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Cultural references in films: an audience reception study of subtitling into Arabic

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ABSTRACT



This article focuses on the issue of capturing cultural references in subtitled translations. It addresses three shortcomings in current translation scholarship. First, most of the studies in audiovisual translation focused on cultural references are primarily based on European languages and contexts. Second, the typologies resulting from those studies focus solely on verbal references and often ignore the multimodal meaning-making situation in which cultural references are construed or their non-verbal nature. Third, most of the extant studies on the translation strategies used are descriptive, rather than grounded in empirical reception studies. This article will report and discuss the data collected on an experimental study examining the reception of cultural references on films subtitled into Arabic. It will revisit the traditional understanding of cultural references as limited to the verbal mode and examine the impact of domesticating and Foreignisation methods on Saudi-Arabian viewers' meaning-making process.

KEYWORDS

Cultural references; subtitling; arabic; english; reception; multimodality

1. Introduction

The translation of cultural references (CRs) has been identified as one of the most challenging 'cultural bumps' (Leppihalme 1997) and has been a recurring topic of study in Translation Studies. Studies such as Nedergaard-Larsen (1993), Alvarez and Vidal (1996), Leppihalme (1997), Gottlieb (2009) or Pedersen (2011), to name just a few, have developed different taxonomies which allow the identification and classification of different types of cultural references included in the source text as well as the translation strategies employed in the target text. Through the use of large corpora, it has been possible to cross-reference those findings and examine specific patterns of translation behaviour according to variables such as genre and date of translation as well as professional and cultural norms. However, despite the invaluable contribution of the existing scholarship on this topic, it is possible to identify three main shortcomings: first, the typologies used to classify and reflect upon cultural references have in most cases been developed in studies considering European languages/contexts and do not include strategies that are often used in translation into Arabic, which is the focus of the current study. Second, the

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studies on audiovisual translation show a conspicuous logocentric approach that not only limits cultural references to a verbal phenomenon, but also does not fully account for the complex multimodal meaning-making context in which verbal cultural references participate. This overlooks the complex multimodal nature of audiovisual products such as films and limits non-verbal resources to the secondary role of context while disregarding the challenges the visual resources can bring to different viewers in different contexts. The focus on the verbal is undoubtedly a result of the more general logocentric approach of Translation Studies as a whole, but it would not be unreasonable to see it as a consequence of the focus on European contexts. After all, visual resources might not present as many challenges within European contexts as they do when translation happens between more culturally-distant-contexts. Third, most of the studies on cultural references have assumed a descriptive studies approach which, despite the crucial pool of data generated, would benefit from further empirical enquiry on the impact of the strategies used on viewers' meaning-making process.

This article describes the first experimental reception study of subtitling into Arabic, examining the impact of specific subtitling choices on Saudi-Arabian viewers' meaning-making process. It is necessarily an exploratory study and it constitutes a first step in empirically addressing the shortcomings in audiovisual translation regarding cultural references. It will focus on testing the impact that methods of foreignisation and domestication (Venuti 1995) might have on viewers' understanding and perceived understanding of cultural references. It will also look at possible patterns of correlation between viewers' understanding and the film's source language (familiar or unfamiliar), as well as the nature of the cultural reference. Adopting a multimodal perspective, in this article we will revisit the traditional understanding of cultural references by a) considering verbal references within a larger network of intermodal relations established with other aural and visual resources, and b) acknowledging visual resources as socially-shaped resources that can present different challenges to different viewers and might need to be addressed in translation (Adami and Ramos Pinto 2020). We will start by providing a short review of the relevant literature on the basis of which the experimental study was organised. This will be followed by a detailed account of the methodology and the discussion of the data.

2. Cultural references in films and their translation

The challenges presented by cultural references to translation have deserved great attention in Translation Studies since the early 1990s' with pivotal studies such as Nedegaard-Larsen's (1993), Alvarez and Carmen-Africa Vidal (1996) and Pedersen (2011), to mention just a few. Such interest comes greatly from the fact that, as culturally specific elements that reflect values and dynamics of a particular culture (Schwartz 2007), cultural references bring to the fore the difference between cultures and a particular need for intercultural mediation and translation. This has led authors to refer to them as 'culture-bound elements' (Nedegaard-Larsen 1993; Gottlieb 2009) and often to distinguish them as 'cultural bumps' (Leppihalme 1997), 'translation crisis points' (Pedersen 2008) or even as 'untranslatable' (Baker 1992). In this article, we will follow Pedersen's (2011) proposal and use the term 'cultural references' as a comprehensive term that allows us to deal with a wide scope of challenges covering 'references to people, places, customs, institutions,

food, [sounds,] etc., that are specific to a certain culture, and which you may not know even if you know the language in question' (Pedersen 2011, 44). In accordance with this definition and still building on Pedersen (2011, 59–60), in this article we will classify cultural references according to the following list of domains:

- Weights and measures
- Proper names (personal names, geographical names, institutional/brand names)
- Professional titles
- Food and beverages
- Literature
- Government
- Entertainment
- Education
- Sports
- Currency
- Technical material
- Other

This typology appears to be very comprehensive, but it nevertheless shows some limitations in the sense that it distinguishes cultural references according to what they refer to, but not according to their nature. By adopting a multimodal approach to the study of cultural references, in this article we would like to expand on this typology and propose an additional level of classification which will allow us to account for the multimodal nature of the source text.

As previously mentioned, despite the various calls for a multimodal approach to audiovisual translation (O'Sullivan 2013; Pérez-González 2014; Gambier and Ramos Pinto 2018), a strong focus on the verbal can still be recognised in most studies on subtitling. Such logocentric approach made it possible to build large corpora which in turn allowed us to examine translation strategies and identify important patterns of translational behaviour. However, it has kept the study of subtitling strategies separate from its multimodal context or reduced non-verbal resources to the role of 'context'. This overlooks the fact that the meaning brought to the film by cultural references is built within a complex web of intermodal relations with other visual and aural resources, but also that some of those non-verbal resources might present specific challenges to different viewers. Following the trail of Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), in this article we acknowledge both verbal and non-verbal resources as socially-shaped signs that participate equally in the overall meaning-making process and that can thus present different challenges to different viewers.

When examining cultural references in film and their translation, it is thus relevant to make a distinction, on the one hand, between verbal, visual and aural references, and on the other hand, between cultural references that take advantage of one or more than one mode. It is also equally relevant to consider the different intermodal relations that can be established between resources. Regarding the nature of the references, in this study we make the following distinction:

Monomodal references: references to people, places, behaviour, institutions, food, sounds, etc., that are specific to a certain culture and whose meaning is erected through one single mode. These can be *verbal references* when erected through verbal resources only – for example, when in *Forrest Gump* (1994), Forrest mentions the “White House” (verbal resource) to Jenny. They can be *visual references* when erected through visual resources – for example, when in *Munich* (2005) we are shown the Eiffel Tower (visual resource) to place the action in Paris. They can be *aural references* when erected through aural resources – for example, when in *Year and Years* (2019, S1:E1) we hear a siren (aural resource) resembling the ones used in WWII to warn of a German raid. The potential difficulty interpreting this aural resource is illustrated in the series itself when the younger characters were not able to interpret the sound and did not react accordingly by looking for a safe hiding place.

Crossmodal references: references to people, places, institutions, food, sounds etc. that are specific to a certain culture and whose meaning is erected through a combination of signs of different natures. For example, when in *Heartburn* (1986) the main character mentions “pasta carbonara” (verbal sign) while the camera focus on a plate full of pasta (visual sign).

In the intricate web of audio and visual, verbal and non-verbal resources that we call a film, no resource works or can be examined in isolation for its meaning depends on the multimodal context in which it appears. The same is true for cultural references not only because their meaning and diegetic function (e.g. building of a comic moment) in the film depends on the filmic context in which they appear, but also because some cultural references are built, as seen before, through the combination of resources of different natures. It is thus important to consider the intermodal relations through which the cultural references can be made. In this study we take advantage of the COSMOROE model (Pastra 2008), a framework that ‘looks at cross-media relations from a multimedia discourse perspective, i.e. from the perspective of the dialectics between different pieces of information for forming a coherent message’ (Pastra 2008, 306). This is a very complete and refined model which can be used to identify different types of intermodal relations between any two or more resources of an audiovisual product. However, given the focus of this study on cultural references, a less detailed framework was developed out of the COSMOROE model, one mostly focused on the intermodal relations established to erect cultural references. Using the terminology proposed by Pastra (2008), we distinguish between intermodal relationships of:

Independence; the cultural reference is built on the basis of a single mode which “carries an independent message [...] and can stand on its own” (Pastra 2008, 308). In this case, the cultural reference can either be erected through visual, verbal or aural resources (see examples above).

Equivalence (token-token); the cultural reference is erected on the basis of more than one mode and the information expressed by the different modes is semantically equivalent, it refers to the same entity” (Pastra 2008, 307) as in the above “pasta carbonara” example.

Complementarity; the cultural reference is erected on the basis of more than one mode, but the information expressed by the different modes is not semantically equivalent, it “complements the information expressed in the other mode” (Pastra 2008, 308). When in *Expendables 2* (2012), a character mimics the Terminator saying, “I’ll be back”, the cultural reference is erected both through the gestures and facial expression (visual resource) and what is said (verbal resource) in a relationship of complementarity.

Foreignisation ↑	Retention	The source text CR is retained in the subtitle unchanged
	Direct translation	Translation with no semantic alteration, literal translation
	Transcription	The CR is written in the target text using the target writing system
↓ Domestication	Official equivalent	Use of a ready-made official term used in the target context
	Specification	Use of a more specific target culture CR than the source text CR
	Generalisation	Use of a more general target culture CR than the source text CR
	Substitution	The source item is replaced with a target culture item or a better-known source culture item
	Omission	The CR is not reproduced in any way in the target text

Figure 1. Typology of translation methods and strategies.

For translators, it will be important to consider if their translation choices maintain, alter or modify the intermodal relations and consequently the diegetic function they fulfil in the film. For researchers examining the translation of cultural references, it will be important to consider the multimodal context in which the cultural reference was built and if the intermodal relations were maintained, eliminated or modified in translation. The exploratory reception study reported in this article, does not include all the types of CR in this framework but the purpose was to design a framework able to account and describe CRs of different natures and in all their different dimensions. This has allowed us to consider the cultural references included in the experiment in a new light, establishing possible correlations between reception behaviour and cultural references of different natures and posing new questions regarding possible correlations between reception and intermodal relations. We hope this framework is found to be equally useful by other researchers in future studies.

The final aspect to discuss relates to the strategies¹ used to translate cultural references. Previous descriptive studies developed on the basis of large corpora have identified a series of commonly used strategies as well as some of the mediating factors behind translator's decisions (Nedergaard-Larsen 1993; Alvarez and Vidal 1996; Leppihalme 1997; Gottlieb 2009; Pedersen 2011). It will not be possible to review in this article the immense body of work already available on this issue, but we would highlight the work by Harvey (2000) and Pedersen (2011) which provide important reviews of previous taxonomies of strategies and whose proposals we will follow more closely in this article. Pedersen (2011) proposes a taxonomy of seven strategies including 'retention', 'direct translation', 'official equivalent', 'specification', 'generalization', 'substitution' and 'omission'. Given the focus on subtitling into Arabic, the category 'transcription' (as proposed by Harvey 2000) was added to this taxonomy to account for situations in which the characters of the source text are changed to word characters from the target context, thus changing the writing of a term from one writing system to another. Finally, given that the purpose of this article is to test the impact of methods of foreignisation and domestication on viewers' meaning-making process, we propose the organisation of the strategies in a cline from source to target oriented strategies which can help us to prepare different conditions focused on testing different methods (more

details in the next section). The taxonomy of strategies used in this study (see [Figure 1](#)) builds on Harvey (2000) and Pedersen (2011) and includes the following categories²:

3. Methodology

3.1. *Experimental procedure and apparatus*

This study was completed in 2018 at King Abdulaziz University in Saudi Arabia. Participants viewed six short clips (under 12 minutes) in a dedicated room where noise levels were controlled, and distractions minimised. Before viewing the clips, participants were informed they would be watching a series of short clips and answer a few questions on what they had seen. They were, however, not informed of the focus of the study to avoid having the participants pay special attention to subtitling or cultural references. Participants were informed of the focus of the study afterwards and had ample opportunity to ask questions or exclude themselves from the study. Participants answered two different questionnaires in writing relating to each clip immediately after watching the clip. The questionnaires were divided in two parts. Part I focused on the participants' perceived understanding of the clip and difficulties they might have faced with specific scenes. Part II contained interpretation questions as well as dummy questions to ensure participants did not identify the focus of the study.³

3.2. *Participants*

The population from which the sample was drawn is female students of King Abdulaziz University in Saudi Arabia. The gender segregation policy in Saudi Arabia has limited the study to female participants due to the fact that the data was being collected by a female researcher. The 65 participants who volunteered signed a consent form agreeing to participate in the study and to the data collected being used anonymously. The participants were between 18–22 years old. All students had Arabic as their language A and English as their language B. They were enrolled in a BA in English Literature and Linguistics and they did not have any translation training. All students went through regular University admissions process and can be assumed to have the equivalent of a 5 in the IELTS test. However, given the specific nature of the study and its focus on audiovisual products, a second level of assessment was included to test the participants' English language proficiency when watching a film. All participants watched a short clip from the television series *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–2019) (S8:E2) without subtitles and afterwards answered a short questionnaire with two open questions (to avoid guessed responses) on the content of the clip. The participants' level of English was considered 'Advanced' when two of the answers were correct; or 'Intermediate' when only one answer was correct. We were not expecting to have students with a low level of English and those would have been excluded from the study. The study included 34 participants with an 'Advanced' level of English and 31 participants with an 'Intermediate' level of English.

3.3. Material and film analysis

The clips were selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- (a) **Source language:** the study includes clips in a foreign language familiar to the participants (English) and languages of which participants have no knowledge of (German, Hindi, French) in order to study the impact of having a familiar vs unfamiliar language/culture on participants' responses. The source languages were selected according to three criteria: a) languages not known by the participants (as determined by a pre-experiment questionnaire); b) languages known by the researchers or for which they had adequate support from native speakers; c) languages from a European and non-European context.
- (b) **Frequency of culture references:** the study includes clips with a high occurrence of cultural references in order to ensure that enough data was collected. Ideally, we would have several cases of each type of cultural reference and cultural references of different natures as contemplated in the framework proposed in section 2. However, issues around ecological validity and the difficulty in generating source texts according to specific conditions (as often is the case when studying reception of technical translation, for example), promoted the choice to use pre-existing film clips (and the cultural references they naturally contained) that allowed the inclusion of a large enough number of cultural references while keeping the experiment under one hour to avoid participants' exhaustion.
- (c) **Type and nature of cultural references:** the study is largely dependent on the cultural references used in films, but efforts were made to include culture references of different categories (following Pedersen's (2011) typology) and of different natures, i.e. erected on the basis of one mode or in a combination of different modes.

Figure 2 provides information on the clips and cultural references included in the study.

The clips were subtitled by professional translators (the researchers) under two different conditions. Condition 1 implemented source-oriented method foreignisation (the most common subtitling practice in Saudi-Arabia)⁴ and employed strategies of 'retention', 'direct translation' and 'transcription'. Condition 2 implemented target-oriented method of domestication and took advantage of strategies of 'omission', 'substitution',

Source film	Source language	Clip selected	Number of CRs	Category/Type of CRs
<i>Sleepless in Seattle</i> (1993)	English	00:51:05–00:59:40	4	Medicine [verbal], Personal names [verbal], Sport [verbal], Games [verbal]
<i>Fever Pitch</i> (1997)	English	00:03:31–00:09:18	5	Literature [verbal], Personal names [verbal], Geographical names [verbal], Entertainment [verbal]
<i>Truly, Madly, Deeply</i> (1991)	English	00:08:30–00:15:11	4	Food and beverages [crossmodal], Geographical names [verbal], Medicine [verbal]
<i>Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela</i> (2013)	Hindi	00:41:58–00:44:39	4	Currency [verbal], Transportation [crossmodal], Other [verbal]
<i>Entre Les Murs</i> (2008)	French	01:06:30–01:12:02	5	Brand names [verbal], Geographical names [verbal], Entertainment [verbal], Sport [verbal]
<i>Goodbye Lenin</i> (2003)	German	00:16:09–00:18:14	4	Government [verbal], Geographical names [verbal], Personal names [crossmodal]

Figure 2. List of film clips and culture references included in the study.

Example from <i>Sleepless in Seattle</i> (1993), 00:51:20–00:51:21				
Sam Baldwin: <i>Here's a bottle of Ipecac if anyone drinks poison.</i>				
	CR	Arabic translation	Back translation	Strategy
Condition 1	Ipecac	هذه زجاجة ابيكاك في حال شرب أحد السم	<i>This is a bottle of Ipecac if anyone drinks poison.</i>	Transcription + Direct Translation
Condition 2	Ipecac	هذا دواء للتسمم في حال شرب أحد السم	<i>This is a Poison Medicine if anyone drinks poison.</i>	Generalisation

Figure 3. Example of the different strategies used in conditions 1 and 2.

'generalization', 'specification' and 'official equivalent'. [Figure 3](#) provides examples of the subtitling included in both conditions:

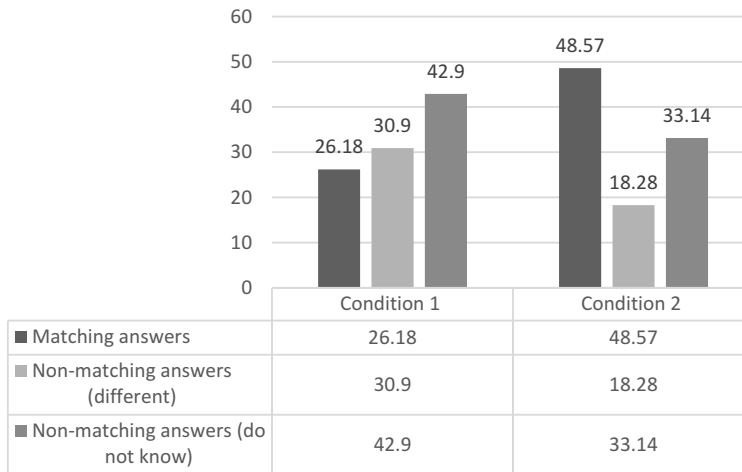
3.4. Quantitative and qualitative data

The data was collected by asking the participants to answer a questionnaire after the viewing of each clip. **Part I** of the questionnaire included questions on the participants' perceived understanding of the clip they had watched. The participants' answers were coded on the basis of two categories: *Declared understanding* when the participant replied to have understood the clip and *Declared non-understanding* when they answered the opposite. **Part II** included interpretation questions referring to each scene in which a cultural reference had been integrated. The participants' answers to those questions were coded on the basis of three categories: *matching* when the information given in the answer matched the information given in the subtitles and/or source image; *non-matching (different)* when the information given in the answer was different from the one provided in the subtitles and/or source image; *non-matching (do not know)* when the participant could not recall and answered 'I do not know'. This produced frequency data which then allowed us to examine patterns of behaviour and to see if there were any significant differences regarding the impact of Conditions 1 and 2 on the participant's understanding of the cultural references. It also allowed us to cross-reference the data and examine possible differences between: a) perceived understanding and actual understanding of the cultural reference; b) (non)-understanding of the cultural reference and the presence of a familiar/non-familiar source language; c) (non)-understanding of the cultural reference and the nature of the cultural reference. Given the overall aim to examine the effects of translation methods of foreignisation and domestication on viewers' meaning-making and understanding of the cultural references, the participants' answers to the interpretation questions were always organised and examined according to the two experimental conditions mentioned in [section 3.3](#). For statistical testing, the results of the experiment were analysed using ANOVA and t-tests.

4. Results and findings

4.1. Perceived understanding and actual understanding of the cultural references

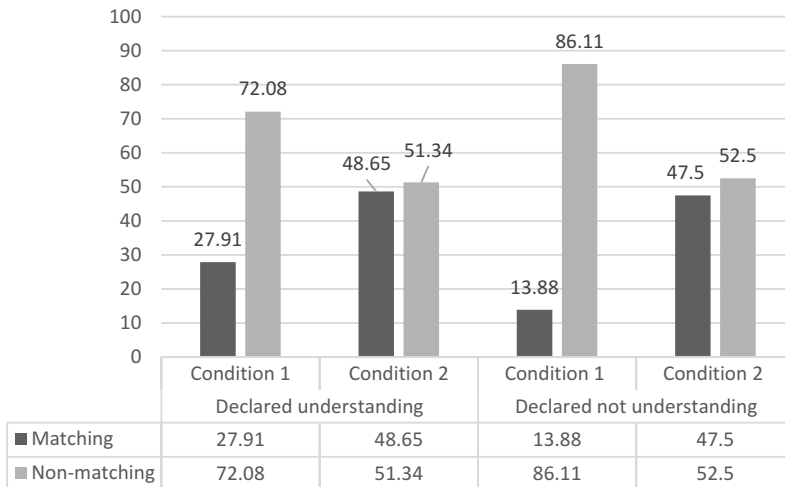
We first looked at the distribution of the questionnaire's interpretation questions (Part II) across the two conditions in order to see if a change in translation method impacted participants' meaning-making process. The data shows a higher number of *matching*



Graph 1. Data (in %) regarding answers to interpretation questions across both conditions.

answers in Condition 2 than in Condition 1 (see Graph 1 below), meaning that participants more easily recalled the information offered in the subtitled and/or source image when the method of domestication was used. On the other hand, it was observed that the number of both *non-matching (different)* and *non-matching (do not know)* answers was higher in Condition 1 than in Condition 2, which indicates that an overwhelming number of participants (73.8%) were not able to understand or recall the cultural references when the method of foreignisation was used, but that 48.57% of the participants were able to answer the interpreting questions when a strategy of domestication was applied.

The results of the one-way ANOVA test indicated that the difference between translation conditions were highly significant with a p-value of $<.001$, confirming the initial conclusion that participants' ability to understand and recall cultural references was significantly affected by the change in translation method. Such results seem to suggest that the use of the method of domestication facilitated participants' understanding of cultural references to a greater extent than the method of foreignisation. Snell-Hornby (1995) has alerted to the risks of 'overestim[ing] the target-audience's familiarity with the source-language culture' (1995: 42), which is what might be happening in subtitling in Saudi Arabia given that the foreignisation method is the most commonly used (see footnote 4). We do not mean to say that the domestication method should be the preferred solution (also because one cannot overlook the 51.42% of non-matching answers in Condition 2), but these results highlight the fact that viewers are missing important moments of the film as well as the need for more research on audience profiling and viewers' meaning-making processes. Given the technological developments made possible by digital media, the results also show how important it is to consider possibilities such as headtitles and pop-up balloons (used in fansubbing) or on-screen side/drop-down comment bars (used on Amazon Prime), through which one can consider Jianghua's (2006) recommendation to integrate both domestication and foreignisation methods, now seen as 'supplement[ing] each other rather than a pair in conflict' (2006: 59).



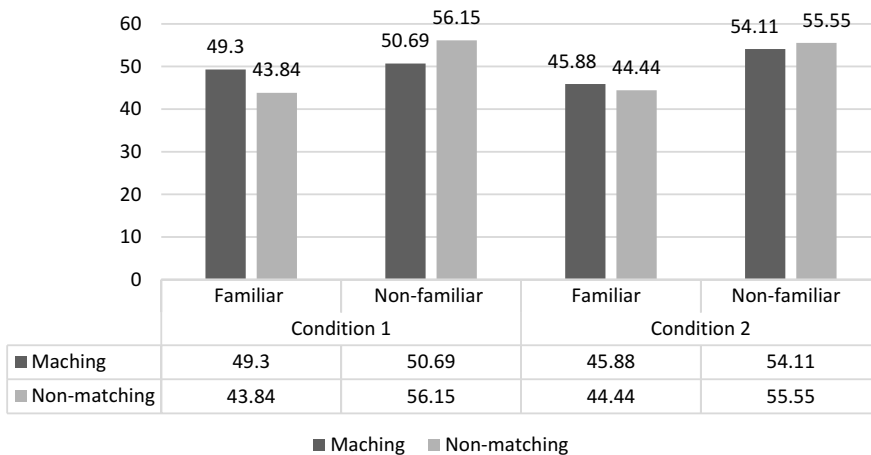
Graph 2. Data (in %) regarding participants' perceived understanding and answers to interpretation questions.

Having had also collected data regarding the participants' perception of their level of understanding, it proved important to contrast these two groups of data to find if the participants' understanding of cultural references corresponded to their own perception of how much they had understood.

As can be seen in Graph 2, a high number of participants declared in both conditions to have understood the clip but provided *non-matching* answers, showing a noticeable mismatch between the participants' perception of how much they understood and actual understanding. These results seem to be in line with Antonini's (2005, 2007) findings which allowed her to conclude that 'Italian TV audiences believe and declare that they have understood most of [the] references, [when] in reality they have not' resulting in 'a remarkable discrepancy between what the viewers declared they had understood and what they actually did understand' (2007: 161–165). Unfortunately, Antonini's study could not determine if there was a difference in these observed patterns according to the translation strategy used, but the data collected in this study allows us to see that a different pattern is found when domestication method was used (more details later in this section). The findings also confirm Bucaria's conclusions (2005) who stated that the declared understanding was always higher than actual understanding; however, it seems to run contrary to Caffrey's (2009) findings which supported the conclusion that declared understanding was, in most cases, lower than actual understanding. The variation found in these different studies point towards cultural differences or perhaps different attitudes regarding research, an issue that deserves further investigation, but which goes beyond the scope of this article; however, one possible reason for the participants' perceived understanding in this study being higher than the number of *matching* answers in the interpretation questions could be their desire to provide what they think is considered to be a 'good' answer – in this case declaring to have understood the cultural reference – even when they did not really understand them. Another more worrying possibility is that they were in fact not aware they had not understood the cultural reference. This issue and

the impact it might have (or not have) in the overall understanding of the film deserve further attention in future research projects.

When cross-referencing these results with the two conditions considered in this study, it is possible to see that the number of participants declaring to have understood the clip but providing *non-matching* answers was lower in Condition 2 than in Condition 1, whereas the number of participants who declared having understood the cultural references and provided *matching* answers was higher in Condition 2 than in Condition 1. From this, it is possible to conclude that when the domestication method is used, participants not only seem to have a higher level of understanding of the cultural reference, but they also seem to be more aware of that understanding as there is a higher level of correspondence between participants' perceived understanding and actual understanding of the cultural references. This can be confirmed by the fact that the



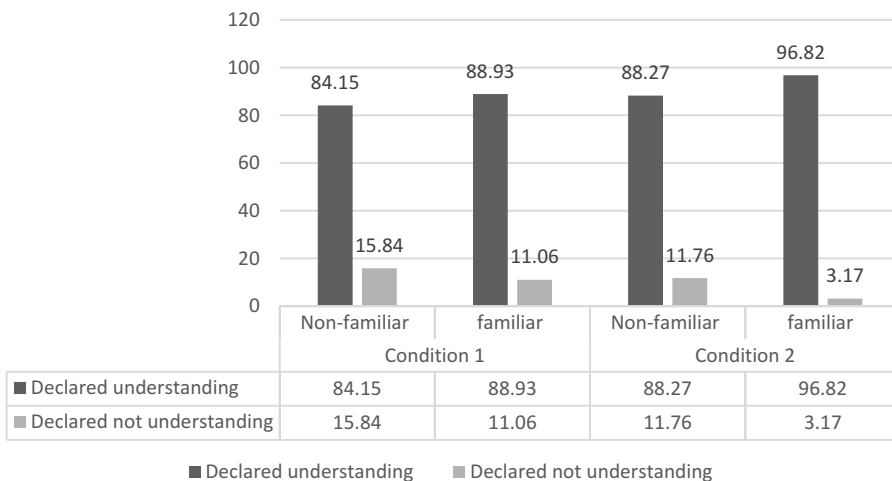
Graph 3. Data (in %) regarding matching-non-matching answers in films with a familiar or non-familiar source language.

opposite is also true, i.e. there is a lower level of correspondence between participants' perceived understanding and actual understanding when the method of foreignisation is used.

4.2. (Non)-understanding of the cultural reference and familiar/non-familiar source language

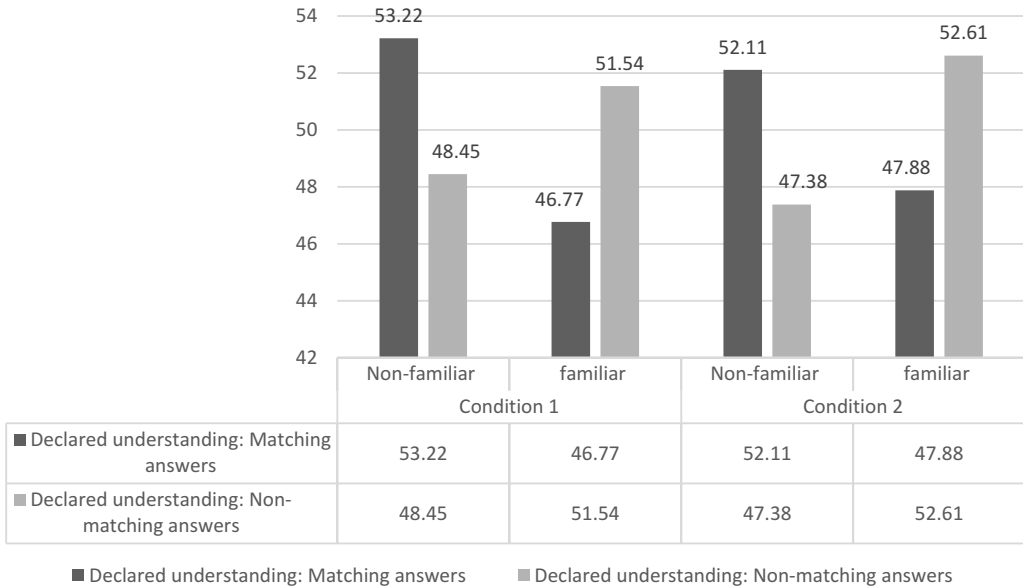
Given that the ability to interpret a cultural reference is directly dependent on the viewers' knowledge of the culture in which the cultural reference is embedded, it stands to reason that a cultural reference will be more or less readily accessible depending on how familiar/non-familiar the source culture and source language are. It was thus relevant to cross-reference the categories *matching/non-matching* with the categories of *familiar/non-familiar* source language, as shown in Graph 3.

The t-test did not show any significant statistical difference (p -value of >0.05) between answers regarding films with a *familiar* or *non-familiar* source language in the two conditions, but there are a few observations to make when examining the results more closely. The number of *matching* answers in Condition 1 were almost identical between *familiar* and *non-familiar* source language films, with results only 1.39% higher in the *non-familiar* category. In Condition 2, there was a larger difference in the number of *matching* answers between *familiar* and *non-familiar* (8.23%), but the pattern was the same, as the number of *matching* answers was still higher in films with a *non-familiar* source language. The results seem to suggest that having a *familiar* source language does not facilitate the meaning-making process, which is surprising when it seems reasonable to assume that a familiar language and culture would facilitate the interpretation and understanding of cultural references. This is an issue that certainly deserves further enquiry given that professional subtitling practice often operates under this assumption; however, it will be important to note that these results are not conclusive and that other factors might be behind them. One of those factors could be the participants' awareness of the difficulty of the task ahead, that is, watching a clip in a language they are not familiar with and having to rely exclusively on the subtitles. This would be related to what has been referred to as the 'Inverted U' (Cassady and Johnson 2002), which suggests an improvement in the performance under moderate levels of anxiety. Previous studies examining the relation between anxiety and performance revealed that moderate levels of physiological arousal resulted in higher exam performance (Cassady and Johnson 2002). Taking into consideration that participants were aware they would be watching a clip in a language they are not familiar with and asked to answer some questions about it, one cannot discard the possibility that their level of anxiety increased, resulting in a better-than-usual performance when answering the questions. One other possible reason supported by previous studies, could be the fact that participants might have been distracted by the fact that both languages on screen – English and Arabic – were familiar languages. Previous studies



Graph 4. Data (in %) regarding participants' perceived understanding in films with a familiar or non-familiar source language.

(Lavour and Bairstow 2011; Bairstow and Lavour 2012) have shown that ‘the distracting effect proved to be stronger when two known languages were on-screen simultaneously (audio dialogues and written subtitles)’ (Bairstow and Lavour 2012, 290). In this context, listening to the English dialogue and reading the Arabic subtitles at the same time may have caused an attention split, which may have affected negatively on

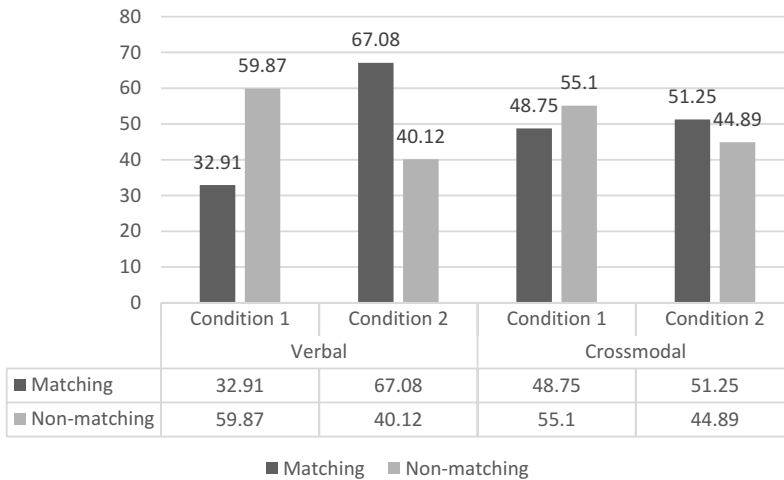


Graph 5. Data (in %) cross-referencing matching answers and participants’ perceived understanding in films with a familiar or non-familiar source language.

their performance when answering questions about cultural references. This was not the case in the *non-familiar* category since the focus was devoted solely towards the one language they understood, that is, the Arabic subtitles.

In addition to cross-referencing the data between *matching/non-matching* answers and *familiar/non-familiar* source language, we wanted to also examine the possible correlation between *perceived understanding/non-understanding* and *familiar/non-familiar* source language.

As shown in Graph 4, similar to what was found regarding *matching* and *non-matching* answers, the data shows an incredible similarity in results regarding perceived understanding/non-understanding between films with a *familiar* and *non-familiar* source language across both conditions. This seems to indicate that, along with the fact that familiarity with the source language does not seem to meaningfully impact participant’s level of understanding of the cultural references, it also does not seem to considerably impact their perception of how much they understood or not. Having said this, it is important to note that contrary to what was possible to note in Graph 3, the results regarding perception of understanding are slightly higher when participants were commenting on films with a familiar source language.



Graph 6. Data (in %) regarding participants' understanding and nature of the cultural reference across conditions.

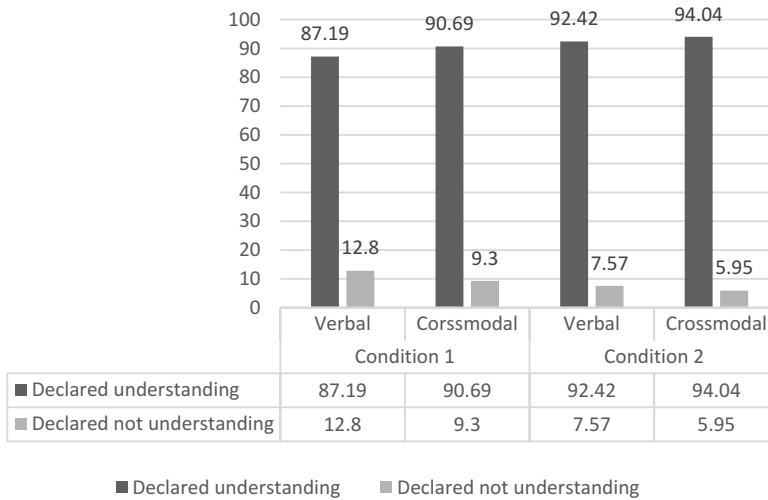
Looking more closely to the possible correlation between *familiar* and *non-familiar* source language and *matching* answers given by participants that declared to have understood the cultural reference (see Graph 5 below), it is possible to note that the number of *matching* answers given by participants' declaring to have understood the cultural reference was higher in films with a *non-familiar* source language in both translation conditions.

This seems to suggest a pattern where participants are more aware of, and perhaps more confident in, their understanding of the cultural references when the film's source language is *non-familiar*. Such awareness and confidence could be related to the same reasons behind a better performance when answering interpretation questions regarding non-familiar source language films. For instance, paying more attention when faced with a language they are not familiar with might have enhanced their awareness of and confidence in their understanding. On the other hand, being distracted with two familiar languages on screen might have reduced their awareness of and confidence in what they think they understood.

4.3. (Non)-understanding of the cultural reference and the nature of the culture reference

Given the multimodal nature of the audiovisual text and the fact that cultural references, as discussed in section 2, can happen through one or more modes and different types of intermodal relations, this study aimed at looking into the possible correlation between translation strategy, (non-)understanding of the cultural reference and nature of the cultural reference.

The cultural references included in this study can be divided into *monomodal (verbal) references* and *crossmodal references*, the later showing always an intermodal relationship of *equivalence*. The data in Graph 6 shows that the number of *matching* answers in relation to *verbal references* was noticeably lower in Condition 1 (32.91%) than in Condition 2 (67.08%), indicating that the method of



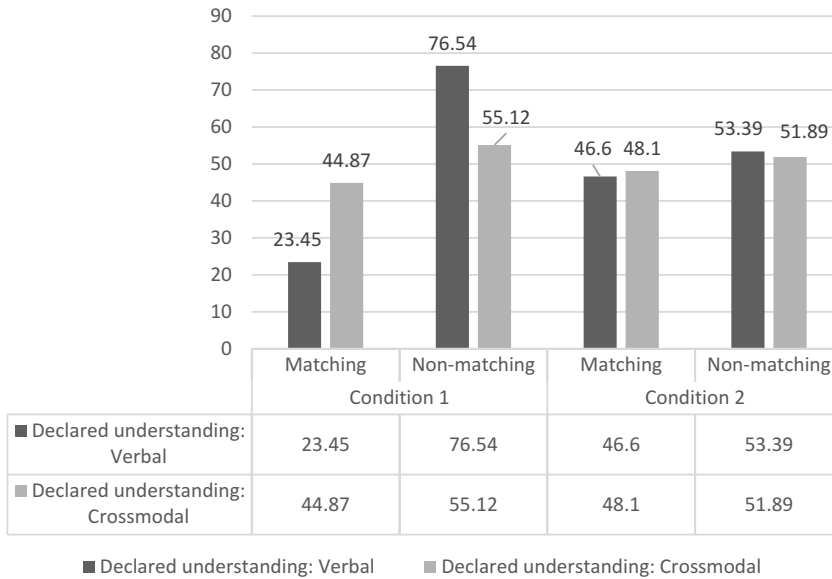
Graph 7. Data (in %) regarding participants' perceived understanding regarding monomodal (verbal) and crossmodal references in both conditions.

domestication facilitated understanding of the cultural references. The t-test showed a significant difference (p -value of $<.001$) regarding *verbal references* between the two conditions, which indicates that the change in translation methods had a significant effect on the level of understanding of the *verbal references* among participants.

Regarding *crossmodal references*, it is possible to note that the number of *matching* answers was also lower in Condition 1 (48.75%) than in Condition 2 (51.25%), but the impact of the change in translation method seems to be much smaller or nonexistent, as shown by the t-test results which confirmed no significant difference (p -value of $>.636$) regarding the *crossmodal references* between the two conditions. One cannot overlook the fact that the lack of statistical significance could be due to the low number of *crossmodal references* (the study included only three); however, it is important to consider the role that the intermodal relation might have played in the results. After all, it seems reasonable to suggest that the intermodal relationship of *equivalence* facilitated the understanding of cultural references regardless of the strategy used, due to the fact that the meaning expressed by the visual and verbal resources was semantically equivalent, thus reinforcing each other. This raises important questions regarding the importance of considering the multimodal nature of the cultural reference which deserve further exploration in future studies. It would be important to test the impact of translation strategies in relation to *crossmodal references* erected through different intermodal relationships of independence, equivalence and complementarity.

Having collected data on participants perceived (non-)understanding, it was relevant to also cross-reference such data with the data relating to the *verbal* or *crossmodal* nature of the references.

Following Graph 7, results show that the difference between *verbal* and *crossmodal references* does not seem to impact the fact that a high number of



Graph 8. Data (in %) cross-referencing matching answers.

participants declared in both conditions to have understood the clip but provided *non-matching* answers, showing a clear discrepancy between the participants' perception of how much they understood and actual understanding. Similar to what was noticed before, the *crossmodal* nature and intermodal relationship of *equivalence* seem to result in a higher number of participants declaring understanding, possibly due to the overlap in meaning expressed by both modes involved.

Looking more closely to the possible correlation between *verbal* and *crossmodal* references and *matching* answers given by participants that declared to have understood the cultural reference (see Graph 8, below), it is possible to note that the number of *matching* answers with *verbal* references is lower in Condition 1 when compared to Condition 2, confirming the clear impact of the difference in translation strategy discussed before. A similar pattern can be identified when considering *crossmodal* references; however, the difference in the number of *matching* answers between the two conditions, although still higher in Condition 2, was much smaller than the one identified regarding *verbal* references.

And participants' perceived understanding of verbal and crossmodal references

This seems to suggest that participants were more confident in their understanding of cultural references in the verbal and crossmodal categories when domestication strategies were used, but, perhaps more importantly, that such level of confidence is higher in the case of crossmodal references, probably due to the already mentioned overlap in meaning expressed by the modes involved.

5. Conclusion

This article yielded original findings and provided insights into the reception of subtitling of cultural references in Saudi Arabia. By adopting a multimodal approach, it revisited the concept of cultural references and suggested going beyond the verbal to include audio and aural references (here seen as socially-shaped resources) and consider the intermodal relationship in which references are erected. By adopting an experimental methodology, it examined the impact of methods of Foreignisation and domestication in participants' meaning-making process. Finally, it focused on subtitling into Arabic, and considering Harvey (2000), added a new category to Pedersen's typology of strategies.

Based on the findings of this study, it would appear that domestication strategies facilitate viewers' understanding of cultural references more than foreignisation strategies. However, it became clear that both approaches are deficient and that most viewers have difficulties understanding most references. It was thus curious to find that viewers' perception runs contrary to these results leading a large number of participants to respond to have understood not only the cultural references but the entire clip without difficulties. These are important findings that question the current tendency to use foreignisation strategies in subtitling in Saudi Arabia. However, and perhaps more importantly, given the large number of participants who thought they had understood the cultural references when in fact they had not, these results highlight the considerable number of viewers that might be interpreting specific scenes differently than expected. How can viewers misinterpret the cultural reference (and possibly the entire scene) without being left confused? Does this have an impact on the overall reception and enjoyment of the film? These are important questions that deserve further exploration.

The results of this study also show that the level of understanding of cultural references was higher in non-familiar source language films regardless of the translation strategy used, contradicting common expectation that knowledge of the source language implies knowledge of the source culture which, in turn, facilitates understanding of cultural references. Less surprising was the finding that the levels of actual and perceived understanding were higher regarding crossmodal references. This is most probably due to the fact that the references were based on an intermodal relationship of equivalence in which there is an overlap of meaning expressed by the different modes involved, but it highlights the importance of considering the multimodal nature of the source text. It also highlights the need to study this issue in more detail to better understand the implications of applying similar strategies independently of intermodal relationship at play as commonly done in subtitling professional practice (especially now with the pressure to use machine translation in subtitling). More comprehensive studies including larger samples, references of different natures (also visual and aural), and different types of crossmodal references from the ones in this study are necessary.

The results of this study offer a useful foundation for further research in the field of reception analysis of subtitling in Saudi Arabia. They identify tendencies that can lead to a future revision of subtitling practice and point towards several other avenues of study that deserve to be further explored. It will be important to examine more closely viewers' meaning-making process, the impact of specific subtitling strategies in that process and the possibility that overall understanding and enjoyment of the film might not be compromised by the misunderstanding of isolated scenes. For translators, it will be important to know how to

identify the intermodal relations on the basis of which the cultural reference is erected and how to consider it in translation.

Notes

1. In this article a distinction is made between macro- and micro-level translation decisions. For greater clarity, we will follow the terminology proposed by Pedersen (2011, 69–70) who distinguishes between ‘method’ (global decision-making) and ‘strategy’ (local decision-making).
2. For a more detailed qualitative differentiation between strategies, see Pedersen (2011, 69–104).
3. The questionnaire also included a third section consisting of questions about the participants’ views and attitudes towards the subtitling they had experienced and translation in general. The purpose was to collect data that allowed us to contrast reception and perception data, but the space restrictions natural of an article do not allow us to include that discussion in this article.
4. Given the lack of descriptive studies on subtitling practices in Saudi Arabia, a small descriptive study was conducted by Alfaify (2020) to identify the most common strategies used. The study included five films selected on the basis of the following criteria: 1) the films featured a high concentration of cultural references; 2) the subtitles in these films were done by professionals and were easily available on DVD.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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