subtitlers working to meet the ever increasing demand created by the proliferation of satellite channels is undermining quality. The current practice of using translator-cum-subtitler must give way to proper film translators who understand the special link between text and image and are attuned to the special constraints of the medium.

Subtitling at the Cairo Film Festival

The Cairo International Film Festival (CIFF), established in 1976, has been the major cinematic event in Egypt. In addition to bringing world cinema to Egyptian fans it also showcases Egyptian films to the world. Subtitling at the CIFF has always been a controversial issue with varying results. Despite festival regulations that films have to be subtitled into Arabic, the subtitling of foreign films was not always available and the popularity of the festival plummeted. When the festival management insisted on enforcing the subtitling clause on all participating films during the 2004 session the result was a success the likes of which Egypt had not seen for many years. This raises the issue of accessibility and the importance of AVT in a country of 77 million.

Though Same Language Subtitling has not been examined in Egypt, the concept may have some direct benefits to the national campaign to encourage reading or at least boost reading skills among school children. In the 2000 session of the festival, North African films particularly Moroccan were subtitled into Arabic to facilitate their understanding by Egyptians and other Arabic-speaking viewers. This raises the issue of dialects in Arabic and the acceptability of one dialect that serves as a *lingua franca* among the 22 Arabic-speaking nations. Research on Arabic dialects is scarce and the interface between dialects in one film requires more examination particularly in subtitling Egyptian films which employs and plays on the several sub-dialects of the country (e.g. the Valley, the Delta, Alexandria or the Suez Canal).

The 2006 session of CIFF had Omar Sharif as the honorary president. The Festival President Dr Ezzat Abou Ouf declined an offer to establish a link between the film festival and the AVT industry. Though he politely cited financial constraints he also admitted that such would open Pandora's Box as far as the festival constitution is concerned.^{xxiv} The Cairo International Film Festival is one of the internationally recognized film festivals and its constitution is governed by its membership to the International Federation of Film Producers Association. When a parallel event was suggested, the president replied that he had been to many international festivals and the fact is 'no other festival has established such nexus' confirms what many researchers have said about the need to raise the "ancillary" profile of subtitling, to include AVT in

film encyclopedias, to make subtitling and dubbing “directly proportional to the degree of commercialism of the original” and to establish a more dynamic link between the cinema industry and the AVT profession.^{xxv} One encouraging sign is the appearance of the subtitler’s name in the credits of many subtitled programs shown on Egyptian television. This is a big step forward which reflects the rising profile of, and hopefully, specialization in audiovisual translation in Egypt.

Conclusion

When Egypt organized the African Cup in March 2006, soccer fans realized that the only multilingual screen in Egypt was not the one at the Cairo Stadium. Television screens with a multitude of national, international, terrestrial and satellite channels, mobile phones, PDA’s, Laptops, digital cameras, ATMs, large public square screens and smaller traffic screens all had multilingual messages. Screens are everywhere and they are getting a lot smaller, more powerful and more portable. As the AVT market in Egypt is fast outpacing the profession, this paper hopes to raise some questions and to point at some areas that might help in making audiovisual translation in Arabic an area of academic excellence and professional success.

Muhammad Y. Gamal *is an applied linguist with special interest in audiovisual translation. He is a senior linguist working for the state government of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. His email address is muh_gamal@yahoo.com.*

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