Why Egypt needs an Audiovisual Translation Authority

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The digital revolution has changed the way information is created and accessed. Communication has become multimodal, created almost instantly and made available online, accessed 24/7 and is updated regularly. This development has also changed the way translation is created and accessed. Translation is fast becoming multimodal; using image, video, audio and colour in addition to text in a myriad of ways, contexts and settings. However, this new format of translation is being practiced without formal training, education or research. Despite an early interest in subtitling, Egyptian academia has been slow in espousing the larger discipline of audiovisual translation. This paper takes a strategic look at the current practice of audiovisual translation in Egypt and argues that an audiovisual translation authority is needed for the new discipline to take root.

Introduction

Digital technology is shaping the way information is created, presented, searched, accessed and archived. This has changed, almost entirely, the way print media, book publication, encyclopaedia preparation and even academic courses are professionally designed, commercially sold and publicly accessed. Furthermore, information is now being combined with entertainment to create a new industry dedicated to making information more accessible to children, the young and the non-specialist. Infotainment is thus becoming an independent industry that addresses an important sector in society: children and youth.

There is no denying that smart technology is changing the media landscape. Agost sums up the new trend in the following way: "Audiences of all ages and from all cultures and levels of society have made the screen one of their favourite channels of communication through which it is possible to access knowledge, establish social relationships, work and have fun (2011:8)". This has made audiovisual translation, a new format of translation that relies heavily on the two sensory visual and audio channels, a rising academic discipline with a huge industry.

The creation, importation, exportation, localization and employment of audiovisual material have significantly increased over the past two decades. Some of the manifestations of this trend vary from the subtitling and dubbing of foreign films, TV drama and documentaries into Arabic, the creation and translation of Egyptian tourist DVDs, educational and archaeological documentaries, Egyptian cultural programs targeted at foreign audiences to

online courses and the creation of multilingual websites promoting Egyptian culture, industries and investments. Yet the translation community in Egypt (the industry, profession and academia) have not responded to the technical challenges posed and opportunities made available by digital technology. Unlike the computer industry, which has invested in training and developing a generation of software programmers, "subtitling in Egypt remains an industry without a profession" (Gamal 2007).

Historical background

Translation has played a significant part in the modernization of Egypt since the time of Napoleon's Expedition in 1798. Early translation efforts in the country were closely linked to official government plans designed with the sole purpose of modernization. Thus, the establishment of the Translation School of Al-Alsun in Cairo was part of a large-scale state policy. Al-Alsun's first director Rifa'a Al-Tahtawee trained translators, in the hard sciences, law and medicine, to spearhead the 'localization' of European knowledge with the purpose of 'applying' the gained knowledge to build a strong, up-to-date modern state. Since its inception, the modern school of Al-Alsun has represented a vehicle for change, progress and development not only in Egypt but in the entire Arab world (Gamal: 2014). It is worth noting that translation conferences held in Egypt like to allude to the pioneering role and effort of Al-Tahatwee but stop short of appreciating the fact that translation was a state policy, with a clear vision and a defined mission. Once the state relinquished its sponsorship of translation, leaving it to commercial forces, the state as a whole suffered.

Baalbaki, one of the prominent translation strategists who spearheaded modern translation efforts in the Arab world with his Al Mawrid dictionary in 1967 views translation in strategic terms "We need to translate everything and this must be done systematically. We lack a translation library in Arabic. This is the task of a number of states or even one state. There is a need for a supreme authority to shoulder the task"(1993:62) Today, the teaching of almost all the hard sciences in Egypt is in English, illiteracy is still high, and with the supremacy of visual culture, youth have developed an intrinsic aversion to reading. This is at a time when foreign language kindergartens, language schools and even universities have mushroomed in the country creating a cultural elite that essentially communicates and expresses itself professionally, artistically and linguistically not only differently, but not even in Arabic.

The advent of digital culture

Audiovisual translation essentially means multimodal translation that employs video and audio channels. The most common example of audiovisual translation in Egypt is subtitling filmic material into Arabic for viewing by an audience who do not understand the source language of the program. Dubbing, live subtitling (news), delayed subtitling (sports events) and web site localization are some of the other manifestations of audiovisual translation. Although Arabic sign language interpreting is increasingly being offered on state television, audio description for the deaf and hard of hearing and same language subtitling are rarely employed in Egypt despite their manifest relevance and benefits to large sectors of the society. It is significant to observe that the vast majority of audiovisual translation, not unlike traditional print translation, is translation into Arabic.

Notwithstanding inconsistent individual (Anani 1992, 1997, 2000, 2003) and intermittent institutional (eg the National Translation Centre) efforts, the translation scene in Egypt over the past twenty years has been modest. Translation Studies is without the academic and professional vitality necessary to make it relevant to society despite the fact that, according to some in the industry, there is a "need to translate everything" (Baalbaki: 1993: 58). Despite its significance to society at large, translation lacks the vigorous academic debate, the professional functions, the commercial initiatives, and most importantly state patronage. The only strategically worthwhile achievement over the past twenty years is the establishment of the National Translation Centre (NTC). However, despite its potential, it has become a bureaucratic governmental department: commissioning translations and paying translators. Judging by its web site and announced programs, the NTC appears to lack the vision and the means to create a thriving translation movement in the country. Its programs and priorities are too dependent on each director, not functioning cohesively as an institution. For example in October 2012, the Egyptian Translator Day was announced by then director and was hailed as a significant step towards the professionalization of the translation movement in the country. In the following year, the new director did not observe the occasion. In 2014, another new director decided to bring back the event but changed the date from October 15th, the birthday of Rifa'a Al-Tahtawee, to December 15th. Under the current management style it is doubtful that it can serve the interests of a country the size and significance of Egypt without the right framework and professional vision.

The cultural challenges facing Egypt are serious and numerous. They vary from illiteracy and radicalization, to the inability to engage with the outside world by successfully and effectively presenting a positive image. The media scene in the country over the past four years reflects the intensity of the cultural and indeed political situation. To appreciate this, one has to remember that the proliferation of satellite TV channels, the advent of social media, the accessibility of audiovisual resources, the emergence of citizen journalism and other manifestations of digital technology have caught Egypt by surprise. Briefly, the digital revolution of the mid 1990s arrived in Egypt without the appropriate educational context or cultural infrastructure. Indeed, the Mubarak government was surprised to discover how the revolution against the regime was not hatched underground but mobilized online (Gamal 2013).

Another serious indication of how unprepared the Egyptian government was evident in the almost non-existent Egyptian Arabic content online. Two decades ago the concept of the information society was born with the Internet. The technical infrastructure also necessitated the existence and availability of a body of knowledge to be accessible through the Internet. This body of knowledge has been lacking in Arabic, leading to a culture of "cut and paste" in most Egyptian personal and institutional websites where the same content is copied from one source and uploaded onto many other sites. Those who needed information have to resort to foreign sources for fast, available and credible information. This issue, alone, is serious enough to create a cultural divide in the country: the information rich who speak foreign languages and can access information online and the information poor who cannot access information in Arabic. The latter group represents a majority that is becoming susceptible to

inadequate general knowledge, superficial culture, narrow minds and extremist views. In a culture that relies on translation in almost every aspect of modern life, the significant role audiovisual translation can play is not difficult to appreciate.

Against this backdrop, it is clear how traditional translation efforts in Egypt have underachieved. The NTC is not seen as an institution with clear policies, objectives, or plans for the generation to come. Rather it is a bureaucratic organ of the government with a small budget serving short-term plans. The number of books translated annually is too small to make a difference in the cultural scene let alone contribute to general knowledge within Egypt. An examination of the titles translated does not exhibit sensitivity to the immediate needs of the country and appear to serve the interests of a narrow sector of society. Given the current issues with the education system in the country, it might be worthwhile for the NTC to channel its efforts and funding into the translation and creation of general knowledge content relevant to everyday life. This could focus on health issues, current topics such as celebrating diversity and difference, the arts, and different ways of thinking such as project management, problem solving, and good governance. Besides this, the sale of the low print runs of the translated books face another problem due to distribution and marketing issues. There are educational, political and financial reasons behind this. Cairo today lacks the 1960s' culture of bookshops; where books were sought after, acquired and bought as gifts. Even the culture of *Sour El Azbakiyah* (used books market) has now all but disappeared in the collective memory of Cairenes in favour of satellite channels, CDs, pirated DVDs and YouTube.

The promise of digital technology
Digital technology has changed the way translation is created, displayed and accessed. Traditional print-based translation has lost its primary supporter: the young reader. Translated material is now displayed via screen and online. It has become durable, portable and affordable in comparison to the older modality. It is accessible not only round-the-clock and from anywhere, but also through regular and immediate updates. This is the world of audiovisual translation, which covers not just narrative films but all topics from technical documentaries to promotional material and the news. There are two issues here that deserve attention. First, is the creation of content whether on a website, a DVD or as a video clip to be uploaded on YouTube. Second, is the translation of this material into foreign languages either through subtitling or dubbing. The production of audiovisual material to be accessible (in Arabic and translated into foreign languages) remains largely unexamined by academia. Digital technology offers interactive features and infographics that facilitate understanding and learning. Such features are educationally useful in combatting problems experienced by persons who are of limited educational background. Some of these problems are smoking, reckless driving, diabetes, and inadequate general medical knowledge (from Hepatitis to Ebola), to name but a few. A single professionally designed, educational video to explain the seriousness of diabetes can be made available on YouTube and repeatedly shown on national TV. This audiovisual material could be shown at schools, universities, cinemas and libraries.

Due to its accessibility, durability and low cost, digital content needs to be examined by different government bodies. Audiovisual translation also holds the key to addressing some of Egypt's perennial problems: film distribution overseas, tourist promotion and the national

image abroad. For instance, the subtitling of Egyptian films, and particularly classic films, need to be examined by the relevant government authority responsible for the cinema industry as well as the image of the country abroad. Likewise, the promotion of Egypt as a tourist destination needs the careful attention of a professional body that ensures not only that the information is correct but also professionally designed and translated. Despite the incomparable archaeological heritage the country has, the available information online insufficient. The Ministry of Tourism does not offer a single reliable source of information in several languages. So far there is no multilingual website for the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) website only offers content in English. Despite the substantial funding from Japan, Japanese content is not offered, and shockingly the website is not even available in Arabic. Finally, maintaining an attractive and positive image abroad is a difficult task that requires not only investment, but also marketing, public relations, translation and digital technology expertise.

Audiovisual translation in practice

Digital technology is not only changing the way print translation is created and accessed, it has also made the tools of production more readily available, affordable and accessible. Most software is now being designed with a 'plug-n-play' concept geared at the average tech-literate consumer. Today, the ability to launch a web site, start a blog, create or subtitle a film, upload material online, or post a message in numerous formats, is much easier than ever before.

In Egypt, however, the transition towards the information society was not matched by an organized effort and investment in teaching the basics of how digital technology works nor how it (should) function in the cultural context. There seems to be a huge deficit in the teaching of the fundamentals of information technology in the public education sector. Pedagogic concerns about the transition to the information society are outside the scope of this paper, however, what is relevant here is that even in formal settings of translation teaching the concept of digital technology is ostensibly lacking. Most translation departments at Egyptian universities do not consider audiovisual translation, a discipline that covers many aspects of modern translation activities from software localization to content creation. Universities can no longer argue that audiovisual translation is expensive, nor can they claim that it is of limited scope. Audiovisual translation today covers a wide range of settings and contexts that affect a large sector of society; namely youth.

The information society needs a favourable environment to flourish. Some of the basic conditions of this environment are high alphabetic literacy, high reading levels, computer literacy and training in digital technology. While it could be argued that time will diminish the differences and the digital divide will vanish through increased adoption and consumption of digital technology, the results are neither predictable nor guaranteed. They are unpredictable because entrenched bad or improper habits will be difficult to change. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that the social and economic challenges related to the illiterate class can be overcome.

The following examples provide case studies that translation policymakers and media specialists should consider. The presence of a state-sponsored translation policy that exploits the full potential of information technology would at least capitalize on the available opportunity.

In July 2014, the decision by the Northampton Museum in the UK to sell Sekhemka, a 4000-year old Egyptian statue in its collection, to raise funds for expansion shocked the museum world (Youngs 2014). The sale was organized by auction house Christie's on the 10th of July 2014. The Egyptian Antiquities Ministry tried to prevent the sale through diplomatic and cultural channels, however they were unsuccessful. While the statue was "gifted" to the museum by an English Lord in the 19th century, Egyptian authorities argued that after the sale it would be held in a private collection and probably not seen again.

In its campaign to attract wider attention to the issue, Egypt did not utilize audiovisual translation. A short well-circulated film of 8-10 minutes subtitled into several languages is the kind of strategy that should be in the repertoire of an organization seeking international attention. The effort may not have stopped the auction but it would have added to the cumulative experience of utilizing audiovisual translation in addressing and impacting global opinion. In the sixties, in its bid to save the Nubian temples, Egypt effectively employed print promotional material (posters, pamphlets, postcards and postage stamps) but times have changed. As audiovisual translation, and its employment, remains a novel technique in Egypt, the Sekhemka incident would be an invaluable case study to be examined and analysed by practitioners, professors and policymakers.

Likewise, in May 2014, a Chinese film studio constructed a copy of the Sphinx in the northern province of Hebei to shoot a Chinese costume drama. The poorly designed Chinese replica did not compliment the Egyptian original as it was meant for use only as decor during filming. However, the Egyptian Minister of Antiquities complained to the Chinese embassy as well as UNESCO citing the 1972 UNESCO agreement to protect cultural heritage (El-Aref 2014). What the Minister of Antiquities within his charge, however, the incident also offered an opportunity that was not utilized. The Ministry of Antiquities and indeed other organizations in the country ought to have mounted a campaign to highlight the history of the Sphinx and explain why it was important to protest the Chinese replica. At a time of hard economic times, when the country needs to promote its tourism such an opportunity should have been creatively used. A single short video highlighting the background of the Sphinx, to be subtitled and circulated as proposed above, would be the first step. This example underscores the importance of effective collaboration between Egyptologists, audiovisual translators, and media specialists for organizing such an effort.

Similarly, in June 2007, Egypt announced the most important archaeological discovery since Tutankhamun. The international press conference held at the Cairo Museum, and attended by the ministers of Culture and Antiquities, underachieved as it failed to capitalize on the important occasion. In the press conference, the world heard how the mummy of Queen Hatshepsut was discovered and also how the mummy of Thutmose I was declared a non-royal mummy; thus gaining a queen and losing a pharaoh (Rose 2007). Apart from the

makeshift ceremony, the press conference and its follow up did not utilize the occasion to promote the country. The creation of a multilingual website, or a documentary in Arabic with multiple subtitled versions are examples of the types of initiatives that employ digital technology, making full use of the power of audiovisual translation to bolster the global image of the country. Furthermore, the occasion overlooked another sombre anniversary. Ten years earlier, the Temple of *Dier El Bahari* was the scene of the Luxor Massacre that saw 58 Swiss, Japanese, British and German tourists gunned down by extremists in Egypt's worst terrorist attack to date. A gesture to the memory of those who lost their lives in front of Hatshepsut's monument would have contributed to repairing and strengthening Egypt's image as a tourist destination.

These examples show that the concept of audiovisual translation is seriously lacking. Indeed, similar incidents had occurred previously. For example, the online competition selecting the New Seven Wonders of the world that called on youth to vote online on 07/07/07 angered the Egyptian officials who announced the competition invalid. In an official statement, former head of antiquities Zahi Hawass said: "The world knows that the only surviving wonder is the Pyramids of Giza." Hawass was of course right but missed the fact that the competition was for the "new" Seven Wonders of the World (www.new7wonders.com) an initiative primarily targeting young people. Neither the Ministry of Antiquities nor the Ministry of Culture thought to do anything to capitalize on the international interest the New Seven Wonders, which attracted 100 million voters, garnered.

Likewise, Egyptians football fans remember with chagrin the infamous "Zero in Zurich" which crowned the Egyptian bid to host the 2010 World Cup (Mazhar 2004). In May 2004, the Egyptian bid committee made their presentation to the world football body in Zurich. The presentation, which enlisted the efforts of Omar Sharif and senior government officials, is a lesson in what audiovisual translation and presentation should not be. The audio and video channels need to complement each other to make the presentation a smooth experience. In this instance, the presentation was marred by glitches, both technical and linguistic, that detracted from its content. Ultimately Egypt received no votes, as the other two contenders shared the possible 24: Morocco 10 and South Africa 14. The incident is commonly known as *Cifr el mundial* (The World Cup Zero).

The Authority
There is no shortage of relevant examples to show the value of audiovisual translation and how it relates to cultural policy issues. In the digital age, mastering the use of audiovisual media is a must. In a culture that depends on translation as the vehicle for its progress and development, translation efforts need to make full use of the current technology. This is perhaps one of the reasons the idea of an authority is proposed. One of the immediate tasks is to oversee the localization of the concept of audiovisual translation by investing in training, encouraging academic and professional studies and organizing conferences dedicated to the examination of its local applications. Its role is not to control but to provide support and guidance for the localization of the concept. As an authority it should have the means to bring the translation profession, the cinema industry, and the media sector together with information technology under one roof. The task is not difficult as there are plenty of

examples to convincingly show that all sectors can benefit from such collective interest and mutual cooperation.

Over the past twenty years, the teaching of audiovisual translation in Egypt has not moved beyond the professional training of subtitlers. This bottom-up effort is indeed required for the creation of a large base of professional practitioners; however, a top-down effort is equally necessary. What is required now is a state-sponsored initiative to invite a national debate on the wider framework of audiovisual translation: over and above 'film translation'. An authority is seen as the driving force for starting and affecting change in how translation is organized for the generation to come. In this respect it needs to be organized as a think tank and not as an administrative unit. As a think tank it will attract professionals, consultants and project managers to work with audiovisual translators and specialists from the media and IT sectors.

In the current situation, it is perhaps opportune to begin with a national conference on audiovisual translation to launch the debate on the landscape and context of audiovisual translation in Egypt. The conference needs to develop its own theoretical framework and agenda, relying on local expertise and with the Egyptian milieu as its focus. After all, the country has been practicing some major aspects of audiovisual translation for more than 80 years (Gamal 2009) and has one of the oldest subtitling studios in the world. Thus, the national conference will, in a way, instil the necessary confidence to make audiovisual translation a state policy. It is perhaps insightful to recall that soon after the introduction of the Internet in Egypt in the mid-nineties a new ministry for Communication and Information Technology (www.mcit.org.eg) was established in 1999. On its website, the Ministry states: "No country seeking real, sustainable development and progress can hope to achieve these aims without a strong ICT sector in place to drive the necessary change." While the government has spent time, effort and money establishing the necessary infrastructure for the information society, it has overlooked the importance of modernizing its translation policy and practice. This is seen as the task for an audiovisual authority that compliments the technical and legal frameworks necessary for the establishment of a vibrant information society.

An authority is seen as a catalyst for the development of local theoretical frameworks that will enable practitioners, as well as policy makers, to be mindful of opportunities and capable of drawing policies that address immediate needs. The absence of debating audiovisual translation in Egypt, despite the large base of practitioners, leads to a deficit in the theoretical knowledge deemed necessary for the appreciation of the landscape of audiovisual translation in the country. This is why the current practice of teaching audiovisual translation (with a primary focus on subtitling), and after twenty years, has not contributed to the development of a generation of audiovisual translation researchers, thinkers or policy makers.

Conclusion

Digital technology has a lot of promise to help solve Egypt's cultural and educational problems from poor teaching standards, the lack of multilingual Egyptian content online to (re)presenting the country overseas. However, the field of audiovisual translation needs to be

espoused at the national level and sponsored by the state as print translation has been in the past. This new concept needs to be fully localized so that a clear Egyptian theoretical framework is developed. Such a framework is also necessary for the development of an Egyptian school of thought that adapts technology to meeting local needs.

Audiovisual translation policymakers, equipped with sufficient theoretical background and local professional expertise, need to examine the cultural landscape both realistically and skilfully. Such background is the *sine qua non* for the successful localization of the new concept. Anything short of this will amount to skimming the surface or simply keeping the concept as a foreign discipline like medicine, biochemistry and Egyptology. While these disciplines are taught at Egyptian universities, in English, they have remained foreign to the local culture with very little professional creativity or academic contribution. It is because of its immediate relevance to the needs of the country that a state-sponsored authority with objective-oriented policies is required.

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