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Foreign movies in Egypt:

Subtitling, dubbing and adaptation

Abstract:

Foreign movies in Egypt provide both a stimulus for the local culture and the impetus for the nascent film industry. Egypt was one of the few countries the Lumière brothers visited to demonstrate their new invention, the Cinématographe. With the first purpose-built cinema house opening in 1907, foreign films are fast becoming a regular event that the local cultural milieu is becoming accustomed to. However, foreign movies are not only foreign in their language but also extravagant in their context, social mores and themes. When foreign movies are brought into Egypt they require translation as very few movies are shown in their original language. This paper examines how foreign movies are received and processed in Egypt.

1. Introduction:

In order to appreciate the effect of the introduction of foreign movies to Egypt it is necessary to examine the cultural situation in the country. When the Lumière brothers brought their Cinématographe to Egypt in the late 19th century to demonstrate their invention, they landed in Alexandria which was not merely a port but also the cultural centre of the country featuring a large population of foreign communities. At that time, the city of Alexandria was the seat of a vibrant theatre, music and literature movement. The cafés of the city were also the natural venue for poets and provided the medium to exchange ideas both political and literary. The country was under British occupation and the major issue at the time was the management of the Suez Canal and the emerging literary form of the Arabic novel. (Shalash: 1992) Early foreign films which were silent and primitive in their technique were shown to café patrons for free as part of the service to attract more customers. These films were shown as they were, with no music or commentary. It is also likely that when a music record was played to accompany the silent film, it was a foreign record playing foreign music. With dedicated cinemas established in Alexandria and Cairo, showing films became a worthwhile financial investment. As film became a regular event in cultural life, Egyptian-made silent films began to appear. (Hassan: 1995)

2. Silent films

The arrival of silent films heralded the advent of the age of cinema and the emergence of a new generation of Egyptians who were fascinated by the new vogue. Some would continue to enjoy attending cinema houses to watch its development whilst others would decide to play a more active part in the new age. The latter became the pioneers of Egyptian cinema who through their keen interest in foreign films translated their understanding and appreciation into what would soon become the Egyptian film industry.

The first direct job in the emerging film industry in Egypt (and indeed in many parts of the world) was that of the commentator who interpreted the events and actions of the silent film to the captivated audience. Thus the *Mefahimati* (which literally means Explainer) would attempt to bridge the gap between the foreign world on screen and the local world in which he and his audience live. There is very little written on this period of Egyptian cinema despite several works by Abu Shadi (2004), Mar'i (1996) and Hassan (1995) on the history of Egyptian cinema. Yet, it is not difficult to reconstruct the *modus operandi* of the *Mefahimati* as he endeavoured to stimulate the audience and increase their enjoyment.

The following is a construction of what several people in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon have conveyed to the author reflecting on their early experience with the person who made cinema-going an unforgettable experience for them as young people¹.

The *Mefahimati* was a middle-aged male, with a good loud voice who stood on a chair at the back of the hall and near or under the film projector. He manipulated his voice to achieve dramatic effect, changing his voice to reflect gender, age and emotional state. He used words effectively and relied on brief periods of silence to heighten the suspense. The *Mefahimati* would laugh, cry, shout or whisper as the picture dictates but at times he would appear to be talking to excess. Early audiences went to the cinema to enjoy the film and not to enjoy listening to the commentator. Although there was only one commentator working for or engaged by the cinema house, audiences did not notice or remember the different styles of another *Mefahimati*.

This reconstruction appears to be consistent with the Arab tradition of story telling in both villages and towns and conforms to the *Benshi* tradition in Japan (Shimizu, Toda and Ueno: 1992). It is insightful to observe that the character of the *Mefahimati* has not been studied within Egyptian cinema, although the characters of the ballad singer, storyteller and puppeteer, who sang, danced and told tall tales, were attempted. Omar Sharif played the character of the puppeteer in a movie by the same name in 1991.²

3. The arrival of foreign motion pictures

Foreign-made movies were exciting and Egyptians were keen to look at other lifestyles, cultural settings and languages. The latter is of particular interest to this paper. The large multilingual communities within Alexandria and Cairo are likely to have contributed to the demand for foreign language films. The presence of a fairly large French and Italian community and business sector paved the way for the acquisition of and investment in cinema technology. Thus, Mar'i (1996:44) reports that the earliest reference to a

¹ The reconstruction is based on interviews with people who experienced foreign silent cinema in Cairo, Beirut and Damascus.

² The author specialises in the examination of the subtitling of Omar Sharif early Egyptian films (1954-1961) in English.

subtitling company was in the Arabic language magazine *Moving Pictures* in issue 13 (02/08/1923).

Equally interesting is the 1912 invention by Leopoldo Fiorello, an Italian resident of Alexandria, of transparent slides bearing Arabic subtitles which were reflected on a small screen placed adjacent to the primary screen.

When talking movies came to Egypt, Italian companies provided the subtitling for almost a decade and a half until Anis Ebaid came on the scene in the mid 1940s (Gamal: 2007a, 2008a). The early period of subtitling in Egypt remains shrouded in mystery and deserves to be examined for several reasons. One of the most significant reasons for this is the changing demography and taste in Egypt (and the Arab world) today. Early cinema press dealt with the foreign and exotic elements of the outlandish invention and debated the morality of women appearing in film and being kissed by strange men. Cultures as well as societies develop tastes, change perceptions, embark on vogues and adopt new interests all the time. It is highly relevant today as the population is getting younger, to examine the new language of youth and their perspective of foreign cinema. One of the relevant approaches is to look at the early subtitling style and the rules governing language on screen. Another is the examination of the subtitling manual developed by Anis Ebaid, and later promoted in almost all Arab countries, as it shaped both the taste and perception of viewers for almost half a century. Here power, authority, agency and local demand and taste provide a rich scope for research.

Although the experience of Anis Ebaid was examined by Gamal (2006, 2007b, 2008b) the whole experience deserves further attention through the rigorous examination not only of the style of subtitling (and dubbing) but also of the feedback received. Furthermore, the examination would require the review of the comments levelled at subtitling since the company became the dominant provider of audiovisual translation in Egypt in the 1940s until the beginning of the digital age in the early 1990s.

4. Anis Ebaid and Sons

When Ebaid died in 1988, two of his six children took up the business and attempted to maintain the same lead their father had on the business of film translation in Egypt and the Arab world. The eldest son Adel became the chairman of the company and his sister Aida became his vice-chairman (till her death in 2004). The challenges the new generation of managers was facing were monumental, for not only would they have to compete to earn their monopoly of the market but they had to accommodate technological changes in the industry. The digital revolution was about to announce its arrival and CNN coverage of the Gulf War from late 1990 was the first taste of it. The effects of CNN on Arab media tend to be obscured by the proliferation of satellite channels and the impressive launch and success of Aljazeera. Within a decade of the death of Anis Ebaid, the market was teeming with media companies specialising in post-production and media services such as subtitling, voice over, narration and dubbing. The market itself also underwent a drastic change – the establishment of at least 50 new satellite channels, most of which had an insatiable desire for new mostly foreign material,

whilst at the time of Ebaid's death there were none! In addition, the office in Cairo was not fully automated and subtitlers formed a pool of "script translators" working in a room with no computers. There was no software for subtitling and the very concept of ripping, burning and authoring DVDs was a distant nebulous dream.

As audiovisual translation was a concept unheard of at academic institutions in Egypt, no university offered formal training in subtitling or dubbing. Overnight, the number of media companies catering for the new demand was mushrooming. The monopoly that Anis Ebaid once had even on the Egyptian market had evaporated. By then, the names of at least a dozen media companies specialising in the subtitling (and dubbing) of new programs began to appear at the end of the foreign program where once the famous phrase "Subtitled by Anis Ebaid in Egypt" appeared.

The opening up of the subtitling market in Egypt helped in foregrounding the AVT profession. One noticeable difference is the appearance of the subtitler's name in the credits. The increased visibility of the subtitler, through direct on screen crediting rather than that of the company's, helped cast more light on the new domain of audiovisual translation in Egypt and less on the older concept of "film translation".³

In 2008, two decades after the death of Anis Ebaid, the situation became a lot more dynamic with the proliferation of Arab satellite channels, some 550 channels. Naturally additional media companies sprang up in all Arab capitals offering tailored audiovisual translation. Al Farhan (2008) argues that the style of Ebaid's subtitling was simple and smooth unlike the subtitling offered by Lebanese companies that opt for regional lexical items, unusual syntactic structures and odd expressions. He concedes that the central challenge of subtitling is the rendering of spoken language into written, condensed and constrained two lines of text.⁴

5. An attempt at examining viewer feedback

The increased visibility of subtitlers over the past two decades has not however increased the quality of subtitling. It is insightful to observe that over a 25 year period, the author has been monitoring the audiovisual scene in Egypt and observing the general feedback on subtitling quality as expressed in journalistic articles, letters to the editor, complaints and interviews with directors, producers, presidents of the Cairo film festival, Anis Ebaid (1980) and another interview with his son in 2003. The collection of material cover a broad range of issues, examples and suggestions made by viewers who are keen consumers of subtitled films in Egypt. The collection of material has also been used in the translation classroom to illicit feedback on translation theory, strategies, reception and quality control. It has been instrumental in suggesting research topics and stimulating classroom discussions. The topics raised are numerous and multifaceted and vary from lexical issues to syntactic structures and from social values to cultural institutions. Most significant is the issue of translating film titles into Arabic which remains unexamined.

³ Despite the increased volume of AVT work, translation conferences in Egypt do not debate AVT topics.

⁴ The plethora of channels also offers the chance to conduct comparative studies on subtitling quality.

The significance of this collection of viewer commentary, which has been increasing due to increased production, the number of television channels, and indeed the population, lies in the fact that it constitutes, in the absence of any formal survey by media channels, a valuable source of viewer opinion. (Gamal: 2007a) Naturally, some of the commentary reflects a lack of understanding of the nature and purpose of subtitling. Others however, amount to what Shochat and Stam (1985) coin as “play spot the error game” by viewers who are fluent in the language but ignorant of the constraints of subtitling and the inevitable need to reduce the linguistic message on the screen. There are several issues that still dominate the debate on the subtitling of foreign films in Egypt. They can be summed up into three main categories:

- 1- Linguistic :
 - a- translation of obscene language
 - b- translation of abbreviations
 - c- translation of cultural values
- 2- Technical:
 - a- font size and colour of subtitles
 - b- duration and synchronization
- 3- Post-production: a. quality control

In the following section, each category is examined as well as how different companies deal with these challenges. It is important however to observe the role and direct responsibility of the subtitler in each category. Practitioners would readily appreciate that more often than not the responsibility is discharged once they submit the subtitles file, i.e. at the linguistic level.

Linguistic challenges:

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing subtitlers in subtitling foreign programs into Arabic is dealing with the increasing levels of obscenity in American films and particularly TV drama. The key strategy employed is reduction through two formats which Kovacic explains as “total reduction” and “partial reduction” (1994:247). This strategy is dealt with differently by different companies and can be one of the following:

- 1- Partial reduction or condensation: allows the register to show the pragmatic force of meaning, but the words are expressed in a filtered way. Thus, the translation appearing on the screen is acceptable to the censorship office guidelines and is deemed appropriate by the majority of viewers.
- 2- Total reduction or deletion: here the offensive register is totally excised and ignored. It is insightful to observe that some viewers believe the image would supplement the text while others argue that translation should reflect what is being said.

The second issue is the translation of English abbreviations into Arabic. This is a considerable challenge as Arabic uses a different script which does not lend itself to the use of abbreviations. Whilst it is indeed possible to write the abbreviation IBM in Arabic, the result may be undesirable as it will appear longer since Arabic would have to spell the Eye-Bee-Em. Further, the abbreviation PM (Prime Minister) would be written Bee Em since there is no /p/ in Arabic. The lack of equivalent phonemes particularly the /p/ leads to some embarrassing moments in subtitling. The increasing use of abbreviations in everyday spoken English places Egyptian subtitlers under pressure to compensate for meaning and to attempt rewriting their initial subtitles. Failure to compensate for the abbreviations leads to longer subtitles, missing the intended meaning or inevitably leading to incomprehensible titles.

The third issue in the linguistic category is cultural values. Failure to get it right can be attributed to two major reasons; the first of which is inexperience on the part of the subtitler when it comes to cultural references, idiomatic expressions or social customs. The literal translation of these examples exposes the subtitler and creates difficulties for the viewer who is struggling to make sense of what is actually happening. Unfortunately, it is at times like these that viewers are forced to use the image to disambiguate the subtitle. Such a scenario should never happen (Hajmohammed: 2004)

The second reason can stem from the fact that a large number of subtitlers work from the dialogue list without seeing the film. This modus operandi is widespread and accounts for a large number of the errors in subtitling. It is interesting to observe from viewer feedback such commentary concerning use of the dialogue list like: "Did the subtitler watch the film?" Relying on the dialogue list, for all intents and purposes, is a quick way of completing subtitles. This is understandable in the incredibly busy world of broadcasting where deadlines are practically impossible. However, the subtitler must be afforded the opportunity to view the film at the earliest possible opportunity. (Arnaiz: 1996)

Although subtitlers have little control when it comes to the technical category, since this is dependent on the hardware used by the television channel or the media production company, the examination of viewer comments is nevertheless invaluable. Different television channels and media production companies use different typefaces, font sizes and colour. Some still use white subtitles which irritate a large number of viewers as they tend to dissolve into the white or lighter part of the image. Different companies use more elaborate type faces which add to the value of subtitles. Likewise, the size of the typeface varies from channel to channel and they vary from being too small to too large.

It is this lack of uniformity in the font type and size that characterises and entrenches the perception of variation in the quality of subtitles between television channels.

The other technical issue of duration and synchronization, or "spotting", is an issue that crops up periodically and is perhaps due to the inexperience of a "new" subtitler. However, technical glitches where subtitles freeze on the screen too long, appear early or

disappear too quickly are not infrequent and they can be irritating particularly in verbally-dense programs or action films. Quite often the spotter is a mere technician who is neither fluent in the language nor interested in what they are doing. However, new software programs are helping subtitlers to take more control of their craft allowing them to carry out almost all stages of the subtitling cycle.

The third category of post-production is significant.

As different companies have different working conditions and arrangements, it is the final product that will be judged and not the way it was produced. Thus, regardless of whether subtitlers are freelancers or in-house employees, the networking and sharing of the task is crucial to the production of quality subtitles. This demands quality control measures are put in place in order to ensure that the subtitles are concise and precise. Cavalieri rightly points out that subtitles should enhance the viewers' "enjoyment and appreciation of the foreign program" (2008: 175). This is exactly the task of the post-production team; to ensure the subtitles are concise and precise and not merely "correct and accurate" as in traditional linear translation.

5.2 Evaluation of viewer reception

The examination of journalistic material and media coverage of subtitling issues in Arab media provides a rich source for the examination of several aspects of audiovisual translation. Reception studies (what viewers perceive as quality subtitling) forms the backbone of such body of knowledge, which in the absence of formal literature examining these issues, merits the attention of researchers, trainers and students.

Subtitling errors, clichés used in subtitling language or "televese" (Gamal: 2007b) have become standard anecdotes that frequently appear in comments made by speakers in political, academic and media settings as well as in sport. For instance, the trainer of Cairo's leading soccer team Al Ahly rebuked his defenders for their recurring mistakes that "appear to be as constant in each match as subtitling errors in every film"[2003]⁵. The emphasis here is on constant errors which have come to be expected in every film. Generally speaking, the published comments reflect the level of understanding of the viewers and some do not always seem to appreciate the purpose, let alone the constraints of subtitling. Yet other comments come from experienced viewers who offer better translations as well as "subtitling strategies". One viewer wrote to a newspaper complaining that the subtitles referred to the nurse in one film as "she" through out the film where in fact the nurse was a male. The viewer advised the television channel to give the subtitler the opportunity to watch the film and not merely translate the dialogue list. The dialogue translator fell in the cultural trap where nurses are assumed to be females and not males. (Al Ahram: 1998)

6. Dubbing foreign programs in Egypt

⁵ The match in question was Al Ahly vs Al Masry published in Al Ahram 26/07/2003.

Most of the press articles on audiovisual translation that I have collected over a 25 year period refer to subtitling and not dubbing. This is mainly due to the fact that subtitling has been the favoured mode of film translation in Egypt. Maluf (2005) argues that subtitling was a conscious decision made early on to protect the nascent local cinema industry. He argues that dubbing foreign films would have dealt a crippling blow to Egyptian cinema as it would not have been able to compete with better produced Hollywood films. Thus adding Egyptian voice to American-made films was seen as a dangerous formula that filmmakers and producers abhorred and resisted. Very few foreign films have been dubbed and shown at cinemas in Egypt. Subtitling was therefore seen as a cheaper, faster and safer way to translate foreign films whilst at the same time protecting the local film industry. Thus Egyptian cinema, long regarded as the powerhouse of the Arab cinema industry (Buscombe: 2003), established the norm for film translation in the entire Arab world. Later, with the broadcast of national televisions (Baghdad in 1956, Cairo and Damascus in 1960, Riyadh in 1965, Amman in 1968 and so forth) the taste for subtitled foreign programs was firmly established and followed.

Since the early years of television, dubbing was reserved for children programs, experimental joint films with Turkey shown on television but not in cinema, and a small number of foreign films particularly the Soviet war films of the late sixties but almost no television drama were dubbed till the mid 1990s. Children programs were dubbed in the colloquial dialect of Cairo for younger children and in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) for older children. Documentaries were either partially dubbed (voice over) or totally dubbed (re-narrated) in Arabic. One of the most popular programs to be re-narrated was the Animal World. Studies on dubbing in Arabic are very scarce and despite their relevance to language acquisition by children and language maintenance by adults (who do not often use MSA) remain unexamined⁶.

Apart from the protectionist needs of Egyptian cinema and not withstanding the cost and time factors, dubbing has always been regarded as “unauthentic”, lacking credibility and essentially “foreign”. There are two major reasons for this:

First, most early dubbed programs employed MSA which is the higher level of educated speakers of Arabic. The vernacular, on the other hand, is the language of the people, spoken almost everywhere by everyone and at every level. The difference between the two is vast to the extent that it would not be an exaggeration to say that they are two different languages. (Gamal: 2007a) The former is used in educated circles, the media, the Koran, broadcasting particularly the news, literature and writing. The latter is essentially the language of the uneducated although also spoken, with particular refinement, by the educated. The only difference is that the elite when they write resort to the higher form of the language. Several studies have been dedicated to the examination of this phenomenon such as Ferguson (1959) who invented the term “diglossia” to distinguish between the two varieties of Arabic. (Dickins et al: 2002)

⁶ Apart from dubbing children programs, “film” dubbing has never been a popular form of film translation in Egypt. Lebanon, Gulf states and recently Syria have invested more in dubbing and seem to have developed a taste for dubbed programs particularly television drama, not films.

The relationship between the vernacular and MSA in Arabic is a hotly-debated issue in Egypt and one that has not abated since the early years of the twentieth century with language purists and modernists calling for the adoption of one and the expunging of the other (Mahmoud: 1993)

Second, dubbing is labour-intensive, costly and requires a longer time to complete.

The early choice for using MSA in dubbing was perhaps a technical decision. The dialogue list was translated into “written” Arabic and thus into MSA. The technical capabilities of synchronisation were not that advanced but a good effort was made and indeed achieved. However, the use of MSA, as a higher form of Arabic, betrayed the foreign program and highlighted its foreignness. The employment of MSA in dubbing does not seem to be debated at translation conferences or even at Arabic linguistics research fora. Traditionally, Egyptian cinema employs the vernacular in its mainstream films reserving MSA to films that either have a predominantly religious, literary or historic context. Thus, to hear MSA while watching modern foreign films immediately foregrounds the outlandish features of the program. This is exacerbated by the features of the foreign actors (mostly western)⁷, the décor or the physical features of the location such as green pasture lands, high mountains, dense forests or climate-related scenes such as heavy rain, snow storms or simply the autumn season.

The Mexican wave

Al Khateeb points out that not unlike subtitling; the proliferation of satellite channels gave dubbing a big boost (2004). By the mid 1990s, a new trend in dubbing foreign television drama was taking place in Lebanon and Egypt. This phenomenon known as the “Mexican drama” originated from Mexico, Brazil and Spain. Such dubbing was again carried out in MSA leaving the same questions unexamined and unanswered. With the Mexican drama, dubbing was a factor adding to the foreignisation of the filmic material which was not helped by the predominantly female actresses featuring fair complexion, blond hair with different body language, westernised lifestyles and with more liberal attitudes to love, sex and material values.

In 2008, Egyptian viewers were able to watch on pay-TV the new wave of dubbed television drama that swept the entire Arab world: “Turkish drama”. With the second wave of dubbed TV dramas, some major changes were observed. Essentially, the dubbing was carried out in Syria and in the vernacular of the Syrian dialect. Turkish drama dubbed in Arabic has been labelled a new change that has breathed life into Arabic language drama production and brought foreign romance to Arab TV in a way that is both linguistically acceptable and culturally appropriate.

However, the change brought also challenges to Egyptian drama which has always enjoyed high esteem in Arab countries. The Egyptian dialect, long perceived as the lingua

⁷ When Japanese television drama *Oshin* was subtitled and shown on television in several Arab capitals, the acceptance was not high despite the popular sympathy *Oshin* enjoyed. The Japanese drama was distinctly foreign in shape and content.

franca in the Arab world was given a taste of competition as the Syrian dialect coupled with superior foreign production mounted a challenge that many believe will shake Egyptian drama from its complacency.

The unprecedented success and appeal of the dubbed Turkish drama is attributed to three major factors:

- a- The vernacular (Syrian Arabic) was employed instead of MSA which helped in bringing the work closer to the viewer rather than distancing the work by making it ‘uncontemporary’.
- b- Turkish culture is close to Arab culture particularly in its social mores, cultural values, nuances and feelings.
- c- The dubbing was professionally carried out with superior attention to detail from translation, language nuances, articulation to synchronization.

The feedback Turkish drama received demonstrated that dubbing has been successful in domesticating the foreign work and for the first time dubbing appears to have gained its recognition and acceptance as a viable method of television drama translation in Arab culture.⁸ This trend points to a new phase in audiovisual translation that merits more academic research and examination. Its application to other areas such as feature films particularly thriller and action films, documentary films and children cartoons need to be examined to determine parameters for medium choice and quality. Unlike subtitling, the original language track is not accessible to the viewer so the parameters of quality and success are different and therefore need to be examined differently. (Nedergaard-Larsen: 1993)

7. Film adaptation

Like everywhere else, Egyptian cinema relied heavily on the local theatre movement to recruit not only actors but also directors, script writers and technicians. However, the local cinema turned to Hollywood for inspiration not just in acting, directing and photographing but for ideas and scripts as well. Thus, Egyptian cinema “imported” ideas in the form of scripts and scenarios. Essentially, the purpose was to look for ideas for Egyptian films. The plot would have to be credible to an Egyptian audience and naturally would have to conform to their socio-cultural frame of reference. The importation of film ideas meant essentially that the plot would be translated into Egyptian context and fleshed out with local details from the characterisation to costume, décor, music, songs and dance. From the start of Egyptian talking films, audiences came to appreciate the

⁸ The debate the Turkish dubbed television drama created in Arab media prompted Aljazeera to conduct a survey on viewer opinion of the phenomenon (September 2008). The published views examine dubbing from several angles which raise some very interesting research questions. This is perhaps the first organized public survey of a dubbed work in Arabic. However, to date there has never been an officially-published examination of viewer reception of any dubbed program.

vernacular of the Egyptian dialect which is shared by many in the entire Arab world. (Shafik: 2007)

The process of cultural borrowing, importing, translating or adapting of foreign scripts is problematic in Egyptian (and to a large extent in Arab) cinema. The Arabic term “iqtibass” has a large semantic field that can include “draw from”, “quote” and “adapt”. The debate that has been occurring since the inception of cinema in Egypt is where to draw the line between showing the Arabic version of *Oedipus Rex* or *Hamlet* and presenting the romantic plot of *Romeo and Juliet* from an Egyptian perspective. And, when adapting *My Fair Lady* to the Egyptian cultural setting what norms should be applied: fidelity to the script or to the spirit of the play? Yet, in adapting foreign films to Egyptian cinema, very little research has been carried out from a translation point of view. Should the imported idea be universal, then to what degree can the adaptation be labelled a foreign work and should the new work be recognised as an adaptation or a creative interpretation.

Examples of film adaptation in Egyptian cinema include hits and flops. In some cases, the narrow example of adaptation (literal translation of foreign plots) creates a superficial, half-baked work that lacks credibility and shows poor skills of translation by failing to create a local context. Yet, the opposite is true. Instances of adaptation in the broadest sense (domestication) abound where the translation process has been successful in localising the foreign work and giving it local colour and a frame of reference. Several Egyptian adaptations of American films have been so successful in domesticating the foreign work both at the macro (context) and micro (dialogue) levels that the adapted version is said to have surpassed the original.

Three foreign examples are worth examining here: *My Fair Lady* (1956), *The Inspector General* (1949) and *The Fugitive* (1992).

In *Sayedati al Gameela* (*My Fair Lady*)(1965), Egyptian playwrights Samir Khafagy and Bahgat Kamar with director Hassan Abdel-Salam successfully turned the English play, by the same name, into one of the most memorable plays in Egyptian theatrical history. It is interesting to observe that the credits state that the playwrights have adapted the play but without clearly stating the source. The play is essentially localised in a poor Egyptian suburb where the portrayal of the chief protagonist, the attractive female pickpocket Sodfa Ba’deshi, is presented. This relies on traditional theatrical techniques such as décor, dress and demeanour of the actors. It also employs language skilfully where the plot is translated in a manner that is both culturally correct and pragmatically credible. Yet, the real success is exhibited in the scene where the uneducated girl is being taught illocution and social manners by the etiquette tutor. The contrast between the poor suburb and the opulent palace of the elite is exaggerated but nonetheless purposeful. Dr Higgins’ famous examples in the source film and particularly the memorable example “the rain in Spain” are brilliantly coined and choreographed in Arabic which made the Egyptian version pass as an original. The play presents a useful example for the examination of domesticating

verbally-based humour and offers students and practitioners an opportunity to reflect on strategies for cultural adaptation. (Gamal: 2008c)

In *Al Mufatesh al-'am* (The Inspector General), the Egyptian adaptation (1956) of the American film by the same name (1949) is a success as it localised the main plot in an Egyptian context that is both correct and credible. The characterisation is equally convincing with no apparent challenges to the development of the narrative in Arabic cultural context and language. The dialogue is carefully and cleverly designed to support the main characters and the result is a successful production that passes as an original. A close examination of the Egyptian version would not show any weaknesses in the adaptation of the foreign work into Egyptian target culture. Here the process of adaptation offers valuable examples of domesticating a foreign plot that has a universal appeal. Nikolai Gogol's original Russian comedy on the corruption of government officials has resonance in many cultures. Students of translation, interpreting and particularly audiovisual translation can benefit immensely when such adaptations are presented to them in class. By analysing the original work and suggesting strategies for its domestication the class can debate what constitutes a cultural framework in both the source and target cultures. After viewing the adapted Egyptian version, a discussion of translation proper can ensue focusing on what was kept and regarded as essential to the plot and what was jettisoned and left out as superficial or irrelevant.

In contrast to the above examples, is the localised Arabic production of the 1993 Hollywood film *The Fugitive* featuring Harrison Ford. In the Arabic adaptation which was released as *Eghtiyal* (Assassination) in 1996, script writer and director Nader Galal not only failed to acknowledge the source of his idea but critically failed to localise the plot to the target audience. Although minor changes were made to the characters and their situation, viewers were quick to realise that the Egyptian film was practically a clone of American film. The director appears to have underestimated the public's awareness of the American film and even the 1960's television drama of the same name and premise. (Even the latter was a popular hit in Egypt with its original 120 black-and-white episodes in the early 1970s).

This raises the issue of dealing with classics or films with "significant form" (Gamal 2008c). In subtitling or adapting famous works, as Mera (1999) argues, attention must be had to the stature of the work in its own culture. In the case of *The Fugitive*, the director perhaps should have paid more attention to the familiarity of the local audience with the American original. Nader Galal defends his localised adaption of *The Fugitive* by arguing that Egyptian viewers did not concern themselves with the source of Naguib al-Rihani's popular films of the 1940s, as long as they were popular (Yaseen: 1999). Such justification is a controversial point least not for the fact that there was some half a century of literary development between both men, but that Rihani relied on adaptations during the time in which Egyptian novels were still developing. The latter introduction of the writings of acclaimed novelist Naguib Mahfouz transformed the environment by introducing an unprecedented stylistic richness to the depiction of Egyptian social, work and religious life.

These three examples of adaptation in Egyptian cinema and theatre provide ample opportunities for discussion and research. The process of inter-lingual adaptation whereby foreign works are “egyptianized” merits the attention of translation researchers to examine the national/cultural parameters that govern the adaptation/translation of foreign works. As the new version takes on a different shape and form, the examination of the relation between the original and the new product can inform and broaden the knowledge of what is preserved and what is jettisoned and why. For instance, in the dubbing of the American show *The Simpsons*⁹, the character of Homer underwent substantial changes: his name became Omar and he stopped drinking beer, eating bacon and above all he spoke politely, perhaps too politely. The question here is who judges the new version? Salman Rushdie speaks of his experience writing and adapting his 1981 novel *Midnight's Children* for the theatre and observes “It soon became clear that the people who most enjoyed the show were those who had not read the novel” (2009: 6)

Opinion in Egypt, as elsewhere, is divided on adaptations. While some are against adaptation from literary works (preferring direct screenplays) others are against adaptations from foreign filmic material. One of Egypt's prominent and prolific directors, Henry Barakat (1913-1997), preferred adapting foreign literary works rather than adapting foreign filmic material. Believing that turning books into films allows him greater artistic liberty he enriched Egyptian cinema with 25 films based on foreign novels from French, American, British and Russian literature. Likewise, he adapted numerous Egyptian novels into film such as *A man in our house* (1961) by Ehasan Abdel Qudous featuring Omar Sharif. As translation activity plays a significant role in Egyptian society at almost every level from fashion to physics and from fine arts to football, the examination of different forms of audiovisual adaptation such as presenting interviews, broadcasting the news or even the in-house commentary on pre-recorded sports programs can only broaden and enrich the contexts of teaching, research and professional practice.

8. Conclusions and future trends:

The examination of foreign films in Egypt remains a potential untapped. It includes many aspects that are multidisciplinary in nature and impact on several interrelated industries and professions such as cinema, theatre, media, communication, film festivals and the audiovisual translation industry. The latter is of particular interest to the author and the paper focuses on subtitling, dubbing and adaptation of foreign films into Arabic.

With half a dozen international and significant film festivals held in Egypt each year, the relationship between the film industry and the translation profession must grow into one of cooperation and mutual appreciation. The paper has demonstrated that there is ample scope for research on ways to strengthen the relationship. One way of such cooperation is for the cinema industry to begin examining the current practice of film translation in the country. Likewise, the broadcasting sector (public and private) will find many rewards in investing in the examination of audiovisual translation in the broadest sense of the word. Language on screen is affecting a large section of the population and the education

⁹ *The Simpsons* was subtitled and shown on Gulf TV before it was dubbed by the MBC for Saudi Arabia.

system should be aware of, if not alarmed by, the increasing exposure to audiovisual material on the big screen, television, the Internet and on DVD.

There is no doubt that the demographic change in Egypt is having a great impact on popular culture, the consumption of foreign films and the production of audiovisual material. Gambier (2008) points out that AVT industry is attracting young researchers and this is not surprising as digital technology is increasingly dominating how we do things from creating digital files to using digital cameras and mobile phones. Software programs are making it easier and faster to manipulate information electronically and to process text, image and sound digitally. The fact that 40% of Egyptians are under the age of 15 is a major factor that must be taken into consideration when planning, examining and determining audiovisual translation strategies.

AVT remains an area that is only examined as a mere linguistic activity and is not taught or researched as a stand-alone subject. There is still one academic institution that offers professional training though not academic research in the various aspects of AVT studies. The DVD phenomenon remains outside the scope of academic examination and the market is open to foreign DVDs subtitled into Arabic. The examination of these DVDs, whether feature films or television drama, has not been tackled by Egyptian researchers.

In the digital age where there are more than 550 satellite channels broadcasting foreign language programs that are either subtitled, dubbed or adapted into Arabic, an opportunity now exists to carry out comparative studies of translated foreign programmes¹⁰. As each Arab country subtitles its own foreign films, this plethora of subtitling gives the audiovisual researcher an opportunity that was not available a mere decade earlier. Comparative studies in subtitling, not unlike print translation, have the potential to stimulate interest in AVT by embarking on descriptive analysis of case studies or research in any of the many aspects of audiovisual translation in Arabic.

¹⁰ The author takes great interest in conducting comparative studies of subtitling practices particularly in Cairo and Beirut. Satellite television channels offer a unique opportunity to monitor and research subtitled programs such as feature films.

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