Towards an Audiovisual Translation Policy in the Arab World

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Abstract
The future of translation studies in Arabic is in screen and not print translation. As digital technology is fast changing the way we access information, do business and entertain ourselves, the screen has become the modus operandi through which much of infotainment is produced and consumed. However, the majority of Arabic translation research has been not only confined to print translation but surprisingly oblivious of the significance of the screen. The paper examines the emerging field of audiovisual translation, which is essentially done on a screen. Part of an ongoing research that examines the status of audiovisual translation in Arabic, the paper argues for an audiovisual translation policy that attempts to explore the impediments facing Arabic translation studies today. Discussions of policy, like theory and practice, is seen as an essential part in pushing translation studies into the digital age in a bid to answer some of the vexing questions and challenges facing Arabic language, culture, education and translation in the second decade of the 21st Century.

Key words: Arabic, Audiovisual translation, digital technology, multimedia, policy

Introduction

Audiovisual translation studies; the discipline that examines the creation, accessibility and consumption of translation on screen is now two decades old. It has its own "specialized conferences", publications and academic programs (Diaz-Cintas and Anderman 2009: 8). While it is true that such progress seems, for historical and technological reasons, to be centered in Europe, the rest of the world including the Arab world does not seem to be mindful of AVT. There is of course some research, that could be broadly classified as audiovisual translation research, in some Arab countries but it remains token research that is essentially an academic exercise in translation studies and not in audiovisual translation studies proper (Gamal 2014). Surprisingly, audiovisual translation studies, and despite the significant relevance to the Arab context, has not been endorsed by Arab academia (Gamal 2013). In the past two decades, there has not been any debate of audiovisual translation as a discipline that has direct relevance to the issues, problems and challenges facing the Arab world today. Most of the discussions of audiovisual translation in the Arab world amount only to dealing with subtitling, and only into Arabic, while neglecting the broader picture of the discipline, its theoretical background, its technical aspects and relevant applications. One of the significant reasons why AVT has not emerged in the Arab world is attributed to the lack of a generation of translation scholars who have had first-hand experience working as translators in the audiovisual field, understand the technical background of the industry, and have the tools to do research in and to debate the issues of this emerging field. This paper builds on previous research (Gamal 2007, 2008) that examines the state of the field in the Arab world and argues that for the new field of audiovisual translation to take root in Arabic it must enjoy state sponsorship due to its high relevance to the local context in almost all twenty-two Arab countries.

Historical background

It is exactly two decades since the Strasbourg conference in 1995 that gave rise to the academic field of audiovisual translation studies (Von Flotow 1995: 286). Held on the centenary of cinema it gave the impetus for the formal examination of translation on screen from subtitling and dubbing to audio description. The mid-nineties were also the years that witnessed the commercialization of the Internet, the increased accessibility of the personal commuter with Microsoft's Windows 95, the emergence of multimedia through digital technology and the arrival of the compact disc. Since then digital technology has been dominating our life whether working, playing, entertaining ourselves, studying or communicating with each other. Shortly before the Strasbourg Conference, the field of Translation Studies was confidently moving towards establishing a separate field of studies with its own popular theories that modernized the field of translation, and popularized the discipline as an academic pursuit particularly at the postgraduate level with more and more universities offering MAs and PhDs in Translation Studies. In the Arab world, however, the region was shocked by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991 and shaken by the audacity of CNN covering the first televised war (Arnett 1994). Technologically, the advent of the Internet, the proliferation of privately owned satellite channels, the introduction of mobile phones and the arrival of Gameboy marked the beginning of a dramatic change in Arab culture, education, economics, politics and even Arabic itself. The arrival of AL Jazeera in 1996 helped in reshaping the stagnant, government-controlled

media sector. The traditional problems in the Arabic educational system were further exacerbated as several Arab countries, rich and poor, adopted Thatcher-style privatization policies which essentially meant the selling off of the debt-ridden public sector to private (mostly foreign) investors. The introduction of Australian and American universities in the region extending from the GCC countries, to Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt was the hallmark of the privatization frenzy that gripped the Arab world.

Translation in the Arab world

Several scholars have examined the history of translation in the Arab world which has a long tradition (El-Shayyal 1951, Tager 2014). There is the early Arab period in which the new religion of Islam made Arabic its religious vehicle and cultural repository. There is also the golden Arab period that is closely associated with the medieval city of Baghdad, which witnessed a state-sponsored translation movement. In the middle ages, commonly known in the west as the Dark Ages, the Arab and Muslim worlds were abuzz with light and enlightenment as the Andalusian cities of Toledo, Cordoba and Seville were not only centers of knowledge, tolerance and culture but also centers of translation (Galal 1977). In those years, the world spoke Arabic, which was the language of science, philosophy, poetry and the arts. A millennium earlier, during the Roman Empire, the entire Mediterranean Sea was referred to as a Roman lake. Yet by the time the Catholic Kings were reclaiming Spain from the Muslim Andalusians most of the Mediterranean was speaking Arabic and collecting Arabic manuscripts as they included translations of ancient Greek and some Roman manuscripts that were disappearing or had been lost. The modern period of translation began with the rule of Muhammad Ali in Egypt and the establishment of the School of Al-Alsun (Languages) in 1835 (Hassan 1966). The old school was responsible for the training of translators required for the official modernisation program designed and implemented by the government.

The history of Al-Alsun is worth examining as it reflects the perception of translation as a catalyst for progress: from a state-sponsored policy in the service of a national modernization program to what appears as a cultural movement in modern times devoid of any vision or aims. In order to appreciate the seriousness of the translation situation in the Arab world one has to remember the work of Rifaa Al-Tahtawee , the first director of the School of Al-Alsun and the pioneering father of translation and education in Arabic. Under his tutelage translators were trained for the clear purpose of modernization and nation building. It is insightful to remember his instructions to translators to include a glossary at the end of each translated book. The translated books were not literary books but hard science, with the purpose of localizing western knowledge and domesticating the skills required for modernization. Several Arab countries today host centers for translation that embark on translating a number of books that are considered lacking in the Arabic library and therefore necessary for the modern Arab reader. Yet, the fact is the number of books translated falls far short of what is required for a nation of 300 million people. What makes the situation even more complicated is the fact that 30% of the population is illiterate. A closer look at the titles translated reflects a tendency to select books for the elite and not for the masses or the youth. The current translation effort is clearly not for modernization, nation-building or the masses but is seen as a cultural policy that reflects the views of the government of the day or simply the wishes of the director in charge.

Pedagogically speaking, most Arab universities teach in English or French. All technical and scientific disciplines are taught in English. In addition to the foreign universities, there are the language schools that teach all subjects in the foreign language to students who went to foreign kindergartens learning their ABC before mastering their Arabic alphabet. This clearly points to a rift between those who received better education at foreign schools and universities and those who attended the over-crowded, run-down and poorly-managed public universities. There is another disturbing fact concerning the educated class whether they studied at Arabic language universities or foreign language universities that is the poor reading level among young Arabs. A feature article published in July 1995 attempted to investigate the reasons behind young people's aversion to reading in Egypt in the age of satellite television (Nasr, Zaafan and Zaitun 1995: 17). Two decades later, the situation is not any better. As Arabic is not being used as the language of science, research or critical thinking there is a direct impact on the language of the media which also reflects the social norms and trends of favoring new, trendy and foreign words, idioms, images and even syntactic structures (Amin 1998:100). It is easy to see how the language of the media is foreignizing the use of Arabic and is actually undermining the position of the national language. This phenomenon is taking place across the entire 22-state Arab world from the Gulf countries where foreign workers and residents are to be found at every level, to North Africa where French still dominates the educational system and the language of tertiary instruction (Mathews 2014).

Translation in the Arab world has been traditionally centered in Cairo, Beirut and Baghdad. However, over the past twenty years, and due to political and economic reasons, the balance shifted to the Gulf States and particularly to Abu Dhabi where a vibrant translation activity is attempting to replenish the Arabic language with translated books at the rate of one translated book a day. Yet, the question remains: how to instill the habit of reading in young people who are growing up surrounded by screens, visual culture and digital toys and tools?

Translation studies in the Arab world exist, and the translation programs are popular but for alternative reasons. Most students study translation as a means of learning the language and culture better and not necessarily to become translators and interpreters. The graduates of Al-Alsun in Cairo are snapped up by call centers offering customer service for international companies. Current research in translation studies at most Arab universities, seem to have the academic purpose of getting a tenured academic position and lacks the dimension of applied translation. While this is a legitimate purpose for pursuing a PhD, most doctoral research in translation studies (and particularly in audiovisual translation) reflects a western agenda: not just the research methodology but also the theoretical framework, objectives and conclusions. Consequently the doctoral research has no relevant applications to the context in Arab society. Furthermore, translation conferences in Arab cities reflect a western theoretical framework from the title of the conference to the themes and sub themes discussed. Again, the current translation movement seems to be separated from the local context. Academic conferences have become ceremonial in nature based on personal contacts and less on individual output with quality, relevance and a clear research objective. One of the best examples to illustrate this is the field of audiovisual translation, which is widely seen in Arab academia as a trendy genre of translation. Some universities add audiovisual translation in their conference call for

papers with no background, local expertise or even knowledge of the field except to imply that their translation program is modern.

Audiovisual Translation in the Arab world

The lack of academic interest in audiovisual translation in the Arab world is perplexing. On the one hand, academia still views audiovisual translation as a trendy specialization that is closely associated with youth, digital technology and subtitling. On the other hand, it is something that most of faculty did not grow up with and consequently regard the specialization as a costly investment that is unrelated to context and therefore not a priority.

The few studies in audiovisual translation that are conducted by native speakers of Arabic are all related to subtitling and dubbing and almost all are focused on the direction English-Arabic. This is not *audiovisual translation* but subtitling (or dubbing) research. The American University in Cairo which began offering training in subtitling attempted to keep pace with the developments in the field and changed the name of its course from subtitling to screen translation to audiovisual translation with little or no change in the core subjects and skills taught. What is remarkable is that the research at the doctoral level (so far all in western universities) has the western literature as its background: the references, the theoretical framework, the ideas, examples, research method and the result is that it lacks any relevance to the local Arab context. Written in English, and based on western theory and references, such effort continues the market-driven trend that considers Arabic a language not fit for scientific research. This does not only undermine the national language, but also keeps audiovisual translation as a *western science*, a foreign concept ultimately delaying its localization.

The digital revolution with its numerous manifestations from satellite channels to the Internet, digital toys and games, cameras and portable technology came to the Arab world at a time when there was no technical or economic background to receive the new age of telecommunication. The last decade of the Twentieth Century ushered in the new age of globalization that was forced on many countries and cultures with little any Arab government could do. In the digital age, it is very difficult to close borders when the skies are wide open. Yet, the argument of this paper is that Arab governments can and should examine current trends and draw maps, plans and policies in a bid not to control but to manage what is happening. When privatisation was adopted there were little studies on the effect such 'foreign' models could have and do to the local culture. Likewise, when globalizing measures were allowed in, first through big shopping malls and later through foreign investments, banks, companies and universities; the average person in the street became estranged in their own culture unable to fathom the purpose of acquisitions and takeovers by foreign global companies of local businesses. Although globalization brought in better goods, it also devastated local economies that were not ready, or at least, prepared for the sweeping changes.

Opportunities and challenges of the digital age

There is no doubt that the digital Revolution of the 1990s has brought about unimaginable opportunities and creative solutions to, inter alia, how we do business,

educate and entertain ourselves, design and deliver national policies and market our cultural services abroad. Yet, the digital age has also brought about challenges and problems that force communities that imported or are invaded by such digital products, to adopt values that run contrary to their cultural vein. To illustrate this situation further I shall take the Arab world as an example. The Arab world has a population of 300 million of whom about half are classified as youth (under the age of 25). Illiteracy is estimated to be 30% and unemployment at about 13%. The commercialization of the Internet, in the mid-nineties, did not speed up communication, business, education or production not only because the Internet penetration is low (estimated 36% of the population) but more importantly because of the lack of the infrastructure that allows for fast internet connection. When Facebook arrived, about a decade later, there had been no generation used to the Internet, its protocols, ethics and Netiquettes. The spread of Facebook in the Arab world, while reflecting a desire to be modern it also reveals a deeper desire to be different, expressive and free. However, the Internet in the Arab world, broadly speaking, has not enhanced the cultural values but posed greater threats to one of the most revered components of Arab culture: Arabic.

Youths in the Arab world introduced a Romanized alphabet for their Arabic language and began using it in emails and SMS messages on their smart mobiles. While this was mainly due to the fact that early mobiles did not support right-to-left languages such as Arabic, the new vogue continued even after an Arabic script became available on smart phones, email programs and search engines. In addition, mature authors of Arabic, in a bid to appeal to the youth started using the vernacular in their writings not only in blogs online but also in printed newspapers and leading publications. Furthermore, there has been a widespread trend of using American words in everyday parlance at an increasing rate that can readily be interpreted in psycholinguistic terms as 'integrative motivation'. Yet, the majority (if not all of the borrowed words) have their equivalents readily available in both varieties of standard and vernacular Arabic. Thus any claim of integrative motivation, beyond the trendy lexical borrowing of Americanisms, becomes untenable. There is another aspect to Arabic in the digital age that is directly linked to how the media, particularly the print media, affected Arabic. Traditionally, journalism is viewed as one of the sources, if not forces, of change and modernization, of the national language. Thus, journalistic style is credited with enriching the local language and its usage. However, from a translation point of view, 'literal translation' appears to be a predominant strategy favored by the print media. Borrowed lexical items abound in the text and this seems to be infiltrating the Arabic phraseology not just at the lexical level but also at the semantic and even the syntactic level as well. While literal translation, is acceptable (if warranted) it appears to be the easiest strategy selected by the writer who obviously lacks training in translating from foreign (mostly English) sources as well as training in writing in clear, and good, Arabic.

The proliferation of satellite TV channels operating round the clock created a demand for media specialists that was not available and continues to be unavailable. The need to fill the broadcasting hours led to a demand for subtitled (and later dubbed foreign programs) and also the translation and adaptation of foreign programs such as talk shows, Arabs got Talent, Who wants to be a millionaire, and the like. In the digital age, 'talk shows', mixed news with politics, and the inexperienced broadcasters committed gross professional errors whether interviewing ambassadors or discussing

the policies of other Arab countries that they had to be taken off the air. Public speaking, like composition, film literacy and art appreciation are not among the subjects taught at schools and in the media age they have become sorely lacking. There are several other examples of how the digital age has posed challenges to communities that were not ready for it. Some of these challenges are: the digital divide between the information rich and the information poor in the same country, digital ethics, Arabic content online, availability for training, cost of digital tools and toys. Against this background, there seems to be a need for a government body to examine the impact digital technology has on the local culture. Such body would also study, research and advise on how best to use the opportunities made available by the new technology and how best to meet the challenges posed by it.

Need for a policy

Translation in the Arab world did not make the transfer from the verbo-visual (print) world to the audio-visual (digital) reality smoothly. Apart from the more affluent Gulf States, the majority of the Arab world still relies on and thinks in terms of print technology. The past two decades show, rather clearly, how digital technology has caught the Arab world by surprise. To contextualize the effect digital technology has had on Arab society, the media scene provides a relevant example. The proliferation of satellite channels, the emergence of blogs, personal web sites and the interactivity some official news media outlets offer have turned consumers into Netizens and created citizen journalism. This effect can be seen in better light when examining western cultural settings such as Australia; however, the picture is darker in other societies such as Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, the cradle of the Arab Spring. In countries with no traditions of free media, good reading levels and a healthy book publication market and with high illiteracy, stagnant economy, poor educational system, low scientific knowledge, and conservative values; the localization of digital technology (and its cultural changes) needs to be fully and *officially* examined. The decision not to examine the changes digital technology has on society runs the risk of not only being controlled by the consequences but also falling victim to its influences. The finest example is the Egyptian government's failure to anticipate the role social media played in bringing down the entire regime that was essentially built on a central government and media censorship. The Egyptian revolution was not hatched underground but rather masterminded online. By the time Egyptian authorities woke up to the fact that social media has become a force galvanizing popular support, it attempted undermining the revolution by switching off the Internet and the mobile phone network. It was too late for such desperate measures for the online revolutionaries were already amassed in Tahrir Square.

Many scholars, researchers and authors in the Arab world have been calling for the need to examine the current digital state of affairs in Arab societies (Kirat 2001, Al-Rifaai 2011, Al-Jaber & Alareshi 2014). Digital technology does not affect the media sector alone but the translation scene that has been traditionally of significant importance to the modern Arab nation.

There is a dire need for an audiovisual translation policy in the Arab world today. Audiovisual translation as the term suggests is translation created and accessed through audio and visual means, in other words, via screens. With the proliferation of screens (Gambier 2003) information could be translated via numerous applications to

reach consumers via cinema, television, the Internet and mobile devices, all of which are accessed through screens. Given that translation is vital for the Arab world in its plans for modernization and given its youthful population, digital translation becomes an important issue of national security level. The last statement is not an exaggeration. Over the past two hundred years, print translation, has been traditionally the only viable and permanent mode of enlightenment and modernization in the Arab world. Other modes existed, of course, such as the radio, cinema, television, theatre and formal education yet the book and the printed word were the most popular and most accessible. Digital technology, on the other hand, has given a new meaning to affordability, accessibility and durability of information and programs designed for mass enlightenment and education. To illustrate this point further, one has to look at the benefits of a DVD on Diabetes; a problem that affects a significant sector of the society everywhere in the Arab world. A single professionally designed DVD that addresses the majority who come from a low socio-economic background would be more efficient, cheaper and durable than thousands of wasted print-based advertisements and literature aimed at people who are averse to reading or are simply illiterate. A well-designed and well-maintained web site is equally affordable, accessible and durable and is valid and relevant to a population of over 300 million users from Marrakesh to Muscat. However, the field needs specialists who understand how to create translation while employing multimedia: using text with video, images, color and sound. In this respect audiovisual translation, unlike print translation, is more interactive designed to make information more accessible for children, the young, the educated and also for the un-educated and the illiterate through the use of multimedia (Gamal 2014).

The policy does not have to be set in stone with strict guidelines and unrealistic objectives. A policy, by its very nature, provides a framework of how to carry out an objective. Perhaps one of the primary objectives is to localize digital technology and to make it serve national needs. It must be remembered that digital technology and its tools and toys arrived in the age of globalization that markets international products and focuses on higher levels of consumption. Once again, globalization, as a western concept, works well in western societies that can afford high levels of consumption from buying better quality products to obtaining the latest version of consumer goods. Digital technology in non-western societies, however, needs to be examined differently and employed to achieve different objectives. These objectives must be directly related to nation building: better management, responsible media, and good governance. Examination of the media situation in the Arab world today, from official media to social media, reveals an undeveloped understanding of the potential digital technology has.

The media scene in most Arab countries is fragmented and unregulated. The attempt by Egypt and Saudi Arabia to propose a 'Framework for Regulating the Satellite Broadcasting Service' that was concluded in February 2008 appears now as outmoded measure given the social upheavals of 2011. The fact that several Arab countries, such as Jordan and Egypt, have abolished their "Ministry of Information" is a significant measure that requires further examination. It is significant because in the absence of reliable public opinion studies and mechanisms the 'information' field should not be left vacant with no government involvement. This is not to be understood as a call for direct government intervention in the traditional pre-satellite-age sense, but rather an informed and enlightened type of involvement. This is expected, if not required, of

governments allowing such (foreign) technology into the country: after all many governments, did not allow GPS technology until they have established controls to ensure national security is not compromised. The same applies for the mobile phone networks, the Internet and foreign media control. Even in western countries there are numerous government controls in place to protect their citizens varying from protecting children surfing the Net to fraud, money laundering, Internet crime and transnational organized crime. The difference here lies in the much higher level of literacy, education, social political awareness and general knowledge.

Conclusion

The field of audiovisual translation is still in its infancy in the Arab world. The limited opportunities available to localize the concept are confined to learning the basic skills and norms of the field. The few academic studies completed in the field do not examine policy issues. There is no need to wait until the localization of the new concept has been completed and taken root before professional or academic policy studies are attempted. As explained in the Egyptian Revolution example, it will be too late to have any relevant or useful impact. The paper argues that the localization of audiovisual translation in the Arab world needs an official policy. Leaving digital technology, in traditional societies, to market forces is a risky policy. This is simply because such societies are consumers of foreign technology and inventions and are, mostly, not active contributors to its design and development. The political, economic, social and cultural repercussions could be devastating as seen in the post-Arab-Spring context of Arabic. The paper calls for a continuous and rigorous examination of and debate on the localization of audiovisual translation so that the concept becomes localized, used in Arabic and employed to serve local needs enhancing local values and cultures and enriching life experience.

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