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Gauging the Reception of Arab Translators to the Subtitles of Taboo Language in Hollywood Movies

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Abstract

This investigation analyzes the appropriateness of Arabic equivalents of English taboo words according to the perceptions of the Arab translators. It also detects if there is a difference in the perceptions of the male and female translators in the subtitles of such taboo words, according to the strategy used in the subtitling of taboos. The study asked translators to suggest their translations for the unacceptable sentences. A self-prepared scale of 16 sentences containing taboos was administrated to Arab translators. Sixty translators responded to the scale. The results showed that Arab translators moderately ($M=3.38$) accept the translation of the taboo language. Results also showed that males ($M=3.41$) accept the rendering of taboos more than females ($M=3.31$), however, the difference was not significant ($\text{Sig.} = .831$). Male translators prefer omission, cultural substitution, and reformation higher than female while female translators prefer direct translation over male translators. The findings also showed that translators provide some translations depending on using cultural substitution for the taboo expression, followed by reformation. Omission was also preferred by some translations, especially where direct subtitling was adopted. This study concludes that subtitling taboo expressions poses difficulties to translators that may not be easily worked on. This study recommends that subtitling companies to a balance between euphemizing the offensive or taboo expressions and preserving the intended meaning provided.

Keywords: Arab translators, cultural substitutions, direct translation, omission, reformation, subtitles, taboo language.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Rendering and subtitling taboo languages are challenging for translators (Harris et al., 2003). Hashemian et al. (2014) affirmed that one of the primary worries for audiovisual translators is rendering the cultural elements, including taboo expressions. Subtitling taboos put the translators in an embarrassing situation (Ávila-Cabrera, 2016; Samir & Hashemizadeh, 2023; Tot, 2013). Such a worry stems from the numerous limitations requiring subtitlers to employ particular strategies to improve the quality of the subtitles (Abdelaal, 2019).

Subtitling from English into other language pairs was explored in numerous studies. The majority of reviewed studies were conducted in English and Persian. For example, Hashemian et al. (2014), Kheradparvar and Davoodi (2014), Hadian (2015), and Samir and Hashemizadeh (2023) examined the strategies adopted while rendering taboo expressions between English and Persian. Furthermore, Yuan (2015) studied the rendering of taboo languages between English and Chinese. On the contrary, a few studies were conducted to analyze the rendering of taboo expressions between English and Arabic (e.g., Abdelaal, 2019; Almijrab, 2020; Sahari, 2021; Slamia, 2020). However, despite the various purposes of the previous studies between English and Arabic, there is a need to conduct more studies to cover the scarcity of literature, especially the perceptions of translators regarding the acceptability of subtitling, as well as the level of agreement between male and female translators on subtitling.

A plethora of studies have investigated the strategies used to render taboos between different language pairs. Ávila-Cabrera (2016) explored the strategies used in rendering taboos between European and Spanish languages. Abdelaal and Al Sarhani (2021) detected the strategies involved in translating English and Arabic. Hashemian et al. (2014) compared the dubbing and subtitling of taboo languages in five Hollywood films from English to Persian. Furthermore, Abdelaal (2019) studied the strategies used in rendering taboo expressions in English in *The American Pie* movie. Despite these studies on rendering taboos, there is not a single study that explores the translators' reception of accepting the rendering of taboos into Arabic, nor the strategies used in rendering taboo language.

Studies recommended the pivotal necessity to conduct research studies on the subtitling of taboo expressions (Abdelaal & Al Sarhani, 2021; Haider et al., 2023). Such a call motivates us to study the subtitling of taboo expressions from translators' reception. However, the various studies listed above (e.g., Abdelaal, 2019; Abdelaal & Al Sarhani, 2021; Haider et al., 2023), among others, exist in the field; no study analyzing the acceptability of translators to subtitling has been identified, either in the Arab context or elsewhere. This gap urged us to explore the level of translators' acceptability of subtitling in the target language, i.e., Arabic, in this study. Furthermore, the novelty in this study lies in its exploration of gender perceptions to evaluate the translation. Therefore, this study tries to bridge the gaps listed hereafter by exploring the following research questions:

1. To what extent do Arab translators accept the subtitles of the taboo language of the prescribed Hollywood films?
2. Do Arab male and female translators' levels of acceptability to the subtitle of taboo words statistically differ according to the strategy used?
3. What suggestions have Arab translators provided to amend the translation of the prescribed taboo language into Arabic?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is no doubt that cinema acts as a cultural ambassador, with the ability to shape perceptions and influence behaviors across diverse societies (Williams, 2002). Hollywood films, with their broad global reach and deeply rooted cultural identities, play a special role in this context (Chan, 2009). They present a detailed set of narratives, attracting viewers from all over the world (Debbas & Haider, 2020). Yet, overcoming language and cultural differences in this worldwide interaction is a challenging task, especially when dealing with sensitive topics such as

taboo language (Cintas, 2013). The inherent subjectivity of taboo words creates a challenging obstacle to subtitling these films (Slamia, 2020). It has been agreed upon that what might be considered acceptable speech in the context of American culture can easily cross the boundaries of appropriateness in more conservative societies such as Arabic (Hughes, 1991). Despite these challenges, the role of subtitling in fostering intercultural understanding is essential in establishing cultural exchange (Cintas, 2013). In the following sections, relevant theories related to the research topic are explained.

2.1 The Theory of Translation

The theory of translation reception explores how translated texts are received and interpreted by readers in the target culture (Cadera & Walsh, 2022; Thawabteh & Afifi, 2023). This translation theory emphasizes the translator's role in comprehending meaning while doing the translation process; it draws its principles back from reader-responses theory (Brems & Ramos Pinto, 2013). Reception theory has many manifestations. For example, Thawabteh and Afifi (2023) studied the impact of sociocultural factors on receiving translated texts. Cadera and Walsh (2022) examined reception theory on a mistranslation of the same text and its impact on the interpretation of texts over time. Reception theory is based on another theoretical concept called the intended meaning. In the meantime, the intended meaning refers to the reception's ability to comprehend what the speakers or text said. In translation studies, the intended meaning which is associated with the source text has been the focus of several studies (Nord, 2016; Vermeer, 1998). Skopos theory was coined to ensure that the purpose of the target audience is to comprehend the translation, which gives translators more freedom and responsibility (Nord, 2016). Therefore, this theory highlights the pivotal role of translators in reconceptualizing the source text (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2010). Coinciding with this focus on intended meaning, the term equivalence is proposed (Baker, 2018). Yet, some scholars paid attention to thematic equivalence while doing the translation (Wang, 2014), while others view the necessity to focus on relevance theory instead of coded-based translation theories.

Regarding the theories of taboos, taboos are perceived as primary thoughts rooted in anthropological theory (Burton-Bradley, 1970). They are prohibited expressions embedded socially, culturally, religiously, and morally (Price, 2020). They maintain moral boundaries, social order, and a classification system (Burton-Bradley, 1970). They disseminate supernatural danger and events that are socially circulated (Price, 2020). Additionally, they are also considered a complex phenomenon, sociocultural rooted and evolved in anthropological studies (Burton-Bradley, 1970). Taboos are also linguistically rooted and are impacted by some factors responsible for cultural violation, replacement, and development (Al-Khatib, 1995). Moreover, theories on taboos were proposed as a result of the contradiction between social norms and innate desires (Marshall, 2010).

Taboo language "refers to language that is a breach of etiquette because it contains so-called 'dirty words'" (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 40). Taboo words are typically spoken in informal contexts; they serve as a way to express intense emotions and feelings (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Jay, 2009), or to add humor to a situation, for catharsis, or to assert power (Abdalhakeem, 2022). Currently, the academicians are increasingly focusing on the study of taboo language, which falls within the category of colloquial language and a lower register (Ávila-Cabrera, 2016). However, the offensive levels of using taboo language differ; all languages and cultures use them (Hughes, 2015). Taboos were classified into six categories by various researchers: religion, body parts, sex, mental disability, excrement, and prostitution (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Meanwhile, Abdalhakeem (2022) categorized taboo expressions into five genres: epithets, profanities, obscenities, cursing, and sexual harassment.

2.2 Subtitling Taboo Language

Subtitling is the most frequently used method for translating audio-visual content between different languages or within the same language (Haider & Hussein, 2022). Using Modern

Standard Arabic (MSA) in subtitling may impede the subtitler's task by not equipping them with the necessary tools to efficiently carry out their mission (Elbakri, 2021). Netflix offers its subscribers subtitling services in MSA for certain movies in Arabic dialects to assist individuals with hearing impairments (Al-Abbas & Haider, 2021). Netflix also uses MSA as the intralingual subtitles of its Arabic series as a form of euphemism (Haider & Hussein, 2022). Arab subtitlers face the challenges of not being able to translate taboo words literally due to social and religious considerations. Instead, they employ euphemistic strategies to mitigate the impact of these words (Khalaf & Ali, 2023).

In terms of subtitling strategies, subtitlers adopt some techniques while rendering audiovisual content between two language peers. In addition to the translation strategies, they focused on cultural factors and space-time limits (Khalaf, 2016). In subtitling, translators are guided by relevance theory, which serves as a theoretical framework for translation decisions (Wu, 2021). Furthermore, among the widely used strategies are paraphrasing, deletion, explanation, and cultural adaptation (Díaz-Cintas et al., 2007). Understanding these strategies helps in selecting the appropriate ones while subtitling. Moreover, Hastuti (2015) confirmed that strategy selection relies on cultural, social, and contextual factors needed to convey the meaning effectively.

In the case of English-Arabic subtitling, the inherent divergences in linguistic structures and cultural perspectives between Arabic and English make the translators deal with significant challenges when navigating the translation of taboo language. English often utilizes these sensitive terms idiomatically or colloquially, while in Arabic, the language used for subtitling belongs to a high and formal register, namely MAS (Furgani, 2016; Sahari, 2021). Moreover, the shift from spoken language to a highly formal register, such as MSA, which is commonly used for Arabic subtitling, presents a significant linguistic limitation (Al-Abbas & Haider, 2021; Sahari, 2021). This shift restricts the vocabulary choices available to subtitlers as the options available for them are confined to formal ones. Additionally, taboo words, typically found in informal, colloquial speech, become more severe and harsher in their written form, let alone if the language used in subtitling is as formal as MSA (Khalaf, 2016). This linguistic shift poses challenges for subtitlers aiming to produce translations faithful to the source text. Consequently, subtitlers often resort to using religious terms, less offensive archaic words, or formal expressions (Sahari, 2017). As highlighted by Al-Kharabsheh and Yassin (2017), slang and colloquialisms frequently undergo neutralization during subtitling, resulting in a loss of their intended impact and cultural specificity. Furthermore, space and time constraints inherent to subtitling may necessitate the elimination of additional spoken language features, leading to a further disconnect from the source material.

On the practical side, as shown in previous research findings, Hashemian et al. (2014) found that deletion was the topmost strategy used in rendering taboo language between English and Persian. Furthermore, Abdelaal and Al Sarhani (2021) revealed that euphemism and deletion were the foremost strategies used to translate taboo and swear words from English into Arabic. Slamia (2020) showed the presence of four distinct recurring techniques used in subtitling to deal with the translation of taboo words. Furthermore, the findings uncovered additional lexical and semantic methods, including euphemism, dysphemism, and general terminology. It also identified various translation techniques such as literal translation, partial adaptation, and inaccurate equivalence, as well as other technical strategies employed in subtitling. Taboo expressions are spread among both genders and across different age ranges. AlSabbagh (2023) found that both Bahrain male and female students use taboo language equally (58.6%). Other studies reported that males use taboo expressions more than women (Hadian, 2015; Jay, 1999; Kheradparvar & Davoodi, 2014).

2.3 Taboo and Gender

Researchers confirmed the existence of gender-based differences in the use of taboo expressions (Hadian, 2015; Jay, 1999; Kheradparvar & Davoodi, 2014). Research suggests that males curse more often than females, use a wider variety of curse expressions, and use more

insulting curse expressions than females (Jay, 1999). Kheradparvar and Davoodi (2014) investigated the differences in the use of taboo language between Iranian males and females, as well as the underlying factors influencing these discrepancies. The results highlight that males used taboo expressions more than females in their single group. Females do not use taboos due to their upbringing. Males are influenced by their peers. A third study that differs from the previous two showed that Sudanese females not only swear more than males, but they also demonstrate a better understanding of and have different attitudes toward English taboo language (Habibovic, 2010). This is confirmed by Thelwall (2008) who stated that younger women are more inclined to use the word 'cunt' compared to young men.

Hadian (2015) delineated whether there were differences between men and women in their use of taboos in Persian everyday conversations. The results showed that male students used taboo words 1.73 per cent more frequently in their conversations than female students. The results also indicated that females, like males, tend to use taboos in their conversations. AlSabbagh (2023) found that both Bahrain male and female students use taboo language equally (58.6%). Young adults aged 17-30 were found to be the age group most frequently using taboo language (81.8%). Taboo language is mainly used in private settings, specifically among friends (48.9%), and the most frequently used category of taboo expressions is animal terms (81.4%). Valdeón (2024) found that both male and female translators employ intensification strategies in their translation practices. Female translators tend to choose a higher quantity of more potent swear words compared to their male counterparts.

Theorists proposed models that help in rendering culturally specific terms. Díaz-Cintas et al. (2007) listed six strategies for subtitling cultural references. These strategies are: transposition, calque or literal translation, explication, cultural adaptation, generalizations, and loan. Furthermore, Pedersen (2018) coined a model consisting of six strategies for rendering culturally specific terms. Three of them are source language (SL) oriented, while the other three are target language (TL) oriented. Retention, specification, and direct translation are SL-oriented. Generalization, substitution, and omission are TL-oriented strategies. Still, Almjirab (2020) pointed out that when a taboo is translated into taboo, or when not a taboo in the SL is considered as taboo in the TL, the translators may use censorship, substitution, replacing taboo with taboo, and using euphemism.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

A quantitative research paradigm was followed. In this study, translation reception theory is adopted to check the perceptions of Arab translators of some taboo words that appeared in Hollywood films. The study focused on four subtitling strategies used in the subtitling of taboo words as listed in the corpus of 90 Hollywood films. These strategies are omission, cultural substitution, reformation, and direct translation. Omission is a strategy in which the taboo expression is omitted. These four strategies are the most widely used in subtitling taboo words, as adopted by Sahari (2021). Cultural substitution occurs when a specific term related to the source culture is replaced by a corresponding term from the target culture (Pedersen, 2018). Reformation involves rephrasing the source text by expressing the idea differently while retaining the essential meaning without any sensitive elements. Direct translation is employed to convey a taboo concept without altering or adding any material (Sahari, 2023).

A questionnaire is administered to numerous translators in the Arab world. Translators are required to rate the degree of acceptance of the translation of taboo language as appears in the subtitling of Hollywood movies. Furthermore, the quantitative paradigm was also combined with a qualitative design, where the translators were also asked to provide their translations with sentences that they thought were not suitable.

3.2 Data Source and Participants

The participants were translators in the Arab world. Translators were selected conveniently to evaluate the translation because they are knowledgeable and specialists in the field. Convenient sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that targets those participants who are accessible (Golzar et al., 2022). Various studies recruited translators as subjects (Huang, 2021). This study tested the perceptions of Arab translators on four strategies of taboo words as listed in the corpus of 90 Hollywood films. This corpus of 90 Hollywood films was developed by the first researcher while doing his PhD (Sahari, 2021). These 90 films were systematically selected to compile films of different genres released between 2000 and 2018. These films must have English and Arabic subtitles. The corpus consists of 1.473.421 words and about 165 hours.

A Google Form was shared with groups of translators on Facebook and WhatsApp. Convenient translators responded to the form. There were 60 translators with different experiences working in the Arab world. Table 1 shows that 58.3% of the participants were males, whereas 41.7% of them were females. They represented 12 Arab countries. Recruiting translators from various Arab countries gives more consistency to the data due to the various cultural backgrounds of these countries, ranging from very conservative to less conservative in displaying such taboos. They are from Yemen (N=15), Iraq (N=11), Jordan (N=7), Saudi Arabia (N=5), Lebanon (N=5), Algeria (N=3), Egypt (N=3), Tunisia (N=2), Palestine (N=2), and Oman (N=1).

Table 1. Participants' demographic information.

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	35	58.3%
	Female	25	41.7%
Country	Lebanon	5	8.3%
	Yemen	15	25.0%
	Egypt	3	5.0%
	Jordan	7	11.7%
	Syria	2	3.3%
	Libya	4	6.7%
	Iraq	11	18.3%
	Oman	1	1.7%
	Algeria	3	5.0%
	Tunisia	2	3.3%
	Palestine	2	3.3%
	Saudi Arabia	5	8.3%

3.3 Instrument

A questionnaire was built up of four dimensions according to the strategies used in translating taboo words mentioned in the corpus. The first dimension included four instances where taboos are omitted in the subtitling. The second dimension provides four instances where cultural substitutions were provided in the subtitling. In the third dimension also four examples where reformation of the taboo was used in the rendering. Finally, the fourth dimension provided direct translations of the taboos into Arabic.

Translators were asked to express their reception of the subtitling from 'very accepted' (5) to 'very not accepted' (1). The translators were also told to add their translations for the subtitling that they thought was not suitable. The scale was built after careful investigation of the corpus, taking into account that the example includes all the categories of taboo words, i.e., religion, body parts, sex, mental disability, excrement, and prostitution. Furthermore, it gave a context to taboos, not just isolated words. The scale was sent to two professors in Translation Studies. They validated it and gave slight modifications to be added, particularly considering sentences with direct translation to the taboo words. Furthermore, the scale reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha. Cronbach's Alpha is widely used to measure the reliability of the translation scale (Cha et al., 2007). Table 2 shows that the total score of the scale was .822, which is a good sign of reliability. Table 2 indicates that the reliability of the first dimension, i.e.,

omission, was the highest with .839, followed by cultural substitutions, which scored .733. However, the last two dimensions, i.e., reformation and direct translation, got a little bit low score with .599 and .586, respectively; they are acceptable.

Table 2. Reliability of the scale.

Dimension	Reliability statistics	
	Cronbach's Alpha	N of items
Omission	.839	4
Cultural substitutions	.733	4
Reformation	.586	4
Direct translation	.599	4
Total	.822	16

3.4 Data Collection

As the questionnaire was prepared and checked for its face validity, the researchers began the data collection process. They prepared the questionnaire using Google Forms to be shared with Arab translators in different countries. The researchers posted the link to the questionnaire on the Facebook platform and shared it with translators. Social media made it easier for them to connect with translators in different online groups. They could ask translators in online groups to share opinions on subtitles and suggest better translations if some were not accurate or appropriate.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. For quantitative analysis, the translators' responses were coded. Five for strongly accepted and one for not strongly accepted. Some statistical tests (SPSS 23 Version), such as Cronbach Alpha for detecting stability, and One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov were used for checking the homogeneity of distribution of the participants. The Wallis Test was also used to show whether there was a difference between male and female translators in translation reception. Moreover, mean scores and standard deviations were also used to display the results. The qualitative findings were presented by displaying all the suggested translations for the taboos. The most appropriate translation was selected for discussion. The Arabic-suggested subtitles were transliterated into English and placed in brackets for global readers.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Acceptability of Taboo Language in Hollywood Film Subtitles Among Arab Translators

The results on how Arab translators' acceptance of taboo language subtitles in Hollywood films are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Acceptability of Arab translators to the subtitling of taboo words.

Dimensions	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Omission	60	3.16	1.10
Cultural substitution	60	3.71	.85
Reformation	60	3.22	.80
Direct translation	60	3.43	.78
Total	60	3.38	.64

Table 3 presents the statistical results of the acceptability of Arab translators to the subtitling of taboo language. It further indicates that Arab translators moderately accept the

translation of taboo language with a total mean score of 3.38 and a standard deviation of .64. Focusing on each dimension, it is found that cultural substitutions received the highest mean score among translators ($M=3.71$, $Std=.85$). This is followed by direct translation which reached an amount of ($M= 3.43$, $Std=.78$) with high score. Reformation received the third level of acceptance with a medium score of ($M=3.22$, $Std=.80$). Finally, omission received the lowest amount compared with the other strategies with a medium level of acceptability ($M=3.16$, $Std=1.10$).

4.2 Acceptability of Taboo Word Subtitling Among Arab Male and Female Translators

Before checking the difference between male and female translators in the acceptability of translation strategies used in subtitling, the One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was adopted to check the homogeneity of the sample. Table 4 shows that the data were normally distributed in three dimensions, i.e., omission, reformation, and direct translation. The Sig value reached .200^{c,d}, .200^{c,d}, and .178^c, whereas the fourth dimension, i.e., cultural substitution, was not normally distributed. The Sig value reached .005^c. The total also showed that the data were normally distributed as the Sig value scored .200^{c,d}. Therefore, a parametric test, an independent sample t-test, was used to calculate the difference between males and females.

Table 4. One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

		Omission	Reformation	Direct Translation	Cultural Substitution	Total
N		55	55	55	55	55
Normal Parameters ^{a,b}	Mean	3.1591	3.2455	3.4000	3.6955	3.3750
	Std. Deviation	1.07837	.79129	.76467	.86561	.63670
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.097	.102	.107	.147	.071
	Positive	.095	.066	.084	.072	.048
	Negative	-.097-	-.102-	-.107-	-.147-	-.071-
Test Statistic		.097	.102	.107	.147	.071
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.200 ^{c,d}	.200 ^{c,d}	.178 ^c	.005 ^c	.200 ^{c,d}
a. Test distribution is Normal.						
b. Calculated from data.						
c. Lilliefors Significance Correction.						
d. This is a lower bound of the true significance.						

Table 5 below displays that males scored higher than females in the acceptability of the adopted translation strategies for taboo language.

Table 5. Gender differences in the acceptability of rendering strategies used.

Strategy	Gender	N	Mean	Std. deviation	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Omission	Male	35	3.28	.957	.428	.428
	Female	25	2.99	1.28		
Cultural substitution	Male	35	3.75	.784	.798	.760
	Female	25	3.65	.962		
Reformation	Male	35	3.27	.75	.307	.846
	Female	25	3.14	.884		
Direct translation	Male	35	3.37	.592	-.195-	.483
	Female	25	3.52	.989		
Total	Male	35	3.41	.553	.614	.542
	Female	25	3.31	.745		

Table 5 reveals that male participants showed a high level of acceptance toward the translation ($M=3.41$, $SD=.553$), while female participants demonstrated moderate acceptance of the subtitling of taboo words ($M=3.31$, $SD=.745$). The difference in mean scores appears to be minimal. To determine whether this difference is statistically significant, a Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted. As shown in Table 5, the significance value was .831, indicating no significant difference between the two groups.

When analyzing the mean scores of male and female translators for each strategy, males scored slightly higher than females in three strategies: omission (Male=3.27, Female=2.99), cultural substitution (Male=3.75, Female=3.65), and reformation (Male=3.75, Female=3.14). Conversely, female translators scored higher (M=3.52) than males (M=3.37) in their acceptance of direct translation. However, this difference was also not statistically significant.

4.3 Arab Translators' Suggestions for Amending Taboo Language Translations into Arabic

To understand how Arab translators handle subtitled taboo language, they were asked to suggest alternative translations that better capture the original tone and intent. These suggestions reflect efforts to balance cultural accuracy with audience acceptability, using both literal and culturally nuanced approaches. Table 6 summarizes selected English taboo sentences, their official Arabic subtitles, and the translators' proposed alternatives, illustrating their negotiation of meaning and cultural sensitivity.

Table 6. Arab translators' suggestions for rendering taboo words omitted in subtitling.

English sentence	Subtitling	Suggested translations
1. What, so I gotta sit here and eat dessert alone, like I'm fucking Steven Glanzberg?	إذن سأجلس هنا وأكل الحلوى بمفردي وكأنني ستيفن غلانزبرغ؟	1. إذن سأجلس هنا وأكل الحلوى بمفردي وكأنني ستيفن غلانزبرغ اللعين. 2. إذن سأجلس هنا وأكل الحلوى بمفردي وكأنني ستيفن غلانزبرغ اللعين؟ 3. إذن سأجلس هنا وأكل الحلوى بمفردي وكأنني اللعين ستيفن غلانزبرغ
2. I told myself, "Charlie, get your stupid ass to Yellowstone."	قلت لنفسني: "شارلي"، اذهب إلى "يلوستون"	1. فحدثت نفسي شارلي، خذ حمارك المشلول إلى يلوستون 2. قلت لنفسني "شارلي، أحضر حبيبك إلى يلوستون" 3. قلت لنفسني تحرك إلى يلوستون 4. قلت لنفسني: "تشارلي، اذهب بحمقك إلى يلوستون."
3. Move your ass!	تحركوا	1. هيا تحركوا بسرعة 2. أرقصي 3. تحركوا سريعا
4. Where's the goddamn map?	أين الخريطة؟	1. أين الخريطة اللعينة؟ 2. أين الخريطة اللعينة؟ 3. أين الخريطة اللعينة؟ 4. أين الخارطة اللعينة؟ 5. أين الخريطة ال...؟ 6. أين الخريطة اللعينة؟ أو أين الخريطة بحق السماء؟

Table 6 displays the suggested subtitling for sentences where the translators in the subtitling omitted the taboo words. To begin the first sentence, "What, so I gotta sit here and eat dessert alone, like I'm fucking Steven Glanzberg?", has been subtitled into إذن سأجلس هنا وأكل الحلوى بمفردي وكأنني ستيفن غلانزبرغ؟ [iidhan sa'ajlis huna wakal alhalwaa bimufradi waka'anani stifin ghlanizbirgh]. Arab translators added the word اللعين [allaeayn] to the subtitling. Therefore, the suggested subtitling will be إذن سأجلس هنا وأكل الحلوى بمفردي وكأنني ستيفن غلانزبرغ اللعين؟ [iidhan sa'ajlis huna wakal alhalwaa bimufradi waka'anani satafun ghlanzubirgh allaein].

Regarding the second sentence, i.e., "I told myself, "Charlie, get your stupid ass to Yellowstone"." Arab translators provided four translations, yet some of them seem strange. The most suitable is قلت لنفسني: "تشارلي، اذهب بحمقك إلى يلوستون" [qult linafsi: "tsharli, adhhab bihamqik 'iila yilustunu], this is the suggested translation to substitute the subtitling in the film. Translators provide translation to the third sentence, i.e., "Move your ass!", as, هيا تحركوا بسرعة [hayaa taharakuu bisurea] or تحركوا سريعا [taharakuu sariean], yet the Arabic word سريعا [sariean] is suggested to be added to the subtitling. Finally, the word لعينة [laeyina] is suggested to be added to the subtitling.

In the following four sentences (5-8), the subtitler used cultural substitution while translating the taboo language, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Arab translators' suggestions on cultural substitutions used in rendering taboo language.

English sentence	Subtitling	Suggested translations
5. Goddamn it, let's go.	تَبَا، لنذهب.	
6. The only problem is, after that, you say some crazy-ass shit, and then you fucking die.	المشكلة الوحيدة هي أنك بعد ذلك . تتفوه بالترهات ثم تموت	1. ثم تموت غير مدرك ما خلفته من ازعاج...
7. Jesus, where are the police?	رباه، أين الشرطة؟	1. يا إلهي أين الشرطة 2. أين الشرطة؟ 3. أين الشرطة؟
8. You touch him, I swear to god I'm gonna beat the shit out of you with Allen's head.	إن لمسته، قسماً بالله سأوسعك ضرباً برأس "ألن"	1. أن كلمته سأوسعك ضرباً 2. قسماً بالله إن لمسته سأوسعك ضرباً برأس "ألن"

As Table 7 shows, translators have agreed upon the subtitling of sentence 5. Regarding sentence 6, one translator suggested a rendering that seemed better than the one provided in the subtitling. The suggested translation is [thuma tamut ghayr mudrik ma khllfth min azeaj]... ثم تموت غير مدرك ما خلفته من ازعاج. In sentence 7, one translator provided a similar translation to the subtitling, just substituting the word رباه [rabaah] with يا إلهي [ya 'alhi]. Other two translators preferred to omit the taboo word, suggesting "أين الشرطة". When sentence 8 was checked, the same level of agreement between translators was found. They just provided more natural translations such as, [qsaan biallah 'ina lamisth sa'uwsaeak drbaan biras :alin], "قسماً بالله إن لمسته سأوسعك ضرباً برأس" "ألن", [ana kalimatah sa'uwasieuk drbaan].

In sentences 9 to 12, reformations were used in the subtitling. Sentence 9 received a high number of suggested translations in the rendering. It seemed that translation number 3 is more natural and accepted among the suggested translations. This translation can be suggested for rendering the English sentence, *I'm sure your approach to women is Snapchatting a dick pic or two*. Sentence 10 in Table 10 got three suggestions. However, a reformation was used, translators preferred to adopt cultural substitution to make the sentence more natural. All three suggested translations provide very accepted translations. In sentence 11, three translations were suggested, the first suggestion is similar to the subtitling but more natural. The second added the rendering to the taboo word. Finally, the third translation ['ana muta'akid 'anak tataqarab min alnisa' bi'iirsal suarik lahuna] seems strange. Regarding sentence number 12, one translation was given. It seems more natural than the subtitling.

Table 8. Arab translators' suggestions on the reformation that translators did while rendering taboo.

English sentence	Subtitling	Suggested translations
9. I'm sure your approach to women is Snapchatting a dick pic or two.	تغازل النساء حتما بإرسال صورة لك لهن.	1. صورك عاريا لهن عبر الإنترنت/سناپشات 2. حتما إنك تغازل النساء بإرسال صورك لهن 3. أنا متأكد أنك تتقرب من النساء بإرسال صورك لهن 4. صور فاضحة 5. أنا متأكد بأنك تتعامل مع النساء من خلال إرسال صورة أو صورتين 6. تغازل النساء حتما بإرسال صورة لأعضائك لهن. 7. اني متأكد من ان نهجك نحو النساء ماهو الا صورة أو اثنتان في السناپ شات 8. انا اكيد ان مفهومك للمرأة يقتصر على ارسال صورة لعضوك الذكري.
10. Jesus Christ.	يا للهول	1. يا إلهي 2. بسم الله! 3. بسم الله!
11. That shit is hardcore and it fucking kills people.	وهي مادة قوية تقتل الناس	1. تلك المادة المؤذية تُبِيدُ الناس 2. هذه المادة اللعينة قوية وكفيلة بقتل البشر 3. البذاءة هي مرض مزمن تقتل الناس.
12. Everybody knows that I like my shit prompt.	يعرف الجميع أنني أحب كل شيء سريعا.	1. الكل يعرف انني أقع في حبال العشق بسرعة.

These sentences (13-16) were translated directly. Arab translators gave their translations, suggesting slight modification. Beginning with sentence 13, one translator made a cultural substitution for ‘hell’ with the word الله [Allah]. The second suggestion seemed strange, while the third translation omission was used, in which the taboo word ‘hell’ was omitted in the suggested translation. For sentence number 14, three translations were suggested. The first omitted the taboo word ‘balls’. The second and third translation reformations were used to make the translation neutral to the Arab audience. In sentence number 15, no translation was suggested. Finally, three translations were suggested. The first rendered the sentence directly in a more accurate way than the suggested one. The second used reformation (euphemism) in which the word ‘bitch’ was translated back into ‘my beloved’. Finally, the third sentence omission was used. The word ‘bitch’ was omitted in the Arabic rendering.

Table 9. Arab translators’ suggestions on the use of direct translation in rendering taboo language.

English sentence	Subtitling	Suggested translations
13. Stay the hell away from me!	ابتعد عني بحق الجحيم!	1. ابتعد عني بحق الله 2. ابعدني عن الجحيم 3. ابتعد عني
14. You’re crushing my balls!	إنك تسحقين خصيتي	1. أنت تسحقني! 2. أنت تضعين علي ضغوطا مؤلما 3. انك تؤلمني
15. It’s a goddamn homing beacon	إنه جهاز إرسال لعين	
16. Get ready for a close encounter, bitch!	استعدي لمواجهة عن قرب أيتها الساقطة!	1. استعدي للقاء قريب أيتها الساقطة 2. استعدي للقاء حميم، يا حبيبتي 3. استعدي لمواجهة عن قرب

5. DISCUSSION

The study found that Arab translators moderately accepted the subtitling of taboo language in Hollywood films ($M=3.38$). Presenting texts to translators for evaluation is grounded in translation reception theory, which emphasizes the translator’s central role in interpreting the intended meaning (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2010; Nord, 2016). The findings suggest that subtitling companies have not given sufficient attention to the accurate rendering of taboo language from English into Arabic. Alsharhan (2020) supports this, noting that Netflix follows a no-censorship policy regarding the translation of taboo words into Arabic. However, this contrasts with the findings of Abdelaal and Al Sarhani (2021), who reported that the subtitling quality of the film *Training Day* was perceived as high.

Additionally, the study highlights that subtitling taboo expressions remains a particularly challenging task. This complexity has prompted scholars and practitioners to propose models for translating culturally specific terms (see Díaz-Cintas et al., 2007; Love, 2021; Pedersen, 2018). Despite these efforts, there remains a lack of consensus, consistency, and clarity in translating such expressions. As taboo words vary in meaning across different contexts, their perceived offensiveness also shifts, leading subtitlers to adopt different strategies, ranging from deletion (Hashemian et al., 2014) to euphemism and omission (Abdelaal and Al Sarhani, 2021; Sahari, 2023). Moreover, Karavelos and Sidiropoulou (2024) observed a link between the timing of translation and the level of offensiveness: more recent translations tend to be more explicit, while older versions tend to use euphemisms and avoid direct references to sex or intimate body parts. This evolution suggests that taboo language has become more integrated into everyday discourse, potentially due to the influence of the internet and widespread use of social media.

Nevertheless, the study found that Arab male translators showed a higher level of acceptance of subtitled taboo language ($M=3.41$) than female translators, who demonstrated moderate acceptance ($M=3.31$). However, this difference was statistically insignificant. The variation between genders in perceiving taboo translation supports the arguments of Burton-Bradley (1970), Al-Khatib (1995), and Marshall (2010), who noted that taboos are influenced by

factors such as cultural norms, social development, and linguistic evolution. This finding also aligns with [Stenström's \(2006\)](#) study, which observed that the difference between males and females in using swear words is minimal, particularly when the language is used in group communication rather than direct confrontation.

Furthermore, the results revealed that male translators tended to prefer omission, cultural substitution, and reformation strategies more than their female counterparts, while female translators showed a stronger preference for direct translation. This may point to gender-based differences in the acceptability of subtitling strategies. However, this finding contrasts with [Valdeón \(2024\)](#), who reported that an all-female translation team from *Chicago PD* omitted a greater percentage of swear words (32.8%) than their male counterparts from *The FBI* (20%), suggesting a possible gender-based difference in conservative translation tendencies, often linked to the vulgarization hypothesis.

Additionally, our findings align with [AlSabbagh's \(2023\)](#) study, which found that taboo expressions are commonly used across genders and age groups. While the current study shows a slight difference between male and female translators in their acceptance of taboo subtitling, it somewhat contradicts [AlSabbagh's \(2023\)](#) finding that Bahraini male and female students used taboo language at equal rates (58.6%). This discrepancy may stem from the distinction between accepting taboo language in translation and using it in everyday conversation. Supporting this idea, [Habibovic's \(2010\)](#) found that Sudanese women demonstrated a higher level of understanding and held distinct attitudes toward English taboo language, suggesting that perception and actual usage may not always align.

Similarly, [Hadian \(2015\)](#) reported that Iranian females were inclined to use taboo language in conversation. However, [Samir and Hashemizadeh \(2023\)](#) found no significant differences in the strategies used by Iranian male and female translators when subtitling and dubbing taboo words. In the current study, Arab translators occasionally used cultural substitution rather than omission when rendering taboo expressions. For instance, they added the words اللعين [*allaeayn*] and اللعينة [*allaeyna*] to render the first and fourth sentences, respectively, and the term بحمقك [*bihamqik*] in the second. They also applied reformation, such as translating the third sentence into تحركو بسرعة [*taharuku bisurea*]. This tendency to translate taboo expressions rather than omit them aligns with [Haider et al. \(2023\)](#), who noted that taboo content may be rendered with similar, higher, or lower intensity levels depending on context. In some cases, as [Greenall \(2024\)](#) observed, translators may use a re-borrowing strategy when translating taboo language, particularly when the source text lacks metalinguistic commentary on the offensive term. In Greenall's analysis of *Jo Nesbø's Harry Hole* series, re-borrowing was the predominant strategy, occurring in 81.8% of cases..

In this present study, when subtitlers initially employed cultural substitutions in examples 5–8, Arab translators proposed reformulated translations that sounded more natural. In other cases, they opted to omit the taboo expression entirely. These practices reflect the findings of [Khalaf \(2016\)](#), who emphasized that subtitlers consider not only translation techniques but also cultural norms and technical constraints such as time and space limitations. Similar conclusions were reached by [Abdelaal and Al Sarhani \(2021\)](#) and [Hashemian et al. \(2014\)](#), who found that euphemism and omission were the most frequently used strategies for subtitling taboo language.

Cultural substitution was also favored by Arab translators to revise translations where the original subtitler used reformation. This choice suggests an intent to preserve a similar level of offensiveness in the target language, which contrasts with the broader tendency to soften or omit such expressions ([Khalaf & Ali, 2023](#)). For instance, in sentences 13–16, direct translations of taboo words were omitted altogether. This strategy aligns with [Briechele and Eppler \(2019\)](#) and [Abdelaal and Al Sarhani \(2021\)](#), who highlighted that omission and euphemism, along with adjustments to the semantic fields of taboo, are common in localization processes. These approaches help ensure that the translated content remains culturally appropriate and comprehensible to the target audience. Furthermore, the findings corroborate [Hashemian et al. \(2014\)](#), who identified deletion as the most prevalent strategy for rendering taboo expressions between English and Persian. [Samir and Hashemizadeh \(2023\)](#) similarly found that Iranian translators primarily employed substitution and euphemism.

The current study both supports and challenges previous research, raising important questions for future investigation. For instance, why do Arab translators show the highest acceptance for subtitles that omit taboo language, yet frequently offer cultural substitutions in their own translations? Another question concerns gender differences: why did female translators in this study tend to use more direct translations of taboo expressions, despite earlier findings suggesting that males generally use taboo language more frequently than females (cf. Hadian, 2015; Jay, 1999; Kheradparvar & Davoodi, 2014).

6. CONCLUSION

Translating taboo words remains a subject of ongoing debate. These debates often stem from translators' cultural backgrounds and the broader society's level of acceptability toward offensive terms. The findings revealed moderate agreement among translators, suggesting the need for subtitling companies to consult with professional translators before releasing films. Subtitling companies should carefully consider the cultural sensitivity required when rendering such terms. One key challenge in subtitling taboos is the decision of whether to omit them; many translators believe that omission compromises the accuracy of the translation. This concern for precision led some translators to euphemize taboo expressions instead. However, even when euphemized, the translations occasionally lacked smoothness and naturalness.

This study presents several implications for subtitling companies. As the findings indicate, Arab translators showed a moderate level of acceptance toward the subtitling of taboo words. This degree of acceptability calls for subtitling companies to consult language and translation professionals to ensure subtitles sound natural and culturally appropriate. Furthermore, ministries of information and media across the Arab world should establish clear censorship guidelines for the release of foreign films. These policies should regulate the language used in subtitles to align with the values of conservative Arab societies.

Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. It used a scale to assess translators' acceptability of taboo translation; however, focusing specifically on professional subtitlers might have yielded more accurate insights. Additionally, the corpus analyzed included Hollywood films from 2000 to 2018, which may be considered outdated. Therefore, future research should examine more recent films to reflect current trends in subtitling practices. Another limitation is the treatment of the Arab world as a homogeneous entity. In reality, Arab countries vary in their degrees of conservatism; some are more liberal and may tolerate taboo expressions, while others are highly conservative and strictly reject them in subtitles. In light of these conclusions and limitations, there is an urgent need for collaboration between Arab translators and governmental institutions, such as the Ministries of Culture, to develop a comprehensive model for translating taboo expressions. This model should respect the religious and cultural sensitivities of Arab societies. Future studies should also examine the extent to which censorship policies in Arab countries align with the content of foreign films. Additionally, further research could explore the emotional, social, and ethical effects of directly subtitled taboo language on Arab audiences.

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