

Subtitling Strategies of Swear Words and Taboo Expressions from English into Arabic in the American Sitcom Friends: Corpus-Based Study

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Abstract

The current study attempted to determine the techniques used to render swear words and the translation quality. The present study's findings will help address the gaps in the literature and the translation practices related to translating taboo expressions and swear words. The study adopted a mixed method to conduct the analysis. The qualitative techniques of the study focused on identifying the strategies employed when working with audiovisual rendering, while quantitative techniques focused on quality assessment. It is important to note that no quantitative tests were carried out in the analysis to measure the quality of the study. From the investigation, the study confirmed that the most used translation techniques were omission and euphemism. Another reason to use omission as a translation approach is that some swear, and taboo words collide in English but not Arabic. Omission as a tactic may be appropriate if the translation does not create a vacuum on the screen that prevents viewers from thoroughly enjoying the film. Besides, the translator euphemistically interpreted various curses and forbidden phrases to contain such subtle offensiveness and vulgarity. This method is acceptable if it does not alter the essence of meaning. On quality, the study found that most of the subtitles are of low quality. While the approach provides a quantitative assessment, a qualitative assessment is also essential. Previous research on subtitling swears words and prohibited terms needs to be expanded. A paradigm that governs the tactics employed in Arabic-to-English subtitling is also required.

Keywords: Arabic translation, friends movie, swear words, subtitling strategies, taboo words

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Introduction

Swear and taboo words in the subtitle are a rendering problem that has attracted significant scholarly attention (Abdelaal & Al Sarhani, 2021; Díaz-Pérez, 2020; Goddard, 2015; Hawel, 2019). According to Goddard (2015), such swear words are essential in expressing emotions like frustration and anger. Moreover, it is important to note that the use of swear words generates social implicature, implying it gives valuable hints relating to an aspect of individuality and class membership information that is crucial in understanding an individual's background (Díaz-Pérez, 2020). While swearwords have become commonplace in films and television shows, many cultures prohibit such terms due to social and cultural factors. Most of these words are considered taboo, particularly those used to describe sex, bodies, and function, and used to insult others (Al-Jabri, Allawzi, & Abushmaes, 2021). The taboo concept relates to the prohibition or avoidance of behavior in one culture since it is considered harmful to the members as it causes fear, humiliation, or shame. Considering the proliferation of taboo words in the media that is often rendered into different languages, studies must be conducted to determine how these words are translated into different linguistic backgrounds.

The current study aims to determine how swear words and taboo expressions are subtitled from English to Arabic. The current study will contribute to the body of research relating to the subtitling of taboo expressions and swear words, as currently, there is limited research on effective subtitling and translation of swear words. The western and Arabic cultures are different; hence, some Western concepts and words might not be appropriate in the Arabic world. Thus proper and effective translation techniques must be properly understood to ensure effective translation.

The study will specifically address two primary objectives:

- i. To determine subtitling techniques used to subtitle taboo expressions from English to Arabic in Friends
- ii. To determine subtitling techniques used to subtitle swear words from English to Arabic in Friends

The article's next section will include the literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

Literature Review

Taboo expressions and swear words are an inseparable component of each language. Ordinarily, Taboo expressions are subjects, phrases, or words that individuals avoid as they are extraordinarily offensive or have an embarrassing impact. Studies indicate that such taboo terms can be broadly categorized into five primary classes. These include the religious class, scatological theme, reproductive organ class, sexual activity, and mother theme (Almijrab, 2020). On the other hand, swear words are profanities, have long been considered offensive in the English language, and are also inappropriate when spoken out during live television performances or broadcasts (Andang & Bram, 2018). Such words include swear and curse words involving genitals and intercourse.

A growing body of research examines the strategies used to translate English into another language. Research such as the study by Debbas and Haider (2020) evaluated the cultural challenges relating to rendering the animated American sitcom Family Guy into Arabic and the strategies used in subtitling the cultural references like swear words and taboos and reported

challenges primarily attributed to the nature of the audience. Such challenges compelled the Audiovisual translators to resort to euphemistic expression and omission. While the use of omission is common in translation, especially from one culture to another, it is a lazy approach, thus calling for research to determine an appropriate means of subtitling without leaving out part of the translation. Nonetheless, it is essential to note that the study focused on animation, a different genre from sitcoms and comedy.

Abdelaal and Al Sarhani (2021) conducted a study to examine the challenges experienced by translators when translating swear words and how to overcome these challenges when translating from English to Arabic. The study drew samples from the American sitcom *Friends*. The analysis confirmed that various strategies could be used in translating swear words from English to Arabic, with the two main strategies being omission and euphemism. The authors indicate: "Omission was used because of cultural constraints, as the translator observed the target culture constraints that sometimes make it difficult to render some swear and taboo words into Arabic, especially those which are perceived as very pejorative and unacceptable." The study's assertion offers essential insights into the translation and subtitling of profane words from English to Arabic however could be more replicable considering the author focused on an action film that was more intense with little or no humor compared to the sitcom genre.

Recently, Almijrab (2020) conducted a study on the translation of taboo expressions and concluded that euphemism was the most appropriate strategy when dealing with taboo words because of the Islamic background of the Arab audience. The study reports that translation from English, considered a lingua Franca and a religious-oriented language, is faced with challenges stemming from untranslatability, especially regarding taboo words and expressions. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that the study should have considered the everyday use of profane words, especially in the audiovisual context, thus making it hard for the study's findings to be replicated in the current study.

The translation of a sitcom as a genre has received significant attention in translational research. Alharthi (2016) conducted a study on the translation of swear words in the television show, indicating that translators experienced challenges in rendering and translation from English to Arabic due to the culturally bound nature of the taboo words. The challenge resulted in omission and euphemism when translating from English to Arabic. Nonetheless, it is essential to note that the focus of the study was on swear and taboo expressions; thus, the findings cannot be generalized, but additional research on the translation of swear words from American movies, and Arabic renditions confirms that Arab subtitlers opted for omission and euphemism as translation techniques, a phenomenon attributed to cultural constraints between Arabic and English (Al-Yasin & Rabbah, 2019). In this regard, it is evident that translating profanity and taboos from English to Arabic is complex, requiring most translators to omit portions of the conversation. Particular subtitling methods are required to overcome this obstacle.

The current study examines taboos and swearing words to assess the strategies and quality of the translation of these swear and taboo words and expressions in the American sitcom *Friends*, which premiered in 1994 and ran for over ten years, with a season finale streaming in 2004 (*Friends*, 1994). The sitcom was selected considering it received global recognition in Arabic and has been rendered in Arabic. Besides, the show has numerous extralinguistic cultural references, including taboo expressions and swear words.

Theoretical Framework

The current study will be premised on Pedersen Model. The model outlines that translators adopt different strategies in translating audiovisual content from English to Arabic, broadly classifying the approaches to Source Language-oriented translations (ST-oriented) and target language-oriented translation (TT-Oriented). The theory will be supported by the FAR model advanced by Pedersen (2017), focusing on the translation's functionality, acceptability, and readability. This model will help in evaluating the quality of the translation. According to Pedersen's Model, these strategies include retention, which involves adapting or retaining items in ST in the TT. It is more ST oriented as it transfers the term from ST to TT without changing its lexis. The technique is applicable when translating proper nouns. The second rendering technique is a specification. The technique does not involve translation; it is explained through addition or completion. In addition, explication or addition is used to explicate the ST item. The explanation occurs to render some explicit meaning or explain an acronym. Often used when translating acronyms or names by filling out the acronym (Pedersen, 2005). Besides, addition can occur when there is a need to elaborate on the topic further and issue a clarification. The last technique that is source language oriented is a direct translation which involves the word for word translation and often focuses on rendering the names of institutions and common names.

The TT-oriented strategies include generalization, which happens when the ST lexical item is translated into a more general term. The second technique in TT-oriented translation is a substitution, similar to the technique equivalence technique proposed by Vinay and Darbelnet (1995). When applied, the strategy involves rendering the ST item into a culturally equivalent TT item. The last technique is an omission, which occurs when ST is omitted and not translated to TT.

The FAR quality assessment model, as advanced by Pedersen (2017), will be adopted concerning quality assessment. In the model, F stands for Functional equivalence, A stands for acceptability, and R stands for readability. The functional equivalence emphasizes the message conveyed by the translation and whether the message in the subtitles is what was intended by the speaker. Acceptability relates to whether the render is natural and natural in the target language. The last component of the model is readability, which is concerned with whether the subtitles can be read fluently. Based on the FAR model, these three elements are employed to assess the quality of subtitles. The quality will be based on a scoring scale with errors in the categories of minor errors, standard or serious errors that can compromise the subtitles. A score of one is assigned to serious errors, 0.5 to standard errors, and 0.25 to minor errors. These errors are unpacked in table one.

Table 1. *Errors and scores*

Error	Rating
Serious error	1
Standard error	0.5
Minor errors	0.25

Based on the FAR model, errors fall into different categories. First, the functional equivalence element, the most crucial form of equivalence in subtitling, has two main errors. These include semantic errors and stylistic errors. On the Acceptability element, the errors are broadly categorized into grammar, spelling, and idiomaticity, which often impede the reading and comprehension of the information. The last element is readability which has errors such as segmentation and spotting, punctuation and reading speed and line length.

Method

The primary objective of the current study is to determine the strategies that are adopted in the rendering of swear words and taboo expressions and evaluate the quality of the translation. Thus, the current study adopted a comparative research design with mixed methods. The qualitative approach seeks to find out the strategies used for subtitling, while quantitative techniques will focus on the quality of translation. The study's findings will be compared to determine the equivalence and functionality of the translation. Moreover, it is essential to note that only numbers were used in the analysis, and no statistical tests were used. The numbers were assigned to the best understanding of the researchers with a background in both languages.

Participants

The current study adopted purposeful sampling. The sampling technique was deemed appropriate since the researcher intended to evaluate information in the study could only be evaluated from the sitcom *Friends* since it was widely recognized and popular in Arabic-speaking nations and English-speaking countries. According to Kothari (2004), the technique is appropriate when the researcher selects a sample with specific and specialized information. Hence, *Friends* was selected as it is rich with taboo expressions and swearwords. Secondly, the study was appropriate due to its popularity in the Arab world. The television show was accessed through the Netflix streaming platform, and the subtitles were downloaded from the website <https://www.tvsubtitles.net/tvshow-65-1.html>.

The television show revolves around the lives of six friends. The show premiered with Monica Geller (Courtney Cox), Ross Geller (David Schwimmer), Rachel Green (Jennifer Aniston), Chandler Bing (Matthew Perry), Joey Tribbiani (Matt LeBlanc), and Phoebe Buffay (Lisa Kudrow) all in their 20s and lived in the same area. They spend every day together at each other's residences and New York City's "Central Perk" coffee shop. According to some academics, it is a "show about nothing." However, it is still worth viewing because it is about how individuals make sense of their situations and construct their identities. According to Barry et al. (2009), the show's popularity can also be attributed to the fact that it depicted real-life situations: "(a) friends can be a substitute family for young people, giving them advice, support, and companionship; (b) friends can be of the same or opposite sex, but these two types of friendship work differently; (c) friends can have casual sex, (d) or can also fall in love.

Results

The following section outlines the strategies adopted in subtitling swear words and taboo expressions in the film and exhaustively identified and described according to Pedersen's taxonomy. The evaluation is further followed by a quality assessment of the translation, as Pederson (2017) advanced. It is worth noting that only some of the examples were included to reduce redundancy. Some of the taboo and swear words on the television show include:

Table 2. *Taboo expressions and swear words on the Friends*

Phoebe	Rachel	Joey	Ross	Monica	Chandler
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Bringing the noise, bringing the fuck on the bladder!	What a bitch. Horny bitch! No, you're a horny bitch What happened? Did her ass explode? What a manipulative bitch. What is the duck? What the hell did the damned duck do now?	Does a bear shit in the woods?	Damn IT! Boy, what an ass am I!	Why is there an ass print on my couch? And I hope someday she can kick his ass. Why is there an ass print on my couch?	What kind of scary-ass clowns came to your birthday? You bitch.
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Sample and Translations from Friends

Sample One Context: Rachel is expectant and hesitant to break the news to the father. Phoebe encourages her to go to his house and tell him.

Phoebe: (sarcastic) Yeah. You're just gonna knock on his door and change his life forever. You're like Ed McMahon, except without the big check or the **raw sexual magnetism**.

Arabic Translation

فبيبي: ما عليك سوى ان تطرقي بابيه و تغيري حياته للأبد
و كأنك (إيد ماكماهون) لكن من دون الشيك الكبير، أو الإنجذاب المجرد

In the translation, the subtitle Raw sexual magnetism has been deleted to allow the introduction of Ed's program to enable the audience in the target language to realize it is a joke.

Sample Two: Joey, who was pursuing a career in acting, wants his eyebrows trimmed as the director of the film he is part of his asked him to do so to play the role of a woman. He consults his friend Chandler if he knows of a place, and Chandler offers to help him with it

Chandler: (to Joey) Ok, you know how most kids get their allowance

from mowing the lawn or taking out the garbage? Well, I earned mine by plucking my father's eyebrows and his —business\ partners.

Joey: Oh my God!

Chandler: Well, I guess you don't need my help Victor Victoria!

Sample Six: Occurs during a breakup with another love and a small argument ensues after Phoebe leaves her flat: Phoebe tells him:

Phoebe: So long! Don't let the best door in the world hit you in the a** on your way out.

The term mass is lost in the translation through omission and euphemized, possibly because the translator needed help to think of a better alternative for the phrase that is culturally appropriate.

Arabic Translation

تشاندرلر: أنت تعلم أن معظم الأطفال يحصلون على مصروفهم جراء جز العشب أو إخراج النفايات
أما أنا فقد حصلت على مصروفي من إنتزاع شعر أبي و شركائه في العمل
روس: يا إلهي
تشاندرلر: حسنا، أعتقد أنك لست بحاجة لي يا (فيكتور فيكتوريا)

Sample Three Omission: The friends are sitting together discussing what is more difficult to give up sex or food:

Phoebe: Ross, how about you?

What would you give up, sex or food?

Ross: Food.

Phoebe: (to Ross) Ok, how about... Uhm... sex or dinosaurs?

Ross: Oh my God. It's like Sophie's Choice.

Arabic Rendition

فبيبي: (روس)، ماذا عنك؟
هل تتخلى عن الجنس أم الطعام؟
روس: الطعام
فبيبي: حسناً، الجنس أم الديناصورات؟
روس: هذا بمثابة خيار (صوفي)

The scene draws from Pakula (1983) drama film where a woman is compelled to decide which of her children lives and which one dies. In the translation, the audience can be pointed to Sophia's choice and omitting "Oh my God. In this sense, the translators can render the text from English to Arabic through omission.

Sample Four: In the scene, Mona is expressing her admiration for Rachel as she has heard a lot about her from Ross:

Ross: (To Mona) Oh, come on, Mona, don't kiss a**.

روس: كفى يا (منى) لا تتملقي

The translators avoid the word a**S through omission and euphemism without paying attention to the humor surrounding it.

Sample Five: Rachel is in her office talking to her workmate Gavin who is attracted to their secretary, who shows up in the office to collect some files.

Rachel: I'm just happy...I'm sorry. Obviously, Heather's a** has something more important to say, so I'll wait until it's finished.

Gavin: I was looking at the skirt. Or was it pants?

*I did not really see what happened below the a** area.*

Rachel: If you like looking at butts so much, why don't you just go look at a mirror?

راشيل: أنا مسرورة...المعذرة يبدو أن لدي قوام هيذر

In the translation, the word ass is lost in translation as the translator euphemized it with Butt, which was more polite to use in the context of the translation.

Sample Six: Joey and Rachel are having a conversation in the hotel

Joey: Is it hot in here?

Rachel: No. Not for me, but why don't you take off your sweater?

Joey: I would, but this is a nice place, and my T-shirt has a picture of **Calvin doing Hobbs**.

Rachel: Oh, my God! Really? Can I see it?

Joey: Yea, sure.

Rachel: Huh, wow, I wouldn't think Hobbs would like that so much.

جوي: كنت لأفعل لكنه مكان فخم وعلى القميص صورة (كالفن) و(هويس)

The phrase "Calvin doing Hobbs," which implies having sexual intercourse, is euphemized, and omitted.

Sample Seven: Jim and Phoebe are on a date. He is mischievous, and while in the restaurant, he continues looking at her and flattering her.

Jim: (to Phoebe) I'm sorry, I'm staring.

*It is just that you have the most beautiful eyes... and your **breasts!** Hmmm!!!*

Arabic Translation

جيم: آسف لأنني أهدق فيك، لكن لديك أجمل عيين... و قوامك

In the translation, the translation of breasts is lost as the translator replaces it with an expression that sounds like "what a hot woman you are" in Arabic.

Table 3. *Quality assessment*

Sample	Subtitling strategy	Functional eq	readability	acceptability
1	Omission	.25	0	0
2	omission	0	0	0
3	Omission	00	0	0
4	Omission	0	0	2.5
5	Omission	.25	0	2.5
6	Omission/Euphemizing	0	0	1
7	Euphemizing	.25	0	1

The findings indicate that the primary methods that are used in the translation are euphemizing and emotions. Besides, the quality assessment also confirmed that the acceptability and omission as a means of translation were higher compared to euphemizing. The study confirms that the two primary translation techniques include omission and euphemizing.

Discussion

The study reports that omission and euphemism were the most used translation for swearing and taboo words. The study also confirmed that the most acceptable translation technique used in swear words and taboo expressions was an omission. This view is supported by Abdelaal & Al Sarhani (2021), who indicated that the approach was used because of cultural constraints, as the translator observed the target cultural constraints that sometimes make it difficult to render some swear and taboo words into Arabic, especially those which are perceived as very pejorative and unacceptable. The Omission occurs when the source term is omitted and not translated to TT (Pedersen, 2005). The different scenes sampled where sexual connotations were made primarily left out of the Arabic rendition. For instance, in sample 7: *Jim: (to Phoebe) I'm sorry, I'm staring. It is just that you have the most beautiful eyes...and your **breasts!** Hmmm!!!*. The translation was euphemized in Arabic so that it turned to "what a hot woman you are" this not only takes away the meaning but is also difficult for the audience to read, thus the low score (0) and acceptability. Making references to women's body parts in a sexual manner goes against the values of Arabs, thus the need to come up with a more culturally acceptable term. Nevertheless, in doing so, the meaning and the joke are distorted, making it less appealing to the TT audience as it does not have the same effect as in the source language. This finding is consistent with the view of Abdelaal

(2019), indicating that translating culturally bound phrases can be challenging due to a lack of compatibility between the terms or having an alternative term in the culture, thus making it hard to translate to be successful. The assertion is bolstered by Al-Yasin and Rabab'ah (2019), who attributed the phenomenon to cultural constraints between Arabic and English. Similarly, when rendering the phrase "Calvin doing Hobbs," an English sexual connotation, the translators euphemized and omitted the phrase making the statement even more confusing to the target audience.

Phrases such as ***s* were omitted or euphemized with terms like *back* or *Butt* that were deemed more polite. The use of euphemism in the translation is vital in the Arabic world because the nature of Arabic society's religious and societal aspects makes it hard to translate some ST words into Arabic. It is difficult from a religious and societal standpoint rather than a translation standpoint. When translating from any SL to a TL, translators usually adhere to the conventions of the TT cultures as well as the social and religious aspects (Almijrab, 2020). Thus, from the evaluation, the most used strategies in rendering swear words from English to Arabic were largely omission and euphemism. Similarly, the omission was also seen with swear words such as "Oh my God" these were left out entirely from the translation, as shown in sample 3, something that can be attributed to the laziness of the translators.

Regarding the quality of the translation, the scores were generally low as serious errors were made while translating and euphemizing the text and the content. The replacement of the word *breast* with *what a hot woman you are* in Arabic makes it hard to read and prove the functional equivalence. Besides, the omission of raw sexual magnetism in the translation makes it difficult for the target audience to realize the joke.

Conclusion

The current study focused on identifying the strategies used in translating taboo and swear words in the American sitcom *Friends* and assesses the quality of translations. The analysis was guided by Pederson's (2005, 2017) models. The study confirmed that the most used strategies. The subtitler's most typical methods include omission and euphemism translation. The translator employed omission due to cultural restrictions. The translator recognized the cultural constraints that sometimes make it difficult to translate some curse and taboo words into Arabic, particularly those viewed as exceedingly derogatory and inappropriate. These terms include sex, excrement, and other expressions. However, on other occasions, the translator chose to translate those derogatory sex and excrement terms into English to keep the spirit of the ST, which tragically affects young people and teenagers. Another rationale for using the omission approach is to save space on the screen, which only allows for a limited number of characters. Another reason to use exclusion as a translation approach is that some swear and taboo words collide in English but not Arabic. Omission as a tactic may be appropriate if the translation does not create a vacuum on the screen that prevents viewers from thoroughly enjoying the film. The second most prevalent method is euphemistic translation, which is understandable given that Arab society is conservative, and hence some swear words and banned terms seem insulting. The translator euphemistically interprets curses and forbidden phrases to prevent such subtle offensiveness and vulgarity. This method is acceptable if it does not alter the essence of meaning. One issue with such an approach is that it may result in a mismatch between the actors' facial emotions and body gestures on one side and the subtitles on the other. More specifically, the body language and facial expressions

may communicate wrath and rudeness that are not conveyed in the subtitles. The quality assessment revealed that most of the subtitles are of low quality. It is proposed that Pedersen's Quality Assessment Model be changed. While the approach provides a quantitative assessment, a qualitative assessment is also essential. Previous research on subtitling swear words and prohibited terms needs to be expanded. A paradigm that governs the tactics employed in Arabic-to-English subtitling is also required.

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