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Non-professional subtitling: Opportunities & challenges

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*Abstract-*This article attempts to tackle non-professional subtitling in a more holistic approach. By holistic I mean to talk about the two conflicting aspects of positivity and negativity of such a practice. In other words, the opportunities offered to the market and to viewers and the challenges created by non-professional subtitling.

Index Terms- AVT- subtitling – nonprofessional

It is logical to start by an overview of audiovisual translation (AVT) that recently acquired more interest in the literature of translation studies and the factors that contribute to the popularity of subtitling among other mode of AVT.

Generally speaking, AVT is the translation of any multimedia material in which the verbal dimension is not the only mode of communicating meaning. The interplay between the different semiotic modes of the audiovisual material such as picture, sound, colour and others, contribute to the meaning-making of the media content and shape its communicative effect. The questions of how media content of the audiovisual material is rephrased visually and aurally and how it is interpreted by the audience give audiovisual translation studies great visibility.

In this respect, audiovisual translation is gaining more visibility in shaping the communication process of screen material in a multicultural and multilingual environment. Diaz Cintas (2009: 8) further elaborates "It is not an exaggeration to state that AVT is the means through which not only information but also the assumptions and values of a society are filtered and transferred to other cultures".

Subtitling and dubbing are the two translation techniques that receive the lion share in the studies of audiovisual translation (Gottlieb & Gambier, 2001, Diaz-Cintas, 2003, 2008, 2009, 2010, &2012, Diaz-Cintas & Remael 2007, Bogucki 2009, Foerster 2010 and others).

Subtitling, non-professional subtitling (NPS) in particular, has become more popular with the emerging media landscape and digitization and internationalization allowing non-professionals to produce and share their individual and collective identities through interactive websites.

It is worth mentioning here that attempts to define non-professional subtitling have occupied the mind of many translation scholars. However, they failed to draw a clear demarcation line between what is professional and non-professional. Attempts to define professional subtitling lean towards subtitling of institutional or rather state established websites or renderings of trained translators (Perez Gonzales & 'Savera 2012). One can say that professional translators are paid translators.

Perez-Gonzalez & Susam-Saraeva (2012) give a rather general definition of non-professional translators and interpreters as individuals who did not receive any formal translation training and work for free. However, they are not simply a cheaper alternative to professional translators as they are actively involved in the distribution of news and the spread of social networks and virtual communities on the internet with wider audiences in the foreign context, and this takes away from the neutrality of 'narration' as they may be subject to 'cause or agenda' bias. It is also worth to add here that they are "ordinary citizens [who] become increasingly involved in the co-creation of media content" (Perez-Gonzalez, 2013b: 4; *emphasis added*). Non-professional subtitling is often linked to bilingual volunteers who chose to contribute to the dissemination of the media content of the audiovisual material. It is also worth to add here that they are "ordinary citizens [who] become increasingly involved in the co-creation of media content" (Perez-Gonzalez, 2013b: 4).

NPS emerged probably because of several reasons, most important of which is the viewers' discomfort of some of the professional subtitling rendered to favoured audiovisual material. Needless to mention the overflow and free access to subtitling programmers on the internet. Although the Quality of subtitling rendered by non-professionals which has occupied the minds of subtitlers, users and translation scholars and opened new venues of research in this respect, the issue remained unsettled. Hence, I will not draw upon this aspect but for a general view of the issue, one can say that users might define quality in terms of availability of subtitled audiovisual content on the internet that have easy access and speed in release. The issue of how far this media content is 'honest' and 'true', is deemphasized with the remarkable expansion of this new media landscape. However, attempts to examine the subtitled audiovisual content in terms of how subtitles relocated/reconceptualized the meaning have gained more prominence.

What is the current status quo?

Hundreds of audiovisual material are posted in their subtitled versions on the YouTube, facebook or other social media to maximize the connectedness with the outside world. Volunteer bilinguals often offer a cheaper alternative to the audiovisual content that they appreciate because of its cultural significance. In this context, non-professional subtitling closely associates with the term 'fansubbing'. Diaz Cintas and Remael (2007) argue that fansubbing practices are the significant consequence of the rapid development of subtitling programs which have become much more affordable and accessible on the internet. Fansubbing is subtitling produced 'by fans for fans', or as preferred by many as instances of 'subbing' and not subtitling (Diaz Cintas and Remael, 2007). Fansubbing contributes to popularize an area of particular interest and make it accessible to wider viewers/readers (Bogucki

2009). These new ideas that come from outside the Code of Good Subtitling Practice, allow new trends to infiltrate into the practice which then enter the commercial realm (Foerster 2010). Popular cultural contents such as movies, songs, TV programmers, TV series and others receive significant share of non-professional subtitling.

Hence, this new form of users-generated media give rise to new forms of subtitling which need to be studied not from the linguistic perspectives but rather towards the core of cultural/ideological considerations.

Examples
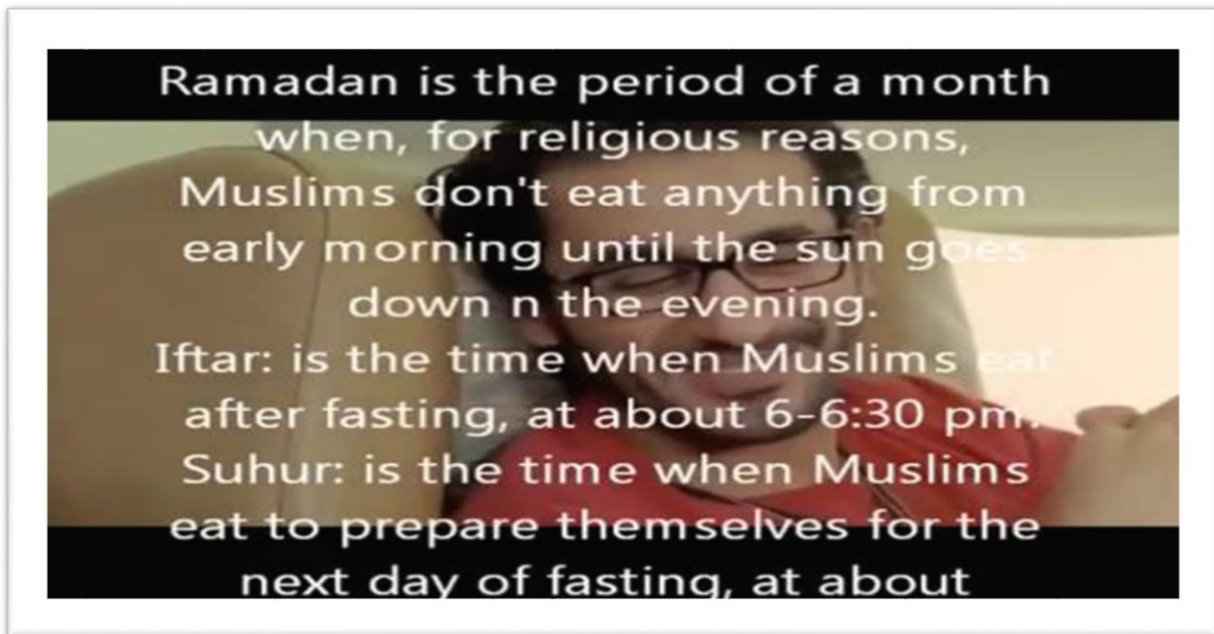
a

Screen capture (1): *asel eswed* (Black Honey), (youtube.com)

The above screen capture is taken from the popular Egyptian comic movie *asel eswed* (black honey). The main character Ahmed Helmy is an Egyptian American who lived all his life in the USA then decided to visit Egypt. Feeling nostalgic of the Egyptian traditions and customs, he narrates his good memories of the month of Ramadan in Egypt. To give more significance to sharing more information about the month of Ramadan in the Islamic tradition with foreign audiences, the subtitler opts to violate professional codes of subtitling, i.e subtitles are filling the whole screen and not rendered in two lines at the bottom as practiced by professional subtitlers. Instead the subtitler gives full account of this month at the expense of the narration of the main character. Subtitling here gains primacy in disseminating a cultural/religious notion over the purpose of subtitling events of the movie. In this sense, non-professional subtitling overrides direct equivalence of visual and linguistic renderings of the original to contribute to the viewer's knowledge of cultural/religious concept.

In the same vein, non-professional subtitling of virtual activists groups manifests more inclination towards intensifying the cause or the ideology of the group. The example below may make the point clear.
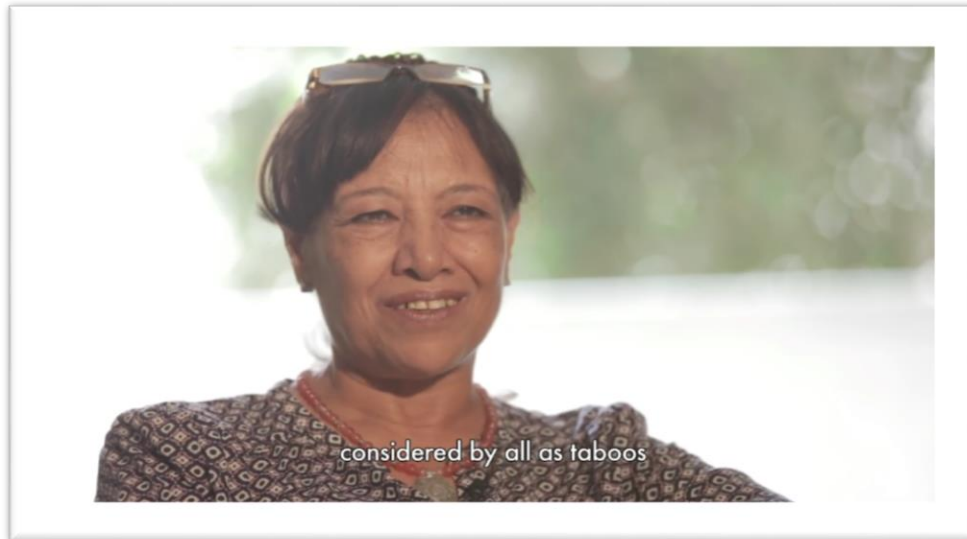
Screen capture (2): 'Feminism is a Choice', (youtube.com)

Recently, feminist activists' groups have invaded the internet crying out to the support of the outside world to women's rights in the Arab world. Suffering from the patriarchal dominance in the Arab societies, Arab feminist activists plead for the solidarity of the foreign communities in their fight against such dominance. They have used the internet to circulate such plea in subtitled audiovisual material.

The above screen capture is taken from a recorded video on the history and objectives of the Egyptian NGO 'New Women Foundation' uploaded on their website. This video is entitled 'Feminism is a Choice'.   The narrator's verbal comment on feminism issues that people see not appropriate to speak about *mosh mafroud 'n iḥna netklem feeha'* (isn't appropriate to speak about), is subtitled 'considered by all as taboos'. There is a subtle amount of information communicated by the word 'taboos'. Apart from the linguistic manipulation, the use of the word 'taboo' in place of 'is not appropriate' in the English subtitles explores more hidden issues in relation to the construct of the patriarchal societies which consider calling for women's right as a taboo. Needless to say that taboo in the Arabic Islamic context includes the sinful actions that are forbidden by Allah. The word taboo in the subtitles magnifies women's struggles against dogmatic patriarchal oppression in the Arab societies.

In conclusion, non-professional subtitling allows more audiovisual content to be seen by foreign audiences free of charge. It helps disseminating and introducing cultural concepts to the

outside world. Nevertheless, this new users-generated media give rise to new forms of subtitling which need to be studied from different perspectives rather than the technical/linguistic one.

Can quality and rapid expansion of such subtitled audiovisual material by non-professional be monitored or limited in the future? The answer to this question seems impossible.

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