Challenges and Strategies in Translating Humour for Arabic Subtitling

Abderrahim Eljazouli

Research Lab: Translation, Intercultural Communication and Knowledge Integration; Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Cadi Ayyad University, Marrakech, Morocco
abderrahim.eljazouli1997@gmail.com

Noureddine Azmi

Research Lab: Translation, Intercultural Communication and Knowledge Integration; Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Cadi Ayyad University, Marrakech, Morocco
azmi.noure@gmail.com

Abstract

The translation of humour in audiovisual media presents unique challenges due to its cultural relativity and dependence on social, linguistic, and cultural contexts. While Audiovisual Translation (AVT) studies have expanded since their emergence in the 1950s, research on humour translation between English and Arabic remains understudied, particularly regarding culturally sensitive content. This study addresses this gap by examining the strategies employed in translating humorous content from English to Arabic in subtitled media. Using a corpus-based approach, this research combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies to analyze translation strategies for humour, with particular attention to sensitive topics including sex, religion, and politics. The qualitative analysis examines the specific challenges and solutions in translating culturally-bound humour, while the quantitative component provides statistical data on the frequency and distribution of various translation strategies. The findings reveal that Arabic subtitlers predominantly employ Preservation strategies (50%), followed by Reduction (18.2%) and Expansion (16.7%). This pattern differs from previous studies of other language pairs, suggesting that the English-Arabic translation of humour involves unique considerations and approaches. The research contributes to AVT scholarship by providing empirical evidence of translation strategies in the understudied English-Arabic language pair and offering insights into the handling of culturally sensitive humour in Arabic subtitling practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

The field of Translation Studies has grown significantly in recent decades, evolving to include various specialized branches, such as translation technology and audiovisual translation (AVT). This growth reflects the increasing complexity of global communication and the need to address diverse forms of content, including humour. Researchers like Martínez Sierra and Zabalbeascoa have observed that humour is becoming a prominent focus within Translation Studies, recognizing it as a "symptom of research trend." This signifies that humour translation is not just an isolated issue but a central challenge for modern translation scholars (Martínez Sierra & Zabalbeascoa, 2017).

Despite advancements in translation technology, humour remains one of the most difficult areas for translators to master. The translation of humour often involves more than just a

linguistic transfer; it encompasses intricate considerations of culture, context, and timing, which can vary significantly between the source and target languages. Numerous studies have explored this topic, applying diverse scientific methods and theoretical frameworks. For instance, Aleksandrova emphasizes the multifaceted nature of verbally expressed humour, which requires careful consideration of the original text's structure, the intended audience, and the subtle nuances of both languages involved (Aleksandrova, 2020).

Both Translation Studies and Humour Studies are interdisciplinary fields. They draw insights from disciplines like linguistics, psychology, and sociology to understand not only how language works but also how people perceive and react to humour in different contexts. This interdisciplinary overlap enriches both fields, as the findings from one discipline can inform the other. For example, insights from psychology regarding humour perception and social dynamics can provide valuable context for translation strategies, while linguistic theories about syntax and semantics help explain why certain humour techniques, like puns or wordplay, may not easily transfer between languages.

In essence, the translation of verbal humour presents both practical and theoretical challenges. The type of humour, whether it is wordplay, satire, irony, or cultural reference, directly influences the translation process. Additionally, the length of the text may impact how humour is maintained across languages, particularly in the context of audiovisual media where time constraints further complicate the process. Cultural differences are perhaps the most significant factor; what is considered funny in one culture may not resonate the same way in another, or may even cause offense. Translators must navigate these complexities to create translations that preserve the original humour's effect while adapting it to the target culture's sensibilities.

This study aims to examine the challenges and strategies involved in translating humour in audiovisual translation (AVT), with a specific focus on subtitling in the English-Arabic language combination. By employing a corpus-based approach, the study seeks to analyze both qualitative and quantitative aspects of humour translation, particularly about sensitive topics such as sex, religion, and politics. The research aims to fill the existing gap in knowledge regarding humour translation in Arab cultures and provide insights into the micro- and macro-strategies employed by Arabic translators when dealing with culturally specific humour.

The research is committed to addressing these questions to achieve this objective.

Q1: What are the primary challenges that translators encounter when subtitling humour from English to Arabic, particularly in relation to sensitive topics including sex, religion, and politics?

Q2: What micro- and macro-strategies do Arabic translators employ to address cultural differences and sensitivities in the translation of humour in audiovisual content?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1. Theories of Humour
Humour theory is a multidisciplinary field that explores the origins and functioning of humour across different contexts. Scholars have developed several theories to explain why and how humour works, and these theories are often grouped into three main approaches: superiority, incongruity, and relief (Dynel, 2013).

Superiority Theory

The Superiority Theory of humour revolves around the idea that humour often serves as a way to assert power, dominance, or superiority over others. This concept, first proposed by Thomas Hobbes, suggests that laughter can arise from feelings of superiority and is often motivated by a desire to mock or ridicule someone (Dynel, 2011). According to Hobbes, humour can be used as a tool for aggression, harm, or belittlement, making it a way to assert control in social dynamics (Dynel, 2013). For example, in cases of sarcasm or cruel jokes, humour is used to target someone's weaknesses or misfortunes, thus reinforcing a sense of superiority in the one who laughs.

Incongruity Theory

The **incongruity theory** in humour studies is one of the most prevalent explanations for why people find certain things funny. According to this theory, humour is generated when there is a mismatch between what we expect to happen and what occurs. This unexpected twist or incongruity leads to a humorous response when the situation is resolved unexpectedly (Roberts, 2019). For instance, in a joke, the setup often leads the audience to form a certain expectation, but the punchline defies this expectation surprisingly or absurdly. Similarly, humorous situations in daily life often involve some sort of sudden shift or contradiction, such as an absurd situation or an unexpected reaction, which creates an incongruity between reality and expectation. What makes the incongruity theory particularly powerful is that it suggests humour is not merely a matter of individual preference or taste. Instead, it is tied to the cognitive processes of understanding and processing information. All humans naturally try to predict outcomes based on patterns, logic, or cultural norms. When something defies these predictions but does so in a non-threatening or playful way, the brain finds it amusing. This resolution of incongruity, whether through surprise, absurdity, or irony, sparks laughter (Ruiz & Alvarado Ortega, 2013). While humour is often influenced by cultural specifics and personal experiences, the mechanism of incongruity is thought to be a universal one that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries. Regardless of the context, the basic cognitive experience of encountering something unexpected and finding humour in its resolution appears to be a shared aspect of the human condition.

Relief Theory

According to Raskin, release-based theories of humour are centred on the idea that humour serves as a form of liberation from the constraints and rules that govern normal communication and behaviour (Raskin, 1984). When transitioning from genuine communication to joke-telling, both the speaker and the listener are freed from the conventional expectations of discourse—such as the need for clarity, logical coherence, and adherence to social norms. In this mode of communication, ambiguity, absurdity, and the breaking of established conventions are not only accepted but become part of the humour itself (Raskin, 1984).

These three theories have been extensively discussed and debated within various academic disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, and sociology. Each theory contributes a different perspective on humour, emphasizing either the emotional, cognitive, or social aspects of why people find certain things funny. As new research emerges, these theories continue to be refined, often blending elements of each approach to better explain the complexity of humour across different cultures, contexts, and situations.

2.2. Semantic Script Theory of Humour and General Theory of Verbal Humour

Victor Raskin's Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH) is a cognitive-based approach to understanding humour, which builds on the bisociation theory by emphasizing the role of scripts in the creation of humour (Roberts, 2019). In this theory, a script is defined as a cognitive framework or mental representation that contains semantic information about a particular concept, situation, or word. These scripts are internalized by speakers based on their experiences, knowledge, and language use (Raskin, 1984).

In Raskin's Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH), script opposition refers to the contrast between two conflicting cognitive structures that create humour through incongruity. These oppositions can be abstract, such as real/unreal, actual/non-actual, and normal/abnormal, or more concrete, including possible/impossible, good/bad, life/death, obscene/non-obscene, money/no-money, and high/low stature (Raskin, 1985). Humour arises when these opposing scripts are activated simultaneously, leading to a playful or surprising resolution that the mind finds amusing (Dore, 2019).

On the other hand, the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), developed by Attardo, provides a framework for understanding how humor is processed in the human mind (Attardo, 2008). It formalizes humor as a combination of different knowledge resources (KRs), which work together to produce a humorous effect by creating incongruity, surprise, or paradox (Attardo, 1994).

These include Language (LA), which refers to the linguistic aspects like word choice and grammar; Narrative Strategy (NS), which focuses on how the joke is structured (e.g., puns or irony); Target (TA), which considers the audience's preferences and attitudes; Situation (SI), which encompasses the context in which the joke is told; Script Opposition (SO), which highlights the clash between two conflicting ideas or scripts that create incongruity; and Logical Mechanism (LM), which provides the reasoning that resolves the incongruity and makes the joke funny. These resources work together to shape how jokes are understood and received, offering a comprehensive framework for analyzing humour (Attardo, 1994).

2.3. Development of AVT as a Field

Audio-visual translation (AVT) involves translating content from audio-visual media like cinema, television, and VHS, where both sound and images are integral to conveying the original message (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007). The process includes translating spoken dialogue, written text, sound effects, and visuals while preserving the meaning and cultural context. Different practices are used, such as subtitling, where text translations appear on screen, or dubbing, where original speech is replaced with translated dialogue. According to Díaz-Cintas & Remael, AVT manages the complex interaction of four core elements: spoken verbal content (dialogue), unspoken acoustic elements (music and sound effects), non-verbal visual cues (images), and verbal-visual content (subtitles) (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007). These combined elements shape the overall experience of the media, with AVT ensuring the translation retains the intended meaning and cultural nuances in the target language (Díaz-Cintas & Anderman, 2009).

In audiovisual translation (AVT), whether for subtitling or dubbing, translators face the challenge of balancing creative freedom with technical constraints. Subtitling requires condensing dialogue to fit limited screen space and time while maintaining the original meaning, tone, and style (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007). Dubbing, on the other hand, demands that translated dialogue align with the characters' lip movements and timing, adding another

layer of complexity. Translators must also account for non-linguistic elements like gestures, facial expressions, and cultural references, ensuring that the translation complements the visual and auditory cues of the original content. The goal is to produce a natural, culturally relevant translation that preserves the original experience for the target audience, despite the tight limitations of the medium (Aleksandrova, 2020).

2.4. Subtitling vs. Dubbing

Dubbing and subtitling are two key methods of audiovisual translation (AVT), each with distinct characteristics and challenges. Dubbing involves replacing the original spoken dialogue in a film or TV show with a newly recorded version in the target language, making it appear as though the characters are speaking the translated language. This method has been widely studied, with researchers exploring how dubbing adheres to the norms of the target culture and handles culturally specific or ideologically sensitive content (Pérez González, 2019). On the other hand, subtitling, defined by Gottlieb, is a written form of translation that displays text on screen, usually at the bottom, to convey the spoken dialogue, on-screen text (like signs or inscriptions), and other sound elements (such as songs or off-screen voices) (Gottlieb, 1992). Subtitling must synchronize with the visuals and dialogue, capturing the essence of the original while being concise enough for viewers to read comfortably. The balance between spoken dialogue, visuals, and the time allowed for reading subtitles is essential in shaping the audiovisual experience (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007).

On the other hand, subtitling is a well-established method in audiovisual translation that involves translating spoken dialogue into written text displayed on the screen. It has specific communicative goals, aiming to simplify and condense the source text to make it easier for viewers to understand (Perego, 2007). One of its unique features is that both the source and target texts appear together: viewers can hear the original audio while reading the subtitles. This dual presentation allows for a richer experience but also opens subtitles to criticism. Depending on their language proficiency, viewers might compare what they hear with what they read. If the subtitles don't perfectly match the original audio, some may view them as inaccurate or unreliable, which can lead to dissatisfaction (Perego, 2007).

Furthermore, in Audiovisual Translation, particularly subtitling, there has long been a misconception that it faces unique spatial and temporal limitations, a view originally emphasized by early scholars like Titford (Titford, 1982). These discussions often focus on how subtitlers must deal with restricted screen space and time to convey the original spoken message effectively. However, this notion overlooks the fact that many forms of translation face similar constraints. For example, translating poetry requires attention to layout and rhythm, and theatre translation must consider performance-related timing and delivery (Zabalbeascoa, 2001). While subtitlers do face challenges like condensing spoken language into written form, syncing subtitles with visual elements, and navigating the presence of the source text (ST), these are not entirely unique to AVT. All translation types involve complex processes of reading, interpretation, and making choices, and each comes with its own set of challenges (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007).

2.5. Humour Translation

> *"The area of humour and translation has not always been so popular in academia. Before the mid-nineties academic literature on the subject was scarce and often more anecdotal than scholarly in nature."* (Chiaro, 2010)

The study of humour and its translation was once an underdeveloped area in the fields of translation and linguistics. Before the mid-1990s, there was a noticeable lack of scholarly attention to the topic, and the few materials available were often informal and anecdotal, lacking the depth of academic analysis applied to other translation topics. This reflects the broader historical development of translation studies, where humour was not initially seen as a subject requiring rigorous exploration. However, as researchers began to understand the cultural and linguistic complexities of humour, they recognized its importance in communication. This led to a growing interest in how humour is created, conveyed, and adapted across languages in translation. Today, humour translation has become a more respected and thoroughly researched area, with scholars applying greater academic rigor to investigate the challenges and nuances involved in translating humour across different cultural contexts.

Translating humour through subtitles requires a delicate balance of creativity and decision-making. Humor can take many forms, such as through visual and verbal interactions, wordplay, or even as part of the narrative structure. It might also arise from genre experimentation or intertextual references. Some types of humour are easier to translate than others, and their importance varies depending on the context. The concept of (un)translatability is central to translation studies, raising the key question of what aspects of meaning can be transferred from one language to another. This issue is crucial in both the theoretical study and practical application of translation. Despite the challenges, many scholars and practitioners maintain a belief in the potential for humour and meaning to be translated, whether fully or to a degree, depending on the context (Ivashkiv, 2019). This reflects the broader debate on how language, culture, and meaning intersect in translation.

2.6. Humour Translation in the Arab World

Humour translation remains an underdeveloped area of study and practice in the Arab world, largely due to several factors that complicate its growth. Firstly, humour is deeply rooted in cultural, social, and linguistic contexts, making it challenging to translate across different cultures, particularly between Western and Arab cultures, which often differ in their sense of humour, values, and taboos. The difficulty is further amplified by the sensitive nature of certain humorous elements, such as sexual innuendo, political satire, or religious jokes, which are commonly filtered or censored in Arab media to align with local cultural and religious norms.

In their study of irony in the Disney film "Monsters Inc.," Yahiaoui et al. used a descriptive framework to compare the original English version with two Arabic translations: one in Egyptian Vernacular and the other in Modern Standard Arabic (Yahiaoui et al., 2020). They focused on scenes featuring irony, using Muecke's (1978) classifications of irony markers to identify relevant segments. The study revealed that situational and dramatic irony were the most frequent types of humour used in the film. Each translation addressed the challenges of translating irony in different ways. The Egyptian Vernacular version adopted a target-oriented, creative approach, adjusting narrative names and dialogue to make the humour resonate with the Egyptian audience. This approach follows Toury's notion of an "acceptable" translation, which prioritizes the linguistic and cultural norms of the target culture, ensuring the translated version feels natural and culturally relevant within its own context (Yahiaoui et al., 2020).

In their study, Al-Adwan and Yahiaoui examined how Arab subtitlers navigate translating sexual references in the sitcom "Two and a Half Men" into Arabic, influenced by state censorship and self-censorship due to the cultural and religious sensitivities of Arab audiences

(Al-Adwan & Yahiaoui, 2018; Alfadda et al., 2024). The researchers identified four main strategies used by these subtitlers: semantic misrepresentation (changing the meaning to avoid offensive content), implication (suggesting rather than directly translating taboo topics), reversed metonymy (shifting the reference of the language), and omission (completely removing problematic content). These strategies often led to significant alterations in the translation, which caused Arab viewers to miss or misunderstand the humour, particularly in moments involving taboo subjects like sexuality. The study also pointed out a disconnect between the Arabic subtitles and the characters' facial expressions or background laughter, which normally signal humour. By filtering or toning down offensive content, Arab subtitlers aimed to safeguard cultural norms but inadvertently distorted the portrayal of characters and the show's humour (Al-Adwan & Yahiaoui, 2018).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study addresses the gap in research on humour translation in the English-Arabic language pair by adopting a corpus-based approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods. Previous studies have largely focused on Western cultures, leaving a lack of understanding about how humour is translated across different language and culture combinations, such as English to Arabic. The qualitative approach of this study is designed to explore the challenges of translating humour, particularly in relation to sensitive issues like sex, religion, and politics, which are often considered taboo in Arab societies. By examining specific scenes with humorous dialogue, the qualitative analysis reveals the rationale behind subtitling strategies, showing how humour is adapted and localized within these societal constraints.

Additionally, the study incorporates a quantitative analysis to provide statistical data on the micro-strategies (specific linguistic choices) and macro-strategies (overall translation approaches) used by Arabic translators when subtitling humour. This combination of approaches allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how humour is transposed into Arabic, offering both statistical insights and in-depth analysis of the translation processes.

The selected corpus consists of carefully curated scenes from sitcoms, specifically chosen to align with the study's focus on analysing the translation of humour connected to societal taboos.

Table 1: Selected Series for Humour Translation Analysis

Series	Episode	Provisional Titles	Runtime (hh:mm)
Shameless	S1.E1	Pilot	58m
Shameless	S1.E2	Frank the Plank	54m
How I Met Your Mother	S1.E1	Pilot	22m
How I Met Your Mother	S1.E10	The Pineapple Incident	26m

The selection of "Shameless" and "How I Met Your Mother" for this study represents a deliberate contrast in analyzing humour translation across different television formats and styles. These shows offer distinct approaches to comedy, with "Shameless" being a dramedy that runs approximately 55 minutes per episode and tackles controversial themes through raw, boundary-pushing humour while addressing serious social issues, whereas "How I Met Your Mother" represents mainstream network sitcom humour in a shorter 22-26 minute format, relying more heavily on wordplay, cultural references, and traditional sitcom structures. The choice to analyze pilot episodes from both series is significant as these establish the fundamental tone, characters, and humour style that define each show, while the follow-up

episodes ("Frank the Plank" and "The Pineapple Incident") allow researchers to examine how the established humour patterns develop and evolve.

The data analysis procedures for the research tool (Corpus) in our study utilize both qualitative and quantitative methods to comprehensively explore the translation of humour in audiovisual content, with a particular emphasis on scenes addressing societal taboos.

Table 2: Subtitles Providers and Their Corresponding Media Content for Humour Translation Analysis

Subtitles Provider	Series-Movie-Animated Film
Amazon Prime Video	Shameless S1.E1 Shameless S1.E2
StarzPlay	*How I Met Your Mother S1.E1* *How I Met Your Mother S1.E10*

The above table presents a list of streaming platforms and the corresponding series or films used for the analysis of humour translation. It identifies specific episodes of each series, pinpointing the media content that contributes to the research. Amazon Prime Video is shown as the provider of the first two episodes of *Shameless* (Season 1, Episodes 1 and 2), while StarzPlay is the source for selected episodes of *How I Met Your Mother* (Season 1, Episodes 1 and 10). Each subtitle provider is noted to examine how humour, particularly in sensitive or culturally nuanced themes, is translated across different audiovisual contexts.

The qualitative aspect of the analysis aims to uncover deeper insights into the subtitling strategies used when translating humour.

Table 3: Albert F.S. Pai Proposed Taxonomy of Subtitling Strategies (Pai, 2020)

Orientations	Macro-strategies	Micro-strategies
Minimal–change (SL–oriented)	Preservation	(1) Transfer, (2) Literalness
	Transformation	(3) Transposition, (4) Modulation, (5) Zooming, (6) Patterning
Interventional (TL–oriented)	Expansion	(7) Explicitation, (8) Elaboration, (9) Dramatisation, (10) Bridging
	Adaptation	(11) Equivalence, (12) Refocusing, (13) Distortion, (14) Punning
Alternative (Medium–oriented)	Reduction	(15) Condensation, (16) Removal, (17) Decimation, (18) Dilution, (19) Prefabrication, (20) Waiving

By focusing on these specific scenes, the qualitative analysis allows for a comprehensive understanding of the rationale behind the subtitling strategies. The use of Albert F.S. Pai's model plays a crucial role here, as it helps categorize the strategies based on their orientation:

Minimal-change strategies (source-language-oriented), which focus on preserving the original text's meaning and structure.

Interventional strategies (target-language-oriented), which adapt the content to suit the cultural norms and expectations of the target audience.

Alternative strategies (medium-oriented), which modify the content to fit the audiovisual medium's technical constraints.

The qualitative approach sheds light on how these strategies are employed in translating humour that touches on sensitive or taboo subjects, making it possible to understand the complexities and decisions behind the translation process.

On the other hand, the quantitative analysis, on the other hand, provides statistical data on the use of micro and macro strategies by subtitlers. By examining a large corpus of subtitles, the study quantifies how often certain strategies are used when translating humour, particularly in challenging contexts. This includes counting the frequency of each strategy.

4. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The analysis begins with a quantitative examination based on our corpus-driven study, focusing on the frequency and distribution of subtitling strategies employed in translating humorous English expressions into Arabic. By exploring a wide range of media formats, we identify common micro-strategies and macro-strategies, shedding light on the patterns and tendencies of subtitlers when dealing with sensitive content.

Table 4: Micro Strategies of Subtitling Humour - Series

		Series				Total
		How I Met Your Mother - S1 E1	How I Met Your Mother- S1 E10	Shameless S1 E1	Shameless S1 E2	
Strategies	Bridging	0	0	1	1	2
	Condensation	1	1	1	0	3
	Decimation	1	0	1	0	2
	Dilution	0	0	2	1	3
	Distortion	2	0	2	0	4
	Dramatisation	2	3	1	1	7
	Elaboration	0	2	0	0	2
	Equivalence	0	1	1	0	2
	Literalness	3	4	3	0	10
	Patterning	0	0	1	0	1
	Prefabrication	0	0	1	0	1
	Punning	1	0	0	0	1
	Refocusing	0	0	2	0	2
	Removal	0	0	1	0	1
	Transfer	4	3	13	3	23
	Transposition	0	0	1	0	1
	Waiving	0	0	0	1	1
Total		14	14	31	7	66

The table shows the frequency of different micro-strategies used in subtitling humour across four episodes from two TV series: "How I Met Your Mother" (HIMYM) and "Shameless".

HIMYM (2 episodes, 28 total instances):
- Relies heavily on Transfer (7 instances) and Literalness (7 instances)

- Shows a preference for Dramatisation (5 instances)

- Uses fewer varied strategies overall

Shameless (2 episodes, 38 total instances):
- Has a strong preference for Transfer (16 instances)

- Uses a wider variety of strategies

- Shows more instances of TL-oriented strategies (Distortion and Refocusing)

This difference indicates that Shameless contains more culturally specific humour and complex jokes that require a more varied approach to translation.

Handling of Specific Humour Elements
- The presence of Punning (1 instance in HIMYM) and Waiving (1 instance in Shameless) indicates attempts to deal with language-specific humour. These are especially difficult to translate.

- The use of Bridging (2 instances, both in Shameless) indicates the presence of cultural-specific humour that needed additional context for the target audience.

- Equivalence (2 instances) and Prefabrication (1 instance) show efforts to find corresponding expressions in the target language, which is crucial for maintaining the natural flow of humour.

The high use of Transfer and Literalness might preserve the original humour well for viewers who have some familiarity with the source language and culture. On the other hand, the presence of Dramatisation (7 instances) suggests efforts to enhance the comedic effect, which could compensate for any loss of humour in translation. Moreover, the use of Distortion (4 instances) and Refocusing (2 instances) indicates that some jokes were significantly altered, which might change the viewing experience for the target audience. Furthermore, the low frequency of Condensation (3 instances) and Removal (1 instance) indicate that preserving humour was prioritized over typical subtitling conventions due to the space constraints of subtitling. The absence of Zooming and Explicitation from the table, despite being in the taxonomy, suggests that these strategies were less suitable for humour translation in these specific episodes.

In conclusion, this detailed analysis reveals a varied approach to subtitling humour in these series. While there's a clear preference for preserving the original content as much as possible, subtitlers also employ a range of interventional and medium-oriented strategies to effectively convey humour across linguistic and cultural barriers. The differences between the two series and even between episodes of the same series highlight the complex and context-dependent nature of humour translation in subtitling.

The comparative analysis between the research findings and Ghassemiazghandi & Tengku-Sepora study reveals significant insights into humour translation strategies in subtitling. Ghassemiazghandi & Tengku-Sepora's study shows that "transfer" and "paraphrase" are the dominant strategies in Persian animation subtitles (Ghassemiazghandi & Tengku-Sepora, 2020). This high use of *transfer* (39.33%) and *paraphrase* (28.2%) suggests a significant effort to retain the original humour while accommodating language and cultural differences (Ghassemiazghandi & Tengku-Sepora, 2020). Similar to the study, the findings in HIMYM

and Shameless also indicate a preference for *transfer* in both series, with HIMYM showing a strong reliance on literalness and minimal variation, while Shameless uses a broader array of strategies, including *distortion* and *refocusing*. This difference aligns with the nature of each show: HIMYM's humour is relatively straightforward and often universal, whereas Shameless incorporates more culturally embedded jokes that require additional adaptation for a foreign audience. Both studies reveal that humour subtitling often requires balancing fidelity to the source material with making the humour accessible and natural for the target audience. In HIMYM and Shameless, subtitlers appear to prioritize humour preservation by using transfer and literalness, when possible, but also apply a range of interventional strategies to maintain the humour's impact, particularly in culturally specific jokes. The absence of certain strategies, like zooming and explicitation, could imply that subtitlers found them less applicable or effective for humour, opting instead for more targeted strategies like dramatization or distortion.

Table 5: Distribution of Macro Translation Strategies

Macro Strategies

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Adaptation	8	12,1	12,1	12,1
	Expansion	11	16,7	16,7	28,8
	Preservation	33	50,0	50,0	78,8
	Reduction	12	18,2	18,2	97,0
	Transformation	2	3,0	3,0	100,0
	Total	66	100,0	100,0	

The table presents a quantitative breakdown of macro-strategies used in translating humorous English expressions into Arabic. These strategies, applied by subtitlers to manage sensitive or culturally specific content, are categorized by frequency, percentage, valid percentage, and cumulative percentage.

- Preservation is the dominant strategy, accounting for 50% of all instances (33 out of 66).

- Reduction (18.2%) and Expansion (16.7%) are the next most common strategies.

- Adaptation (12.1%) is used moderately.

- Transformation is the least used strategy (3.0%).

The high prevalence of Preservation (50%) suggests a strong preference for maintaining the original content and style where possible. This aligns to provide an authentic viewing experience. The significant use of Reduction (18.2%) and Expansion (16.7%) indicates that subtitlers often need to adjust the content, either condensing or elaborating, to fit the constraints of subtitling or to clarify cultural references. Moreover, the moderate use of Adaptation (12.1%) shows that some content requires more substantial changes to be effective in the target language and culture. In addition, the low use of Transformation (3.0%) suggests that major alterations to the original content are rare.
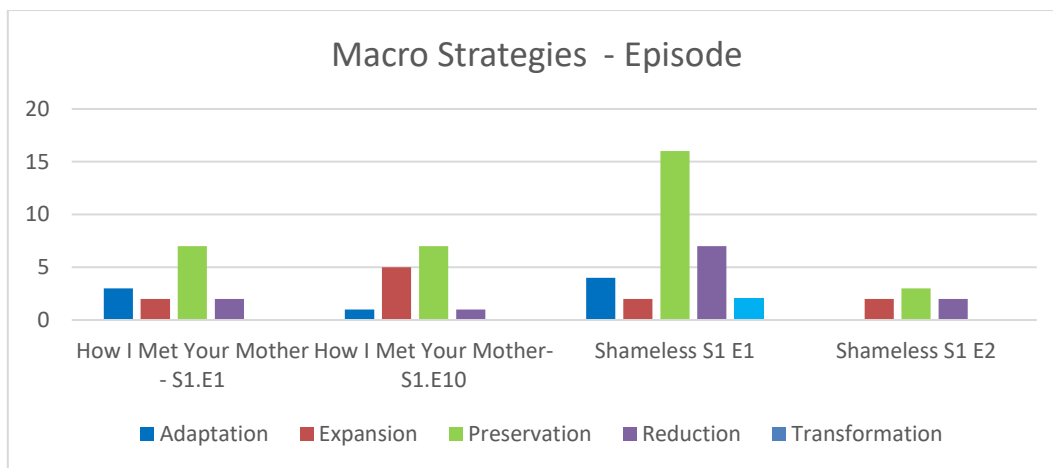
Figure 1: Macro Translation Strategies by Episode

The analysis reveals a nuanced approach to subtitling humour in these series. While preserving the original content is prioritized, subtitlers employ a range of strategies to effectively convey humour across linguistic and cultural barriers. The differences between episodes and series highlight the context-dependent nature of humour translation in subtitling, requiring a flexible approach to maintain both meaning and comedic effect.

HIMYM seems to require more varied strategies, with a more even distribution across categories. 'Shameless', particularly S1E1, heavily favours Preservation, which indicates that its humour is more directly translatable or that the subtitler chose to stay very close to the original text.

Translation Strategies and Cultural Adaptation in Series

Building on the quantitative findings, we now turn to the qualitative analysis, which explores the subtle principles and reasoning behind subtitling decisions. Through a detailed examination of scenes featuring humorous dialogue exchanges, we gain valuable insight into the subtitlers' thought processes and the factors influencing their choices.

Table 6: Subtitle Translation Analysis for 'Shameless Season One Episode 1'

Series	Episode	Timecodes	Duration
Shameless Season one	Episode 1	00:00:11,920 - 00:00:18,601	00:00:06,681
Dialogue		Nobody's saying our neighborhood is the Garden of Eden. Hell, some people say God avoids this place altogether...	
Subtitle		لا أحد يقول بأن حيّنا هي جنة عدن بل إن البعض يقول بأن الرب يتجنب هذا المكان بأكمله	
Back translation		No one says that our neighborhood is the Garden of Eden. In fact, some say that even God avoids this place entirely.	
Strategy		**Transfer and Condensation**	

The scene is from the pilot episode of the U.S. adaptation of *Shameless*, a show that follows the chaotic life of Frank Gallagher and his dysfunctional family. The Gallagher family lives in a rundown neighborhood, far from the idyllic, perfect world. The series portrays their struggles with poverty, addiction, and complex family dynamics, often through a dark comedic lens.

"Nobody's saying our neighbourhood is the Garden of Eden." is a massive understatement. The Garden of Eden represents perfection, while the neighbourhood in Shameless is portrayed as

deeply troubled. The humour comes from the stark contrast between this idealized biblical location and the reality of their impoverished, crime-ridden area.

The translator has preserved the semantic content and overall meaning of the source text. The core message about the neighborhood not being ideal and potentially avoided by God is maintained. There's a slight condensation in the translation. The informal exclamation "Hell" at the beginning of the second sentence is omitted. This strategy helps to fit the subtitle within space and time constraints while maintaining the essential meaning. The translation maintains the reference to the "Garden of Eden" (جنة عدن), which is a concept familiar in both Western and Middle Eastern cultures. The mention of God (الرب) is also preserved, respecting the religious undertones of the original dialogue. Overall, the translation effectively conveys the main ideas and tone of the original dialogue while adapting to the constraints of subtitling and cultural considerations. It maintains the essence of the neighborhood being portrayed as a less-than-ideal place, potentially forsaken even by divine presence.

Elbakri's analysis of humour translation, particularly with regard to vulgar or potentially offensive content in Middle Eastern contexts, highlights the complex cultural and linguistic challenges in subtitling American humour into Arabic (Elbakri, 2021). This complexity is compounded by several factors, including the multimodal nature of audiovisual content, cultural disparities, and the formal constraints of subtitling, all of which make it difficult to retain the humour's impact (Elbakri, 2021). Elbakri's research and the "Shameless" example provide a comprehensive illustration of the intricate challenges and strategic solutions in translating American humour for Middle Eastern audiences through subtitling. The analysis focuses on a specific line referencing the "Garden of Eden," which encapsulates the multifaceted nature of cross-cultural humour translation, demonstrating how subtitlers must navigate multiple challenges simultaneously: the multimodal constraints of audiovisual content, significant cultural disparities, formal subtitling limitations, and the need to handle religious and cultural sensitivities with extreme care. The successful translation employs a combination of transfer and condensation strategies, showcasing how careful strategy selection can preserve core humorous elements while respecting cultural boundaries. By strategically omitting potentially offensive elements and shifting from informal to more neutral language, while maintaining shared cultural symbols(Al-Wasy & Mohammed, 2024).

Table 7: Subtitle Translation Analysis for 'Shameless Season One Episode 2'

Series	Episode	Timecodes	Duration
Shameless Season one	**Episode 2**	00:38:42,697 - 00:38:47,767	00:00:05,070
Dialogue		My Karen was 12 when I heard her use the C-word. And on a Sunday.	
Subtitle		إبنتي كارين كانت بعمر الثانية عشر حينما سمعتها تنطق بكلمة غير لائقة وكان يوم أحد	
Back translation		My daughter Karen was twelve years old when I heard her say an inappropriate word, and it was a Sunday.	
Strategy		**Bridging**	

The main cultural gap is the reference to the "C-word." This is a highly offensive term in English-speaking cultures, particularly shocking when used by a young person. The taboo

nature of this word and its specific connotations might not translate directly to Arabic-speaking cultures. The translator employs bridging by replacing "C-word" with "كلمة غير لائقة" (an inappropriate word). This general term bridges the cultural gap by conveying the essence of the situation - a young girl using shocking language - without specifying the exact word or level of offense. By using a general term for inappropriate language, the translation sidesteps potential censorship issues that might arise from translating or explaining the C-word explicitly in Arabic subtitles. The bridging strategy here effectively conveys the core meaning and emotional impact of the original line while adapting it to be culturally appropriate and understandable for the target audience. It sacrifices some of the specific shock value of the original for broader accessibility and cultural appropriateness.

Table 8: Subtitle Translation Analysis for How I Met Your Mother Season One Episode 1

Series	Episode	Timecodes	Duration
How I Met Your Mother Season one	Episode 1	00:38:42,697 - 00:38:47,767	00:00:05,070
Dialogue		- Sort of looks like a Smurf penis. - when you go on a first date, you really don't wanna say "Smurf penis."	
Subtitle		- إنه يشبه قرن السنفور - بنيّ، سأسدي إليك نصيحة في الموعد الأول لا تقل قرن السنفور	
Back translation		- It looks like a Smurf's horn. - Son, let me give you some advice, on a first date, don't say 'Smurf's horn.'	
Strategy		Distortion	

The most significant distortion is the replacement of "penis" with "قرن" (horn). This is a clear euphemism to avoid explicit sexual reference, due to cultural sensitivities and potential censorship issues in Arabic-speaking countries. While the explicit sexual humour is lost, the translation still maintains a level of absurdity by referring to a "Smurf's horn," which doesn't exist and sounds ridiculous, preserving some of the humour's essence. The distortion helps in adapting the joke to be more acceptable in cultures where explicit sexual references might be considered too vulgar for television, especially in subtitles. The translation sacrifices the explicit nature of the original joke and some of its shock value. However, it gains in terms of cultural appropriateness and potential reach to a broader audience who might be put off by the original phrasing.

In his "A Corpus-Based Approach to the Study of Subtitling Humour", Albert F.S. Pai's research delves into the use of corpus methodology for investigating the subtitling of humour, offering a comprehensive overview of how corpus linguistics has evolved and its relevance to audiovisual translation (AVT) (Pai, 2020). His study emphasizes the importance of designing a well-structured corpus, particularly in the context of humour analysis. This includes the detailed development of annotation schemes tailored specifically to humour subtitling, which allowed for a nuanced analysis of the translation strategies employed in subtitling cross-cultural humour. The theoretical framework selected for the research is crucial, as it supports understanding the complexities and nuances involved in translating humour across languages and cultures. Pai explores the significance of domain knowledge in this process, highlighting how deep cultural and linguistic understanding is necessary to effectively analyze humour subtitling.

A key component of Pai's work is the ECCO corpus, which he designed to specialize in AVT research, specifically focusing on humour. The process of constructing this corpus is thoroughly detailed, providing a step-by-step methodology that future researchers can use when building custom corpora for specialized AVT research (Pai, 2020). Pai employs both quantitative and qualitative analyses to examine the use of subtitling strategies in translating humour, showcasing how a DIY corpus can serve dual purposes in humour translation studies. His analysis revealed that the Reduction strategy (31.62%) was the most commonly used macro-strategy in humour subtitling, followed by Preservation (26.56%). The current research data shows that Preservation is the most frequently used macro-strategy (50%), followed by Reduction (18.2%) and Expansion (16.7%). This distribution suggests that subtitlers into the Arabic language prioritize maintaining the original content where possible, but also frequently need to adjust the text to fit subtitling constraints or clarify cultural references.

Both studies offer valuable insights into the strategies employed in subtitling humour, but with notable differences in their findings. Pai's research, utilizing corpus linguistics, focused on developing a comprehensive framework for analysing humour in subtitles, emphasizing the importance of corpus design, theoretical frameworks, and annotation schemes. Pai's results showed a preference for Reduction (31.62%) and Preservation (26.56%) strategies, interpreted through the lens of relevance theory as attempts to balance cognitive effects and processing effort. In contrast, the current study, focusing on English-Arabic subtitling, found Preservation (50%) to be the dominant strategy, followed by Reduction (18.2%) and Expansion (16.7%). This research provided a more detailed analysis of micro-strategies, highlighting the use of techniques like Transfer, Literalness, and Dramatisation to preserve or adapt humour. While Pai's work emphasized the development of corpus methodology for humour analysis in AVT, the study offered insights into the specific techniques used by subtitlers, particularly in preserving and adapting humour for an Arabic-speaking audience. Both studies acknowledge the importance of cultural adaptation, but the current findings suggest a stronger preference for maintaining original content where possible. The research also highlighted the context-dependent nature of humour translation, noting variations in strategy use between different series and episodes. The differences in findings between the two studies could be attributed to factors such as different language pairs, corpus content, or evolving subtitling practices.

Modern viewers, having greater exposure to international media, demand higher quality standards in subtitling that maintain both accuracy and cultural authenticity while preserving original humour and cultural nuances (Yuan, 2022). This creates a complex challenge for translators who must demonstrate exceptional flexibility in their approach, adapting their translations to accommodate different cultural contexts, language proficiency levels, viewing purposes, platform requirements, and regional regulations.

5. CONCLUSION

This research significantly contributes to the field of Audiovisual Translation (AVT), particularly in the context of humour subtitling from English to Arabic. By employing a corpus-based approach that combines qualitative and quantitative analyses, the study offers valuable insights into the strategies and challenges involved in translating culturally-specific humour across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The findings reveal a marked preference for the Preservation strategy (50%) among Arabic subtitlers, followed by Reduction (18.2%) and Expansion (16.7%). This distribution suggests a prioritization of maintaining original content where possible, while also acknowledging the

need for adjustments to meet subtitling constraints and clarify cultural references. The study's detailed examination of micro-strategies, such as Transfer, Literalness, and Dramatisation, provides a nuanced understanding of how subtitlers navigate the complex task of preserving or adapting humour for an Arabic-speaking audience.

In comparison to previous research, such as Pai's work, which found Reduction to be the most common strategy, this study's results highlight the context-dependent nature of humour translation (Pai, 2020). The differences in findings underscore the importance of considering factors such as language pairs, cultural contexts, and evolving subtitling practices in AVT research. This analysis further explores the complex landscape of humour translation strategies in subtitling across different studies and cultural contexts, particularly examining work by Ghassemiazghandi & Tengku-Sepora (Ghassemiazghandi & Tengku-Sepora, 2020), Elbakri (Elbakri, 2021), and examples from TV shows HIMYM and Shameless. The research reveals that transfer (39.33%) and paraphrase (28.2%) emerge as the predominant strategies in Persian animation subtitles, aligning with the research findings that indicates that HIMYM favours literalness for its universal humour while Shameless requires more nuanced approaches like distortion due to its culturally specific content. When translating English humour into Arabic, subtitlers face additional challenges related to cultural sensitivities, especially concerning vulgar language and religious references, necessitating careful adaptation strategies that preserve humour while respecting cultural norms. The analysis ultimately demonstrates that successful humour translation requires a dynamic, context-dependent approach where subtitlers must carefully balance humour preservation with cultural sensitivity, linguistic differences, and technical constraints, selecting strategies that best serve each specific situation while maintaining the essence of the original content.

The research also addresses a significant gap in the literature by focusing on the English-Arabic language combination, an area previously underrepresented in AVT studies. By examining the translation of humour related to sensitive topics like sex, religion, and politics, the study offers crucial insights into the cultural and social factors that influence subtitling decisions in the Arab context.

REFERENCES

Al-Adwan, A. M., & Yahiaoui, M. (2018). Intercultural pragmatics: A corpus-based study of speech acts in English and Arabic. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics, 22*(3), 363-389.

Aleksandrova, E. (2020). Audiovisual translation of puns in animated films : Strategies and procedures. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, *7*(4), 86-105. https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2019.7.4.aleksandrova

Alfadda, N. A., Mahdy Mohammed, O. S., & Qadha, A. M. (2024). The Translation of Complaint Speech Act in Business Communication: A Cultural Perspective. *Al-Andalus journal for Humanities & Social Sciences*, *11*(96).

Al-Wasy, B. Q., & Mohammed, O. S. M. (2024). Strategies of Translating Euphemistic Expressions from Arabic into English: A Comparative Study of Artificial Intelligence Models with Human Translation. *Humanities and Educational Sciences Journal*, (40), 826–855. https://doi.org/10.55074/hesj.vi40.1121

Attardo, S. (1994). Linguistic theories of humor. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Attardo, S. (2008). Semantics and Pragmatics of Humor : Semantics and Pragmatics of Humor. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, *2*(6), 1203-1215. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-818X.2008.00107.x

Chiaro, D. (Éd.). (2010). *Translation, humour and the media*. Continuum.

Díaz-Cintas, J., & Anderman, G. M. (Éds.). (2009). *Audiovisual translation : Language transfer on screen*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Díaz-Cintas, J., & Remael, A. (2007). *Audiovisual translation : Subtitling*. St. Jerome Pub.

Dore, M. (2019). Editorial : Multilingual Humour in Translation. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, *7*(1), 1-6. https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2019.7.1.dore1

Dynel, M. (Éd.). (2011). *The pragmatics of humour across discourse domains*. John Benjamins Pub. Co.

Dynel, M. (Éd.). (2013). *Developments in linguistic humour theory*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Elbakri, A. (2021). THE ISSUE OF SUBTITLING HUMOR IN ARABIC. *European Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics Studies*, *5*(3). https://doi.org/10.46827/ejlll.v5i3.289

Ghassemiazghandi, M., & Tengku-Sepora, T. M. (2020). *Translation Strategies of Humor in Subtitling*. 18.

Gottlieb, H. (1992). *Subtitling: A practical guide*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Ivashkiv, R. (2019). (Un)translatability revisited : Transmetic and intertextual puns in Viktor Pelevin's Generation "P" and its translations. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, *7*(1), 109-125. https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2019.7.1.ivashkiv

Martínez Sierra, Juan & Zabalbeascoa, Patrick. (2017). Humour as a symptom of research trends in translation studies. Monografias de Traduccion e Interpretacion (MonTI). 2017. 29-48.

Pai, A. F. S. (2020). A corpus-based approach to the study of subtitling humour. In Humour Translation in the Age of Multimedia (pp. 22-49).

Perego, C. (2007). Subtitling and dubbing. In J. Díaz-Cintas & A. Remael (Eds.), Audiovisual translation: A handbook (pp. 143-164). Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.

Pérez González, L. (Éd.). (2019). *The Routledge handbook of audiovisual translation*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Raskin, V. (1984). *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-6472-3

Raskin, V. (1985). The semantic structure of jokes. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Roberts, A. (2019). *A Philosophy of Humour*. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14382-4

Ruiz, L., & Alvarado Ortega, M. B. (Éds.). (2013). *Irony and humor : From pragmatics to discourse*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Titford, A. (1982). Subtitling: Sine qua non or superfluous? The Translator, 1(1), 33-41.

Yahiaoui, R., Alqumboz, B., Fattah, A., & Al Adwan, A. (2020). Translating irony into Arabic – who's having the last laugh? Dubbing Monsters Inc.: Egyptian vernacular vs. modern standard Arabic. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, *7*(4), 32-46. https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2019.7.4.yahiaoui

Yuan, C. (2022). A Study of American TV Series Subtitle Translation From the Perspective of Translation Variation Theory. *Asian Journal of Social Science Studies*, *7*(2), 52. https://doi.org/10.20849/ajsss.v7i2.1010

Zabalbeascoa Terran, P. (2001). La traducción del humor en textos audiovisuales. In M. Duro Moreno (Ed.), La traducción para el doblaje y la subtitulación (pp. 251-266). Madrid: Cátedra.