



مجلة وعي للعلوم الإنسانية

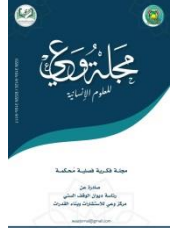
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العراقي

Machine Translation (MT) vs. Human Subtitling in the audiovisual translation of Iraqi media content

م.م حارث عبد الله محمود

Asst.lect. Harith Abdullah Mahmood

Harith.abd@uosamarra.edu.iq

<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5307-536X>

جامعة سامراء/كلية التربية/قسم اللغة الانكليزية

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Abstract

Though quickly achieved, machine translated Iraqi media subtitles are at times unable to detect dialectal nuance, cultural allusions or idiomatic usage. However, human subtitles are able to easily contextualize, registered and audience orientate subtitles. Particularly in politically and culturally sensitive Iraqi media contexts, human intervention is required in order to ensure that the subtitled material is accurate, readable and communicatively relevant.

Introduction

Nowadays, machine translation has become highly active and important in the research field (Afzaal, Imran, & Almusharraf, N, 2022), and this is also applying to audiovisual translation because artificial intelligence has provided scientific findings with a new opening. (de los Reyes Lozano, & Mejías-Climent, 2023). Audiovisual translation (AVT) have been widely studied in academic research, whether it may be subtitling or dubbing (Vaudequin-Engel, M.-S., 2023); and also AVT is well recognized because it is realized as a combination of verbal, visual and auditory aspect

This research compares the intersection between machine translation and human translation in audiovisual translation, focusing particularly on the challenges associated with translating the Iraqi dialect in audiovisual media from Arabic to English. Subtitling is one of the most important types of audiovisual translation because it converts spoken text into written text on the screen, making it easier for viewers to understand the content regardless of their language Petrilli and Zanoletti (2023). It is one of the most common types of audiovisual translation in the Arab world when the content broadcasts on channels such as MBC .The subtitling process is limited by the necessity to synchronize with visual and auditory components while preserving the original message's meaning and tone Ben Slamia F. (2019).

Due to the rapid growth of digital media and global streaming platforms, the demand for audiovisual translation has increased significantly. Therefore, subtitles for films and television series are among the most important means of

conveying meaning, making media content accessible to multilingual audiences. The rapid development of media and the pressing need for subtitles have led to the emergence of machine translation. The option to use machine translation in the audiovisual translation domain concerns not only costs and budgets but also time required for post-editing. Switching from the conventional human subtitling to the machine subtitling will not eliminate the need for the human-made subtitles in audiovisual translation. Although machine subtitling is a lot easier and less time consuming, the human-made subtitling is still considered the best solution for the product! each approach needs its own time to produce the best quality of the product. Audiovisual translation steams the machine subtitling vs. the human subtitling on the one-way road. The difference between them is the central question of the current approach to translation studies, particularly in the translation of more than one language or culture!

Iraqi audiovisual content is special in so far as it is presented in a variety of source languages, i.e., Arabic, Kurdish and English, with the frequent switching between them, and different regional varieties of the spoken Arabic, besides the heavy use of jokes and comic elements, cultural and colloquial references, and all that exceeds the capacities of the machine translation engines programmed to translate the language of Quran the formal one, the modern standard Arabic.

In terms of human translation, one of the main advantages it poses is that it creates a clear, deliberate translation; translators are capable of interpreting a context, adopting idiomatic expressions, and managing the translation constraints such as readability, and timing while still respecting the intention of

the communicative source text. However, it is also far more time consuming and expensive hence why media producers often turn to machine translation and then human editors.

2. Theoretical and Contextual Framework

It has been shown in various studies and research that human translation actually provides a more accurate cultural and contextual interpretations than MT when compared with MT. The interpreters manage to express the complexities of language in the source text into a target text, hence they translate the minor differences between linguistic contexts, cultural references and idiomatic expressions (Alawi & Abdulhaq, 2025).

However, the MT engine faces difficulty in all that, even though it is a little bit more advanced than what it used to be years ago. These are little issues which normally a professional human translator will instantly comprehend when he/she handles them on a daily basis. for example, when the source text contains the word “Masjid” in the source text, it refers to a mosque in the MT but when it comes to the target text which the translator is working on to generate, the target word is “mosque”.

3. Machine Translation in AVT

Recently, machine translation (MT) has seen a rapid development and a growing use in translating films and TV programs. Machine translation, particularly neural machine translation (NMT), is particularly attractive for use in movie and TV subtitling because of its primary advantage in speed and

scalability, i.e., real-time or near real-time translation of a large volume of content, which is convenient for global internet distribution Lapshinova-Koltunski (2025).

Some research has been conducted to investigate machine and human translations in order to compare between them. It was found that the linguistic style in machine translation was more formal and was nearer to academic language. Human translators, however, could produce translations that are more identical to spoken language and could be more contextual and pragmatic and this communicative function is also more appropriate for audiovisual translation.

In translation studies, Lapshinova-Koltunski et al. (2025) tested the viewer's ability to differentiate human translations from machine translations subtitles and found that human professional subtitlers could skillfully notice detailed style differences that could not be recognized by machine subtitling which implies that this qualitative aspect is preserved if the subtitling is done by human not machine subsystem.

Also, it has been observed that almost all machine translation needs a human review to be of somewhat acceptable quality. Recently, however, a hybrid approach has gained popularity among professional MT translators. Researchers have identified many problems associated with machine translation like unidiomatic language, misleading translations, wrong technical usages and so on. Human review could solve them or at least ameliorate them. This makes

the “fully automatic” deployment of an MT system in the subtitling workflow questionable.

4. Human Subtitling: Strengths and Professional Perspectives

Human translation may, however, combine to other factors; cultural competence of the translators, their linguistic prowess and consideration of the constraints of audiovisual timing being able to produce a justifiably a readable, culturally appropriate translation. The implication of this in Iraqi content is, however, a different ball game, since idiomatic expressions; local dialects and references to political and societal conditions become the very crux of conveying the same meaning. There are few studies that focused on Iraqi subtitling, still from Arabic media translation many scholars have found out how human translators outscore machine translation to manage the context and the expectations of the audience, especially when the content is culturally specific (idioms, comedy, political discourse. There are concerns expressed by professional translators over the quality of the work and the workflow shifts imposed by machine translation systems. They are afraid that machine translation will continue until translator’s function will be reduced to quality control as opposed to a creative language worker: this seems to have implications in AVT training and professional identity. Jorge Díaz Cintas & Aline Remael. (2021)

5. Hybrid and Collaborative Models

As a greater number of people researches a cold call for the forkers or the fountain of Deflux, the power of machining the way of the translation with the translation is preserved correctly and an advantage of the crew and sutured for the time being unless you say or more than the machine. And from this combination you found it is better and candies side by machine deliver a better translation culvert a sub silent under a doctor of the mountain. Ben Slamia . (2019).

On the other hand, considering the specificity of Arabic, the post-editing of machine translation outputs is seen as increasingly being a solution linking speed with quality: in fact, human translation makes a very small marginal for fluency and accuracy even when comparing professional human subtitling and AI subtitling in Arabic, reminding that human will always, in many ways, be needed to assure quality for audiovisual translation.

6. Implications for Iraqi Media Content

Below is a clear, academic-style, comparison of Machine Translation (MT) vs. Human Subtitling in the audio-visual translation of Iraqi media content, with specific concise samples and examples you can include in a paper, presentation, or thesis¹. Context: Iraqi Media & Audiovisual Translation

Iraqi media content often includes:

- Iraqi Arabic dialects (Baghdadi, Southern, Mosul)

- Code-switching (Arabic ↔ English)
- Cultural references (tribal expressions, religious phrases, political slogans)
- Emotion-heavy speech (news reports, protests, interviews)

These features pose challenges for machine translation, while human subtitlers can adapt meaning, tone, and context.

3. Machine translation is still weak in dialectic handling, however, in human subtitling it is strong. In terms of cultural references, is still often too literal in machine translation however in human subtitling they are typically well contextualized. Machine translations often completely ignore issues of timing and readability whereas good human subtitling is optimized for the work's particular audience. MT needs to improve its Emotional tone while hum sub keeps it flat. Idioms & metaphors are typically treated literally, or wrongly adapted, by MT whereas hum sub does a good job.

3. Sample

1: Iraqi News Interview

Source (Iraqi Arabic – Baghdadi dialect)

“الوضع بعده مو زين، والناس تعبانة من الوعود”.

Machine Translation (e.g., Google Translate) “The situation is still not good, and people are tired of promises.”

Human Subtitling :“The situation hasn’t improved, and people are exhausted by empty promises.”

Analysis

- MT is grammatically correct but simplistic
- Human subtitler:
- Adds natural collocation (“empty promises”)
- Reflects public frustration implied in Iraqi discourse

4. Sample 2: Political Commentary (Iraqi TV) Source

“هذا الكلام كله حجي فاضي” .

(Colloquial Iraqi expression)

Machine Translation: “All this talk is empty talk.”

Human Subtitling: “This is all meaningless rhetoric.”

Analysis

- MT translates word-for-word
- Human version:
- Uses formal political register
- Matches the tone of a TV analyst

5. Sample 3: Protest Footage “انريد وطن”

(Common protest chant in Iraq)

Machine Translation “We want a homeland!”

Human Subtitling “We demand a real homeland!”

Analysis

- MT misses the political depth
- Human subtitler:
- Adds implied meaning (corruption, failed governance)
- Aligns with international media discourse

4: Religious Reference in Media

Source

“إن شاء الله تنحل الأزمة قريب”.

Machine Translation “God willing, the crisis will be solved soon.”

Human Subtitling (depending on context) “Hopefully, the crisis will be resolved soon.”

Analysis

- MT keeps the religious phrase literally
- Human subtitler:
- Neutralizes religious reference for international audiences
- Maintains natural English style

7. Sample 5: Idiomatic Expression Source

“الشارع العراقي غاضب”.

Machine Translation “The Iraqi street is angry.”

Human Subtitling “Public anger is growing across Iraq.”

Analysis

- MT produces an unnatural metaphor
- Human subtitler:
- Converts idiom into acceptable English media language

8. Subtitling Constraints: Where MT Fails Most

Human subtitlers consider:

- Reading speed (max. 2 lines, ~37 characters per line)
- Synchronization with speech
- Condensation

Example: Source:

“المسؤولين ما دا يحسون بمعاناة المواطن.”

MT: “The officials do not feel the suffering of the citizen.”

Human Subtitle: “Officials are disconnected from people’s suffering.”

Conclusion

While machine translation (MT) may garner quicker results than human subtitling, the lack of expertise on culture and context may compromise the outcome of the targeted text, sacrificing contextual richness and stylistic naturalness in the process. Human subtitling brings cultural competence, and the ability to capture even the untranslatable in a film that machine translation fails to reproduce completely. Various hybrid approaches to translation (incorporating MT and human post-editing) have gained ground in AVT

operations as they lend themselves to a more efficient compromise of translation speed and quality. In the case of Iraq the use of human subtitling is a must in order to produce good quality audiovisual translation. Language used in the media in Iraq is various and does have cultural specificity, making it difficult for machine translation to cope.

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