

DUBBING INTO ARABIC: A TROJAN HORSE AT THE GATES?

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Summary: This paper examines the reasons why the dubbing of American film and television programs, common throughout much of the world, remains non-existent in the Arab world. Despite a considerable surge in television stations and much need for quality programs, dubbing into Arabic is limited to a few Latin American soaps, children's cartoons and, more recently, Iranian films. Will an increase in dubbed Western programs reflect a greater encroachment of a global culture in the Arab world?

Dubbing, the replacing of the original dialogue or soundtrack by another, either in a different language or voice, dates back to the early days of film. Following the success of the talkies at the close of the 1920s, silent movies became obsolete within a matter of a few years, prompting the film industry to look at their actors in an entirely new way. How they sounded was now as important as how they looked and acted. With audiences able to enjoy dialogue, actors' voices and related sounds became an integral consideration of film production. When the articulation, intonation, accent, or dialect of the stars of the silent silver screen were inappropriate for the new movies, studios resorted to dubbing over the dialogue, by adjusting the mouth movements of the original actors in the film to the voice of other actors. Thus, the practice of lip-synching was introduced. Later, studios would entirely replace stars of the silent screen whose voices were inappropriate for the talkies (Parkinson 85-86).

Outside the United States, in Latin America and Europe, where Hollywood productions started to make serious inroads as early as the late 1910s, the fact of sound and dialogue forced distributors to consider ways to reach out to their non-English speaking audiences. Both dubbing and the cheaper practice, subtitling, of American films were the options adopted. By 1931, the practice of dubbing had been refined enough to be used adequately and convincingly (Thomson 210). Initially, the stimulus for the more expensive practice came from irate nationalists and governments who believed that dubbing would defend the national language against the Hollywood onslaught (Segrave 77-104). Thus in 1941, Spain, which had only a modest cinema industry, ordered that all foreign films be dubbed into Spanish before they could be shown locally (D'Lugo). The decree was well received and, soon, American, British or French stars, on the large and, later, on the small screen, were speaking Spanish. A similar law came into effect in France in 1947. Again, the main incentive was the belief that dubbing would preserve the local language and, through it, the national culture. In the two largest South American countries, Brazil and Argentina, the dubbing of foreign films has also been mandatory since the late 1940s (Segrave 155-56). In Mexico alone, where there was a relatively strong cinema industry, dubbing met with opposition from local studios who feared loss of market share if Hollywood productions were marshaled in Spanish. The Mexican Film Law of 1949 prohibited the dubbing of all films except those classified as educational. While local television stations and production houses have been dubbing U.S. and other productions into Spanish, Mexican studios successfully prevented Hollywood from dubbing their films into the local language until the year 2000 when lawyers representing American interests, alleging that the Mexican prohibition discriminated against 20 million illiterate Mexicans, as well as the elderly and the poor sighted, were successful in overturning the law (Tegel). In India, a major film producer, the dubbing of foreign films was made legal only in 1990 (Segrave 256-257).

With the advent of television, dubbing of TV programs also became popular, so that by the late 1970s, most major European and Latin American markets were watching television and cinema productions made in Hollywood in their local language. Today, in Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and Turkey, and increasingly in the major East European nations, audiences see Hollywood productions in their local languages, rather than subtitled, as a result both of concern for audience size and linguistic

purity. (Hassanpour) Somewhat ironically, Hollywood commercial interests allied with the interests of those concerned with safeguarding the local language from the American cultural invasion. The concern that dubbing, by bringing characters and plots closer to the audience, may act as a cultural Trojan Horse, allowing for the intrusion of a foreign culture through the local language does not seem to have been a major consideration.

In the Arab world, dubbing of feature films or TV productions has been slow in coming, despite a large market and a high index of illiteracy, estimated at higher than 40 percent in 2002 by the UNDP (Report 27), and which should, at least theoretically, favor dubbing over subtitling. In none of the Arab countries has the government mandated the dubbing of foreign films. The mushrooming of competing pan Arab stations has also failed to trigger a significant interest in the practice.

One of the first, if not the first, production houses to dub media programs into Arabic, was Al Ittihad al Fanni, originally developed as a radio production house by Ghanem Dajjani, Sobhi Abou Loghd and Abed El Majid Abu Laban in 1963. Their first experiment was a voiceover adaptation of a BBC radio episode of Jane Eyre. Dajjani remembers it as a “very modest” success. (Dajjani). The pioneer of video dubbing into Arabic was Nicolas Abu Samah whose company, Filmali, dubbed the children’s cartoon “Sindbad” in 1974. The success of this production was such that it was followed by the dubbing of “Zena Wa Nakhoul” in 1975 and later by a slew of other children's cartoons. The Lebanese civil war forced the company to move its operations to Cyprus (personal interview). From there, in 1991, Filmali dubbed the first of a series of Mexican soaps into Standard Arabic to be broadcast at the privately-run Lebanese Broadcast Corporation (LBC), a station that gained immediate popularity when it was launched in 1985 during the country's civil war. The success of that Mexican series, with the translated title of “Anta Aw La Ahad,” literally “You or No One,” was such that 11 Mexican and Brazilian soaps were translated into Standard Arabic within a period of eight years. The practice continues, although it tapered off in recent years. George Abou Salbeh, then with Filmali, recalls that the primary motive behind LBC's decision to commission the dubbing of the Mexican telenovela was a desire to increase their Arab programming at little expense. The cost of the dubbed telenovela was significantly below that of a locally produced program of comparative quality. No one anticipated the huge success of this stopgap measure (Abou Salbeh).

In 1999, what was probably the first dubbed long feature film, “Police Academy,” was shown on Beirut's Murr TV, known locally as MTV. The dubbing in Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA) was not well received, being virtually ridiculed by the local press, and the station discontinued what it had originally programmed as a weekly showing of a long U.S. feature film. (Gihad Murr, personal interview) The reasons for the success of the Mexican soap and the failure of the otherwise very popular “Police Academy” film series to attract a wide audience in Arabic were, in the opinion of Abu Samah, cultural. The plots and dialogues of the former were culturally acceptable by Arab audiences as possible Arab stories with Arab actors, while the latter were seen as a contrived translation of plots and dialogues that had no bearing on Arab reality. (Abou Samah, personal interviews). Latin American soaps require “a minimal amount of editing to make them acceptable to Arab audiences and at no sacrifice to the story line.” This was not just true of the dialogue, but also of the actors’ deliveries. (Abou Samah). However, the cultural leap required to accept Hollywood storylines and their actors, with all their idiosyncrasies, as speakers of Arabic was too great, and tended to be unacceptable to Arab audiences. “Arab heroes do not use curse words,” says Abou Samah, “they don’t jump on a moving train, slide down a window and machinegun 10 criminals. Nor does a husband, upon finding his wife in bed with another man, slam the door and go to his office to call his lawyer.”

Arab audiences, television programmers argue, are accustomed and prefer to hear Hollywood actors speak English. Subtitles carry none of the pretenses of dubbing, rather, they act as constant reminders that the film or television program being seen is foreign. Viewers are not required to identify with the actors, or to believe that the storyline applies to their own cultural environment. While the objective of dubbing is precisely for viewers to "repress all awareness of the possibility of an incorrect translation" and should in fact "forget that there has been any translation at all" (Shochat 49). The film or program is presented to them as if part of their own culture.

However, the cultural explanation may not in itself be enough to explain why dubbing has failed to make the inroads in the Arab world that it did elsewhere. Cultural differences are also significant between the U.S. and Italy, or between the U.S. and Turkey, or, indeed, India where the practice, although selective, is nevertheless common. While Indians shy away from dubbing dialogue-dependant films, they will dub action-oriented productions. The very culturally laden and dialogue reliant "Kramer vs. Kramer" was remade in Hindi as "Akele Hum Akele Tum" with Aamir Khan and Manisha Koirala stepping in for Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep. However, "Jurassic Park" and "Anaconda" are two examples of movies that were dubbed and well received. ([Screenindia?](#)).

Other than cultural, there are probably other reasons dubbing has not caught on in the Arab world.

Movie theaters. In Europe, Asia and Latin America, the initial impetus for dubbing was the cinema, or long feature films. In the Arab world, viewing audiences for foreign movies or programming only became significant when Arab countries started to develop what were essentially state-owned or -controlled TV stations – and even then the amount of foreign programming was modest. In most of the Arabic-speaking world there were few movie theaters before the 1960s, and where they existed, audiences queued to watch Egyptian films. Egyptian studios found it profitable to replicate American movies with local talents and more adapted scripts and settings, than to simply dub the language. Many of Egypt's more successful films, including musicals, cop and robbers, whodunits, and love stories were Cairene versions of Hollywood films. In Algeria, and to a lesser extent in Tunis and Morocco, although the number of theaters was relatively large, cinema was a colonial activity until independence, with preference given to productions that promoted the colonizers' language (Shafik 24). In the richer Gulf countries, movie theaters were either slow to develop or, as in Saudi Arabia, remain nonexistent.

Dialect. Which vernacular Arabic should be used? Arabs do not all use the same dialect in everyday speech and, in some cases, the differences are such that the vernacular is almost incomprehensible or significantly alien to people from different Arab countries. While the Egyptian dialect is the more widely understood form of colloquial Arabic, precisely because of the diffusion of film and popular lyrics from that country, the fact that Egypt was not dubbing Hollywood productions meant that the dialect was not being used for that purpose. The language Arabs have in common is Standard Arabic, a high or classical form of the language normally reserved for literature, formal occasions, or, in the context of television, news broadcasts. Everyday discourse is carried on in the vernacular. Some media will use a form of Arabic known as Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA) that intermixes between Standard Arabic and acceptable intrusions from the colloquial. Despite the popularity of Mexican and Brazilian soaps or telenovelas, their use of Standard Arabic in the dialogue is seen as stilted and remains the butt of popular jokes. Arabs simply do not use their "common language" in everyday speech. Adrian Gully, in "The Discourse of Arab Advertisement" indicates a move toward a form of Arabic in the media, and particularly in advertisement, that is a corollary to ESA, combining local, common colloquial expressions, with a level of Standard Arabic. Increasingly, that language is becoming the preferred form of informal discourse on Arab satellite programs broadcast to Arab audiences.

State-Control. The concern for audience size that encouraged the practice of dubbing in Europe and Latin America did not exist in the Arab world where television programming was state-controlled and driven by political agendas. At the ideological and political level, the broadcast of Western and particularly U.S. programs was not widely encouraged on the grounds that traditional values, political assumptions and social structures should be defended. These concerns militated against any significant import of Western programming, even in their original languages (Mowlana 1981). The lack of interest shown by state-controlled television stations for market forces only came into question in the 1990s with the proliferation of satellite television stations vying for audiences (Miranda Beshara 1999). As long as local populations had no choice other than state-controlled stations, programming was mostly dictated by official, rather than market, considerations.

Costs. This point underlines the importance of the other three: the mechanics and the costs of dubbing are considerably more significant than those of subtitling, and riskier. Developing a market for dubbed films, particularly where no clear choice of dialect exists and where differences between the originating culture and that of the audiences are very significant, requires long-term commitment and is never obstacle free. (Seagrave 151-152) The obstacles are even more difficult when local production is strong and successful. Not only is the cultural element significant, with some films more readily accepted in their dubbed forms than others, but to dub a film adequately involves casting, rewriting the script in language that can be synchronized to the lip movements of the screen actors, directing and long editing hours— everything, as dubbing companies like to repeat, but the visuals. This is a complex process that assumes sophisticated professional work, both on the editing board and in the actual recreation of the script. Here is what one professional translator says about the work involved in recreating a script in another language.

In France, at SACEM (Société des auteurs, compositeurs et éditeurs de musique), those who translate/adapt films and TV broadcasts for dubbing are called “dialoguistes,” screen writers. In fact, that’s exactly what we do. We write dialogues for the screen, except the lines have already been spoken by the screen actors and we have to find a text that fits their lip movements and the length of the utterance, as well as their gestures, the situation, the character, and the setting, not to mention what they are actually saying. (Paquin)

Although costly and complex, dubbing may be very profitable if the audience can be secured, as has happened in many parts of the world. The Indian market has shown that even if a film has to be dubbed into three or four languages – in the case of India typically Hindi, Tamil and Telegu – the practice is worthwhile if the right movies are chosen and the dubbing done expertly (Screenindia).

In Lebanon, where the dubbing industry is relatively significant – many of the Mexican telenovelas are dubbed in Lebanese studios – the costs are far from prohibitive. Nasser Akhdar, director of programming at Al Manar television, says the dubbing of a one-hour long television program costs his station about \$2,500. Al Manar is the only TV station currently dubbing long feature films – all of them Iranian productions, which Akhdar believes are culturally in harmony with Arab values and Al Manar’s mostly Shiite audience (Nasser Akhdar). Subtitling the same program, says Akhdar, will cost the station about 10 to 15 percent of the amount and is thus the preferred option for programs with limited reach. Abou Samah of Filmali, which together with Disney, was among the first to start dubbing cartoons into Arabic in the mid 1970s, estimates the cheaper TV dubbing production to cost about \$3,000 per episode. Much will depend on choice of actors. Unknown or inexperienced actors charge around \$100 for a day’s work, while experienced actors may charge \$500. Studio costs are moderate. According to Walid Hashem of Arabian Media Production a subsidiary of MBC, is also technically complicated when compared to subtitling, and on average requires 24 hours of studio work for one hour of programming. (Walid Hashem). For the most part, these prices only became affordable once the audiences became large, with the advent of satellite

stations. Dubbing for TV is now, roughly, a \$10 million industry, estimates Abou Samah a “small sum compared to its potential.” (Abou Samah 2003)

Even in the money-strapped world of Arab TV, the sums involved in dubbing are not considerable if the demand for dubbed programs can be exploited correctly. As long as dubbing remains limited to Latin American soaps and Iranian films, the full potential of that practice, which has totally transformed programming in Europe and Latin America, will remain untapped in the Arab World. With the development of satellite television in the region in the mid 1990s and the increased competition for audiences, will the demand for dubbed programs increase? If developments in other parts of the world are any indication, then the answer should be yes. However, as long as some of the obstacles referred to above remain, the potential for dubbing into Arabic will remain problematic with the choice of dialect being the more serious hurdle. A new Lebanese television satellite station, Heya TV, catering to Arab women – the word “heya” is the Arabic for “she” – started in 2003 to air a Greek series dubbed into the Lebanese dialect. The CEO of that station, the same Nicolas Abou Samah, of Filmali, who pioneered the dubbing of telenovelas, says that many at first believed the Greek series, “The Thirst” to be a Lebanese production. The station is considering dubbing other programs, including American “mini series” into the Lebanese dialect. (Abou Samah).

While Arab audiences may currently find it difficult to associate foreign film and television productions dubbed into their own language, these same audiences are very much able to view and enjoy programs in their original languages, and accessing them through subtitles. With subtitles, there is no pretense that the protagonists are Arab speakers and the rapport is relegated, to use the language of Saussure and others, to a non-ideological level, or to a simple connotative or denotative level (Hayward 322-3). In simpler words, the audience views the program as story telling from another culture. In this three-tier level of signification, audiences are seen as capable of responding to the cultural signals of video or film productions without seeing themselves as part of the producing culture and without internalizing its principles. All that is required is that they appreciate, at some level, the film’s semiotics, or the structure under which it is produced. This argument helps explain why culturally divergent audiences feel comfortable with, and even empathetic towards, Hollywood productions without committing themselves ideologically to their messages, as long as the TV or film production they are watching follows standard production templates to which they have been accustomed and educated to respond. They can do so without engaging the protagonists, without a profound sense of identification.

However, these three levels of signification are not always distinct. Culture and meanings change and adapt, and audiences may move from one level of appreciation to another, depending on how significant the influence of the medium and how much of an encroachment the producing culture has had on the receiving culture. In today’s world, satellite television and technology in general have freed mankind from the constrictions of social relations and cultural values defined and shaped strictly by geographical space, local community, or face-to-face interaction. Wide and diversified sets of influences, emanating from different parts of the globe, constantly encroach into our daily lives, enjoining us to accept them as part of everyday experience. This development is an aspect of what some have referred to as “deterritorialization,” a result of the globalization of communication that affects us irrespective of where we may be (Tomlison, chapter 4) There is no need to leave home to succumb to this cosmopolitan, globalizing influence. One may say, with Tomlison “that for most people, most of the time the impact of globalization is felt not in travel but in staying at home.” (Tomlison, 151) This globalizing influence is present in our daily lives. The telephone, television, internet, cinema and global newspapers, as well as chain stores, fast-food outlets, and universal consumer goods, coexist with our traditional ways of communication, local entertainment, norms and values. While these influences do not cancel out more immediate factors, they help transform them. Giddens has articulated the process:

In conditions of late modernity we live 'in the world' in a different sense from previous eras of history. Everyone still continues to live a local life, and the constraints of the body ensure that all individuals, at every moment, are contextually situated in time and space. Yet the transformations of place, and the intrusion of distance into local activities, combined with the centrality of mediated experience, radically change what the world is (187)

Although we may live 'locally', writes Giddens, our lives have become a mixture of the local and the global. The extent to which this involvement results in a disfiguration of our traditional values is dependent on many factors, including the extent of global encroachment, local reaction to the process and the disparity between local and non-local messages. Much has been written about this issue and Tomlison offers a rich bibliography on relevant debate, however, it is not the purpose of this paper to develop this argument, rather simply to point out that culture and identity today are shaped by a variety of factors, including those intruding through the global media. This is true in the Arab world as elsewhere.

In *Modernity and its Futures*, Hall writes:

In essence, the argument is that the old identities, which stabilized the social world for so long, are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject. This so-called 'crisis of identity' is seen as part of a wider process of change, which is dislocating the central structures and processes of modern societies and undermining the frameworks which gave individuals stable anchorage in the social world. (274)

In much of the Arab world, the level of 'encroachment' on the local culture is significant, affecting individuals and society at large. The ensuing tensions are considerable. This "dislocation" of central structures impact on the individual and society at large, and global encroachment plays a role in the dislocation. Even in a closed society such as Saudi Arabia, (Rampal 249-50) where media control is among the most severe in the region, media encroachment has occurred via such instruments as the radio or the VCR, and more recently via satellite television. Already in 1986, 75 percent of Saudi homes owned VCRs (Boyd, 66) and Head ranked the Saudi kingdom ninth in the world in terms of VCR per capita ownership (227). Albeit circumscribed, terrestrial television also helped do its share of encroachment, sharpening the distinctions between Arab and Western culture and spurring widespread concern over the invasion of foreign values.

What will be the place of dubbing in these developments? If the cultural clash assumption of programmers is true, that a surge of dubbing of Hollywood productions would require a cultural shift among Arab audiences, then any future success of the practice could be used as a yardstick for the level of American cultural 'encroachment' on local cultures.

As American or Hollywood cultural influence grows in the Arab world, the more one would expect to see the practice of dubbing become widespread – even if carried out in the formal language of Standard Arabic. Heya TV, for one, is already dubbing American soaps, which Abou Samah believes, are not too culturally different from Mexican telenovelas. The encroachment may be gradual, but it seems certain.

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