*Audiovisual Translation in the Arab world v 0.3*

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## Abstract

Over the past two decades information technology has changed the way translation is produced, received and consumed. A great deal of translation work is created and consumed over the internet and thanks to digital technology most translation work today is far different from the traditional mono-dimensional text-based format it used to be. Audiovisual translation (AVT) has been rising in scope and significance for the past eighteen years with applications in a myriad of contexts from the multilingual menus in digital cameras to the localization of almost everything. Despite its relevance to the market AVT has had a varying degree of application and localisation in many parts of the world. Generally speaking AVT deals with translation on screen where there is more than one channel of information: text, colour, sound, image and video. While every country in the world subtitle and dub film and TV programs very few actually conduct research or teaching of the activity. Audiovisual translation studies do not exist in most of the world as they tend to remain a European pursuit or vogue that began in 1995.

The paper examines the situation of audiovisual translation in Arabic. It will focus on the current situation of AVT in the Arab world and examines some of the major areas that are relevant to the Arabic content online and digital culture. It will argue that the current practice of excluding AVT from the translation curricula and ignoring the specialisation at translation conferences held from Abu Dhabi to Marrakesh is not sustainable. As the title suggests, the paper refers to ongoing research on the topic that monitors the progress of AVT in the Arab world. Despite the lack of a formal policy, theory or professional practice audiovisual translation in Arabic continues to be produced on an ad hoc basis. While this situation is not peculiar to the Arab world, the research underscores the direct relevance of AVT to a serious issue in Arabic: the poor online content that accounts for only 3% of the world Internet content. The paper argues that for the online content industry to thrive, Arab academic institutions would do well to investigate and invest in audiovisual translation, and quickly.
Key words: Arabic, Alexandria, Audiovisual translation, digital culture, online content.

Introduction

The field of audiovisual translation as an academic discipline is seen by many academics in the Arab world (and in many other parts of the world including Australia) as a European vogue. Most of the research, teaching and publications on AVT are carried out in Western Europe (Diaz-Cintas 2004). Even within Europe, AVT does not enjoy an equal status with the balance shifting rather convincingly towards the western part of the continent (Nicolic: 2010). Audiovisual translation, in its simplest form is concerned with the creation, consumption and reception of translation over a screen. In this regard, every country could be said to have 'practiced' screen translation since the invention of cinema, the introduction of talking films and the rise of subtitling and dubbing. Diaz-Cintas, Matamala and Neves concur "In principle, audiovisual translation is innate to humankind; people have been translating the audio/visual world which they live in from time immemorial. Every expression of art is, in its own way, a form of AVT" (2010: 13). However, screen translation (subtitling and dubbing) is only one aspect of the overall field of Audiovisual Translation that looks at other contexts such as audio-description, subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing, same language subtitling, games localisation, translation of the news bar on television, the rising specialisation of documentary translation in addition to a long list of other applications varying from the translation of corporate DVDs to digital culture and the online content industry. While the field of audiovisual translation has been formalized in Europe (although not without some debates regarding its very nature, specialisation and terminology) the rest of the world continues producing translation on screen oblivious to the field of AVT or wilfully turning its head away from the new discipline (Orero 2004). The situation in the Arab world has not been different: media companies have adapted to the digital age by purchasing the hard ware and meeting the rising demand for translation on screen (Gamal 2007a). As the title of this paper shows, it reflects on and refers to a research that began a decade ago that examines the emerging field of audiovisual translation and its context in Arabic. This paper attempts to align AVT to the pressing need for the creation of Arabic online content.

Screen translation

The digital age in the Arab world was ushered in with the CNN coverage of the Iraq war in 1991. Soon after that, the age of Open Skies began with satellite technology, cable TV and the emergence of Al Jazeera in 1996. The rapid proliferation of satellite channels in the Arab world led to the rising demand for subtitling as competing channels needed to subtitle foreign programs (mostly American) to fill in their air time (Gamal 2007b). Media companies specialising in subtitling mushroomed and met the demand. By 2002 the first remastered Egyptian films appeared on DVDs with English and French subtitles. The peculiar thing is that despite the increasing demand for subtitling there has been no formal or professional examination of the practice.

While translation as an academic subject is taught at every academic institution in the Arab world, the concept of audiovisual translation remains outlandish. There are several reasons for the apparent reluctance to espouse AVT. First, the complex nature of audiovisual translation as an academic subject which is different from traditional translation based on text only. Second, the cost associated with hardware and software required for the teaching and training. Third, and most significantly, is the lack of experience by the professors and senior teachers who are seen as luddites compared to their young students who grew up with Gameboys and Sony PS1, 2, 3 and Apple wonderful gadgets from iPods to iMacs, iPhones and iPads. In a region where population under 25 reaches 40%, the digital gap made the 'generation gap' far too obvious. The response to this digital revolution was not forthcoming from the translation departments but from the Faculty of Community Education at the American University in Cairo (AUC) that provides commercial courses. The first course was delivered as early as 1995. To date the AUC program on screen translation remains the only training program in the entire region and despite its pedagogic shortcomings it has been growing in strength meeting the demand in Egypt and the Gulf.

Background to the research

The paper reports on the state of audiovisual translation in Arabic which became my primary research as digital technology began to manifest its impact on language, culture, the media and the arts in Egypt since the mid-1990s (Gamal 2006a). The country presents a viable context for research for it has the oldest and perhaps the only viable cinema and television industry in the Arab world. It is also the most populous and its spoken dialect of Arabic provides the only true lingua franca that could be understood from Rabat to Ras Al Khaima. Therefore by examining the AVT situation in Egypt one could easily and fairly appreciate the situation in other Arab countries (Gamal 2006b). As the rise of satellite technology in the mid-nineties changed the media scene in the Arab world beyond recognition, the Arab population began to read less and to watch satellite screens more. Today there are more than 750 channels vying for the attention of Arabic-speaking viewers in the Middle East and as far away as Australia. The Internet and its new concepts of multimedia and infotainment equally affected the education system in Egypt and every Arab country. Digital technology led to applications never before thought imaginable and today visual culture is fast replacing print culture as more and more publications cease their print version and go online. In order to appreciate the impact of the technological change one has also to be mindful of the 'negative' effects globalisation brought to economies that have limited resources, suffer from chronic public sector centralisation, mismanagement, inefficient planning and most significantly a youthful population.

In a previous research (Gamal 2004, 2006a, 2006b), I examined the situation in the Arab world and identified some issues and challenges that audiovisual translation

could tackle. The precondition was, and still is, that Arab academia espouses AVT and dedicates courses and degrees to the examination of translation and the computer. As this has not happened, the genre of AVT has not been discussed or debated at conferences that continue to be mostly repetitive insisting on the same topics that obviously reflect the research interests of the organisers. Although the concept of Screen Translation was adopted in Egypt as early as 1995 when the American University in Cairo offered the first training courses on Screen Translation, no translation conference in the entire Arab world has dedicated a session to the examination of audiovisual translation in Arabic (Gamal 2008). It is insightful to observe that the Arab world has been watching subtitled programs for over eighty years now and yet the professional activity of subtitling foreign programs into Arabic has never been academically or professionally examined. The only academic research on subtitling focuses primarily on the subtitling of foreign programs *into* Arabic and in this respect is narrowly examined from a sociolinguistic angle such as the "translation" of swear words into Arabic and the like. It is equally insightful to note that, to date, the number of researchers who published more than two papers on Arabic audiovisual translation can be counted on only two fingers.

The training program at the American University in Cairo (AUC) has been running now for almost two decades and is by far the largest in the Arab world. However, it has not developed into a full-fledged program that examines audiovisual translation in the broad sense of the word and confines its academic interest in and 'commercial focus' on subtitling. The AUC experience in teaching and training Egyptian and Arab subtitlers is worth examining due to its professional impact: its trainers are practitioners, the practitioners are self-made gaining their experience at media companies that responded to the demand for subtitling, its graduates are snapped up by the proliferating TV channels in Egypt and in media cities in Abu Dhabi, Cairo and Dubai.

In another paper that examines the role of audiovisual translation in emerging economies (Gamal 2010a) the relevance of AVT is foregrounded. Reflecting on the situation in the Arab world, the significant observation has been the lack of interest by academia in the changing nature of how translation is created, consumed and received. By the end of the first decade of the 21st Century translation has gone completely online: from pdf files to electronic dictionaries and is delivered by email or posted online. Translation is thus received instantly and is consumed on a screen. A considerable number of files are multimodal including not only text but images, graphics, music, audio and video and this is the *raison d'etre* of audiovisual translation (Gambier 2003). It is not just TV drama, films or documentaries but a lot more than filmic material. AVT is concerned with a new concept of *infotainment* a term which has not gained an equivalent in Arabic as yet (Gamal 2010c).

The scope of 'AVT in Arabic v.03'

'AVT in Arabic v.03' builds on over 30 research papers and book chapters dedicated to the examination of audiovisual translation in Arabic with a focus on the numerous applications of AVT. The theoretical underpinnings of this literature is that AVT is a lot wider than screen translation and is a lot more than just translating two lines of text and adding them to the filmic material. One of the major observations and indeed conclusions in the research is the serious lack of interest in AVT by academic institutions, culture bodies and the translation industry in Egypt. This is despite some attempts by prominent organisations such as the Library of Alexandria, the Ministry of Culture Report on Digital Culture in Egypt (2005) and the Alexandria Conferences on Digital Culture in 2009 and 2011 to enrich and examine Arabic online content. The literature maintains that AVT can contribute to the economy, culture, education, community education, tourism and good governance. The present paper focuses on some challenges brought about by digital technology that could be met by audiovisual translation policies. In an earlier paper in this forum (Gamal: 2010c) the idea of a national AVT policy is discussed which presupposes academic specialisation and government appreciation and interest in the powerful impact the new format translation has taken. In most of my publications over the past decade I cite relevant incidents and experiences that could have been handled differently (and often better) had an expert in AVT been consulted!

In this paper, I shall focus on the impact digital technology has on Arabic and Arab culture and how audiovisual translation can contribute to the cultural change.

Social media

When Facebook was launched in 2004 it was confined to the US and particularly students and academics. Within five years the world's largest social media network launched its Arabic service in March 2009 and announced 900,000 subscribers in Egypt, 250,000 in Saudi Arabia and 300,000 in Lebanon. Social media took the Arab world by storm and particularly among the young. By June 2010, the membership reached 15 million. Prior to the social upheavals in January 2011 that toppled the governments of Tunisia and Egypt there was very little government presence on Facebook. To appreciate the role and impact social media exerts one has to remember that during the Egyptian Revolution the government had to sever the Internet to stop protestors communicating via Facebook. When the Egyptian president stepped down and the Military took charge of the country the first thing it did was to establish its presence on Facebook. Naturally, Arabic subscription on Facebook doubled within a year (2011) and by June 2012 trebled to 45.2 million (Alanba 2012). Facebook is now regarded as a tool that brought about the demise of governments and helped usher in a new age of citizen media in the Arab world. The impact of social media in a society that still has a high level of alphabetic illiteracy is debatable. Apart from the

proverbial generation gap, there is now the social media gap between an older generation that grew up with the print media and the younger one that is growing with digital, audiovisual and multimodal media.

One of the features Facebook, and other smart technology gadgets helped bring about is youthful language. While this is not new, as the young will always develop their own language with every generation the situation here is different. The youthful language designed and deployed by young Egyptians (and their peers in almost every other Arab society) has its own new alphabet that is based primarily on the Roman alphabet but with the introduction of some new characters for the unique Arabic phonemes that do not exist in English. This means that Arabic is now written in English and the new 'language' is referred to as *Arabish* or *Arabese*. Moreover, the written language has shifted towards the vernacular in a clear defiance of the respected and revered higher register of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). This sociolinguistic change affected other areas in the society and not just the young who make up 40% of the population. A large number of Egyptian publications, including some well-respected publications began to allow the vernacular not only to creep into the discourse but to invade the articles of the once revered publications such as the top government newspapers Al-Ahram and Al-Akhbar. These publications were known for their special writers who represented the intellectual icons of Egyptian culture in the fifties, sixties and seventies.

Mobile phones with texting, initially available only in English, helped promote the new youthful language with messages sent in the new Romanised form of Arabic with a primary focus on the vernacular. When smart phones allowed texting in Arabic some didn't bother to write in Arabic and continued with *Arabish*. The older generation found it difficult to read the vernacular which for centuries was the spoken form only and never in writing (except in the case of personal letters where the vernacular was 'sparingly' used to drive a point home but not as the register of choice).

The rising significance of the vernacular seems more serious than the introduction of *Arabish* which is likely to remain the domain of social media and texting among the young. However, as the young grow older they are keen to speak English and to use it in everyday parlance. This code mixing phenomenon is gaining much popularity and is held in good esteem even where the Arabic equivalent exists. The spread of foreign universities (American, British, French, German, Russian and Japanese) is also adding to the decline in the native interest in Arabic. These sociolinguistic developments have attracted the attention of language purists among other professionals who see it as a cultural invasion that is eroding culture, pride and the national language. As the use of Arabic by young native speakers is facing a serious challenge in the digital age the economic and political forces seem to be unwittingly doing very little to balance the shift towards English. Against this cultural tide, described by some as 'cultural invasion', a number of initiatives and societies have been established with the clear objective to "Protect and Preserve the Arabic language" in Lebanon, Abu Dhabi,

Qatar and Morocco. To this effect, Tunisian researcher Al-Hammar (2013) proposes a new government ministry for "Arabic language affairs".


Arabic content

The digital age brought about the information superhighway which led to the creation of the information society and information economy. The concept is not without its obvious challenges if not limitations in a society that has a youthful population. For without digital education the youthful population will grow into unskilled labour and consequently high unemployment. Against this economic background, the lack of interest by the young in their native language has manifested itself so clearly in the poor percentage of Arabic content online. In 2002, a demographic study by the United Nations reported that the Arab population reached 300 million representing 4.5% of the world population. However, the Arab content on the Internet represents only 3 % of the global content. Al-Abtah (2012) reports that the majority of Arabic online content lies in social media and not websites. She quotes the president of the Arab Thought Organization (ATO) explaining "that the volume of electronic chat surpasses serious and useful information content". Earlier in 2013, the ATO launched the largest project to examine the Arabic digital content (www.arabdigitalcontent.com). The low statistic does not tell the whole picture and to illustrate its seriousness one has to take the demographic profile of the Arab world against its economic power which is far from being healthy even with the much richer eastern region that depends largely on a diversified oil industry. The lack of Arabic-language content on the Internet deprives the Egyptian and Arab student, reader and researcher of information in their own language (Negm 2009). The alternative is to seek such information from a foreign source which will eventually have negative consequences on the thinking process and the way decisions are made. When the language of thinking is foreign to the local culture, ideas will clash with local norms and customs which will inevitably lead to unrest. The situation in the post-Arab spring in Tunisia and Egypt shows how the thinking process is imbalanced: there is a wide chasm between the elite and the masses, the government and the people, and the religious parties and the liberal ones. Due to decades of government controlled-media in the Arab world, the government - supplied content online has been slow and intermittent. In most Arab countries (except the United Arab Emirates) eGovernment remains a concept that needs time in order to gain efficiency, reliability and credibility. In Egypt, a large number of cultural and public sector organisations have no presence online. Most of government sites remain under construction for incredibly long periods and once established online their content, more often than not, remains static for years. Abdelqader (2007) reports that "the Arab Information Technology Association did not update its website for more than two years". Some of the more active sites whether business or cultural lack the finesses of web design and updating. It would appear that web designers favour a frugal or austere design or have not updated their professional skills since completing their web design 101 course. Most of the Arabic content on the Internet is

provided by young individual contributors who lack the rudimentary skills of online publishing and their efforts are based on collecting data through 'translating' or 'cut and paste' techniques with little or no analysis or even critical presentation.

The much wider scope of audiovisual translation

The rising importance of the image in our life from advertising to Skype and the dominating role of the screen in almost everything we do from driving a car (GPS) to paying bills (eGovernment), purchasing books (Amazon.com), bidding for rare coins on Ebay, watching the latest 3D film at the cinema, delivering a PowerPoint presentation at conferences or simply reading email on a smart phone, all these activities require a screen (Deek 2010). There are four major screens that share our attention: television, cinema, computer and the smart phone. One of the prominent features of digital technology is the multimodal nature of discourse where the image is combined with audio, colour, text and video. The concept of multimedia dates back to the mid-nineties and it produced the concept of infotainment and edutainment which led to the production of educational programs on CDs. With the advent of the DVD technology in 1998, documentaries became popular in the new age of edutainment. These developments were not reflected in the Egyptian translation curricula which remained largely paper-based leaving digital knowledge and online research to the individual initiative and economic power of the student. It is little surprise that the term 'infotainment' has not won currency in Arabic and the concept remains foreign (Gaber 2012). One of the many reasons that explain the absence of the infotainment concept in Arabic is that audiovisual translation is understood to mean only subtitling and dubbing.

Audiovisual translation needs to be examined on a much broader level that examines not only the polysemiotic nature of the audiovisual text but brings in the multi-disciplinary impact of the overarching term 'audiovisual translation'. In other words, AVT must be seen as an umbrella term that brings translation, digital technology, computer skills, sociology, digital culture, theoretical and applied linguistics, online content industry and film literacy under one roof in order to bring about the desired effect (Shablool 2009). This fact needs to be firmly established through the examination of real life practices, incidents and events illustrating the much wider scope of audiovisual translation and the obvious need to make AVT a discipline *sui generis* taught at translation schools and debated at translation and digital culture conferences in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world.

Applied audiovisual translation studies

Over the past twenty years, the media in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world nonchalantly reported on incidents and events that had a direct AVT element. For

instance, the decision by Saudi authorities to postpone the opening of public cinemas in the kingdom, the decision to ban Pokémon games and the lack of any audiovisual solutions to the Danish cartoon attack on the highest symbol in Islam were not examined by audiovisual scholars. Such examination would study the sociolinguistic aspects of the decisions and suggest some practical options utilizing digital technology. Likewise, the nomination of Baghdad as the Arab City of Culture in 2013 remains an elitist and a ceremonial event that does not engage the ordinary citizen or the average foreigner interested in the local culture. Audiovisual researchers can and should debate the activity that began in 1996 with Cairo and has failed to produce a multilingual DVD or web site for the eighteen culture cities nominated so far (Gamal 2010d). The Egyptian Football Association's failed bid for the 2010 World Cup held in Zurich in May 2004 is a classic example that warrants close examination. As Egypt failed to get any votes for her bid, the scandal became known in Egypt as 'Zero el Mundial' (the Wold Cup zero) and was widely reported in the media. Essentially, the whole exercise was an audiovisual translation failure par excellence. The new style of audiovisual presentation was simply left to amateurs who had very limited understanding of the composite nature of multimodal texts. Curiously, the incident received very little attention by Egyptian AVT scholars. Similarly, the New Seven Wonders competitions held in 2007 and 2011 provided unique marketing opportunities for the Pyramids, the Petra Monuments and the Jeita Caves in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon respectively. However, the marketing opportunity was misunderstood, mismanaged and missed by the cultural authorities in the three countries who were unable to engage with the digital medium and its culture. The rise and demise of the Egyptian DVD subtitling industry is perhaps the best case-study to examine how audiovisual translation needs investment, training and the political will to usher in the age of audiovisual translation (Gamal 2010b). The current policy of leaving audiovisual translation to market forces, individual initiatives or treating it as a vogue or an added expense will cost Egyptian and Arab culture a great deal. There is a dire need to develop and train a generation of audiovisual translators who are capable of translating multimodal texts and are fluent in the new language of digital technology.

Digital Culture in Egypt

A study commissioned by the Supreme Council of Culture in 2005 warned against the dangerous state of Arabic-language sites online and their 'weak' content. It called for training in digital culture, widening the base of experts in web design and a state-sponsored initiative to encourage the enriching of the Arabic content online. This study coincided with the efforts by the Library of Alexandria which also embarked on adding more Egyptian and Arabic-language books online. Libya organized the first ever conference on Digital Culture in 2007 and called for organized efforts to meet the digital challenge. However, the Alexandria Conference on digital culture has established itself as the major gathering for online writers, digital culture experts,

policy makers, internet publishers and is attended by scholars from Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan (Gaber 2011). The Alexandria Conference, first held in October 2009 then December 2011, has enjoyed the patronage of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture and the support of the Arab eWriters Union (based in Amman) has one strategic feature: it holds a monthly meeting to discuss digital culture issues and developments. This arrangement is a commendable practice for the domestication of the concept and a guarantee that the Conference develops into a lot more than a theoretical forum. The first two conferences examined some very relevant issues and listened to presentations by scholars in the field who participated in drafting the recommendations for each conference. However, there is one aspect that is seriously lacking: audiovisual translation!

Participants listened to speakers highlighting some of the facts: that the prime force behind the creation and consumption of digital content is the young. However, the young's focus has been clearly more on entertainment than on information or education (Gamal 2010b). That their modus operandi is invariably 'translating' or 'cutting & pasting' form other sources and that they lack the basic skills of online presentation. In view of the above, and assuming that the ultimate goal is to enrich the Arabic content online, then the examination of audiovisual translation as a form of translating and presenting information on a screen in ways that are suitable for young adults must be added to the streams tackled by the Third Alexandria Conference on Digital Culture to be held in December 2013.


Conclusion

The issue of the Arabic digital content is not only relevant but is also urgent and is being tackled by several institutions in a number of Arab countries. Initiatives from large institutions such as the Library of Alexandria and the forthcoming King Abdelaziz Centre for World Culture (to be opened in 2015), the Arab Thought Organisation (based in Beirut) as well as the biannual conference in Alexandria on Digital Culture pave the way for the examination of ways and techniques to enrich the Arabic content online (Mohamed 2013). However, there is a need to examine the enabling skills (audiovisual translation, multimedia authoring, project management, etc.) that actually promote the tools (web design, online publishing, intellectual property, etc.) that contribute to the content.

The paper looks at the issue of online content from the production aspects and argues that the Arabic online content needs to be formulated into an industry with a strong theoretical framework, actual academic programs and a national organisation that possess a clear agenda and objectives. Also, there is no denying that some efforts in the Arab world are being duplicated with more than one organisation examining or doing the same issue (from research to encyclopaedia production to digitization of the same books). In the print-based age, the slow pace led to duplication as

communication, project management and research were undeveloped. However, in the digital age, the pace should be a lot faster with better research, communication and policy making skills. The youth need to see policymakers not only speak the language of today but are a step or two ahead in the fast-changing digital age. To this effect, 'AVT in the Arab world v.03', serves as a periodic report that examines the scope of audiovisual translation in the Arab world and points to the increasing applications the new specialisation has for a dynamic culture with a youthful population.

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