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The intralingual subtitling of interdialectal wordplay in the Arabic-speaking world

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Abstract

The present study aims to contribute to the research field of the intralingual subtitling of dialects. It attempts to bring to the fore the unique way in which humorous interdialectal communication, in the ST, notably wordplay, is rendered into one target standard language, MSA; a language deemed unable to vehiculate emotions such as humour, anger, frustration and lust. For this purpose, a qualitative and quantitative analyses of the series From Al Haram Street to…(*Al-Muthanna Sobh, 2022) was conducted. First, the quantitative analysis examined the main mechanisms of expressing humour in interdialectal communication based on a typology inspired by Zabalbescoa (1997), Delabastita (1996), Spanakaki (2007) and Thaler (2016)'s taxonomies of verbal humour. Second, it investigated the main subtitling strategies of rendering verbal humour in interdialectal communication using Gottlieb's (1992) strategies for subtitling. The qualitative analysis, on the other hand, provided deeper insights into the subtitler's tendencies in rendering wordplay in intralingual subtitling. The three dialects of the ST were Egyptian, Lebanese, and Kuwaiti Arabic (KA). The results came as follows: first, humour is chiefly conveyed in the ST via phonetic wordplay, notably malapropisms. Second, the subtitler adopts a neutralizing subtitling strategy exemplified in paraphrase due to linguistic and technical constraints. Last, the subtitler's neutralizing strategy is not deemed suitable when phonetic wordplay is vital to the storyline and when the SL and TL share significant linguistic features and phonetic similarities.*

Keywords: intralingual subtitling, humour, wordplay, interdialectal communication.

1. Introduction

Within the field of Audiovisual Translation (AVT), the preservation of diversity and its transmission necessitate deeper research within the framework of intralingual subtitling of dialectal Arabic. The subtitling from a dialect into a standard language and vice versa is becoming more popular by the day mainly in the Arabic-speaking world given that dialects are independent linguistic systems which serve, within an Arab country, an informative purpose.

Wordplay primarily depends on the ability to understand the play on language to invoke laughter, making its subtitling particularly challenging. This complexity is heightened when dealing with wordplay arising from comic interdialectal communication. In the Arabic-speaking world, intralingual subtitling from multiple dialects into Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) presents a unique challenge. The main issue is conveying verbal humour that stems from the interaction of different linguistic systems in the source text (ST) into one target language (TL): MSA, which is often considered incapable of expressing emotions such as humour, anger (swearing), or lust. A notable example of this challenge is the petition by Disney fans to revert to using Egyptian Arabic (EA) instead of MSA. The petition stated: “We, the Arab fans, ask you to please return the beautiful Egyptian dialect to Disney movies, instead of using the heavy Modern Standard Arabic…”[1] This outcry was a response to Disney’s 2012 decision to use MSA for dubbing, replacing the previously used EA.

Further, the identification and subtitling of humorous meanings require a deeper analysis, given that dialects in Arabic productions serve an informational purpose. This raises questions about how implicatures are represented in dialectal productions. Are they conveyed through the intentional use of sociolects, regiolects, and accents, or are there specific markers of verbal humour inherent to these productions? This study aims to answer such questions by exploring the mechanisms of verbal humour in the ST and how these mechanisms are rendered in subtitling; a technically constrained mode of AVT, where factors such as time, space, spotting, position, and font add further layers of complexity to an already intricate intralingual interdialectal translation process.

Therefore, the present analysis aims to contribute to the research field of dialect translation in AVT. It seeks to highlight the unique way in which two source dialects interact to create humorous messages for the audience and how these messages are subtitled for a broader audience that understands and speaks MSA and shares a similar cultural and linguistic background.

Through qualitative and quantitative analyses of the series *From Al Haram Street to…* (Al-Muthanna Sobh, 2022), we will examine how humour is rendered in intralingual subtitling from three dialects: EA, Lebanese Arabic (LA), and Kuwaiti Arabic (KA) into MSA. For this purpose, segments featuring comic wordplay were selected from all 29 episodes, transcribed, analysed, and compared to their corresponding Arabic subtitles. This research is significant because *From Al Haram Street to…* (Al-Muthanna Sobh, 2022) is a unique show where humour arises from dialect exchanges and is professionally subtitled into one standard language (MSA). Additionally, the research offers a typology for analysing verbal humour from an Arab perspective, inspired by various models, including Díaz-Cintas & Remael (2014 & 2020), Delabastita (1996), Diaz-Cintas & Remael (2007), Spanakaki (2007), and Thaler (2016), and is open to further developments.

The research questions are as follows:

- What are the markers of verbal humour in interdialectal communication within an Arab context?
- Does the subtitler faithfully convey humour in the Target Text (TT), or do they neutralize it?

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[1] petition: Return the Egyptian accent to the Disney movies! (thepetitionsite.com)

2. Literature review

2.1. Intralingual subtitling

2.1.1. Definitions

In the Arab world, AVT primarily refers to two main modes: dubbing and subtitling (Thawabteh, 2011, p. 25). AVT is a type of translation used for audiovisual content such as films and TV series, where multiple channels interact to convey a unified and accurate meaning. These channels include the acoustic, visual, and sometimes tactile channels (see Mejías-Climent, 2018 for video game localisation). In the words of Chaume, AVT is "a semiotic construct comprising several signifying codes that operate simultaneously in the production of meaning" (2004, p. 16).

The definitions of intralingual subtitling, a process of 'rewording', vary in terms of the source and target languages. Gottlieb (1997) describes intralingual subtitling (vertical subtitling) as a process where "the language of the original soundtrack and the written texts at the bottom of the screen is the same." This type of subtitling can serve purposes such as language learning, karaoke, notices, announcements, or reaching a wider audience, including the deaf and hard of hearing (Al-Abbas et al., 2022; De Rosa et al., 2014). Other scholars (Prieels & De Sutter, 2018; Floros, 2016; Al-Abbas et al., 2022) suggest that intralingual subtitling may involve the linguistic transfer from a colloquial language to a standard language. Floros' (2016) article, which examines the translatability of intralingual subtitles from the Cypriot Greek Dialect (CGD) to Standard Modern Greek (SMG), describes intralingual subtitling as "the translation of standard into dialect or dialect into standard." Likewise, according to Al-Abbas et al. (2022, p. 2), it "involves rendering dialogues into written subtitles within the same language."

2.2. Intralingual subtitling int the Arabic-speaking world

The term "dialect" originated in Greece to describe the various forms of classical Greek spoken in different contexts and associated with different types of literature (Haugen, 1966, p. 923). However, the term also carries a negative connotation. According to Bonaffini, dialects are "often considered a 'minor', subaltern, marginal language, even coarse and plebeian" (1997, p. 279).

In the Arabic-speaking world, intralingual subtitling refers to the translation of dialects into MSA to reach a broader Arabic-speaking audience who may not understand the original soundtrack's vernacular. For, despite the presence of an official standard language (MSA in the Arabic-speaking world), the use of "official dialects" persists within a country's borders to ensure proper understanding among residents (e.g., EA for Egypt, LA for Lebanon, Syrian Arabic (SA) for Syria, Moroccan Arabic (MA) for Morocco, etc.). Therefore, despite their lack of standardisation, the longevity of Arab dialects is not threatened:

> The gap between the literary language and any one of the colloquials is so great that an educated Egyptian who knows the literary language as well as the colloquial Egyptian finds it difficult to understand correctly the Iraqi colloquial; and so may the educated Syrian fail to understand the spoken Arabic of Morocco or Tunis.
>
> (Shouby, 1951, p. 286)

This raises the question: how can specific cultural and sociopolitical traits, often emphasized through the use of dialects in films, be effectively expressed in an all dialect-speaking film?

Regiolects (urban vs. rural) and sociolects (higher vs. lower varieties) are conscious choices that aid in constructing characters, building relationships, conveying moods and emotions, and linking them to specific social backgrounds (Kazloff, 2000; Richardson, 2010, cited in Diaz-Cintas & Remael, 2020). However, to serve a communicational purpose and guarantee comprehension among broader audiences (Floros, 2016), the dialect spoken in the capital (e.g., Cairene Arabic for Egypt, Rabati Arabic for Morocco) or by the largest population group (e.g., Hijazi Arabic for Saudi Arabia) undergoes levelling and is considered a neutral language. Music, sounds, and images complement the narrative. Therefore, when translating purely vernacular productions, subtitlers must identify the neutral and nuanced regiolects and sociolects, understand their purpose within the context, and work on effectively rendering them for the target audience (TA) (Diaz-Cintas & Remael, 2014).

However, intralingual subtitling often tends towards neutralisation, using well-structured sentences, formality, correct grammar, and pronunciation (Ranzato, 2010, p. 112). This choice is driven by various factors. Firstly, there is a fear of failing to achieve comprehensibility, readability, and clarity for the TA. In this sense, the subtitler Eija Pokkinen noted: “I would like to use dialects in translations, but they are considered difficult to read” (Alkadi, 2010, p. 28), hence the neutralisation strategy. Likewise, in dubbing into MA, voice actors reported difficulties reading MA translated scripts due to the cluster of consonants inherent to the Moroccan vernacular (Hall, 2015, p. 218). What is more, in the Arab world, “Arab native speakers use MSA in writing and never use colloquial” (Alkadi, 2010, p. 28), mainly due to the lack of linguistic codification (i.e. official standardisation). Similarly, Karamitroglou (1997) argues that subtitles may only include dialects previously documented in print, as language policies generally favor standardisation (Prieels & De Sutter, 2018; Hamaida, 2007; DeHouwer & Vandekerckhove, 2008; Rosa, 2001).

In other cases, subtitlers call for their creativity to convey linguistic features by exaggerating tone, style, and emphasizing visual information. For instance, a subtitler might add names with negative connotations in the TT to recreate the meaning behind the ST’s double negations (Diaz-Cintas & Remael, 2014). In more drastic cases, a subtitler might break the basic time-code rule to preserve the ST, where extremely necessary, as Jacqueline Cohen did when subtitling Shakespeare’s Hamlet. She stated in an interview on August 22, 2006: “Des fois, en simulation, on me reproche que mes sous-titres sont trop longs. Et je réponds: ‘Je m’en fiche. Si certains n’arrivent pas à lire, tant pis, mais je ne vais pas raccourcir Shakespeare et changer une phrase pour eux !’” (Sometimes, during simulations, I’m criticized for my subtitles being too long. And I respond: “I don’t care. If some people can’t read them, too bad, but I’m not going to shorten Shakespeare and change a sentence for them!”) (Sanchez, 2021, p. 86) (my translation). Ideally, subtitles should aim to mirror the ST’s colloquialism markers while adhering to comprehensibility, technical, and sociocultural constraints. According to Dickins et al. (2002, p. 67), compensation can be used when colloquialism is vital to the plot, for example, by adding “she said in a thick Tangiers accent.” However, this solution, famously known as Delabastita’s (1996, p. 134) Editorial Technique, infringes on the sacred time and space code of subtitling. Ultimately, the decision to incorporate dialectal features should be guided by the functional approach (Skopos theory) as stated by Diaz-Cintas & Remael (2007, p. 191).

2.2. Humour: Exploring a taxonomy for analysis

The main challenge in subtitling humour is first, defining then categorizing it (see Delabastita, 1997). Definition-wise, Turner (1986, p. 5) describes humour as “the stimulus for laughter and one of the unsolved problems of philosophy.” Attardo (1994, p. 4) defines humour as “an all-encompassing category, covering any event or object that elicits laughter, amuses, or is felt to be funny." These definitions, among others, are not conclusive, as some forms of humour can be intended to harm by demeaning specific social groups (Diaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007, p. 217). The expression of humour depends on cultural, psychological, social, philosophical, biological, historical, and etymological factors (Ammar & Ahmed, 2022). Additionally, it relies on language, the primary vehicle, to transmit it in a way that is recognizable to speakers. In this sense, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, or the hypothesis of linguistic relativity, has been used in humour-related studies to explain that "the language and culture of a person play a significant role in understanding and perceiving a concept" (Ghassemiazghandi & Tengku-Sepora, 2020). In other words, not everyone is expected to laugh at the same joke. Thus, the perception of humour (i.e., recognizing an utterance as comic) depends on the expression thereof (i.e., language's degree of success in conveying humour). So, how can humour be successfully verbally expressed?

2.2.1. Types of humour

The categorisation of verbal humour varies slightly among scholars, depending on the type of text, genre, context, and other factors. In subtitling fictional texts, Díaz-Cintas & Remael (2014), drawing on Martínez Sierra (2004) and Zabalbeascoa (1996), propose a taxonomy of humorous elements that includes six types of jokes: aural humour, language-dependent humour, visual humour, humour reflecting a community's sense of humour, humour referring to national culture or institutions, and international humour. Conversely, Diaz-Cintas & Remael (2020, p. 224), inspired by Zabalbeascoa (1996) and Diaz-Cintas & Remael (2007), categorize humour into three types: language-dependent humour, national or community-based humour and exoticism[2], and audiovisual challenges. Spanakaki's typology[3] (2007) is more general, distinguishing between two main types of humour: conceptual humour and verbal humour. The former involves the use of non-verbal objects to produce humour, while the latter involves the use of verbal objects.

Given that our study focuses on verbal humour (Spanakaki, 2007), also known as language-dependent humour in Zabalbeascoa's (1996) and Diaz-Cintas & Remael's (2020) models, it is essential to concentrate on the subcategories of verbal humour/language-dependent humour, for the purposes of our analysis.

2.2.2. Taxonomizing verbal humour: Verbal humour and wordplay

Spanakaki (2007) identifies three subcategories of verbal humour, notably wordplay, allusion, and verbal irony. Cicero's taxonomy of verbal humour, as cited by Attardo (2024, p. 12), includes paronomasia (puns), ambiguity, false etymologies, proverbs, literal interpretation of figurative expressions, allegory, metaphors, and antiphrasis or irony. According to Zabalbeascoa (1996, p. 253, as cited in Diaz-Cintas & Remael, 2020), language-dependent jokes/ verbal humour include puns and wordplay.

While these scholars consider wordplay (also called punning or paronomasia) a subtype of verbal humour, others consider wordplay nearly synonymous to verbal humour. Dore (2019, p. 106), for instance, refers to verbal humour in her taxonomy as *wordplay*. Chiaro (1992, p. 4) argues that wordplay is a vehicle for humour, making wordplay and humour inseparable concepts. In contrast, Attardo (2018, pp. 89-90) suggests that verbal humour and 'humorous'

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[2] This refers to "the degrees of familiarity/ unfamiliarity of cultural reference in our discussion of humour,….In fact, some of the humor in a film may originate in a third culture, especially in multicultural and multilingual productions." (Diaz-Cintas & Remael, 2020, p. 218)

[3] Cicero was the pioneer in developing a linguistic taxonomy by differentiating between verbal and referential humour. He noted that verbal humour can be translated or paraphrased, while referential humour cannot (Attardo, 2024, p.12).

wordplay can indeed be used interchangeably, however, humour can exist without wordplay, and wordplay can occur without being humorous (e.g., spelling games, anagrams, palindromes, acrostics, word squares, etc.). Similarly, Hempelmann (2004) contends that wordplay is not inherently humorous; it becomes humorous punning when it involves a play on meaning which is, as stated by Attardo (1994, p. 133), typically contrastive.
Delabastita states that wordplay is:

> The general name for various textual phenomena in which structural features of the language(s) are exploited in order to bring about a communicatively significant confrontation of two (or more) linguistic structures with more or less similar forms and more or less different meanings.
>
> (1996, p. 128)

Creating humorous wordplay is a challenging task for subtitlers due to the difficulty of replicating expressions that induce laughter, which involve both semantic and pragmatic effects stemming from the structural characteristics of the SL (Delabastita, 1994, p. 223). This type of linguistic manipulation, i.e. wordplay, has various subtypes. According to Zabalbescoa (2005, p. 195), wordplay includes forms such as acrostics, rhymes, anagrams, and witticisms. Conversely, Delabastita (1996), whose work on subtitling wordplay was pivotal in the field of AVT, identifies the most common types of lexical wordplay as homophones (different spelling, same pronunciation), homographs (same spelling, different pronunciation), homonyms (same spelling and pronunciation, different meaning), and paronyms (similar sound and spelling). Thaler (2016, pp. 52-61) offers a comprehensive classification of wordplay, viewing it as the result of manipulating various linguistic techniques, which can be linguistic, lexical, orthographic, or morphological, as shown in the following table.

Table 1. Subcategorisation of wordplay according to Thaler (2016, pp. 52-61)

Techniques of wordplay	**Subtypes of wordplay**	**Explanation**
Phonetic techniques	Play on homophones	Same pronunciation, different meanings. Homophones can occur between different languages.
	Play on permutation of sounds	Spoonerism: transposing sounds or letters to produce a humorous effect.
	Play on similarity of pronunciation	Similar pronunciation of different words belonging to the same or different linguistic systems.
	Play on rhythm and rhyme	
	Play on alliteration and assonance	Tongue twisters for instance.
	Homonymy	

Lexical techniques	Polysemy	
	Paronymy	Different meaning, slightly different spelling
	Lexical sets and phraseological elements	Idioms, proverbs, sayings
Morphological techniques	Ludic alteration of morphemes	Play on morphemes
	Ludic word formation	Compounding, comparative forms, etc.
Orthographic and graphic techniques	Orthographic variations	Traumatisé (*traumatized*) = trop (*too*) matisé (neologism referring to the character Titeuf)
	Shifting word boundaries	Play on homophones in oral communication (example: Have an Ice Day= Have a nice day)
	Palindromes	Words or sentences which can be read both forward and backward.
	Play on topographic elements	Font style, creative use of punctuation, play on formal linguistic level and so forth.

2.2.3. Taxonomizing verbal humour and gibberish: Malapropism

On a different note, verbal humour may rely on the lack of understanding, via misspellings (malapropisms), mispronunciations (spoonerisms), for instance, to invoke laughter. As Zabalbeascoa states:

> If humour is brought into the equation, it becomes necessary to balance the importance of understanding the content of words in a message against the value of appreciating the joke, even when the words are not understood, as the humour is derived from incomprehension, misunderstandings and so on, often involving funny foreigners or strange languages or dialects.
>
> (2020, p. 120)

Malapropisms have received little attention given that humorous wordplay, the more general phenomena of humour, sees far more scholastic interest (e.g. Delabastita's work in 1993) (Civera, 2012, p. 606). In establishing our taxonomy for analysis, it is crucial to classify malapropisms, a frequently present phenomenon in comic multilingual communication (Dore, 2019, p. 227). Hence, is malapropism a subtype of wordplay, as is the case of spoonerisms "cf. Table 1 above"? First, malapropism refers to

> the ridiculous misuse of a word, in place of one it resembles in sound especially when the speaker is seeking a more elevated or technical style than is his wont and the blunder destroys the intended effect.
>
> (Hockett, 1973, p. 110)

It can also refer to “non-existing words (words not included in dictionaries) and words that bear no phonetic similarity to the presumed correct word in the given context” (Civera, 2012, p. 617). To put it another way, malapropisms are words which are deliberately mispronounced in order to beget a comic effect.

Thaler states that “wordplay as an action is *purposeful* behavior” (2016, p. 47) (emphasis added). Likewise, for Dore (2019, p. 107), wordplay involves a deliberate—albeit sometimes debatable[4]—manipulation of language, whereas spoonerisms and malapropisms are forms of unintentional linguistic ambiguity. That is, because malapropisms result from a problem on the receptive level, more specifically from mishearing (Chiaro, 1992, p. 20; Blake, 2007, pp. 142-144). However, for taxonomical purposes, and given the arguability of the concept of intention (see Dore, 2019 and Chiaro, 1992) the present study shall consider malapropisms a subtype of wordplay, similar to spoonerisms “cf. Table 1 above”.

2.3. Subtitling humorous wordplay

Subtitling wordplay for humour is a complicated, nearly impossible process (Schröter, 2012, p. 141). The differences arising from the particularities of the source and target linguistic systems render a literal translation of wordplay a ‘lucky shot’ as the latter’s construction relies heavily on the ability to manipulate language. What is more, “free adaptation may result in clashes with the images, the sounds or the logic of the fictional world” (Diaz-Cintas & Remael, 2020, p. 222) while a direct translation is far-fetched (Schröter, 2012, p. 142).

Many authors attempted to devise translation strategies and techniques to deal with the rendering of verbal humour (Delabastita, 1996; Baker, 2018 [1992]; Chiaro, 2010; 2017; Veisbergs, 1997, among others), all of which greatly converge (see Dore, 2019, p. 115-116 for a comparison thereof). However, instead of focusing on strategies, we shall focus on the parameters that come into play in deciding how to deal with the subtitling of humorous wordplay.

Schröter’s (2005) analysis of theoretical translation solutions in rendering language-play (i.e. a term which denotes wordplay and puns according to author’s categorisation) in dubbed and subtitled Swedish and German programs proves that the most prevalent solution is one which preserves the language-play in the TT, either by:

> Creating target-language (TL) language-play (that may or may not belong to the same category as the original); translating without creating TL language play (though possibly a similar effect); completely omitting the passage; or creating TL language-play (or devices having a similar effect) in another part of the text.
>
> (Schröter, 2012, p. 142)

Another parameter is the importance of humorous passages in the film generally (the whole text) and locally (part of the text). Zabalbeascoa (2001, p. 256) categorizes jokes based on their significance in discourse into four levels: high significance**,** moderate significance**,** minimal significance, and insignificant**.** He (1996) establishes a scale of priorities in order to assess the efficiency of a subtitling project and considers a successful translation one which highlights the higher priorities in the TT. As such, the subtitler must assess the importance of humorous messages in order to convey them suitably, by considering the following questions: Does humour have a high priority in the exchange between characters? Is the joke constrained by the visual and the acoustic messages? Is humour part and parcel of a character’s image? In the case of dialects, is the primordial function of the said dialect comic? Is faithfulness required or can equivalence be applied? (Diaz-Cintas & Remael, 2020, p. 222).

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[4] According to Dore (2019), intentionality depends on the level. At the character-character level, the linguistic ambiguity is perceived as unintentional while et the author-audience level, the ambiguity is intentional.

3. Methodology and hypotheses

The research method encompasses three stages, all of which focus on wordplay and its subtypes.

The first stage consists of establishing a typology of verbal humour based on the previously discussed literature, inspired by Zabalbescoa (1997), Delabastita (1996), Spanakaki (2007) and Thaler (2016). This classification shall aid in pinpointing, collecting then analysing verbal humour from our corpus; the series *From Al Haram Street To…*(Al-Muthanna Sobh, 2022).The following graphic summarizes the types of verbal humour.

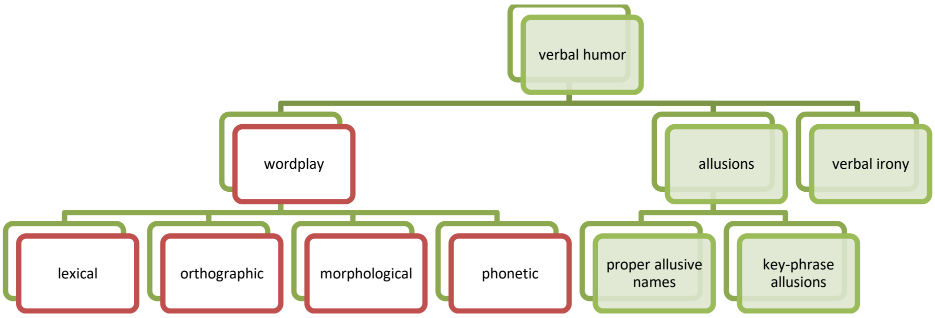

Figure 1. Classification of verbal humour inspired by Zabalbescoa (1997), Delabastita (1996), Spanakaki (2007) and Thaler (2016). Source: Author

The second phase qualitatively and quantitatively analyses the extracted utterance. The data collected based on the quantitative analysis serves two purposes. Firstly, it identifies the most frequently used subtypes of wordplay in interdialectal communication. Secondly, it determines the prevalent subtitling strategies used to handle wordplay resulting from interdialectal communication, based on Gottlieb's (1992, p. 76) ten subtitling strategies: expansion, paraphrase, transfer, imitation, transcription, dislocation, condensation, decimation, deletion, ad resignation (hereinafter explained). The second phase addresses two key questions: What are the commonly adopted subtitling strategies for dealing with wordplay arising from interdialectal exchanges? Is wordplay, in this specific context, maintained or neutralized? What are the primary mechanisms of wordplay used to evoke laughter in a multidialectal fiction series?

The third phase involves a qualitative analysis of segments containing comic wordplay, which will help us understand the reasons behind choosing specific subtitling strategies. Each segment will be examined within its unique context, considering the dialects involved, the characters, the storyline, and any other criteria essential for a thorough qualitative analysis. This section aims to answer the question: What is the subtitler's rationale for selecting Gottlieb's (1992: 76) subtitling strategies?

To answer the research questions, the following hypotheses were formulated:

Hypothesis 1: The linguistic similarities between Arab dialects and MSA will facilitate an accurate reconstruction of wordplay using subtitling strategies such as transfer, imitation, and transcription

Hypothesis 2: Wordplay based on dialect-specific features will be neutralized to avoid incorporating dialectal elements into the subtitles.

Hypothesis 3: Malapropisms and play on phonetic resemblance are the primary mechanisms of wordplay in the series, as the use of various dialects often leads to humorous instances of misspellings and miscommunications.

3.1. Background introduction to the series

From Al Haram Street to… [Min Al Haram Street To] (Al-Muthanna Sobh, 2022) is a television series produced in the United Arab Emirates, written by Kuwaiti writer Heba Mishari Hamada and directed by Syrian Al-Muthanna Sobh. The story is set in Kuwait and centres around the *Abla* family. Abla, the protagonist, is a doctor and the owner of a hospital. She works at the medical facility with her six sons, all of whom are doctors, and they all live together under one roof with their families, where Abla is the matriarch. Each of Abla's sons has his own story and struggles. Their lives take a dramatic turn when the dancer Karima, whose stage name is Créma, the antagonist, enters their lives and moves into Abla's villa after sealing a medical deal with her to save her life. Créma's behaviour raises Abla's suspicions, revealing many secrets related to their shared past.

This series was broadcast during Ramadan, a holy month in Islam during which Muslims fast from dawn (Fajr) until sunset (Iftar). They abstain from food, drink, and sinful behaviours such as rage, anger, badmouthing, and so forth. Every year, new series are exclusively aired during Ramadan, particularly two hours before and after Iftar (the time when Muslims break their fast) to capture the highest viewership. The airing of the series was deemed controversial. Many viewers called for its ban, arguing that the themes it discusses (betrayal, sex, quasi-nudity) do not align with the spirit of Ramadan, notably the character *Créma*, a provocative dancer seen by some as an offensive portrayal of Egyptian women and Arab females in general[5].

4. Analysis

4.1. Data collection

The collection of data was performed upon watching the entire Kuwaiti series *From Al Haram Street to…*(Al-Muthanna Sobh, 2022) which incorporates different dialects, notably SA, KA, and EA. Consequently, the total of dialects incorporated in the study is three along with the presence of MSA in the ST, the study of which is deemed vital to the development of our analysis. Despite the length of the series (29 episodes = 18 hours), the collection and transcription process of wordplay was performed manually given that bidialectal communication is limited to scenes where characters of foreign nationalities (Egyptian or Syrian) are present, considering KA the main dialect. These characters are the dancer Créma, the Egyptian nurse, the Egyptian doctor and the Syrian co-wife.

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[5] Al-Ain News. (23 March 2022). Mussalssal min charii alharam ila... Tassa'odo da'awati lman'i wa batalatou l'amali tarod [مسلسل من شارع الهرم إلى.. تصاعد دعوات المنع وبطلة العمل ترد ; From Al Haram Street to... rising calls for a ban and heroine of the production responds]. https://al-ain.com/article/from-al-haram-street-to-calls-ban

Table 2. Types and subtypes of wordplay used to express humour in interdialectal communication in the Kuwaiti series

	Wordplay						
	Phonetic wordplay= 13					**Lexical wordplay=3**	
Type of wordplay	**Malapropism**	**Rhyme**	**Play On Similarity of Pronunciation**	**Onomatopoeia**	**Homophony**	**Paronymy**	**Homonymy**
Total: 16	7	2	1	2	1	1	2
100 %	43.75%	12.5%	6.25%	12.5%	6.25%	6.25%	12.5%

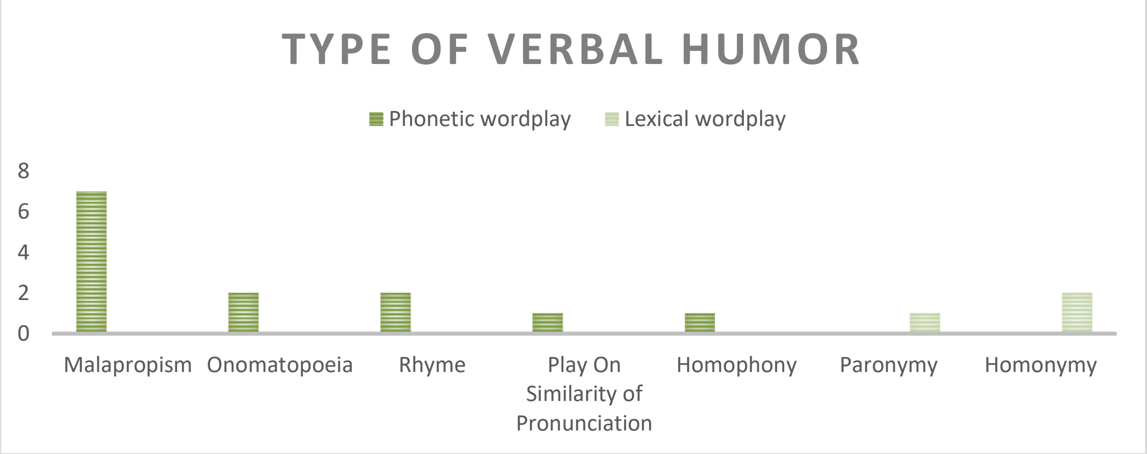

Figure 2. Types and subtypes of wordplay used to express humour in interdialectal communication in the Kuwaiti series. Source: Author

The quantitative analysis of Gottlieb’s (1992) subtitling strategies demonstrates the presence of sixteen instances of wordplay, some of which are used in more than one scene, within the framework of interdialectal communication.

Table 3. Translation strategies for subtitling interdialectal communication into MSA

Gottlieb (1992) translation strategies for subtitling					
Total of wordplay	**Paraphrase**	**Transcription**	**Imitation**	**Condensation**	**Transfer**
16	8	1	1	2	4
100%	50%	6.25%	6.25%	12.5%	25%

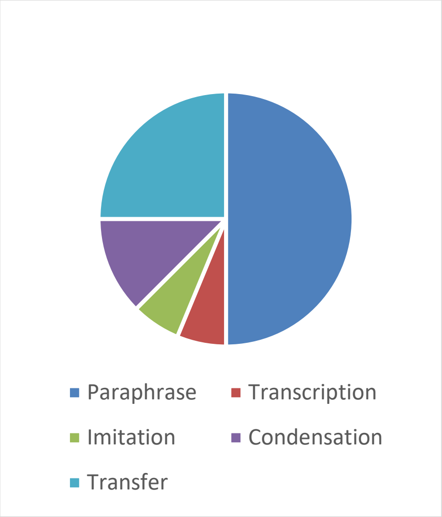

Figure 3. Translation strategies for subtitling interdialectal communication into MSA.

Source: Author

4.2. Discussion

Based on the aforementioned figure, it is evident that humour in the series is conveyed through both phonetic and lexical wordplay. Phonetic wordplay, primarily through malapropisms, serves as the main vehicle for humour. Given that the study focuses on bidialectal communication among characters from different nationalities, misunderstandings are expected to function as a humour mechanism throughout the series. However, are there underlying reasons behind these intentional misunderstandings, or are they purely for comedic effect?

The subtitler employs the following subtitling strategies (Gottlieb, 1992) when translating wordplay arising from interdialectal exchanges in the ST. These strategies are listed most to least frequent.

1. **Paraphrase (neutralizing strategy)**: This subtitling strategy involves rewording the ST expression due to one of the following reasons: i) the impossibility of restructuring it in the TL, ii) the TA's unfamiliarity with the expression, or iii) to achieve a more fluent translation.

2. **Transfer (perpetuation strategy)**: The second most used subtitling strategy. It refers to the direct translation of the ST, preserving its meaning and form as much as possible. The subtitler uses transfer when the source dialect's expression and the TL share linguistic, orthographic, lexical, or cultural similarities.

3. **Condensation (neutralizing strategy)**: This strategy is adopted when the TT is too long to fit in the subtitle. The subtitler reduces the number of words by omitting or simplifying the information. Condensation is often used when dealing with rhyme and rhythm in the ST.

4. **Imitation (perpetuation strategy)**: As the name suggests, imitation aims to preserve the original form of the ST in cases of proper nouns, onomatopoeia, or exclamations.

5. **Transcription (perpetuation strategy)**: This strategy is used when a word that is not meaningful in the ST is transcribed into the TT without attempting to translate its meaning.

The remaining subtitling strategies (extension, dislocation, decimation, deletion, and resignation) were not present in the subtitled version. However, defining them is still essential. **Extension** is the opposite of condensation, where the TT expression is expanded while respecting the intended meaning. **Dislocation** involves changing the spatial and temporal position of the subtitled text. **Decimation** is the significant reduction of the TT. **Deletion** means omitting untranslatable or irrelevant text in the TL. Finally, **resignation** is acknowledging the ST's untranslatable nature by not attempting to produce a TT.

Based on the data collected, paraphrase is clearly the most frequently used subtitling strategy. This indicates that wordplay is not perpetuated as it would be in interdialectal communication if the subtitler had used strategies like transcription, imitation, and transfer more often. This suggests that the subtitler 'tones down' humorous interdialectal communication in the TT. Furthermore, when dialects are involved, humour in the ST is mainly expressed phonetically through malapropisms. However, in the TT, the subtitler primarily neutralizes it. The following sections will expose the main reasons behind this neutralizing subtitling pattern.

4.2.1. Paraphrasing wordplay: cases of malapropism

Case 1:

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4"><i>Following Créma's stunning performance at Dr. Abla's son's wedding, she joined the doctor in her hotel suite to receive her payment. During this encounter, they engaged in an entertaining conversation, during which Créma made several mispronunciation errors in an attempt to impress the affluent doctor.</i></td></tr>
<tr><th>EPISODE</th><th>Original Version (OV)</th><th>Interdialectal communication</th><th>Subtitled Version (SV)</th></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>-ايشي سنابشات ايشي توكتوك واشي انستغرام
“Snapchat” and “TokTok” and “Instagram”</td><td>Egyptian- Kuwait</td><td>- في "سناب تشات" و "تيك توك" و"انستغرام"
In “Snapchat” and “TikTok” and “Instagram”</td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>-السريبشن مسكتش
-...
-اه السريبشن
Cereption wouldn't stop
…
Yes, Cereption</td><td>Egyptian- Kuwaiti</td><td>-لم يصمت رنين الهاتف
-...
- نعم رنين الهاتف
The phone ringing didn't stop
….
Yes, the phone ringing</td></tr>
</table>

The malapropisms “TokTok” for “TikTok” and “Cereption” for “Reception” highlight Crema’s limited intellectual level, which makes both the doctor and the viewers laugh. The subtitler paraphrased by correcting the intentional misspelling “TokTok” and clarifying the reference to the hotel reception “Cereption” in the second scene. This choice results in a loss of comedic effect. Consequently, in the first instance, the subtitles failed to justify the doctor’s laughter, which is a reaction to Crema’s misspelling. In the second instance, Crema’s hand gesture mimicking a phone while saying “Cereption” is sufficient for the audience to understand the malapropism. Thus, the humorous effect was partially lost. Transcription would have been a better alternative, as the subtitler need not neutralize the effect of the misspelling given that comprehension through context (Instagram, Snapchat, hand gesture) is insured. As a result, paraphrasing rather than transcription reduced the humorous effect of the wordplay in the TT.

4.2.2. Paraphrasing wordplay: A case of malapropism

Case 2:

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4">At a barbecue party at the doctor’s house, Créma and the doctor’s daughters-in-law were discussing how a woman could accept living in the same villa as a co-wife, or “شريكة”.</td></tr>
<tr><th>EPISODE
14</th><th>Original Version (OV)</th><th>Interdialectal communication</th><th>Subtitled Version (SV)</th></tr>
<tr><td>05:14:00-5:20:00</td><td>-شريكتها
-ايه ششتها ديه يتعمل ايه
-شني يعني بالمصرى؟
-ضرتها، ضرتها
-The co-wife
-What shishitha? What does she do?
-What’s the word in Egyptian?
-Her Dura (co-wife)</td><td>Egyptian- Kuwaiti</td><td>-شريكتها
-ماذا تقصدين؟ لم أفهم
-ما المرادف باللهجة المصرية؟
-ضرتها، ضرتها
-The co-wife
-What do you mean? I don’t get it
-What’s the word in Egyptian?
- Her Dura, her Dura (co-wife)</td></tr>
</table>

This example illustrates humour derived from misunderstandings caused by the metalinguistic peculiarities of Arab dialects. Créma did not comprehend the term “شريكتها /co-wife”, as pronounced by the daughters-in-law in a Kuwaiti accent /ʃˈriːki-tː-haː/, leading her to mistakenly mimic their pronunciation as “ششتها” /ʃiːʃi-tː-haː/,. In the Kuwaiti dialect, unlike its Egyptian counterpart, certain letters are pronounced differently (e.g., “J” as “Y” /j/ and “k” as “ch” /tʃ/ as in this instance), resulting in Créma’s confusion. Given that the TL is MSA, such dialect-specific nuances are challenging to replicate without a footnote or the use of dialectal Arabic in subtitles. To address this, the subtitler chose to neutralize this dialectal feature by conveying the meaning through paraphrase.

In the hereinbefore discussed two cases, malapropisms are a form of wordplay used not only for comedic effect but also to characterize the antagonist in the series. Créma’s low intellectual level is humorously depicted through her frequent misspellings and mispronunciations of foreign words. Thus, malapropism is integral to the plot and must be conveyed, provided it ensures understanding. The original script offers contextual clues to aid the TA’s comprehension of the jokes, such as references to Instagram and Snapchat in the second example, which hint at the mispronounced word being related to social media, specifically TikTok. The repetition of the mispronounced word “Cereption” along with a hand gesture indicating a phone, and the subsequent scene involving a call, further aid comprehension. Therefore, comprehension, which is paramount in intralingual translation, is achieved through intertextual and visual references. Consequently, the subtitler is not burdened by ensuring comprehension or the presence of linguistic constraints which have the potential to justify their neutralizing strategy. However, in the second case, the neutralizing strategy is explained by the presence of a linguistic constraint in the ST, arising from the impossibility of mimicking ST dialectal features in the TT due to strict subtitling conventions in the Arab world.

4.2.3. Transcription of wordplay: A case of malapropism

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4"><i>In the next scene, Créma lies about being invited to dance on the Champs-Elysées, which she mistakenly believes are in “London,” in an attempt to impress the wealthy doctor.</i></td></tr>
<tr><th>EPISODE</th><th>Original Version (OV)</th><th>Interdialectal communication</th><th>Subtitled Version (SV)</th></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>بس أنا مرة، كنت في الشرعزيليه
يا ختي الشرعزيليه البتاع اللي فلندن ده
Once I was in the Char Elysée
Sis, the Char Elysée, that thing in London</td><td>Egyptian – Kuwaiti</td><td>ولكنني كنت يوما في (الشرعليزيه)
يا عزيزتي، (الشرعليزيه) الموجود في لندن
Once I was in the (Char Elysée)
Honey, the Char Elysée, the one in London</td></tr>
</table>

In this instance, humour is expressed via the misspelling of Champs-Elysées and the wrong information about the location of the well-known avenue in Paris. The subtitler opted for transcribing the misspelled word in order to mimic the ST’s effect. Champs-Elysées, even when misspelled, is fairly recognisable by the viewer for it is a famous French avenue. Therefore, humour was successfully conveyed.

4.2.4. Paraphrasing wordplay: Cases of onomatopoeia

<table>
<tr><th>EPISODE</th><th>Original Version (OV)</th><th>Interdialectal communication</th><th>Subtitled Version (SV)</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4"><i>Créma is reveling in her newfound fame after dancing at the Doctor’s extravagant wedding ceremony, which has caused her phone to ring incessantly.</i></td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>اتصالات ايه تن تن تن
Calls like ring, ring, ring</td><td>Egyptian- Kuwaiti</td><td>اتصالات كثيرة ومتتالية
Continuous and repetitive calls</td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4"><i>After Créma was called a prostitute by the Doctor’s religiously extremist son, she prepares to make him hear a piece of her mind by demanding silence at the barbecue party.</i></td></tr>
<tr><td>13</td><td>سمعا هووووس
Hush, Listen up y’all!</td><td>Egyptian- Kuwaiti</td><td>أريد أن أسمع صمتا
I want to hear silence.</td></tr>
</table>

“Onomatopoeia is a modified type of coining in which a word is formed as an imitation of some natural sound” (Yaqubi et al., 2018). The subtitler conveyed this type of wordplay by expressing the meaning behind the sounds rather than using direct equivalents. Firstly, “Tin, tin, tin/ Ring, ring, ring” lacks a direct equivalent in MSA. Secondly, the direct equivalent of “Hush” (صه) is too formal for this informal context. Therefore, the subtitler’s decision to paraphrase is driven by the absence of an appropriate equivalent in the TL.

4.2.5. Condensation of wordplay: Cases of rhyme

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4"><i>One of the doctor’s sons is playfully cursing his fanatically religious brother for his luck in marrying wives who strive to get along to please him. To do so, he uses a mix of MSA and KA, as the religious brother primarily speaks the language of the Quran, i.e. MSA.</i></td></tr>
<tr><th>EPISODE</th><th>Original Version (OV)</th><th>Intralingual communication</th><th>Subtitled Version (SV)</th></tr>
<tr><td>14</td><td>بعد أن تدبسنا بهؤلاء النسوة قهرا
يا الملعون خيره
يا اللي ما ييجي من وراك الا شرا
After we were stuck with these women
You damned
You who only attracts evil</td><td>MSA- Kuwaiti</td><td>بعد أن تزوجنا من هؤلاء النسوة قهرا
أيها الملعون خيره
يا سبب كل شر
After we were stuck with these women
You damned
The cause of all evil</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4"><i>Créma instantly composed a rhyming song in response to the doctor’s threat of calling the police on her for allegedly stealing her diamond ring and earrings. Having swallowed the diamonds, Créma sings a verse to the doctor, indicating that she is not at all intimidated.</i></td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>اندهي ع الشرطة يا امورة
عشان أنا نفسي أخد صورة
Call the police, beautiful.
I want to take a picture.</td><td>Egyptian- Kuwaiti</td><td>نادي الشرطة يا أمورة
فأنا أتمنى أن أتصور
Call the police, beautiful.
I wish to take a picture</td></tr>
</table>

Condensation is opted for when the ST’s utterance is too long to be translated literally. In the hereinbefore examples, condensation is most prominent in musical or rhythmic instances. In the first sequence, humour is expressed via cursing with rhyme in MSA mixed with KA. In the TT, the subtitler opted for condensing the last utterance, perhaps because a literal translation would beget a long subtitle. This technical constraint caused the loss of the rhythmic effect which chiefly expresses humour. MSA is a rhetorical and poetic language rich vocabulary-wise. What is more, the great similarities between KA and MSA provide the subtitler with more subtitling possibilities. Therefore, it is nearly impossible not to find an equivalent which preserves the vital rhythmic and humorous effect in this scene.

In the second scene, the rhythmic humorous effect could have been preserved for the KA and MSA share common linguistic features. Ergo, the subtitler may have preserved the humorous effect generated by rhyme all the while adhering to the timecode rule[6] inherent to subtitling. Consequently, a possible alternative could have been فأنا أريد أن آخذ صورة /faʔanā ʔurīdu ʔan ʔāẖuḏa ṣūrah/ which translates into “I want to take a picture.” This alternative choice comprises 21 characters, space included according to Microsoft Word Counter.

We deduce that rhythm is a vehicle of verbal humour and must be mirrored when the timecode rule of subtitling allows so. In the hereinbefore sequences and throughout the entire series, rhyme goes abreast with MSA as it renders such a very formal language ludic. Consequently, its replication in subtitling is crucial especially that in intralingual subtitling, the SL and TL share common linguistic features and great phonetic resemblance, which encourages the subtitler to preserve the phonetic effect as much and whenever possible.

4.2.6. Imitation of wordplay: A case of homonymy

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4"><i>Créma, while reciting all the regions in Kuwait where she was invited to dance after her newly found fame, confused a region called Kabed (Liver in English) with Kilwa (Kidney).</i></td></tr>
<tr><th>EPISODE</th><th>Original Version (OV)</th><th>Interdialectal communication</th><th>Subtitled Version (SV)</th></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>كريمة: كلوه، منطئة كلوة
عبلة: شبد، كبد، شبد، شبد
Crema: Kidney, Kidney Region
Abla: Chabd, Liver, Chabd, Chabd</td><td>Egyptian – Kuwaiti</td><td>كريمة: "كلوة"، منطقة "كلوة"
عبلة: (كبد)، (كبد)
Crema: “Kidney”, “Kidney” Region
Abla: (Liver), (Liver)</td></tr>
</table>

In MSA a kidney is ‘Kilya’ while in EA it is called “Kilwa”. In this instance, kidney is a homonym referring to the human organ and ‘supposedly’ the name of a region in Kuwait according to Créma. This linguistic nuance arising from common linguistic features between the dialect and the standard language was exhibited in the TL, despite the subtitler’s tendency to avoid the transmission of dialectal characteristics of Arabic in the subtitles. The humorous effect expressed via the double meaning of Kidney in the ST could have been conveyed in the TT with the Arab counterpart ‘Kilya’, avoiding as a result the use of dialectal features of EA in the TT. Hence, opting for transfer rather than imitation would have preserved humour and meaning. On another note, in the following utterance, the subtitler did not mirror the linguistic feature characterizing the Kuwaiti dialect (pronunciation of ‘k’ as ‘ch’). Understandably, “the translator will not be sufficiently trained to pay much attention to any variations from the norm.” (Ranzato, 2010, p. 110)

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[6] According to Karamitroglou (1998), a subtitle must preferably contain 35 characters. However, depending on the text font, the number of characters may be increased to 40 characters per line.

We deduce that the subtitler attempted to preserve the ST’s wordplay as much as possible via the use of imitation. Consequently, this subtitling strategy resulted in the employment of dialect as part of the speech, which could have been easily avoided should the translator have opted for an equivalent homonym in the TL. Nevertheless, the humorous effect was successfully conveyed to the reader of subtitles.

4.2.7. Transfer of wordplay: A case of paronymy

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4"><i>Créma was booked to where she thought was a lavish party, instead she found herself surrounded by women of a Muslim sisterhood attempting to guide her towards God’s path.</i></td></tr>
<tr><th>EPISODE</th><th>Original Version (OV)</th><th>Interdialectal communication</th><th>Subtitled Version (SV)</th></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td>-نريدلك الهداية
- يا ختي وانا حب الهدايا
-We want guidance for you
-Sis, I love gifts too</td><td>Egyptian – Kuwaiti</td><td>-نريد لك الهداية
- وانا أحب الهدايا
-We want guidance for you
-Sis, I love gifts too</td></tr>
</table>

In Kuwaiti, Egyptian and any other Arab dialect, words relating to religion are calqued from MSA. That is probably why conveying humour was easy in this instance given that paronymy (Hidaya/guidance and Hadaya/ gifts) in the ST was identically conveyed in the TT. In addition, Créma’s low intellectual level permits her to make such jokes. As a result, the linguistic resemblance between the dialect and the standard language facilitated the subtitler’s task.

All in all, the following table sums up the main findings:

Table 4. Summary of the key findings

Humorous wordplay is perpetuated via imitation, transcription, and transfer when:	**Humorous wordplay is neutralized via paraphrase and condensation when:**
part of the storyline	understanding is not guaranteed
in the presence of visual constraints	presence of dialectal features
the dialect’s function in the film is humorous	lack of direct equivalents
lack of linguistic constraints	

5. Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate how wordplay resulting from interdialectal communication is rendered in intralingual subtitling. To achieve this, the script and subtitles of the Kuwaiti series *From Al Haram Street to…* (Al-Muthanna Sobh, 2022) were examined and instances of wordplay in the ST were classified based on the typology of wordplay inspired by

Zabalbescoa (1997), Delabastita (1996), Spanakaki (2007) and Thaler (2016) and analysed in accordance with Gottlieb's (1992) subtitling strategies.

The study comprised a qualitative and a quantitative analysis. The quantitative analysis focused on aggregating instances of wordplay and identifying the predominant translation strategy. It aimed to clarify the subtitler's tendencies when translating wordplay from various Arab dialects into a standardized language form. Conversely, the qualitative analysis provided deeper insights into the subtitler's unconventional strategic choices.

Several fruitful remarks emerged. In interdialectal communication, humour is chiefly conveyed in the ST via phonetic and lexical wordplay, mainly malapropisms. In the TT, the subtitler generally neutralizes wordplay via the strategies: paraphrase and condensation. Paraphrasing neutralized humour conveyed through malapropisms, rhyme, homonymy, etc., some of which were integral to the storyline and should have been mirrored in the TT. Similarly, condensation erased the humorous effect of rhyme and rhythm, particularly where MSA was humorously used. On a positive note, the use of paraphrase was suitable in the TT in two cases: a lack of direct equivalent in the TL and when humour was constructed based on dialectal features which cannot be transferred to the TL for guideline restrictions.

The results of the study enabled us to answer the previously formulated questions and check the validity of the hypotheses. The first hypothesis, which posited that verbal humour would be mirrored using Gottlieb's (1992) corresponding subtitling strategies (transfer, imitation, and transcription) due to linguistic similarities between Arab dialects and MSA, was not validated, as the subtitler did not convey humour through rhyme despite the apparent linguistic similarities. Additionally, statistics showed that paraphrase, a neutralizing strategy, was the most frequent. The second hypothesis, which suggested that verbal humour from dialectal particularities would be neutralized to avoid incorporating dialectal features in subtitling, was partially validated, as the subtitler neutralized it except in one example where s/he incorporated an Egyptian word in the TL. The third hypothesis was validated, as wordplay in interdialectal communication is chiefly based on malapropisms and play on phonetic resemblance.

Throughout the present study, we attempted to investigate a new area of subtitling: the rendering of wordplay in interdialectal communication into a standard language. This is particularly relevant because Arabic dialects are independent linguistic systems, and comprehension among Arab nations is facilitated by MSA. What is more, this study offered a novel perspective on MSA as a language capable of conveying humour, suggesting further research on how MSA can convey humour, whether as a SL or TL.

Finally, our analysis would have been well-rounded should we have been able to analyse, quantitatively and qualitatively, more television productions portraying instances of intralingual subtitling in a multidialectal Arabic context. The study's specificity and the numerous criteria related to the analysed product (i.e., a subtitled program with multiple dialects in the ST, humorous wordplay, interlingual professional subtitling) explain the limited data analysed. Therefore, further studies on the intralingual subtitling of verbal humour, conceptual humour, or related subcategories could provide a more thorough understanding of how humour is expressed in interdialectal communication. This would help answer the question: how can we translate Arabic multidialectal humour into MSA in intralingual subtitling?

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