

Translation of Arabic Idioms into English: The Case of Amateur Subtitling

Received 2026-01-16
Accepted 2026-05-19
Published 2026-06-27

Yasser Sabtan

College of Arts and Applied Sciences, Dhofar University, Salalah, Oman
Faculty of Languages and Translation, Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt
ysabtan@du.edu.om

To cite this article: Sabtan, Yasser (2026). Translation of Arabic Idioms into English: The Case of Amateur Subtitling. *Ijaz Arabi: Journal of Arabic Learning*, 9 (3), 1032-1047, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18860 /ijazarabi.V9i3.37378>

Abstract

Most studies on audiovisual translation focus on English-to-Arabic direction and little research has been conducted on the other Arabic-to-English direction. However, digital technology has increased the need for subtitling from Arabic into English as more and more Arabic-language movies and series are being subtitled and shown abroad. Amateur subtitling or fansubbing, which is a translation done by fans for other fans, has gained considerable attention recently. However, few studies have been conducted to investigate the amateur subtitling of Arabic movies and series into English. To address the paucity in this area of research, the present study is an attempt to explore the translation of Arabic idiomatic expressions, focusing on the strategies used by amateur subtitlers to render these expressions into English. Idioms are culture-specific expressions that are challenging for subtitlers. To achieve the study objective, three Egyptian movies translated by amateur subtitlers on YouTube were collected to examine the strategies used by fansubbers to translate Arabic idioms into English. The analysis of the examined data was conducted using Gottlieb's model (1997) for the subtitling of idioms. The results of the study reveal that amateur subtitlers use a number of strategies to translate Arabic idioms into English. These are correspondence, paraphrase, congruence, omission, reduction and compensation. The analysis shows that the most frequently used strategies are correspondence (36.7%) and paraphrase (33.3%), which constitute 70% of the examples in the current study, while the least used are reduction and compensation, representing 3.3% for each of them. In addition, some of the analyzed subtitles are inappropriate translations of the Arabic idioms, as they are not communicatively translated into the target language.

Keywords: Amateur Subtitling; Fansubbing; Idioms; Translation Strategies; Arabic-English Translation

INTRODUCTION

Translation is broadly defined as the process of communicating a message from one language to another. It is a challenging task, requiring the translator to demonstrate not only expertise in linguistics, but also in cultural matters, in order to overcome the hurdles presented by cultural differences. Despite the existence of many concepts that are shared between various cultures, there are also a great number of culture-specific items and expressions that reflect the values of a given culture and which have no true equivalents in a foreign language. To successfully deal with such culture-bound expressions, translators, as pointed out by (Schwarz, 2003), must possess not only bilingual proficiency but also bi-cultural competence. The cultural differences manifest

in various forms, including idioms, across different disciplines, thereby presenting significant challenges to translators.

Translators are invariably confronted with the challenge of tackling the cultural intricacies inherent in a source language (SL) text and identifying the most appropriate techniques to successfully convey these aspects into the target language (TL). The extent of these challenges may vary depending on the linguistic and cultural disparities between the two languages in question. Therefore, translators must possess the requisite competencies to adeptly handle the cultural differences between the SL and TL. A translation that is effective in conveying the meaning of the SL text accurately into the TL must also consider the cultural background of the SL (Yang & Wang, 2026).

Television and cinema are among the most significant achievements in the current age. The movies produced by such media play an important role in people's lives. They predominate a given society's culture, possessing the intrinsic capacity to entertain, educate, and broaden people's perspectives on life, introducing them to diverse cultures and languages. Nevertheless, substantial segments of any population are deprived of access to audio-visual information. These groups include individuals with hearing impairments and those whose first language differs from the spoken language in the audiovisual media. 'Audiovisual translation' (AVT), sometimes called 'screen translation' or 'multimedia translation', has emerged as a response to the needs of these two groups. AVT is currently a growing sector in the translation market. It is only recently that AVT has found its niche in translation studies, and as such, there is a need for more research in this area. There are three primary types of AVT: namely subtitling, dubbing and voice-over. This research paper focuses exclusively on subtitling which will be discussed below. As for Dubbing, alternatively referred to as post-synchronization, involves the replacement of the spoken elements from the SL on the soundtrack with those from the TL (Jaskanen, 1999). Voice-over, a third major type of AVT, bears some resemblance to dubbing as both involve a certain degree of revoicing. However, dubbing is more synchronous than voice-over.

Recently, with the advancements in technology and the proliferation of online resources on the internet, amateur translation has gained considerable attraction (Chou et al., 2024; Izwaini, 2014; Bogucki, 2009). Amateur translation, or volunteer translation (Garcia, 2009), is known as fansubbing in the field of AVT (Abo Ali, 2023; Al-Zgoul & Al-Salman, 2022). Fansubbing or fan subtitling has emerged as a new form of subtitling, where fans, often lacking formal training, subtitle series or movies they enjoy and then release their subtitling on the internet for others to download freely (Wilcock, 2013). Fansubbing is thus a translation done by fans for other fans. The subtitles carried out by amateur translators or fansubbers differ from those subtitles made by professional translators/subtitlers who follow the norms and standard conventions in their work environment. Fansubbers do not abide by such conventions and norms, as their translation is mostly judged by their peers and viewers rather than by professionals. Research on AVT has long been dominated by a focus on the subtitles produced by professional translators/subtitlers, with little focus on the translation produced by amateur translators/subtitlers. To address this paucity, the present study attempts to explore the fansubbers' strategies of translating idiomatic expressions in a corpus of selected Egyptian movies.

The growing needs of a multicultural world have highlighted the significance of screen translation. The translation of cultural particularities has been an issue of much

discussion amongst translation theorists. In light of this, this paper investigates the subtitling of the culture-specific problem of idiomatic expressions in Egyptian Arabic. The current study, in particular, attempts to discuss the challenges amateur subtitlers face in subtitling this cultural phenomenon and the strategies they employ to overcome them. Lorsch (1991, p. 76) defines a translation strategy as "a potentially conscious procedure for the solution of a problem which an individual is faced with when translating a text segment from one language to another". Within this framework, the study examines the degree of success of these common strategies in some representative subtitles of idioms in accordance with the communicative approach to translation as expounded in Nida (1964), Newmark (1988) or the pragmatic approach as explained by Baker (1992). The TL English subtitle of an idiom is judged acceptable or unacceptable based on whether or not it pragmatically conveys the SL message to the TL viewer and thus a communicative approach is essential for the idiom translation.

AVT, or screen translation, has recently become one of the main research topics in the field of translation studies (Sabtan, 2022). Translation in the world of audiovisual communication, Delabastita (1990: 97) points out, plays "a very effective part in both the shaping of cultures and the relations between them." There are three different types of AVT: subtitling, dubbing and voice-over. The present study is mainly focused on the AVT type of subtitling.

Subtitling is nowadays one of the most prevalent forms of translation worldwide. Subtitling is the "process of providing synchronized captions for film and television dialogue" (Shuttleworth and Cowie, 1997: 161). Until recently, subtitling has received little attention in the field of translation studies. This could be attributed to both the polysemiotic nature and the constraints involved in this AVT type. Rosa (2001: 213-214) refers to the polysemiotic nature of subtitling when she states that it is also an intersemiotic translation, as it involves transferring a source text, which usually corresponds to face-to-face communication, into written verbal language. This is clearly expressed by Clements (1998) as follows: Audio-visual translation, when in the form of subtitling, can almost be considered a combination of both written translation and oral interpreting in that whilst the translated text is rendered in written form and can be prepared at the translator's leisure rather than performed 'live', the translation must keep pace with the action unfolding on the screen. Subtitling is classified as interlingual (used for non-native viewers) or intralingual (mainly used for the deaf and hard-of-hearing people). Any mention of subtitling throughout this paper refers to interlingual subtitling.

Screen translation using subtitles is subject to significant constraints imposed by the demands of the cinema or TV medium. These constraints are concerned with the spatial limitations of the screen and the temporal constraints imposed by the duration of a subtitle. With respect to the spatial constraints, Al-Adwan (2019) points out that a subtitle comprises up to two lines that are positioned at the lower part of the screen.

Temporal constraints, on the other hand, are derived from the need for synchronicity as well as the viewers' reading speed. Hajmohammadi (2004) shows that the time constraints of subtitling are very clear in the continuous presentation of filmic material, over which viewers have no control, which requires constant attention. In addition, De Linde and Kay (1999: 6) add another dimension for temporal constraints when they indicate that "reading speeds not only vary according to the quantity and complexity of linguistic information in subtitles, but also in relation to the type of visual information on screen at any given moment." They note that in love stories, for instance,

viewers do not need to read many of the subtitles on the screen, as they are already familiar with the narrative. However, in stories about crime and espionage, viewers read many of subtitles to understand the subsequent action on the screen.

The study of idioms has attracted the attention of linguists and other scholars of various related disciplines in recent years. Idioms have been defined by many scholars in the field of linguistics. Crystal (1997: 189) states that "an idiom refers to a sequence of words which are semantically and often syntactically restricted, so that they function as a single unit". Semantically, the meaning of an idiom cannot be deduced from the meanings of its individual words. Syntactically, the words in an idiom often do not permit the variability that they usually display in other linguistic contexts. The idiom *it's raining cats and dogs*, for instance, does not permit **it's raining dogs and cats* or **it's raining a cat and a dog*.

Baker (1992: 63) adopts almost the same definition as she indicates that an idiom lacks either "flexibility of patterning" or "transparency of meaning" and that idioms often have meanings that cannot be understood from the individual meanings of the words that comprise them. Carter (1987:58) expresses the same idea as he notes that idioms "cannot normally be understood from the literal meaning of the words which make them up." Thus, an idiom such as 'kick the bucket' does not allow variation in form under normal circumstances. It cannot be changed to passive construction, for instance. One cannot say **the bucket was kicked*.

Cowie (1981: 230) agrees with this as he notes that the passive transformation is not permitted in idioms such as *kick the bucket*. Therefore, the bucket was kicked is impossible. Furthermore, Allan (1986: 237) points out that idioms like *kick the bucket* 'die' and *shoot the breeze* 'chat idly' cannot be subjected to grammatical processes such as passivization. Thus, it is not possible to say **the breeze was shot by the boys*. By the same token, Langacker (1967: 80) notes that when *kick the bucket* means "die", it is incorrect to resort to the passive form. This reveals that changing the traditional formulation of idioms destroys the agreed upon implications which they have. Therefore, tradition in this case is a governing factor.

Concerning types of idioms, many linguists made different classifications of idioms. Palmer (1981: 80-82) distinguishes these types of idiomatic expressions:

1. Total idioms, e.g. *spill the beans* "disclose a secret", where the meaning of the idiomatic expression as a whole is not related to the meaning of its components.
2. Partial idioms, e.g. *rain cats and dogs* "rain very heavily", where one of the words in the idiom "i.e. rain" has its usual meaning, and the other words "i.e. cats and dogs" have a meaning that is peculiar to this particular sequence. Thus, "cats and dogs" are not used in their literal meaning.
3. Phrasal verbs, e.g. *look after* "take care of" are idiomatic as their meanings cannot be deduced from their components.
4. Compound nouns such as *greenhouse* and *blackbird*. These compounds cannot be predicted from the meanings of their components.

As far as idioms in Egyptian Arabic are concerned, Anani (1995: 182-190) sheds light on this linguistic phenomenon, providing the following classification of idioms:

1. The common phrase whether fixed or unfixed, e.g. أهلا وسهلا "how do you do", عامل ايه "how are you doing", ايزيك "how are you", ...etc. As far as translation is concerned, he (1995: 182) points out that this category is entirely culturally biased and thus a pragmatic approach to this category of idiom is inevitable, since it is the cultural

occasions rather than the meaning of the idiom that we are handling. In other words, we are interested in the function and not the semantic aspect of the idiom.

2. The pure idiom; "that is a number of words whose total meaning is not equivalent to the sum total of the individual meanings of the words. For this type of idiom Anani (p.184) cites such examples as "في عقل بالي" in my mind" and /يفهمها وهي طابيرة/ (literally: he understands it while it flies) which means "he can take a hint" or "he is extremely perceptive", "طلع نأبه على شونه" he made the effort in vain", مسح بيه البلاط (literally: he wiped the floor tiles with him) "he gave him a dressing down", ..etc. Anani (1996: 113) points out that this type of idiom has an equivalent type in English such as *blow the gaff* "divulge a secret".
3. The borderline idioms or metaphoric idioms. This type is based on 'dead metaphors'. For example, /رقابتي سداة/ (literally: I can do the job satisfactorily even if it costs my neck) which idiomatically means "I shall show devotion in the performance"

Some scholars classify idioms in Egyptian Arabic according to their syntactic structures. According to Sayed (2003: 218-222), the majority of idioms in Egyptian Arabic have the following structures.

1. A nominal sentence which is used adjectively: Noun (is) Adjective. For example, ايده طويلة (Literally: his hand (is) long), which idiomatically means "he is dishonest".
2. A verbal sentence which has the structure: Verb + Prepositional Phrase. For example, ماشي على قشر بيض (Literally: he is walking on egg-shells), which means "he is very slow".
3. Nominal clauses connected by "and": Nominal and Nominal. For example, عجنه وخيزه (Literally: I knead and bake him), which means "I know everything about him".
4. Genitive clauses with the structure: Nominal of def. Nominal. For example, وش الخير (literally: face of goodness), which means "a person of good omen"
5. A verbal sentence with the structure Verb + Subject + Complement. For example, طلعتني من هدومي/ (Literally: he got me out of my clothes), which means "I became tired and sick of him"
6. One-word idioms. They could be nouns, verbs, or adjectives. قفل (n) (Literally: a lock), which means "a very stupid person", يتمنظر (v) (Literally: shows up his appearance), which means "he is showy", صفراوي (adj), (Literally: he is yellowish), which means "he is a wicked person"

Several studies have discussed the problems and strategies of translating idiomatic expressions on the screen. Bujić (2014) conducted a study on the translation of English idioms to Croatian in TV series, adopting Baker's (1992) model of idiom translation to explore the strategies employed in translating these idioms into Croatian. According to Bujić (2014), translation using paraphrasing was the most frequent strategy used by subtitlers followed by the strategy of using an idiom that has similar meaning and form. In their investigation of the subtitling of English idioms into Indonesian, Manipuspika and Winzami (2021) adopted Baker's strategies for the translation of idioms, noting that paraphrasing was the most prevalent strategy. Moreover, using idioms that have similar meanings but different forms were observed to be common among the employed strategies. However, using idioms of similar meaning and form as well as omission were found to be less prevalent. In their study, Sutrisno et al. (2023) used a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the subtitling of idioms in *Beauty and the Beast* movie from English into Bahasa Indonesia, making use of Baker's idiom translation strategies. Ten idioms were found in the film and were categorized based on the employed strategies.

Three idiomatic expressions were rendered using paraphrasing, three idioms were translated using idioms with similar meaning and form, two were translated using idioms with similar meaning but different form, and two were rendered using the omission strategy.

As regards Arabic, several studies have been conducted to investigate the translation of idioms and other fixed expressions from or into Arabic in the area of AVT. Mazid (2006) discusses the Arabic subtitles of some English movies and TV dramas. The researcher identified some problems including the literal translation of idiomatic expressions. Khalaf et al. (2014) throws light on the problems associated with the Arabic amateur subtitling of English movies, including the problem of translating idioms literally, which makes the meaning unclear to the Arab viewers. Mahdi and Sahari (2024) examined the translation of idiomatic expressions in five English movies subtitled into Arabic to identify the strategies used by subtitlers. Their study revealed that the most common strategy was using idioms with similar meaning and form followed by the strategy of using idioms that have similar meanings but different forms. Paraphrasing strategy came in the third place and finally was the compensation strategy. Obeidat and Abbadi (2024) investigated the translation of cultural expressions in the American movie *Barbie*, focusing on the strategies used to subtitle these culture-bound expressions into Arabic. They noted that idioms were among the most frequent cultural expressions and translation by paraphrase was the most common subtitling strategy. On the other hand, few studies have examined the subtitling of Arabic idioms and proverbs into English. Some of these studies used the Netflix platform (e.g. Shuhaiber & Haider, 2023; Haider & Shuhaiber, 2024), while others (e.g. Sabtan and Al-Johani, 2025) studied the subtitles of proverbs on an official Egyptian TV channel. The current study is an attempt to address the gap in this area through examining the translation of idioms rendered by amateur translators on YouTube channels.

The translation of Idioms has also been discussed in the other AVT mode of dubbing. Al-Yasin (2022) examined the translation strategies employed in dubbing culture-specific expressions including idioms in three Disney animated movies. The results of the study unveiled that the most prevalent dubbing strategies were adaptation and cultural equivalents which, the researcher argues, are recommended by translation scholars since cultures cannot be translated literally and therefore translators should find equivalents that viewers can easily understand in the TL. Similarly, Ibrahim (2022) investigated the strategies that are used in translating idioms in the dubbing of an American animated movie for children. The study concluded that translators should not deal with idioms as single units as they have specific meanings. Having discussed the previous studies on subtitling idiomatic expressions between the English-Arabic language pair, it is evident that most studies focused on the subtitling of English idioms into Arabic, while there have been limited studies concerned with the subtitling of Arabic idioms into English, which is addressed in this research paper. Moreover, what is novel in this paper is that it is focused on the translation of Arabic idioms by amateur subtitlers, unlike the previous studies that investigated the translation of idioms made by professional subtitlers (Ali & Sayyiyed Al-Rushaidi, 2017). Accordingly, this study aims to investigate a significant problem that faces amateur subtitlers (fansubbers). It discusses the English translation of Arabic idiomatic expressions. These culturally specific expressions pose a challenge for translators and subtitlers, who encounter them in different contexts. Hence, the study focuses on the strategies that subtitlers use to translate Egyptian Arabic idioms

into English, exploring the challenges they face when rendering such idiomatic expressions into English. To achieve this goal, some examples of Arabic idiomatic expressions with their English subtitles were collected from three Egyptian movies. These subtitles were made by amateur subtitlers or fansubbers on YouTube channels. The data analysis is based on the communicative translation approach and the strategies suggested by Baker (1992) and Gottlieb (1997), which are discussed below.

A number of AVT scholars have developed typologies of subtitling strategies, either for general subtitling purposes (Lomheim, 1999) or to specifically address particular subtitling challenges, such as idiomatic expressions (Gottlieb, 1997) and taboo words and humour (Díaz Cintas and Remael, 2007). The present study bases its theoretical framework on the communicative translation approach put forth by Nida (1964), Newmark (1988), and Baker (1992) as well as Gottlieb's subtitling model (1997) who proposed a number of strategies for the subtitling of idioms.

In fact, the most challenging aspect of translation is identifying the most appropriate word or expression in the TL that accurately conveys the intended meaning of the SL text. As far as idioms are concerned, Bujić (2014) points out that translators must first recognize that they are dealing with an idiom and then find the appropriate strategy for translating it into the TL. This requires that translators must have an excellent command of both the SL and TL. The translator (subtitler) should strive to produce a TL text that has the same effect on the TL viewers as the original text has done on the SL viewers. This is referred to as 'dynamic equivalence' by Nida (1964, p. 159). The same idea is echoed in Newmark's discussion of 'communicative translation' (1988, p. 39), noting that it "attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original." In addition, Baker (1992) expresses the same idea in her discussion of pragmatic equivalence, which considers the context in which utterances are used and interpreted.

Idioms pose challenges to translators due to their non-literal nature and cultural specificity. That is why some translation scholars were concerned with discussing the way idioms are translated (Baker, 1992; Newmark, 1988; Gottlieb, 1997). Translation scholars, e.g. Baker (1992) and Gottlieb (1997), have formulated a set of strategies that professional translators use when rendering idioms. Baker (1992) suggested that in translating idioms translators use (1) TL idioms that have similar meaning and form or (2) similar meaning but different form. They may also resort to using (3) paraphrasing which is the most frequently employed strategy and is used when there is no equivalent idiomatic expression in the TL. In some other cases translators may (4) omit the idioms in the TT, either because it has no close equivalent or because its meaning cannot be easily paraphrased. (5) Compensation is also another strategy that translators employ. It means that translators may find it challenging to translate a SL idiom in one specific part of the text into an idiom in the TL, but they may insert TL idioms in other parts of the text. Gottlieb (1997) made use of the strategies suggested by Baker to set up the following typology as shown in the following figure.

Gottlieb adopted these strategies in his analysis of subtitling idioms from English into Danish. Gottlieb's strategies will be employed in discussing the translation of idioms in the results and discussion section. In conclusion, one may cite Duff's remarks (1981) regarding the translation of culture-bound idioms, as he points out that the translator should not feel constrained to render idiom for idiom: it is primarily the context that should determine his/her choice.

Figure 1. Gottlieb's Strategies of Idiom Translation

Congruence:	A SL idiom is translated into an identical TL idiom
Equivalence:	A SL idiom is translated into a similar TL idiom
Correspondence:	A SL idiom is translated into a different TL idiom
Reduction:	A SL idiom is translated into a TL word
Paraphrase:	A SL idiom is translated into a TL phrase
Expansion:	A SL idiom is translated into a TL circumlocution
Omission:	A SL idiom is not translated in the TL
Compensation:	A SL non-idiom is translated into a TL idiom

METHOD

The present study, being qualitative in nature, employs a descriptive analytical approach to investigate the strategies employed by amateur translators to subtitle the Egyptian idiomatic expressions into English. It also discusses the challenges that fansubbers face in their translation of idioms. The study sample includes Arabic idioms in the Egyptian vernacular along with their English subtitles collected from three Egyptian movies. The data collection and analysis are discussed below.

The study corpus consists of a number of idiomatic expressions along with their English subtitles in three Egyptian films. The three movies selected for the study are ولد العم "The Cousins", عسل اسود "Bittersweet", and طير انت "You Fly" which were translated by amateur subtitlers on YouTube channels. The main actors in the three movies are big stars who have big popularity in the Egyptian cinema. "The Cousins", starring Kareem Abdelaziz, is an action movie produced in 2009 and whose actions focus on the Arab-Israeli conflict. The comedy movie "Bittersweet", starring Ahmed Helmy, was produced in 2010. The literal translation of the movie's title is "black honey", referring to bitter-sweet feelings that Egyptians feel towards living in their country. "You Fly" movie, starring Ahmed Mekki, is a comedy movie produced in 2009. It is about a nerdy vet who, by means of a genie, endeavours to catch the attention of the woman he loves. The revenues for the three movies under study were high, which indicates the popularity and the wide reception by the Egyptian audience. "The Cousins" revenues exceeded 27 million Egyptian pounds (<https://new.nabdn.com>) and "Bittersweet" revenues exceeded 26 million Egyptian pounds (<https://www.almasryalyoum.com>). "You Fly" achieved nearly 18 million Egyptian pounds (<https://www.shorouknews.com>). The rationale behind the selection of the corpus of movies lies in the films' genre and revenues. The three movies are action and comedy. In addition, the three movies achieved high revenues as shown above.

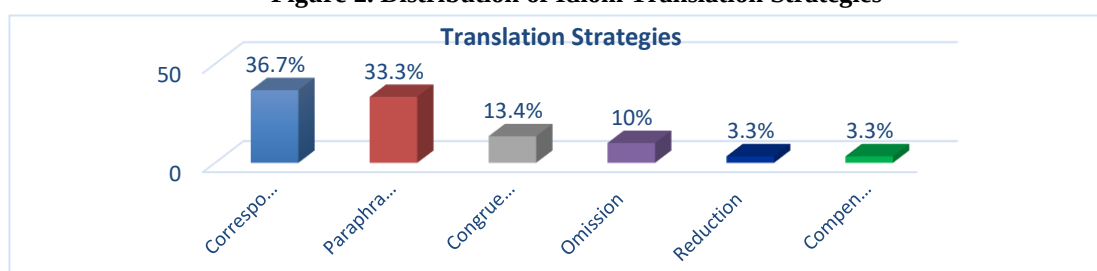
The data of the current study were analyzed based on Baker's (1992) translation strategies of idioms and Gottlieb (1997) subtitling strategies model. Moreover, the success of the English subtitles of the Arabic idioms is based on their adherence to the communicative and pragmatic translation approach as expounded in Nida (1964), Newmark (1988) and Baker (1992). The procedures that are followed in the present study are: (1) watching the subtitled Egyptian films or movies, (2) Comparing the English subtitles with the Arabic original utterances (3) identifying the idiomatic expressions in the original spoken Arabic and their English translation, (4) manually transcribing the utterances that include the idiomatic expressions in the selected movies, and (5) analyzing the idiomatic expressions in the used corpus of Egyptian movies through comparing them

with their English translation in the subtitles to examine the challenges they pose and the strategies amateur subtitlers opt for when rendering these Arabic idioms into English.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the strategies employed by fansubbers to translate idiomatic expressions are examined. Thirty idioms were spotted in the three movies that constitute the corpus of the present study. Figure 2 below shows the distribution of the strategies used in the English subtitles of the idioms taken from the investigated movies based on Gottlieb's subtitling model (1997). The strategies employed for subtitling these idiomatic expressions include: correspondence (36.7%), paraphrase (33.3%), congruence (13.4%), omission (10%), reduction (3.3%) and compensation (3.3%). Some examples of the examined data are analyzed and discussed in this section.

Figure 2. Distribution of Idiom Translation Strategies



As can be seen in the previous figure, correspondence (36.7%) and then paraphrase (33.3%) were the most commonly used strategies for subtitling idioms in the investigated movies. Congruence (13.4%) came in the third place, while omission (10%) came fourth in the subtitling strategies of idioms. Finally, reduction and compensation scored the lowest percentage (3% each) in the fansubbers' strategies. The six translation strategies are discussed through the analysis of some representative examples from the data.

CORRESPONDENCE

Correspondence is the strategy of using an idiom of similar meaning but different form in the TL. It is the most common strategy used by fansubbers in the data under analysis. This strategy was used in eleven examples (36.7%) of the subtitled English idioms. The following examples are translated using this strategy.

Example 1:

Arabic Idiom: صلي على النبي

Literal Translation: pray upon the Prophet

English Subtitle: take it easy

In example 1, the idiomatic expression صلي على النبي, which literally means “pray upon the Prophet”, is often used by Egyptians when they ask someone to calm down. They do this to remind others of the prophet as an excellent example of forgiveness and mercifulness so as to improve their attitude and stop being nervous or angry. The literal translation of the idiom would sound unnatural to the TL viewer. So, the subtitler rendered it into the idiom “take it easy” that is also considered a cultural substitution as it conveys the communicative meaning of the SL idiom and also maintains the same intended effect.

Example 2:

Arabic Idiom: طلعت عين أُمي

Literal Translation: You popped my mother's eye out

English Subtitle: You're driving me crazy

The idiomatic expression *طلعت عين أمي* in example 2 means that the speaker is very upset with the hearer in a particular situation. The TL idiom has a similar meaning to the SL idiom as it refers to making someone upset or annoyed. The idiom in question can be used with variant forms. It is basically used in the form *طلعت عيني*. But it can be intensified by adding some kinship terms like the word *أمي* "literally my mother" as used in the current example, or *أبوي* "literally my father" or *أهلي* "literally my family". The SL idiom is translated using the English idiom "to drive someone crazy", which is similar in meaning but has a different form. It is notable that there are also other variants of this English idiom, i.e. "drive someone nuts/up the wall".

Example 3:

Arabic Idiom: انت مال أمك

Literal Translation: You are your mother's money

English Subtitle: Mind your own business

Example 3 *انت مال أمك* is another form of the idiom *انت مالك* which rudely means "mind your own business" as in the English subtitle. But it is used here with the added word *أمك* "your mother" as a way of insulting the hearer for interfering into the speaker's own affairs. The speaker is verbally expressing his anger at the hearer through the use of this idiomatic expression which amounts to a swearword that is used to attack the hearer in the current situation. The expression is culturally bound as though it does not include any obscene or taboo word, it is used in the Egyptian culture with its current form where the word mother is mentioned to insult someone for poking their nose into other people's affairs or business. It is an indirect question which actually means "why do your mother poke her nose into my own affairs?" In the Arabic culture, unlike the western one, the mention of one's mother is a source of insulting or swearing at someone. In fact, the speaker's anger with the hearer should have been communicatively reflected in the translation to have the same effect on the TL viewers as it had on the SL viewers. However, this aspect was lost in the translation and the subtitler may have relied on the fact that the speaker's facial expressions and the following utterances signify that he is angry with the hearer.

PARAPHRASE

Paraphrasing is the strategy of translating a SL idiom by a TL phrase. It is one of the two most commonly used strategies following correspondence by amateur subtitlers in the investigated corpus, as shown in figure 2 above. This strategy was used in ten examples (33.3%) of the English subtitles of the analyzed idioms in the present study. It seems that translators use paraphrase whenever there is no ready idiom in English (Yan, 2018).

Example 4:

Arabic Idiom: *داحنا زارنا النبي*

Literal Translation: We have been visited by the Prophet

English Subtitle: You've graced us

The idiomatic expression *داحنا زارنا النبي* in example 4, which literally refers to the prophet's visit to someone, is used in Egyptian colloquial Arabic to welcome a guest. This religious phrase along with other similar ones show that the speech of Egyptians regularly includes religious references. Such culturally bound religious expressions pose

challenges to subtitlers who encounter many such examples. These religious expressions cannot be translated literally and should be translated using a pragmatic or communicative equivalence so that the translation would sound natural to the TL viewers. The subtitler attempted to find a pragmatic equivalence to this expression and translated it as “You’ve graced us”. However, the TL expression is missing some words as it is normally used as “You’ve graced us with your presence”, meaning to bring honour to a group of people by coming to something.

Example 5:

Arabic Idiom: أعرني انتباهك

Literal Translation: Give me your attention

English Subtitle: Lend me your attention

Example 5 أعرني انتباهك signifies code-switching where there is a shift from the colloquial variety that is usually used in the movie to the standard variety. The subtitler rendered it using the phrase “lend me your attention”. However, the SL idiom could have been better translated into the equivalent idiom “lend me your ears”.

Example 6:

Arabic Idiom: قابل بقي

Literal Translation: Meet then

English Subtitle: that’s only the start

The meaning of the idiomatic expression قابل بقي in example 6 is context-dependent, as its literal meaning “meet then” has nothing to do with meeting someone. It indicates that the speaker tells the hearer that he/she is going to face troubles ahead. The context of situation in which this expression is uttered should be taken into account to render it correctly in the TL. In Bittersweet movie, passengers aboard a plane from the US to Egypt started to get off at Cairo airport. The movie’s main character “Masry”, who is an American-Egyptian, started to cough because of the dusty weather outside the plane. Then, another American-Egyptian passenger who was sitting next to him aboard the plane uttered this expression after Masry started coughing. This implies that you are going to face troubles in your visit and that is only the start. Thus, the TL English subtitle conveys the intended meaning of the idiom in question.

Example 7:

Arabic Idiom: دي كانت عزومة مراكية

Literal Translation: It was a fishermen’s invitation

English Subtitle: It was only a verbal complement

Example 7 عزومة مراكية is a common idiomatic expression used among Egyptians. It is often used to describe a situation where someone is invited to something with no real intention of them being welcomed. It refers to the scenario of people on one boat passing another in the middle of the sea, inviting the passengers over. So, the invitation is made with the solid knowledge that the other passengers will not be able to leave their boat and accept the invitation. In other words, it is a promise that you don’t intend to keep or an offer you don’t expect the other person to take up. It is only used out of courtesy or politeness with no intention to fulfill the promise. The TL subtitle has mistakenly used the word “complement” instead of the word “compliment”. However, the communicatively intended meaning is “a false invitation”.

Example 8:

Arabic Idiom: أنا اتمر منطت

Literal Translation: I got lots of tiredness

English Subtitle: I got lots of pain, lots of pain

As for example 8, it includes the word *اتمر منطت*, which is a slightly changed version of the actual word *اتمر مطت*, referring to suffering and pain. It means to have really been through a lot. The equivalent English idiom is “have been through the mill”, which refers to having problems or difficulties. The Bittersweet movie’s main character Masry, who is coming back to his homeland after spending 20 years in the US, used to incorrectly pronounce the Arabic words as he is used to speaking English and has little knowledge of Arabic. This addition or substitution of some letters in words has also its comic effect which is not rendered in the English subtitle. Another example in the movie illustrating this point is the word *المرامنت* which is pronounced by Masry in one of the scenes instead of the actual word *البرابند* that means that someone speaks quickly and fluently about something. The word is referring to the Superb Parrot, also known as Barraband's Parrot and the substitution of some letters for others were intentionally made to achieve a humorous effect which is lost in translation.

CONGRUENCE

Congruence is a strategy of using an identical idiom in the TL. In other words, it is, according to Baker (1992), the strategy of using an idiom that has the same meaning and form in the TL. This strategy has been recorded for some idioms in the data under analysis (four examples representing 13.4%). In fact, this constitutes the best choice for translating SL idioms. Nonetheless, finding a TL idiom with the same meaning and form is not always possible.

Example 9:

Arabic Idiom: *غور من وشي الساعة دي*

Literal Translation: Get out of my face this hour

English Subtitle: Get out of my face now!

In Example 9, one of the characters is very nervous with another and expresses his anger using the idiomatic expression *غور من وشي* “get out of my face”. The idiomatic expression is normally used in Egyptian Arabic to express anger at someone. It is a rude way of telling someone to stop annoying you. The English subtitle includes an equivalent TL idiom with the same meaning and form. So, it is the happiest translation equivalent to the SL idiom.

OMISSION

This strategy refers to the omission of the SL idiom. This omission may occur in screen translation for the following reasons. One of these reasons is the lack of an equivalent TL idiom. Secondly, the meaning of the idiom may not be easily paraphrased. Thirdly, there may be another word or expression that expresses the same meaning of the SL idiom and so there is repetition. Therefore, the translator opts for using the omission strategy, as can be seen in the examples below. Finally, it may be omitted for the tempo-special constraints of subtitling. This strategy represents three examples (10%) of the data in this study. The following example illustrates this strategy whereby SL idioms have been omitted in the TL.

Example 10:

Arabic Idiom: *استهدوا بالله كده واخزوا الشيطان*

Literal Translation: Be guided by Allah and disgrace Satan

English Subtitle: Calm down

The three examples of omission in the current study may be due to the third reason discussed above. In other words, the idiom may be preceded by another expression that implies the meaning of the idiom and so it is omitted, as translating the idiom in that case would have caused redundancy. In Example 10, the idiomatic expression اخزوا الشيطان meaning “to put the Satan to shame” is normally uttered after the previous expression استهدوا بالله meaning “to calm down” and so the subtitler opted for omitting the SL idiom in that case.

REDUCTION

It is the strategy of translating a SL idiom into a TL word. Reduction itself cannot be said to be appropriate or inappropriate for idiom translation. Thus, an idiom may be translated appropriately into a word in some cases. However, in other cases this reduction strategy may not result in an acceptable translation. Only one example representing 3.3% of the corpus in this study has utilized this strategy.

Example 11:

Arabic Idiom: البنت حلقت لي

Literal Translation: The girl shaved me

English Subtitle: The girl ditched me

Example 11 was translated by applying the reduction strategy. The SL idiomatic expression حلقت لي, literally means “shaved me”, was translated using a word in the TL. The TL word “ditched”, according to Cambridge dictionary, means “to get rid of something or someone that is no longer wanted”. The TL word is used in the slang variety to mean abandon or discard, e.g. “to ditch a girlfriend”. Thus, the provided English translation conveys the intended meaning of the idiom in the SL.

COMPENSATION

This is the strategy of translating a SL non-idiom with a TL idiom. As the case with reduction strategy, fansubbers have used compensation strategy in only one example which represents 3.3% of the subtitles in the present study.

Example 12:

Arabic Non-Idiom: الحمد لله مبسوطين في شرم الشيخ

Literal Translation: Praise be to Allah, we are happy in Sharm El Sheikh

English Subtitle: We're okay. Having a blast in Sharm El-Sheikh

In example 12, the SL original speech does not contain an idiom. However, the subtitler provides a TL idiom to compensate for the SL idioms in other places in the movie, which were either omitted or translated into non-idioms. The SL word مبسوطين in Egyptian colloquial Arabic which means “happy” was translated by the TL idiom “have a blast” which means “have a good time or a lot of fun”. Though the TL idiom conveys the meaning of the SL utterance, the TL expression should have been used as part of the previous sentence and not as a separate sentence. There is a grammatical mistake in the used form of the TL idiom, and this refers to the fact that amateur subtitling does not normally stick to standards and conventions and their subtitles have some mistakes. So, the English subtitle should be “We're okay, having a blast in Sharm El-Sheikh”. The SL word in question could have been translated without using an idiom in the TL. It could have been translated as “We're okay, enjoying our time (or having a good time) in Sharm El-Sheikh”.

CONCLUSION

Amateur translation on the screen (also known as fansubbing) has gained considerable attraction due to the advancement in technology and the proliferation of online resources. Fansubbing is a type of volunteer translation done by fans for other fans. This type of translation is a new form of subtitling, which is different from the subtitles made by professional translators who follow the standard norms and conventions in their work environment. Most studies on subtitling have discussed the subtitles produced by professional translators, with little focus on the subtitling made by amateur translators or fansubbers. This study is an attempt to address this gap through discussing the strategies employed by fansubbers to translate Arabic idiomatic expressions into English. The study adopts Gottlieb's subtitling model (1997) to investigate the strategies used by amateur translators.

The study concludes that amateur translators use a few strategies to translate Arabic idioms into English. These are correspondence, paraphrase, congruence, omission, reduction and compensation. The analysis shows that the most frequently used strategies are correspondence (36.7%) and paraphrase (33.3%), which constitute 70% of the examples used in the study, while the least used are reduction and compensation, representing 3.3% for each of them. Some problems have been found in the amateur translation of the Arabic idioms in this study. For example, an idiom may be translated using paraphrasing while it could be translated using an equivalent idiom in the TL as in examples 4 and 5. The idiom may not be communicatively translated in the TL as in examples 3 and 7. The idiom may be used for a humorous effect which is not rendered in the TL as in example 8. It should be noted that subtitlers may omit an idiom in the TL as translating it does not add to the overall meaning. In addition, the subtitling time and space constraints necessitate omitting any words that are redundant or superfluous in the TL. Further research is needed on the amateur subtitling of other culture-bound expressions such as proverbs and cultural references. These studies can explore the challenges that fansubbers face in translating these culture-specific items as well as the strategies they use to deal with them.

REFERENCES

- Abo Ali, S. M. (2023). Fansubbing as a Locus of Experimentation and Subversion: A Case Study of Amateur Arabic Subtitles of Selected English Movies. *Transcultural Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (TJHSS)*, 4(3), 43-72
- Al-Adwan, A. (2019). Mapping Arabic subtitling conventions: The case of Dubai One and MBC 2. In S. Faiq (Ed.), *Arabic Translation Across Discourses* (pp. 63-78). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351063388-5>
- Al-Yasin, N. (2022). Translation Procedures of Cultural-Bound Expressions in the Egyptian Vernacular Dubbed Versions of Three Disney Animated Movies. *Open Cultural Studies*, 6, 294-306.
- Al-Zgoul, O. & Al-Salman, S. (2022). Fansubbers' Subtitling Strategies of Swear Words from English into Arabic in the Bad Boys Movies. *Open Cultural Studies*, 6, 199-217. <https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2022-0156>
- Anani, M. (1995). *The Comparative Tone*. Cairo. General Egyptian Book Organization.
- Anani, M. (1996). *The Art of Translation* (in Arabic). 3rd edition. Egyptian International Publishing Company - Longman.

- Baker, M. (1992). *In Other Words: a course book on translation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bogucki, Ł. (2009). Amateur Subtitling on the Internet. In J. D. Cintas and G. Anderman (Eds.), *Audiovisual Translation: Language Transfer on Screen* (pp. 49-57), New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bujić, A. M. (2014). Translation of Idioms in TV Subtitling. *Hieronymus*, 1, 1-34.
- Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.) *ditch*. Retrieved July 20, 2025, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ditch?q=ditched>
- Chou, I, Xiang, Z. & Liu, K. (2024). Unravelling the stylistic nuances: a comparative multidimensional analysis of amateur and professional translations of Legends of the Condor Heroes. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11(1), 1-13
- Clements, S. E. (1998). *Translating the Untranslatable: Overcoming Linguistic and Cultural Barriers to Translation in Subtitles*. Unpublished MSc thesis. University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology.
- Cowie. A.P. (1981). The treatment of collocations and idioms in learners' dictionaries. *Applied Linguistics*, 3, 223-235.
- De Linde, Z. & Kay, N. (1999). *The semiotics of subtitling*. St. Jerome Publishing.
- Díaz-Cintas J, Remael A (2007) *Audiovisual translation: subtitling*. St. Jerome Publishing, Manchester.
- Duff, A. (1981) *The Third Language*. Pergamon Press Ltd.
- Garcia I (2009) Beyond Translation Memory: Computers and the Professional Translator. *Journal of Specialised Translation*, 12, 199–214.
- Gottlieb, H. (1997). "Quality Revisited: The Rendering of English Idioms in Danish Television Subtitles vs. Printed Translations" In A. Trosborg (Ed.), *Text Typology and Translation* (pp. 309-338). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Haider, A. S. & Shohaibar, R. S. (2024). Netflix English subtitling of idioms in Egyptian movies: challenges and strategies. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03327-4>
- Hajmohammadi, A. (2004). The Viewer as the Focus of Subtitling: Towards a Viewer-oriented Approach. *Translation Journal* 8(4). <https://translationjournal.net/journal/30subtitling.htm>
- Ibrahim, S. A. (2022). Strategies for Translating Idioms Involved in The Dubbed Version of 'Monsters Inc.' Movie for Children. *Egyptian Journal of Linguistics and Translation "EJLT"*. 7(1), 11-27.
- Izwaini, S. (2014). Amateur Translation in Arabic-Speaking Cyberspace. *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice*, 22 (1), 96–112.
- Jaskanen, S. (1999). *On the inside Track to Loserville, USA: Strategies used in translation of humor in two Finnish versions of Reality Bites*. Pro gradu thesis, University of Helsinki.
- Khalaf, A. S., Rashid, S. M., Jumingan, M. Z. & Othman, M. S. (2014). Problems in Amateur Subtitling of English Movies into Arabic. *Malaysian Journal of Languages and Linguistics*, 3, 38-55.
- Lomheim S (1999) The writing on the screen. Subtitling: a case study from Norwegian broadcasting (NRK), Oslo. In G. Anderman and M. Rogers (Eds.) *Word, text, translation*. Multilingual Matters, Clevedon, p 190–207

- Lorsch W (1991) Thinking-aloud as a method for collecting data on translation processes. In S. Tirkkonen-Condit (Ed.) *Empirical research in translation and intercultural studies* (p 67–77). Gunter Narr, Tübingen.
- Mahdi, H.S. and Sahari, Y. (2024), A corpus-based study of translating idioms from English into Arabic using audio-visual translation. *International Journal of Information and Learning Technology*. 41(3) 244-261. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJILT-07-2023-0128>
- Manipuspika, Y. S., & . Winzami, D.R.J. (2021). Translation of Idioms: How They are Reflected in Movie Subtitling. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies*, 5 (1) 113-125. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol5no1.8>
- Mazid, B. M. I (2006). Arabic Subtitles on English Movies: Some Linguistic, Ideological and Pedagogic Issue. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies (IJAES)*, 7, 81-100
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Play (it) smart. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved October 26, 2024, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/play%20%28it%29%20smart>
- Newmark, P. (1988). *Approaches to Translation*. Prentice Hall International (UK) Ltd.
- Nida, E. A. (1964). *Towards a science of translating*. E. J. Brill.
- Obeidat, M. M., & Abbadi, R. A. (2024). Subtitling cultural expressions in “Barbie” movie into Arabic. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, 5(3). 278-290. <https://doi.org/10.58256/zjv58d92>
- Palmer, F.R. (1981). *Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosa, A. A. (2001). Features of Oral and Written Communication in Subtitling. In Y. Gambier and H. Gottlieb (Eds.), *(Multi) Media Translation: Concepts, Practices and Research* (pp. 213-221). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Sabtan, Y. M. N. (2022). A Pragmatic Investigation of the Translation of Swearwords in Arabic-English Film Subtitling. *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature*, 28(1), 152-166. <http://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2022-2801-11>
- Sabtan, Y. M. & Al-Johani, H. M. (2025). English Subtitling of Arabic Proverbs on TV Screen: Challenges and Strategies. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 16(3), 856-866. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1603.16>.
- Sayed, A. A. (2003). Compositionality of Idiomatic Structures: A Cognitive Approach. *Faculty of Languages & Translation Studies*, 34, 197-256.
- Schwarz, B. (2003). Translation in a confined space – Film subtitling with special reference to Dennis Potter’s “Lipstick on Your Collar”, Part 2. *Translation Journal*, 7(1). <https://translationjournal.net/journal/23subtitles.htm>
- Shuhaiber, R. & Haider, A. (2023). Strategies of Subtitling Egyptian Idiomatic Expressions and Proverbs into English. *Language Value*, 16(2), 60-99. <https://doi.org/10.6035/languagev.7015>
- Wilcock, S. (2013). *A Comparative Analysis of Fansubbing and Professional DVD Subtitling*, Master’s Thesis, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.