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**The Translation of Cultural References in English Animated Films  
dubbed into Arabic:**

**A Case Study of the Film Monsters, Inc**

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## Abstract

Lately Disney decided to bring Egyptian Arabic back after it has been replaced with Modern Standard Arabic in dubbing for ten years. This decision was welcomed by Arab audience as it brought to mind how enjoyable and popular some animated films that were dubbed in Egyptian used to. One example of this is the comedy animated film, *Monsters Inc*, which was first released in 2003 with Arabic subtitles, then was re-released again and dubbed in Egyptian Arabic in 2011. The dubbed version gained a huge success amongst Arab audience since the script was target-culture oriented including names, songs, idioms, and cultural references. This raises the following questions: what are the strategies used to translate cultural reference in the film, and how do these strategies impact the humors aspect in the film? To answer these questions Venuti's principles of domestication and foreignization, as well as Davias' (2003) strategies for the translation of culture-specific items are adopted as a framework. The methodology is to watch the original version and the dubbed one, as well as compare the written scripts to the audiovisual texts. Consequently, cultural reference and the strategies used to translate them are identified and analyzed. The conclusion is that the translator mostly used creation, localization, and omission as strategies to domesticate the text, translate cultural references, and to successfully render or even increase the humorous load in the scene.

**Keywords:** *domestication, cultural references (CR), dubbing, animation*

قررت ديزني مؤخرا العودة إلى دبلجة أفلامها باللهجة العامية وتحديدًا بالمصرية بعد أن كانت قد استبدلت اللهجة العامية (المصرية) باللغة العربية الفصحى لمدة عشر سنوات. وقد لاقى هذا الخبر ترحيبًا كبيرًا من قبل الجمهور العربي حيث أن هذا القرار قد أعاد إلى الأذهان بعض أفلام ديزني المدبلجة باللهجة المصرية والتي لاقت رواجًا كبيرًا. أحدها هو فيلم الرسوم المتحركة الكوميدي (شركة المرعبين المحدودة)، والذي صدر للمرة الأولى في عام ٢٠٠٣ بترجمة عربية، ثم عُرض للمرة الثانية في عام ٢٠١١ حيث تمت دبلجته باللهجة المصرية. وقد لاقت النسخة المدبلجة نجاحًا كبيرًا لدى الجمهور العربي حيث أن النص المدبلج كان موجّهًا نحو الثقافة العربية، بما في ذلك الأسماء والأغاني والتعبير الاصطلاحي والدلالات الثقافية. مما أدى إلى طرح الأسئلة التالية: ما هي الاستراتيجيات المستخدمة لترجمة الدلالات الثقافية في الفيلم، وكيف تؤثر هذه الاستراتيجيات على جانب الفكاهة في الفيلم؟ وللإجابة على هذه الأسئلة، تم اعتماد مبدأ التوطين مقابل التغريب ل Venuti ، وكذلك استراتيجيات Davies (٢٠٠٣) كإطار عمل. أما المنهجية فتمثلت في مشاهدة النسختين الأصلية والمدبلجة، وكذلك مقارنة كل من النصين المكتوبين ببعضهما البعض من جهة وكذلك مقارنة الفلمين من جهة أخرى. تلى ذلك تحديد الدلالات الثقافية والاستراتيجيات المستخدمة لترجمتها ثم تحليلها. وقد كان الاستنتاج الذي تم التوصل إليه هو أن المترجم لجأ في الغالب إلى استراتيجيات localization و omission و creation لتوطين النص وترجمة الدلالات الثقافية في المشهد وقد نجح بذلك في الحفاظ على التأثير الفكاهي، كما وقد لجأ في بعض الأحيان إلى خلق المزيد من الفكاهة في المشهد المدبلج مقارنة بالمشهد الأصلي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** توطين النص المدلول الثقافي ، الدبلجة ، الرسوم المتحركة

## I. Introduction



Noticeably, there is an increased interest in dubbing animated films in Arabic. However, to ensure a successful translation of these films, one should consider adapting the content of the film, including CRs, to the culture of the target audience. One example of a very popular animated comedy dubbed in Arabic is *Monsters, Inc.* It was introduced in English in 2001 by Pixar Production and continued to gain in popularity as it was dubbed later in Egyptian Arabic. This fact raises a couple of questions related to the choice of strategies implemented to deal with some CRs in the processes of dubbing this film, and the outcome of such decisions.

## II. Questions and aim of the study

1. What are the strategies adopted by the translator to deal with some of the CRs that made the Arabic dubbed version of the animated film *Monsters, Inc* so comprehensible to the audience?
2. How did the choice of these strategies affect the humorous load in the Arabic dubbed version of the film?

Thus, the aim of this paper is to answer these questions through analyzing the strategies applied for the translation of some of the CRs in the Arabic dubbed *Monsters, Inc* in the light of the principles of domestication and foreignization; and Davies' strategies (2003) as a theoretical framework.

## III. Domestication in dubbing

Two notions that can be linked to audio-visual translation: foreignization and domestication. In foreignized texts the source culture is preserved, but in domestication the source culture is eliminated, distorted, or replaced by the target culture; resulting in a text which sounds or reads like an original and in which the translator is visible (Venuti, 2008, cited in Munday, 2012, p. 218-9). Although Venuti prefers foreignization over domestication, one should consider the fact that in dubbing a text the result should be comprehensible and enjoyable for the target audience who has a different culture.

There are some aspects in a film that can be domesticated. “Choosing a certain dialect to translate a certain text is considered domestication by itself” (Alalami, 2006, p. 28). For example, the Egyptian dubbed version of *Monsters, Inc* features Egyptian slang, idioms and proverbs which reflect the Egyptian culture.

Another important factor that can help domesticating a foreign film to the target culture is the fact that characters’ voices are usually dubbed by local celebrities who are well known to the target audience (Ciu, 2012, p.125).

the domestic stars' voices in the target language culture might function better to the target language audience than the foreign stars' voices in the original, since foreign stars might not be well recognized only by ear in animations by the target language viewers (Ciu, 2012, p.125) .

In the Arabic dubbed *Monsters, Inc*; the voice of Wazowski, one of the two main characters, is dubbed by a famous Egyptian comedian, Muhammad Hinaidy, who boosts the humorous aspect in the film.



In addition to the effective use of colloquial expressions and the well-known local cast, the level of domestication in animated films can be enhanced by rewriting the songs in the target language. For example, in the Arabic dubbed *Monsters, Inc.*, neither the content nor the style of the source songs is rendered; however, the Arabic songs sound natural and have a good rhyme.

Another aspect that can enhance the level of domestication in dubbing, as Paulina Burczynska (2012, para. 12) suggests, is the adaptation of proper names into the target language, especially when the names are ‘twisted’ and ‘sound funnier’ in the target language. However, adapting cultural references in general to the target culture plays the most pivotal role in the domestication process.

#### **IV. Translating cultural references**

During the last decade, many scholars have addressed the notion of ‘culture’ and its relationship with language. A considerable number of definitions have been proposed to determine the concept of culture. For example, Newmark defines ‘culture’ as "The way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression" (1988, p. 94). This definition indicates the fact that language and culture are inseparable.

Many theorists have investigated the translation of cultural references and proposed different procedures and strategies for the translation of CRs. However, concerning the translation of cultural elements in films, Nathalie Ramière (2006, p. 155) points out that



With the notable exception of Tomasziewicz (2001) and Nedergaard-Larsen (1993), who have examined in a systematic way the strategies used for the translation of culture-specific references in the context of film, most of the research work on culture-specific material has been carried out in the context of textual translation.

For example, Ivir, Newmark and Mailhac are among those who propose strategies for the translation of CRs in written contexts. Davies (2003), also, suggests seven categories of strategies that are applied on the translation of CRs in J K Rowling's *Harry Potter*. These classifications include preservation, addition, transformation, globalization, localization, omission, and creation. However, although Davies discusses the translation of cultural elements in *Harry Potter* Books, her proposed strategies can be applied on dubbing and audiovisual translation.

## V. Theoretical framework

### Davies' strategies for translating cultural references

Davies' strategies (2003) are used as a framework for this study to analyze the decisions made by the translator when faced by individual CRs and to investigate the impact of such decisions on the comprehension of the text and its humor. Davies' strategies fall into seven categories:

- **Preservation**, where the CR is maintained in the TT without any additions. Davies says that this strategy is most frequently applied on the names of the main characters in a text. She also includes literal translation in this category.



- **Addition**, where a simple adjectival phrase or a long sentence is added in the text or as a foot note. This strategy can be applied either in combination with preserving the source CR or without it; for example, replacing the place name ‘Dundee’ with ‘the east coast of Scotland’ (Davies, 2003, p. 78). In other words, Davies’ ‘addition’ can include definition, footnotes, paraphrasing and compensation.
- **Generalization**, where a CR in the ST is replaced by a “more neutral or general one” in the TT; however, this might cause “a loss of association” in some instances (Davies, 2003, p. 83). For example, one can replace ‘latte’ with ‘coffee’.
- **Localization**, where a CR in the source text is replaced by a CR from the target culture. Davies points out that some localizing adaptations can succeed in creating a “similar effect to that inspired by the source text” (2003, p.85)
- **Transformations**, where an alteration to the original CR occurs. Davies points out that sometimes, there is no clear distinction between this strategy and generalization.
- **Omission**, which is, according to Davies, a strategy the translator resort to when the decision of including a problematic CR might create a confusion for the target reader.
- **Creation**, where a CR is created in the target text.

Even though that Davies (E. Davies, 2003, p. 71) states that she doesn’t place her strategies “on a scale ranging from exotic to domesticated”, or from the most source-culture oriented to the most target-culture oriented; it seems that they are



organized this way. This means that preservation and addition can be considered as the most foreignized strategies, whereas localization, transformation, omission, and creation can be the most domesticated ones.

## **VI. Methodology**

The process involved watching both English and Arabic versions of the film *Monsters, Inc*; as well as reading the English script. However, the Arabic script was not available, which led the researcher to writing down most of Arabic dialogue. After watching the two versions and reading the script, CRs as well as the strategies that were used to translate them were identified.

- **Corpus**

*Monsters, Inc* is a computer-animated film produced by Disney Pixar and released in 2001. The film was re-released in 3D in 2012. This film is chosen because it features a considerable number of cultural elements; and because the Arabic version enjoys a widespread popularity among Arab audience.

- **Summary of the plot**

James P. Sullivan who is a huge, tough, lovable blue Monster and his best friend Mike Wazowski, a witty, short, green monster, work together in Monster, Inc. This company, which is located in the city of Monstropolis, a city of monsters, employs ‘frighteners’ to scare children in their sleep in order to generate energy and supply the city with power. However, ironically monsters are terrified of children, and no human should enter Monstropolis. One day a 2-year-old baby girl called Boo is let inside the monsters’ city by accident. Sully and Wazowski try to bring her back

through the door that leads to her room before other monsters know about the baby's existence.

- **Analysis**

In this section of the paper, the strategies used by the translator to deal with some CRs in the film are investigated. However, because of limitations related to the length of this paper, only some examples are explained below. The scenes are presented according to their order of appearance in the film.

**Scene1:** Sulley and Wazowski walking to work. They meet Tony who works in the grocery shop next door. Then, Tony congratulates Sulley on being close to 'breaking the all-time scare record', and gives Sully and Wazowski some fruits.

| source   | target   | back translation   |
|--|--|--|
| <p><b>Sulley:</b> Hey, <b>Tony!</b></p> <p><b>Wazowski:</b> <b>Tony! Ba-da-bing!</b></p> <p>Tony: I hear somebody's close to breaking the old time scare record.</p> <p>Sully: ah, just trying to make sure there's enough scream to go around.</p> <p>Tony: Hey, on the house!</p> <p>Sulley: thanks!</p> | <p>شَلبي: اهلا توني.</p> <p>وشوشني: عم توني!</p> <p>توني: سمعت إنكم حتضربوا رقم قياسي في التخويف.</p> <p>شَلبي: يا مسهل. أهو الواحد بيعمل اللي عليه.</p> <p>توني: دول على حسابي.</p> <p>شَلبي: شكرا</p> <p>وشوشني: مانتحرمش.</p> | <p><b>Shallaby:</b> Hello <b>Tony!</b></p> <p><b>Wahshwishni:</b> <b>uncle Tony!</b></p> <p>Tony: I hear that you are so close to breaking the scare record.</p> <p>Shallaby: Oh, one got to do what he got to do.</p> <p>Tony: it is on me.</p> <p>Shallaby: Thanks</p> <p><b>Wahshwishni:</b> <b>bless</b></p> |

|                                      |  |      |
|--------------------------------------|--|------|
| Wazowski: <b>Grazie! Ba-da-bing!</b> |  | you. |
|--------------------------------------|--|------|

The proper names, ‘Sulley’ and ‘Wazowaski’, are both localized to be ‘Shallaby’ and ‘Washwishni’, respectively. In general, the majority proper of names in the film are localized by replacing them with Arabic names that sounds relatively like the English ones. For example, ‘Georgie’ and ‘Celia’ are replaced by ‘Shukri’ and ‘Saly’, respectively.

However, the only name that is preserved from the English script is ‘Tony’. It seems that the translator is compensating for the loss of the Italian accent that the character Tony has in the English film. Thus, preserving the name of this character, while localizing all the other names in the film, is successful strategies to show that this character comes from a different background. Moreover, the target text features a cultural creation which is the use of the word ‘uncle’ as it is very common in Egyptian Arabic to address an elderly person by this title out of respect.

According to Oxford English Dictionary (2022) ‘Bada bing’ is a slang expression used in North America “suggesting something happening suddenly, emphatically, or easily and predictably.”

The translator omits this expression in Arabic, as well as ‘Grazie’. The omission of ‘bada bing’ is justified since there is not any close equivalents with similar associations for this expression in Arabic.

## Scene 2

Wazowski asks Celia to go out with him tonight.

| source   | target                                   | back translation  |
|--|--|---|
| Wazowski: I just got us into a little place called, um. <b>Harryhausen's</b> . | وشوشني: حجزت فمكان غالي أوي اسمه كوابيس. | Washwishni: I made a reservation on a very expensive place called <b>Kawabees</b> . |
| Celia: <b>Harryhausen's</b> ! But it is impossible to get a reservation there! | سالي: كوابيس! لكن دا الحجز هناك مستحيل.  | Saly: <b>Kawabees</b> ! But it is impossible to get a reservation there!            |

In this dialogue there is a reference to Ray Harryhausen who is an American animation artist. He created a unique genre of fantasy films during the 1950s, 60s and 70s (the official Ray Harryhausen website, 2009).

As seen above, the name Ray Harryhausen may not be familiar to everyone except for those interested in the history of animated films. Some adults might not understand the reference in the source version, let alone children. Thus, the translator makes a good decision by omitting it in the target version. Also, the translator does not try to provide an Arabic name that sounds like Harryhausen. Since the importance of the name lies in the fact that it suggests horror stories and mythology, the translator opts for explicitation by calling the restaurant 'كوابيس' which means [nightmares] in English. This transformation boosts the humorous value in this scene since this place is supposed to be quiet romantic.

### Scene 3

Sulley discovers that the baby girl whom he calls Boo is totally harmless. When she laughs, she generates power and thus turns on all the lights in the city. Sulley

desperately tries to put her in bed so that she stops laughing and the security team which is currently looking for her outside will not notice the bright lights of the whole building being lit.

| source            | target           | back translation          |
|-------------------|------------------|---------------------------|
| Sulley: Go ahead. | شَلْبِي: يَاالله | Shallaby: <b>come on.</b> |
| Go to sleep.      | نامي             | <b>Go to sleep</b>        |
| Now.              | نامي             | <b>If you go to sleep</b> |
| Now... go.        | وأجيب لك         | <b>I will get you a</b>   |
| Uh, you...        | جوز الحمام       | <b>couple of pigeons</b>  |
| Go...             | ياالله           | go ahead                  |
| To...             | نامي             | go to sleep               |
| Sleep.            |                  |                           |

In the English version Sulley, the giant furry monster, is whispering and begging the baby to go to sleep. This scene is Ironic because a monster is supposed to scare a child and not put her/him to bed; not to mention that she is already making him scared of being caught with a human baby in Monstropolis.

In the Arabic dubbed *Monsters, Inc*, Sully's words 'go to sleep' are substituted with a famous Arabic nursery rhyme usually sung by mothers to their babies at bedtime. So, Sulley is not only whispering and begging, but he is also singing. Not only this cultural creation enhances the level of domestication, but it also increases the humorous load in the scene.

#### Scene 4

Wazowski warns Sulley from the danger of keeping Boo and reminds him of the fate that some of their old colleges have faced.

| source  | target  | Back translation  |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Wazowski: Just think about a few names, will you?</p> <p><b>Loch Ness, Bigfoot, the Abominable Snowman...</b></p> <p>They all got one thing in common, pal... banishment.</p> <p>We could be next!</p> | <p>وشوشني: فكر في اللي حصل<br/>لغيرنا. نسيت؟<br/>البيع<br/>وأبو رجل مسلوخة والمنفي<br/>كلهم حصلهم نفس الحاجة.. اتنفوا<br/>وممكن نحصلهم.</p> | <p>Washwishni: think about what has happened to some of us, have you forgotten?</p> <p><b>The Bo'Bo', the man with the skinned leg, the exiled.</b></p> <p>They all have suffered the same fate and have been sent into exile.</p> <p>We could be next!</p> |

Loch Ness, Bigfoot, and the Abominable Snowman are all names to what are said to be scary creatures inhabiting the Loch Ness Lake in Britain, the forests in the Pacific Northwest region of North America, and the Himalayan region of Nepal, respectively. This is a sarcastic reference to these urban legends which used to be so popular in the 1970s and 1980s; but not anymore.

In the Arabic version, these references to urban legends are localized by some similar fictitious beasts that used to be popular in Egypt and some other Arab countries. Localizing these references is very important to creating a similar humors and sarcastic effect in the target text.

## Scene 5

Celia is angry with Wazowski because dinner last night turned to be a disaster.

| source   | target   | back translation  |
|--|--|---|
| Michael Wazowski!<br>Last night was one of the worst nights of my entire life, bar none! | سالي: وشوشني!<br>إمبارح كانت ليلة أسود من قرن الخروب والزيتون. | Celia: Washwishni!<br>last night was a dark night, even <b>darker than carobs and olives!</b> |

“Last night was one of the worst nights of my entire life” could be easily rendered into Arabic through literal translation. However, the translator opts for a cultural creation by adding “إمبارح كانت ليلة أسود من قرن الخروب والزيتون” which literally means that [last night was a dark night, even darker than carobs and olives]. The carob is a very dark plant that grows in Mediterranean countries, such as Egypt. This is a very popular colloquial expression in Egypt that is usually said to describe how unpleasant or bad a situation is.

This cultural creation made the scene even funnier because this expression is usually used to describe a disastrous situation. Celia sounds even angrier in the Arabic version of the film for what was supposed to be a romantic night that turned into a disaster.

## VII. Findings and Conclusion

The strategies used by the translator contribute greatly to the success in domesticating *Monsters, Inc.* Creation, localization, and omission are the most frequent strategies applied in the translation of cultural references in this film.



Proper names are localized to be more recognizable and funnier for the target audience. Cultural creations are added to some scenes to increase the humorous effect in the Arabic dubbed version. Moreover, the source text does not include as many idioms as the target text. As mentioned earlier, the Arabic text features many Egyptian colloquial idioms which contribute greatly to domesticating the content.

This paper shows how the translator chose to adapt or domesticate CRs in this Disney film that was dubbed before 2012. Since Disney decided in 2022 to go back to dubbing its films in Egyptian vernacular after it had put a pause on it in 2012, it would be interesting to see if the treatment of CRs in films dubbed in Egyptian Arabic before 2012 like *Monsters, Inc* differ than those in films dubbed after 2022. Thus, it is suggested for future research to investigate if this ten-year gap has affected the choices of strategies or procedures to deal with CRs in Disney films that are dubbed in Egyptian vernacular.

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