

## **Bilingualism, Subtitling and Fast Reading**

**Prof. Aboudi J. Hassan**

Full Professor of Communication and Translation  
College of Information, Mass Communication and Humanities  
Ajman University

### **Abstract**

*This work shows the problems faced by Arab bilingual viewers who are interested in foreign narrative visuals and the need to help them achieve their maximal goals when watching. Usually they get lost in the middle of the work because of their inability to match between the spoken language of the visual which they perfected or near perfected and the tempting and distracting Arabic subtitles. This work therefore aims to explore the available means to help them. It suggests a two-tier solution: be a faster reader and seek outside help. This is coupled with a call for the media people concerned to improve the quality of subtitle translation. Keywords: Clarity-condensed subtitling, disruptive, narrative visuals, subtitles, proficiency, bilingualism, coding, decoding and distracting*

### **Part One**

#### **1- Introduction and Problem Description**

##### **1.1- Introduction**

Many researchers and academicians in the media field like, Baran (2002) , believe that communication is a process of a number of relative components: sender, channel, message, recipient, effect, jamming and feedback. Furthermore, taking into consideration the human senses, communication is composed of a number of forms: audio, visual, audio-visual and written. Besides, being aware or unaware, man employs his/her linguistic skills to decipher the numerous daily messages directly or with the help of his fellow men. In this work, focus will be on the audio-visual form of communication, man's linguistic skills and subtitle translation.

Initially media people depend on subtitle translators to do the job in order to convey the message in its entirety rightly believing that the community majority were not bilinguals or multilinguals. Later, however, the mushrooming of foreign languages institutes to teach foreign languages other than the native tongue have provided people with extra tools ( linguistic skills)parallel to subtitling in the native language.

Here, bilinguals in the community are supposed, on some occasions in life, to manage comprehensibly through the two required semi parallel skills (listening and reading) to decipher the received message from the audio-visual media. Many are the times when a bilingual is failed to follow the visual narrative and needs external help. This need has been felt by the media people, and many research works have been made in this regard so far to help solve it. Subtitling started with the emergence of the visual media when the show business celebrity Charlie Chaplin and others made silent movies at the onset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Later it has been employed in the audio-visual media when western movies dealers made inroads in the media markets of the third world countries. Still subtitling is employed by the cutting-edged visual media when used with great success by Benny Hill and Ronnie Atkins in Great Britain. This has coincided with the spread of bilingualism and multilingualism.

##### **1.2 The Problem Description**

This paper is an attempt to show the problems faced by proficient bilinguals when watching foreign movies subtitled to their own native languages aiming to propose means to counter these problems. Here one may argue that if the viewer is proficient in the second language, why he/she should read the native language subtitles. By instinct or curiously, many are the times when the bilingual viewers find themselves reading these subtitles at the expense of listening.

It is undeniably true those bilingual Arab viewers who are interested in watching foreign movies favor to watch English narratives with Arabic subtitles by reading subtitles and make connection with the spoken language or the other way round. Mostly, they get lost between the subtitles and the spoken language, missing important scenes and do not totally enjoy the work. That is mainly because they are not fast or faster readers in such a way that their ability to decipher the written message is of no match to that of the spoken one or the other way round. The main problem, therefore, includes consequent hazy/vague idea about the visual narrative happenings, inability to relate/connect the events and visual situations of the narrative and lack of recognition of the faces and scenes in the movie in part when the main focus of the viewer is on the subtitles. Besides, the viewer loses sight of the main word or the idea of the subtitle as result of probable failure to match the speedy narrative scenes, with the sequences of the subtitles.

To solve this problem, it is required firstly, to equip the bilingual viewers with skills enabling them to faster read the subtitles and near simultaneously watch the sequences of the narrative. Secondly, to suggest for the subtitles translators better means to convert the foreign spoken language into clarity-condensed subtitles.

In nutshell, this work assumes that when watching foreign movies, bilingual Arab viewers' command on their Arabic reading skill is not as effective as their command on the listening skill in the foreign language. Most probably this causes disruption in communication and needs a 2-tier solution: upgrading the viewers' reading and other skills and improving the subtitling language and techniques.

The aim of this work is partially to enable bilingual viewers of media visuals particularly subtitled foreign movies of realizing their ends of their watching choices. Moreover, it aims partially to turn the attention of translators to the need of better communication means to help viewers achieve enjoyment. That is either through proposing means of achieving fair balance between fast reading of their subtitled native language and listening to the spoken foreign language or through managing the translation of the subtitles trimming the translation to achieve condensed clarity. Besides, the work's concluding remarks and recommendations; it is composed of three main parts: Part one is allocated for the introduction and the problem description. Part two contains a description of clarity-intensive translation strategies backed by examples. Part three, on the other hand, is allocated for a description of skill-based strategies for faster reading to help viewers help themselves.

## Part Two

### 2.1- Subtitling and Translation Strategies

From this work standpoint, people in the subtitling industry, professional media translators and media translation graduates in order to maximize their viewership need to bear in mind a number of translation strategies in the field of subtitling. In this part of the work, some translation strategies for subtitling will be discussed as follows:

#### 2.1.1- Condense to ease communication

#### 2.1.2- Maintain same register

#### 2.1.3- Stay cohesive and coherent

#### 2.1.1- Condense to ease communication

Frequently the subtitles of the movie are elongated and sometimes badly situated at the bottom of the clips/shot giving way for confusion on the part of bilingual viewers whose variety of English may be quite different from that of the movie. In this case viewer's variety of English is of no much help. Furthermore, the subtitle of each clip/shot is overloaded with redundancies. As a Semitic language, Arabic can do the linguistic trimming in subtitling through:

- i- lexical brevity (Al ijaz): this can be done through
  - 1- amalgamating a complete sentence in just an Arabic verb with only implicit subject Beeston (1970) like: (He went on a summer holiday=اصطاف),
  - 2- amalgamating a complete sentence in a verb with implicit subject plus an annexed pronoun as an object like (He exchanged letters with her=(كاتبها)
- ii- avoidance of semantic repetition: this can be done through dropping out common sense expressions like the following underlined expression
  - (On Friday =في يوم الجمعة)
  - (In March =في شهر مارس)
  - (In 2015 =2015 سنة)

- Us President Barak Obama= (الوئيس الامريكي باراك أوباما)
- iii-Using figures instead of numbers like Fourteen men=14men 14= اربعة عشر رجلا
- iv-Using acronyms or initials like OPEC=أوبك

### 2.1.3- Maintain the Same Register

Bilingual viewers need not to be confused by any change in the register between the spoken and written language stretches. Any change would intrigue the viewer and made him/her lose connection. Besides it will slow down the cognitive process and divert the attention.

Socio-linguistically speaking, living languages have a number of slightly modified varieties as is the case in English which has the Australian English, South African English.....etc. Equally and accordingly unidirectional professional subtitle translators vary according to the second foreign language they learnt and the variety of the target language they acquired. These mismatches most of the times cause blockages (mishaps) in communication. Not only, that some languages like Arabic (Altoma1969) even have diglossia (The use of two markedly different varieties of a language in different social situations, such as a formal variety at work and an informal variety at home).

Known for their proficiency in English particularly fluency in spoken English, bilingual Arabs command on their native language communication skills are mostly not as effective as those of English. This imbalance in command made their listening skills in the foreign language much better than their reading skills in their own native language. This is an example of a dialogue taking place on one occasion between two colleagues (social workers) in a movie called (case 39). The spoken sentence is:

How do I know?

This informal spoken sentence reads in the Arabic subtitle of the movie scene:

أنى لي معرفة ذلك؟

Which is highly formal in Arabic? That is because the Arabic particle (أنى) is more highly formal question particle than the standard one (كيف). This most probably causes a short while blockage in communication for the poorly equipped Arab bilinguals which delay the viewer to match the next sequence.

The same thing applies on these informal English spoken sentences like:

What is the problem?

ما الخطب؟

Do you have five minutes?

هل انت متفرغة؟

She is doing great.

تبلي بلاءا حسنا

Good night

عمت مساء

### 2.1.3- Stay cohesive and coherent

It is true that lack of cohesion in the subtitling is as disruptive as the tone of the different language stretches. The incohesiveness in the written stretch most often blocks the flow of the message and delay the capability of the viewers of matching between spoken and written language stretches.

Cohesiveness in this regard means clarity and ease of comprehensibility in a certain context but even so sometimes it missed the intended meaning as it will be exemplified later. Cohesion in languages is manifested by explicit and implicit brevity, ease of backward, forward and inward reference, lexical substitution, ellipsis and appropriate connectivity (M.A.K Halliday 1976). For consideration of space and time, these are some examples:

In this scene a man introduces an old classmate to his wife:

This is Matt my old friend.

The Arabic subtitle reads:

مات صديقي القديم

Retranslation: My old friend died.

For an Arab viewer, the expression (مات) means the past tense of the verb (dies) not a common noun as the word means in English. It is a cohesive sentence composed of a verb and a modified subject and seen as a meaningful stretch of language for an Arab bilingual viewer but definitely that is not the intended meaning of the message conveyed by the stretch.

This subtitle definitely intrigues the viewer and his/her ability to match the subtitle and the spoken language unless some type of modification is introduced. It is a cohesive sentence but not a coherent one because coherence is a matter of meaning in context. To be more specific, this incoherence is caused by a change in the word class in both sentences. The English proper noun in the spoken English sentence has become in the Arabic translation a past tense verb. Subtitle translator need to be more or fully aware of different systems of these languages like word-order. Needless to say here the English sentence word-order is

(S)ubject-(V)erb-(O)bject = SVO

While Arabic has the following word-order:

(V)erb)-(S)ubject-(O)bject = VSO

This implies that subtitle translators have to avoid literal translation which is distracting for the viewer as the case in this scene from the movie "Sliver lining playback". In the scene a man after finishing a dance competition successfully with his new girlfriend meets his divorced wife and she told him:

"You have lost weight."

لقد خسرت وزنا

Here, the translator chooses for considerations of speed and ease of reference the Arabic basic meaning equivalent of the English verb (Lose) (خسر). In this context of dance competition the lexical choice is a bit confusing, meaning interruptive and blocking the message flow.

So is the case in the following subtitle taken from the British dance drama (Billy Elliot) when the boy Billy asked his instructor when she gave him a ride

Can I play a tape?

هل يمكن ان العب شريطا؟

The main verb (play) is translated literally (العب)

In the following part, the focus in general will be on the reading skill of the Arab bilingual viewer and the efforts to enhance it.

## Part Three

### 3.1- FAST READING

In this part, this work's interest is partially on upgrading the Arab bilingual reading skill in a way that he/she can manage to match near simultaneously with the spoken language of the visual media to achieve his/her goal. Here also the viewer will be provided with tips how to improve the reading skill and to utilize some possible means other than the reading skill like the searching machines on the Internet and electronic dictionaries on mobile phones.

#### 3.1.1- Reading Skills strategies

Conventionally there are two most important strategies in fast reading: scanning and skimming. According to Chamber dictionary, to scan means "to look or glance over something quickly". If a 5- line paragraph is composed of four sentences, the reader can scan this passage as whole and select four or more keywords and composes a string of helpful words and then move to the following passage.

As for skimming, according to Cambridge dictionary to skim is "to read or consider something quickly in order to understand the main points without studying it in detail". In this way the reader superficially reads the page or the passage trimming all the details. Reading subtitles needs faster reading strategies for the following reasons:

- Though movie subtitles are characterized by shortness, they differ from printed written paragraphs or sentences in that they disappeared momentarily from the bottom of the screen
- The viewer is not required to read in order to understand only but has also to match his cognitive input with the spoken foreign language or vice versa.
- Narrative components, moreover, are sequential and may be consequential unlike other genres. So matching picture with subtitle or vice versa is a must in narrative visual. And this further burdens this type of readers- the bilingual viewers.

To improve the reading skills of this category of movie viewers, a lot of self-dependent work is needed. A viewer is advised to:

- 1- Teach oneself means of fast reading: the viewer here is required to train himself/herself to:

- Spot mentally and envision the keyword in the spoken language stretch and quickly match with its Arabic equivalent in the subtitle,
  - Trim quickly the time consuming and unneeded words and phrases from the subtitle,
  - Read the basics of the stretch either forward, backward or go to the middle of the subtitle,
  - Manage your watching time and balance your attention; don't spend more time on reading the subtitles at the expense of the flow of visual events or vice versa.
- 2- Listen carefully to the spoken language and mentally summarize and reduced it into very few words and then do the matching provided that the temporal gap between the mental summary and the matching with subtitle is just fraction of the second. It should not affect the cognitive process. Or this process of summarize-and-match could be reversed. Summarize the subtitle mentally and compare it with the keyword in the spoken stretch.

### **3.1.2- External help**

Besides, to enhance the comprehension/cognitive process when all other means above prove to be less effective, the viewer is advised to seek help from:

- On-line search machines like Google, Yahoo and others: before watching the media work or during the ad-for-commercial breaks, the viewer is advised also to have some idea about the audio-visual narrative by and through the Internet. This may take minutes but really telling and enables the viewer to cope with decoding the information simultaneously, if this search is done before or during the show time. When done after, sometimes it clarifies some ambiguous points in the work.
- The free information given by the TV broadcasting station before showing the visual narrative. Though this is only two or three spoken sentences, they are really helpful in guiding the viewer throughout the movie. These announcements usually are given shortly before showing the movie or a day ahead with a written line-up. These summaries also are available in the print media.

Some satellite TV stations before showing a movie like the "Beautiful Mind" for example, the announcer of the station used to inform the viewers as follows: Next is a genius university professor (Russell Crowe) playing the role of Dr. John Nash who suffered from mental disorders and later in his life wins a Nobel Prize in economics with the help of his wife Alicia played by (Jennifer Connelly). OR the announcer words could be put like this: next Russell Crowe playing Professor John Nash, the Nobel laureate for economics who suffered from mental disorder throughout his career and Jennifer Connelly as his wife Alicia in Beautiful Mind. Please stay tuned.

- Selective clips(Trailers): Other satellite TV stations during breaks show beforehand selective and telling clips with commentaries about the movies to be shown which are really helpful for the viewers. To exemplify this, before showing the movie "Troy" the UAE satellite TV channel "Dubai One" during one a 2- minute break showed its viewers; the following most important three clips of the movie: the abducting of Helen, the Achilles heel and the gift horse. Sometimes it showed some other interesting clips and fixing the timing and date of the show.
- Written and/or read movie openers: some visual narratives are based on true stories and the movie people to get the story through; they open the work with a brief account of the events. Sometimes the opener may last for few seconds, the viewer is advised to use mobile phone cameras to take a photo for the writing and read it while the unneeded parts of the introduction which carry lists of names are shown.
- Filmed introduction: some works start with a 2- minute filmed introduction presenting the gist of the work which is really important in guiding the viewers, before the work starts.
- In- between introductory relative TV shows: During long breaks, and in order to keep punctual with the TV line-up, some satellite TV channels try to familiarize its viewers with the world of show business by introducing shows presenting news and interviews. These are related to current affairs in show business like the Oscar and the BFTA candidates and winners. This is helpful and viewers are advised to watch and pick themes from the new entries and familiarize themselves with the actors and actress faces and names.

To help all viewers including the bilingual category, the media people in the business of subtitling are advised to situate the subtitles as usual in the bottom of the scene on a black bar in order to make it recognizable. Sometimes, the viewers find some difficulty in recognize the subtitles because of the white color in the scene.

Rarely, a bilingual viewer of foreign movies tries to avoid subtitles in his/her own language. If not frequently, occasionally the viewer is attracted to the subtitle translation and relegating the task of listening to the second place in importance and here, lies the problem because subtitle translation is tempting. Most probably, these bilinguals prefer that the movie is not subtitled but dubbed by any of the languages he/she mastered because that will linguistically be disburden/ make it less difficult for him/her to understand the movie and consequently enjoy it.

On a related front, in some TV satellite stations especially in Eastern Europe, there have been a number of American media visual works particularly American series, are dubbed into the native languages by one collateral speaker or more while the foreign language particularly English is still hearable by the viewers. In this type of dubbing, the viewer's become confused and there is an urgent need to unblock communication. In communication terms, it could be much better for foreign viewers whose native or second language is English to follow.

Still worse when a media narrative visual is in a third language like French and is subtitled into the two languages of the bilingual viewers. A faster reading skill only is needed here to read two different subtitles, while watching.

At this point, one may conclude that when a message is encoded in the two languages of the bilingual viewers, it causes some confusion on decoding and blocks the communication. This can be easily noticed in subtitled and some dubbed visual media works. In subtitled works, the decoding is usually done through the listening and/or reading skills of the bilingual viewers while in dubbing through their listening skills only.

In the short term, to remove the confusion and to unblock communication, three main urgent things are required from the bilingual viewers:

- Faster linguistic skills e.g. reading and listening skills,
- Curtailing one of the dual linguistic skills, and
- Laps-free concentration switching

### **Concluding remarks**

With his amount of description and analysis, one may reach the following

- 1- A considerable number of proficient Arab bilingual viewers who watch TV movies with subtitles are unable to achieve full understanding and enjoyment of their pick to watch,
- 2- This can be attributed to the distraction caused by the availability of two similar helping aids: spoken foreign language and subtitles and consequently the viewer inability to manage time,
- 3- Viewers lack in familiarity with their native language which the language of the subtitles or sometimes could be the other way round because of the languages varieties,
- 4- This category of viewers can overcome this problem by one or more of the following
  - Improving their fast reading skills
  - Seeking outside help like cutting edge technology
  - More familiarity with the native language
- 5- Further this problem can be partially overcome by the attempts of the media outlets which are interested in increasing its viewership to hire different and various subtitle translators and show media works in different linguistic varieties.
- 6- The bilingual viewer of foreign movies is caught in the crossfire between subtitling and dubbing

### **Recommendations**

In the longer term, to counter this problem and to make those viewers satisfactorily enjoy these media works, they have been required by this work to follow one or more of the following:

- 1- Refer to the Internet and have an idea about the work in general, before or after embarking on watching,
- 2- Train to be a fast reader,
- 3- Train oneself to be amateur interpreter/acquire some skills in translation like speed,
- 4- Read an inbuilt bilingual opener summarizing the whole work,
- 5- Write to the media outlet to urge them to employ condensed clearer subtitling or,
- 6- Settle on a unilateral means of deciphering the message of the visual subtitled narrative.

Equally, subtitle translators are also required:

- to employ means to render the spoken foreign language concisely and clearly,
- to avoid as far as possible literal translation,
- to watch the register of the spoken foreign language stretches,
- to approximate culture-specific linguistic stretches.

Finally people in the audio-visual media are required:

- More English subtitled movies varieties,
- More Arabic translators varieties,
- Better subtitle translation,
- Better and more recognizable subtitles location.

### **Cited Works in English**

Baran, Stanely J. Introduction to Mass Communication and culture (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Boston: Mcgraw hill 2002

Beeston, A.F.L, The Arabic Language Today Hutchinson University Library London 1970

Halliday, M.A.K and & Ruqaiya HASAN. Cohesion in English Longman(1<sup>st</sup> edition ) 1976

Halliday, M.A.K linguistic studies of text and discourse 2002

Salih J, Altoma. The problem of diglossia in Arabic Harvard University Press 1969

### **On line links**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy\\_Elliot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy_Elliot)

[https://dictionary.search.yahoo.com/search;\\_ylt=A0LEVvnRafFUggMA6OwPxQt.?p=diglossia&.sep=&fr=yhs-avg-fh\\_lsonswrow](https://dictionary.search.yahoo.com/search;_ylt=A0LEVvnRafFUggMA6OwPxQt.?p=diglossia&.sep=&fr=yhs-avg-fh_lsonswrow)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Case\\_39](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Case_39)

<http://www.chambers.co.uk/#>

<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/skim>