

## **Dialects on Screen: Translating Jordanian Dialect into English The Case of *Captain Abu Raed* Film**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the translation of dialects on-screen within the Jordanian context. Such place of translation is arguably one of the most challenging areas of translation, yet interesting due to its variety. Arab peoples use their dialects to express their opinions on several platforms, including TV media. Audiovisual translation research is growing in investigating subtitling Arabic dialects and languages on screen. Scholars propose a dialect-to-dialect approach or a dialect-to-standard approach. However, in this paper the focus is more on the strategies which inevitably fall within those approaches. The study uses a Jordanian film known as *Captain Abu Raed* as a source of highlighting and demonstrating translation of dialects within an Arabic context. The initial findings show that some dialectal expressions are taken off or sacrificed by replacing them with neutralized standard language.

**Keywords:** Arabic, dialects, film, screen translation, subtitling

**Cites as:** Ethelb, H. (2019). Dialects on Screen: Translating Jordanian Dialect into English The Case of *Captain Abu Raed* Film. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies*3 (4) 36-45. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol3no4>.

## Introduction

Foreign films are a real representation of cultures. The settings, the language, the plot, and the script are authentic manifestations of the source culture. In fact, it can be argued that there can be no place of letting a culture shine through more than in movies and TV series. This is because they discuss societal events and show how people in a society interact with one another. From linguistic and translation points of view, this makes subtitling a challenge due to the fact that the language in films is, in many cases, dialectal. Translators need to produce subtitles that are as fluent and close as possible to the source texts.

Audiovisual translation (AVT) is an emerging field in translation studies. O'Connell (2007) argues that *screen translation* is the preferred term in this field and this can be defined as "subtitling and lip-synch dubbing of all audiovisual materials" (p. 123), occurring on a screen such as TV programmes, films, plays, operas, DVDs, etc. Many scholars, such as Remael (2004); Díaz-Cintas (2004 & 2009), claim that AVT or screen translation has been neglected for a long time; few have studied it, although received attention from many.

Bogucki (2004) explains that screen translation can be classified into subtitling, dubbing and voice over. This study sets out to discuss *subtitling* which can be described as *constrained translation*. This means that the subtitler works within a specific number of characters on the screen. Díaz-Cintas (2009, p. 2) states that the concept "constrained translation" was first introduced by Titford (1982) and means that certain constraints apply to subtitling in that subtitlers do not have much room to work in as both time and space constrictions are imposed if subtitling for a film or TV show is required. Consequently, subtitling could be regarded as an adaptation rather than translation. As indicated by O'Connell (2007), subtitling is an over form of translation in that it is exposed to audience evaluation. Put differently, the audience can hear and see the original voice and picture, and at the same time they read the subtitles and evaluate their quality.

This study will focus on the translation or the subtitling of the Arabic dialects into English, in particular the Jordanian dialect. It uses the film *Captain Abu Raed* to highlight the challenges of transferring dialects into another language on screen. The study raises two questions: (1) Do the dialectal expressions used by the speakers in the film have similar effects on target text viewers? (2) To what extent can the translation of dialects be challenging in carrying out the connotations of the vernacular expressions used in the source text? It is worth mentioning that the availability of Arabic films subtitled into English is limited. In addition, there is a little contribution to work completed in this field.

## Dialects and their translations

Arabic dialects are informal spoken and written languages used across the Arab World (Harrat et al., 2017). Although they differ from one Arabic country to another, they also differ in the same country – the dialect spoken in the East of Libya, for example, is different from the one in the West. This applies to most of the Arab countries. These dialects are used by all Arabs in their daily interactions. Sajjad et al. (2013) state that there are six dominant dialects in the Arab world: Egyptian, Maghrebian, Levantine, Iraqi, Gulf, and Yemeni. Each of these dialects has its own

vocabulary, morphology, syntax and spelling. Although people in the Arab world generally speak and use Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) in their official platforms and channels, each country uses its local dialect and subdialect in their local media outlets and institutional settings such as hospitals, schools, etc. Dialect as defined by Dudek (2018) is "a non-standard variety of a given language" (p. 297). This means that dialects are the necessary alternative forms of language and used more spontaneously in a less stressful environment and settings.

Non-standard form of language indicates that there is a standard form of that language. Unlike the standard form, people usually prefer to use dialects in their everyday casual conversations as it reflects naturalness and spontaneity (Bonaffini, 1997). The linguistic features of dialects can be problematic in rendering them to a standard language or even maintaining them with similar dialect words of the target language. Dialects are characterized by the social class of their speakers, the sentence structure, the figures of speech used, and the reference to local literature. Dialects are often divided into regional and social. The film used in the study is, of course, using a Jordanian dialect which is regional when compared to other Arab dialects. However, it has some social dialectal differences that are present in the speech of the social classes of actors, as shown below. The translation of dialects, as literature shows, usually adopts three strategies: (1) Translators tend to neutralise some of the dialectal expressions, using more known words, (2) change the dialect expressions with the ones translators judge as the closest to the source text, and (3) take off the problematic expression or replace it with another more formal one (Berezowski, 1997).

In this paper, the focus is on the non-standard sentences used in the film. Unlike standard sentences which are characterized by linguistic features accepted and understood by all Arabs who use MSA, non-standard sentences are featured with a deviation from the standard form of language in grammar, morphology, or lexis (Pinto, 2018). Indeed, this deviation applies to oral dialect which, as mentioned, has the features of regional and social dialects.

### Technical issues

The ultimate aim of subtitling which all translators seek and attempt to maintain, as discussed by Linde and Kay (1999) is that subtitling should make a successful integration between the sound and the text, and it is important for the subtitling to synchronize with the image and sound. However, due to some constraints regarding space and time for subtitling, the subtitler would face a considerable challenge to present a readable and comprehensible adaptation of the dialogue as it is not always easy to transfer a spoken dialogue into a written one. It is widely agreed (see Linde & Kay, 1999; Karamitroglou, 2007) that two lines of subtitles are the maximum on-screen in order not to cover the screen image and distract the audience. Karamitroglou (2007) further suggests that in the case of a single line, it should be positioned in the lower position of the two lines. With regard to the number of characters in each line, Karamitroglou (2007) explains that each line should carry no more than 35 characters. Linde & Kay (1999) say that the reading speed of the audience significantly affects the restriction on how long a subtitle should remain on screen. Karamitroglou (2007) suggests that it should stay on for no more than 5 ½ seconds. He further discusses the temporal parameter in detail with regard to two-lined subtitles, adding that they

should not exceed six seconds on the screen and 3 ½ seconds for single-lined subtitles. It is true that the subtitler may face spatial and temporal restrictions; the issues this research explores are related to rendering dialectal expressions of Jordanian dialect into English to see what gets flattened in the way without focusing on the constraints that may arise. The section that follows gives us an idea about the context of the research and the film used in the study with an overview of its dialect and genre.

## **Research context**

### **Storyline and genre of the film**

*Captain Abu Raed* is a Jordanian feature film that discusses real problems people in the Arab world may come across every day. It handles issues such as child abuse, child labour, domestic violence and arranged marriage. The film opens new doors to the Arab world and stresses the need to tackle these problems socially without focusing on real conflict, meaning the issues are tackled without being politically or religiously employed. It is simply about ordinary people who are going about their everyday lives and trying to make a difference.

It is a story of an airport janitor, a simple man who finds a pilot's cap in an airport bin and befriends a group of people in his neighborhood to entertain them with his fantasy adventures. He inspires them to think beyond their social constraints, but the story becomes more complicated. Murad is a victim of domestic abuse who no longer believes in Abu Raed's stories. However, Abu Raed changes Murad's mind and becomes his hero. Abu Raed also befriends Nur; an independent-minded, top-class pilot who dreams of a simple life. Nur is also a woman who faces considerable pressure from her parents to get married – an issue common to most Arab women. The dynamics between Nur and Abu Raed evolve during the film as the differences in their social status become less evident. In the beginning, they are clearly from different classes, but as the film progresses they meet in the middle with a closer, father-daughter friendship. Abu Raed is characterized as a man who understands her character and appreciates people and tackles their issues without being preachy and always resulting in a happy ending.

Captain Abu Raed is obsessed with dreams of traveling around the world and making new friends, but instead he finds himself living a quiet life working as a janitor in an airport. Overlooked by the people around him, Abu Raed watches passengers travel to all the exotic places he reads about, and he becomes a careful observer of the ongoing issues around the world. Captain Abu Raed was forced to pretend that he is a captain as he was found by the children carrying a captain's hat. He told the children that he was not a pilot, but the children insist, then he thought of using the concept of being a pilot as a way of entertaining them.

The film is based on fiction, but there are elements of real-life issues in the story. One criticism which might be directed against the film is with regard to the violence against children. The film approaches the problem from one man's wisdom and position in society. However, the problem should be dealt with at a governmental level. In other words, the government's responsibilities concerning child abuse and domestic violence should have been depicted in the film.

### Contextualization of the film

In the selected film, Abu Raed deals with the issue of child labor as he finds one of his friends, Tareq, selling Wafers in the streets of Amman when he should be at school. He goes to see Tareq's father to discuss this with him. The friendship between Nur (the pilot) and Abu Raed is evolving as she brings him a gift from New York. Murad, a victim of domestic abuse, appears to be angry and shouts at Abu Raed, but Abu Raed deals with him gently and tried to give him the gift he got from Nur, in order to show respect and politeness. In a very significant and emotional scene, Murad, still angry with Abu Raed, calls him a liar and takes the children to the airport to show them the truth about Abu Raed, that he is really a janitor, not a pilot. The children are angry at a time, but their friendship with Abu Raed continues. Murad, who suffered torture by his father and was nearly on the edge of taking a path of criminals and thieves, was saved by Abu Raed. Abu Raed was able to provide him secured future with Nur's rich family until he is a real pilot.

### Analysis and discussions

It has been mentioned that the structure of dialects is not the same as the standard language. We see in Example 1 that the use of the administrative 'ها' (these) has been prefixed with 'الرجلين' (feet) in the source text to indicate tiredness. The subject 'بدهن' (they want), as 'they' refers to 'feet', is personified and gives the impression that the feet are in action and they are the 'doer'. The subtitler attempted to background the antecedent to express this dialect translation. In English, the correct form is 'these feet are getting tired'. The choice of the subtitler is still marked and to a certain degree is justified. The literal translation (LT) is provided to show how the Arabic source sentences are structured.

#### Example 1

|    |                                      |
|----|--------------------------------------|
| ST | بدهن يتهدن هالرجلين                  |
| TT | They are getting tired, these feet   |
| LT | They want to be destroyed these feet |

Dialects are divided into social and regional. Example 2 subscribes to the low-class use of language. In this example, Murad's father is beating and swearing at him, almost every night. Thus, the dialect used is of a low social class because Murad is growing up in a very poor family and with an abusive father. The subtitler adopts a strategy that he/she thought of merging the two sentences into one. The 'اللي خلفك' (birthed you) is replaced by the passive form 'you were born'. Some elements were deleted and the translation has been neutralized as 'damn the day you were born' is somehow frequently used in English and not restricted to one geographical dialect. The word 'خلفك' in Arabic is heavily used in Levantine dialect.

#### Example 2

|    |                                                                            |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ST | يلعن اليوم اللي جبتهك فيه<br>تعال يا حيوان أنت واللي خلفك                  |
| TT | I'll damn the day you were born                                            |
| LT | Damn the day I fathered you<br>Come you animal and the one who birthed you |

**Example 3**

|    |                                                |
|----|------------------------------------------------|
| ST | ماما، تلحلي شوي، احكي مع الناس                 |
| TT | <b>Honey, socialise, mingle</b>                |
| LT | <b>Mama, pal around a bit, speak to people</b> |

The word 'تلحلي' is very informal and said to someone who has a close and intimate friendship with the speaker. Here in Example 3, Nur's mother is trying to encourage Nur to mingle and *pal up* with the people they invited for a party in their house. The translation offers two synonyms: socialize and mingle. The two imperative verbs in fact can be described, to a certain degree, as 'formal' words, with 'mingle' less formal. They summarise the whole concept in the source text but have dissimilar connotations and effects that are present in the source text, which is embodied in a mother speaking to her daughter. The verb 'احكي' is a Levantine and Iraqi dialect, which in MSA means 'تحدثني' (converse) or 'تكلمي' (speak). The subtitler decides to sacrifice the dialectal connotations in the English subtitle, opting for replacing 'ماما' (Mama) with 'honey' which may trigger completely different connotations. Example 4 is the continuation of the conversation between Nur and her mother at the party. In fact, this party was thrown for one reason, which is that Nur's parents are trying to make Nur get around with people and pals up with someone to arrange marriage. The subtitler in this example completely neutralizes the translation in the subtitle 'I am mingling'. The reality is that she is not mingling. She said: 'طيب، ماما' (Alright, Mama), an indication that 'I will do', 'I will mingle', and then asks her mother: 'أيش فيه' (what is there), as saying why you are pushing me. With regard to the use of dialect, 'أيش فيه' (what is there) has been taken off. The subtitler explicitly employs the strategy of *deletion*. The target viewers will not realize from reading the subtitled version of Nur's reply that an integral component of the conversation is missing.

**Example 4**

|    |                                      |
|----|--------------------------------------|
| ST | طيب ماما، أيش فيه؟                   |
| TT | <b>I am mingling</b>                 |
| LT | <b>Alright, Mama, What is there?</b> |

**Example 5**

|    |                                                                  |
|----|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ST | حبيبتي، احكي شوي مع بعض<br>أنا أسلم على الضيوف                   |
| TT | <b>Talk to each other<br/>I will leave you two alone</b>         |
| LT | <b>My love, chat a bit together<br/>I will salute the guests</b> |

Example 5 is a conversation between Nur and her father at the party. The verb 'talk' has been subtitled with the expression 'احكي شوي' (chat a bit) which clearly does not only eliminate the informality connotations of a father gently asks his daughter to enjoy a chat but also communicates to the English viewers a meaning that is absent from the original. Further, the subtitler erases the second part of the sentence: 'أنا أسلم على الضيوف' (I will salute the guests). It is not clear in the subtitle

to the target viewers why Nur's father left them alone, although the message is in the source text. This could make it difficult for target viewers to follow the progress of the events. The sentence 'أنا أسلم على الضيوف' (I will salute the guests) is close to MSA and has no dialectal features. Thus, it could have been rendered quite professionally.

### Example 6

|    |                  |
|----|------------------|
| ST | اسكت يا زلمة     |
| TT | Enough questions |
| LT | Shut up, bloke   |

The word 'زلمة' in Example 6 is a colloquial dialectal expression referring to a 'man'. This word is heavily used in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine and more in conversations than in writings. The subtitle only concludes the idea that Captain Abu Raed is asking his talkative apprentice to stop talking. The difficulty of translating dialects is evident in this example as the use of imperative verb 'اسكت' (shut up) used by a trainer ordering his trainee to stop talking has completely disappeared from the translation. In this case, the target viewers cannot capture the eccentric use of the word 'زلمة' (bloke) in this vernacular speech.

Another geographically neutral use of language is exhibited in Example 7 below in the word *janitor*. The word 'زبال' in Arabic is very close to MSA than a dialect and it means a *garbage man*. The job of a janitor is different from a garbage man as janitors in Western culture have a responsibility of taking care of buildings. However, the dialect used in this example is the interrogative pronoun 'شو' (what) which is equivalent to MSA 'ماذا' (what). The subtitle has clearly adopted a neutralization strategy in translating this question word into English as this can be the only available strategy to deal with this idiolect.

### Example 7

|    |                                     |
|----|-------------------------------------|
| ST | شو بيقوللكم الزبال؟                 |
| TT | What does the janitor tell you?     |
| LT | What does the garbage man tell you? |

Dialects leverage more vocabulary than MSA, as they introduce different new vocabulary based on the geographical locations and cultures of the Arab countries (Sadat et al., 2014). These varieties in the Arabic dialects ultimately enrich the MSA. For instance, Example 8 is a case in point. The expression 'أصلو وفصلو' (origin and tongue) is gaining ground in MSA and it is understood by most of the Arab dialect speakers. This phrase is used in the film by Nur's father. Nur rejected to have a chat and marry the pharmacist who came to the party. Her father was furious about Nur's stance of not accepting him. He yells at her saying: he is a respected pharmacist and we know him, we know his family and ancestors and the language he speaks is familiar to us. In other words, the *tongue* (language) reflects the pharmacist's root and state in society. This phrase completely disappears from the translation, though it has a significant function in the dialogue



**Example 8**

|    |                                                                                             |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ST | صيدلي محترم<br>نعرف أصلو وفصلو وابن عيلة                                                    |
| TT | <b>He is a good pharmacist<br/>From a good family</b>                                       |
| LT | <b>A respected pharmacist<br/>we know his origin and tongue (tongue refers to language)</b> |

In example 9, Captain Abu Raed is speaking to Nur, who asks him: So you speak French? He replied with 'بس هيك، ألتش تلتيش' (Just this, I speak a few words). Such expression is believed to be particularly used in the Jordanian dialect.

**Example 9**

|    |                                       |
|----|---------------------------------------|
| ST | بس هيك، ألتش تلتيش                    |
| TT | <b>Just a few words</b>               |
| LT | <b>Just this, I speak a few words</b> |

The word 'تلتيش' (Taltish) appears to have different meanings in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. The only strategy to manage such expression is to flatten the translation into a well-understood meaning to the target audience. Dialectal translation can be problematic, as this example exhibits. Although the choice of the subtitler generally conveys the connotations existing in the source text, it misses and dismisses the dialectal traits and generally could bring in unwanted associations to the context (Sánchez Galvis, 2013). Apparently, some of the phrases in the above subtitles have been erased, including the expression 'بس هيك' (Just this) in Example 9. According to the practice of translating subtitles, Sánchez Galvis, (2013) argues that texts that contain dialectal and vernacular elements usually deem unworthy of translation. Generally, the existence of vernacular-dialectal characters in the film disappears from the screen, favoring the use of a more standard language.

**Conclusion**

This study explored the translation of dialects on screen. It looked at the strategies used by subtitlers to see whether the dialectal expressions used by the speakers in the Jordanian film *Captain Abu Raed* have similar effects on target text viewers, and the extent a translation of dialects can be challenging in carrying out the connotations of the vernacular expressions. The Jordanian dialect belongs to the Levantine family and shares traits with Syrian and Lebanese dialects. It was observed that dialects emerge to be real languages and a study of MSA should reflect on dialects. The classification of dialects in the Arab world, in fact, simplifies the linguistic situations among them as these countries have a number of dialects. The film in the study specifically uses the Jordanian dialect with some words and phrases that can be found in Syrian and Lebanese dialects. The study demonstrates that dialects are more neutralized and flattened than adapted literally. In occasions, they disappeared from the target texts, resulting in leaving the target viewers not sensing the dialectal and vernacular traits uttered in the source text. Given the close link between idiolect and identity of Jordanian dialect, the subtitles do not appear to convey



those elements of social classes, geographical variations, and relationship with the other speakers in scenes of the film.

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