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A Pragmatic Approach towards the Analysis of Original and Dubbed Cartoons: Insights for Teaching Languages

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ABSTRACT

Language Pragmatics has been in the limelight in recent years as an indispensable factor of Linguistics. Translation of Pragmatic elements of the language also plays an integral role within the domain of Foreign Language Learning and teaching. This qualitative research paper focuses on the effects of Vinay and Darbelnet's translation strategies on the pragmatic meaning of commands, and speech acts of order in a dubbed children's cartoon called 'Avatar': the Legend of Korra. A total of 15 speech acts were selected randomly to be analyzed based on their pragmatic meaning, and if/how it was changed by the translation strategies adopted by the translator. This paper concluded that the most frequently-used strategy from the selected samples was 'Literal Translation', and the most effective one was 'Equivalence'. Also, the study revealed that translation strategies affect the pragmatic meaning; however, it is different for each speech act as other elements of dubbing interfere with the pragmatic meaning in combination with the strategies. The results of the current research will help English Language instructors gain more awareness and insight concerning the pragmatic aspects of languages. Furthermore, curriculum designers may incorporate indirect discourse in their course planning.

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1. Introduction

Audiovisual translation (AVT) has become even more developed and has expanded due to the increase of globalization and popularity of global and foreign entertainment. Although AVT is considered one of the newest fields of translation, it expanded quickly. One of the major subgroups of AVT is devoicing/dubbing, which unlike subtitling, has not developed as much in the Arab world in comparison to other parts of the world like Latin America and Europe (Ziyada, 2017). Today people opt to watch content with subtitles; however, most children cannot, which is why the majority of their

shows are dubbed into their language. Researchers have begun to explore AVT even more due to the increase of people exploring foreign movies, TV shows and drama series (Black, 2022). While some focus on subtitling, others are focusing on dubbing like Fresco (2009) and Pavesi (2013). The field of dubbing is quite large with so many aspects to study one of them being pragmatics which is sometimes ignored and overshadowed by other linguistic aspects. Cuenca (2006) and Matamala (2009) in 'Interjections in Original and Dubbed Sitcoms in Catalan: A Comparison', both explored pragmatics in dubbing however their focus was interjection. There seems to be lack of research focusing on both dubbing and the pragmatic meaning of speech acts; therefore, this study was an attempt to analyse the pragmatic meaning of the speech acts of commands and orders in original cartoons of children (OC) and their dubbed version (DC) since cartoons are what is usually dubbed from English to Arabic in nowadays media and to understand the effects of translation strategies on pragmatic meaning.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pragmatics

According to Yule Pragmatics is the study of the invisible meaning, or how we recognize what is meant even if it is not actually written or said (Yule, 2016, p. 126). David Crystal (1985) describes pragmatics as language analysis from the user's viewpoint, in particular how they use language for social communication and how those choices affect communication participants (Noviyenti & Anwar, 2023). Similarly, pragmatic competence is understood as an understanding of the use of language in order to achieve goals of language exchange in a sociocultural context (Hashemi & Daneshfar, 2020). All definitions given share the point that pragmatics deals with implied meaning. Morris (1938) was the first to use Pragmatics to describe the main parts of semiotics, or the study of signs, their meaning and perception (Levinson, 1983, cited in Hashemi & Daneshfar, 2020). As pragmatics is also used to defend semiotics it will be helpful in studying AVT in general and dubbing in particular. Pragmatics takes into account the speaker, listener (Valdeón, 2023) and the context which is why it is a great approach to studying dubbing (Brandt, 2023). Cuenca's study concluded that mistranslations of interjection in dubbing are mostly the direct result of misunderstanding the pragmatic meaning of the source text (ST) (Cuenca, 2006). This further emphasizes the importance of understanding pragmatic in the process of dubbing.

2.2 Speech Act Theory

The speech act theory proposes that the generation or issuance of utterances is the essential units of communication. This issuance occurs during an execution of a speech act. The meaning of these essential units is considered the basis of mutual understanding between people (Assimakopoulos, 2025). The theory stresses that the utterances have a particular meaning to its user and listener other than its meaning according to the language. The theory divides the utterances into two types: constative and performative utterances (Hussain & Khan, 2024).

A constative utterance, in relation to the fact of true or false, is something which describes or denotes the situation. The performative utterances are the ones that explain absolutely nothing. The utterances in the sentences or in a portion of the sentence are usually regarded as having their own meaning. The linguistic act by a person's feelings, behaviours, emotions and perceptions are more of a principal unit here (Sakai, 2019). The theory according to Austin (1975) also divides the linguistic acts into three groups: Locutionary act, which is the act of saying something. It has a meaning and to

convey or express it creates an entirely understandable one. Illocutionary act is carried out as an act of saying something, or as an act of opposing something. There is a certain force to the illocutionary utterance. Those sounds, behaviors, thoughts, or emotions are well-versed. In illocutionary utterance, the speaker reveals an intention or others. Perlocutionary act, which generally provides a sense of profound impact on the public. The results may be in the form of perceptions, imaginations, emotions or feelings.

2.3 Dubbing

Baker and Saldanha (2019) believe that dubbing is one of two major ways of film translation, whereas the other is interlingual subtitling. According to Maluf (2003): "Dubbing, the replacing of the original dialogue or soundtrack by another, either in a different language or voice. Matamala's study (2009) concluded that dubbing is an artificial linguistic variation that can't be as spontaneous as original film language. In the Arab world, dubbing of feature films or television productions was slow in coming, despite a large number of business and strong index of analphabetism, calculated by the UNDP in 2002 at over 40 percent (Report 27), and which would benefit the dubbing over subtitling, at least theoretically. In no Arab nation dubbing international films has been mandated by the Government (Maluf, 2003). However, Maluf (2003) stated that when they started developing what were essentially state-owned or -controlled TV stations, audiences viewing foreign films or programming only became significant. Including translating children's literature, dubbing animated films has always been difficult due to the unique audience it caters to. Dore (2020) indicated that children do not understand complicated main themes, broad cultural references or too much. Therefore, translator should keep this in mind when dubbing for children.

Some researchers did explore the translation aspects of dubbed cartoons series, an example of that is El Mhassani (2008). He studied the use of domestication and foreignization in dubbing cultural references in children cartoons from English into Arabic. His study concluded that domestication was used to avoid vagueness or misunderstandings in the dubbed version. His study was detailed and informative however it was limited to translating cultural references and that translation strategies adopted to translate them. Similarly, Al Alami (2011) examined the Egyptian-specific cultural and linguistic aspects in the Arabic dubbed version of the Timon and Pumbaa cartoon film. She argued in her thesis that the source text was change greatly that the end result catered to a different audience. She clarified that the end result has more humour added and that children can't necessarily understand the context without the visuals and that the dubbed version seems to also target adults unlike the original. This shows how dubbing could affect the experiences of the viewers. In addition, she highlighted that cultural transplantation adopted meaning that some much semantic and pragmatic meaning was changed to fit an Arab Egyptian culture. This paper does not discuss the effects of the dubbing translation process on the secure text but like El Mhassani (2018) only focuses on cultural references. Accordingly, the following research questions are posed:

- RQ1. Is the speech act of commands and orders concurrent in the cartoon?
- RQ2. What is the pragmatic meaning of the speech acts selected?
- RQ3. Was the full pragmatic meaning of the OC preserved in the DC?
- RQ4. Is the use of certain translation strategies the reason for the change of pragmatic meaning?

3. Methodology

The researchers have opted to use a qualitative design in order to reach the research objective and answer the research question. As a qualitative design will require deep analyses of the data collected and the researcher becomes one of the tools used in this research allowing them to explore the research objectives. Therefore, the researchers adopted an interpretive approach which falls under the umbrella of a qualitative research designs and falls under subjectivist ontology, which is time-consuming when it comes to data collection and analysis (Snape & Spenscer, 2003).

3.1 Participants and Setting

A non-probability sampling type was adopted, which is convenience sampling to select the needed speech acts and to reduce time on collecting samples. It is important to note that non-probability sampling is a sampling technique in which certain units of the population have zero selection chances or the probability of selection cannot be determined accurately (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

3.2 Research Procedure

The data is collected from the American animated television series Legend of Korra which was produced by Nickelodeon and first aired on the TV channel of the same name in 2012 in its original language (English) and the Arabic dubbed version which aired on MBC3 TV channel in 2013.

After the samples are selected the translation technique based on Vinay and Darbelnet (1958) translation strategies, followed by analysis of the speech act and its pragmatic meaning according to the speech act theory, first in the OC then in the DC, which in turn allows the researcher to see how the translation strategies effected the pragmatics if there is any change in the pragmatic meaning.

4. Data Analysis

In this section, the results of this research are presented with deep analysis. Each table includes one sample with an analysis of the pragmatic meaning of the OC and DC as well as identifying the translation strategy used and discussing its effect on the pragmatic meaning.

Table 1

Scene: Korra is going for a walk with her pet polar bear Naga

OC	DC	Translation Strategy Used
Korra: Naga go, go, that a girl, go, go, go.	كوررا: ناجا هيا، هيا، هيا بنا، هيا، هيا.	Literal Translation and Modulation for the underlined words

The phrase that girl implies that Naga is a female polar bear and that Korra is encouraging Naga to go faster. In this version the implied meaning is to go faster. The use of Modulation in Table 1 is due to lip syncing purposes as the phrase أحسنت يا فتاة (equivalence) is more appropriate here; however, it would have been default to lip sync because it would sound longer than the original. In addition, the

use of equivalence would have ruined the fluency of the speech. Therefore, the implied meanings of gender and encouragement were sacrificed and lost.

Table 2

Scene: Tenzin and his family arriving and the grandmother holding her grandchild by taking him from his father's shoulders.

OC	DC	Translation Strategy Used
Grandchild: Unhand me strange women.	الحفيد: أتركني ايدها الغريبة.	Literal translation

This implies that this the first memory the grandchild has of meeting his grandmother as well as adding comedic effects since it was said in an awkward manner by a child. While the translation gives the same implied meaning of first memory the comedic effect is no longer there as this seem to be a normal phrase to be said by a child in the Arabic language. Even though the full comedic effect is not there in the Arabic translation, the voice actor and scene did deliver some of it. The use of literal translation was able to keep most of the pragmatic meaning.

Table 3

Scene: Tenzin's wife (Pema) is getting down from the sky bison (a fictional animal that can fly) which was their means of travel and her husband is lending her a hand after he rushed to help get down.

OC	DC	Translation Strategy Used
Pema: stop doting on me. I'm not helpless, I'm just pregnant.	بيمى: توقف عن فعل هذا انا لست مريضة، أنا فقط حامل.	Modulation

In Table 3, the word doting shows that this is not the first time that Pema feels that her husband is overly helping her. This also shows that she is capable of doing things on her own despite being pregnant and she doesn't want to burden her husband. Also, the tone of the voice actor while saying "stop doting on me. I'm not helpless" sounded like scolding but her tone changed when saying "I'm just pregnant" changed to a soft loving sound implying her love for her unborn child. Here the implied meaning of Pema not wanting to burden her husband is apparent but by using *لست مريضة* another meaning is added which is that being pregnant might be considered a medical case since it is compared to being sick. The use of Modulation did deliver the main pragmatic meaning of not needing help and not wanting to burden the husband but in the DC and there is an added meaning (the medical case) and a missing one which is the love for the unborn baby which was because the tone of voice actor in the OC showed by changing their tone while the Arabic voice actor did not therefore that meaning was lost.

Table 4

Scene: Korra is eating fish with a homeless man who she got from fishing in the park's lake in the city then they get chased by a police officer.

OC	DC	Translation Strategy Used
Police officer: Hey you stop you can't fish here!	الشرطي: يا أنت توقف لا يمكنك الصيد هنا!	Calque

The police officer is trying to stop them which means that it was illegal to fish there. Here it is implied that the police officer was only talking to Korra and ignoring the homeless man which meant he assumed that she was the one that was illegally fishing. Although Calque is the right choice here the translation still gave an extra meaning which changed how the events are revised. In the OC "hey you" were ambiguous so it could be used to refer to either Korra, the homeless man or both but in the DC the use of female pronoun and affix meant that the police officer was only talking to Korra rather than both. This could have been avoided if in translation plural pronoun and affixes were used.

Table 5

Scene: After Korra was arrested by the police for an incident on the street—in which she was trying to help a shopkeeper who was being threatened by gang members but caused a lot of damage by helping—Tenzin is trying to convince the police chief to let Korra go.

OC	DC	Translation Strategy Used
police chief: (sigh) fine, get her out of my city.	رئيسة الشرطة: (تنهد) حسناً اخرجها من مدينتي حالياً.	Literal translation

The tone of the voice actor implies that the police chief agreed reluctantly to let Korra go even though she does not want to. The tone of the voice actor implies that the police agreed to let Korra go to just end the situation. The translation strategy used did not affect the pragmatic meaning but the tone of the voice actor gave different impressions on how they felt affecting the pragmatic meaning.

Table 6

Scene: Korra is playing in a match as a substitute player so her friends do not forfeit however one of them is not too keen on the idea of having Korra in the match since it is her first and it is an important match for them.

OC	DC	Translation Strategy Used
Mako: Don't do anything fancy or aggressive, in fact don't do anything just try not to get knocked of the ring.	ماكو: لا تفعل أي شيء مبالغاً أو عنيف أعني لا تفعل شيء فقط حاولي ألا تسقطي من الحلبة	Literal Translation and Transposition for the underlined words.

Mako using the phrase in fact implies that he understands Korra's personality and that's why he corrected himself and told her to not do anything except avoided getting knocked out. The use of

the word أعني tells the audience that Mako is clarifying himself to Korra this also tells the audience that Mako understands Korra's personality. The use of Transposition is what changed the pragmatic meaning however the implied meaning of Mako knowing Korra's personality.

Table 7

Scene: Before starting dinner, Pema asks where Korra is then Tenzin tells her how he and Korra had a fight and how difficult it is to deal with her. Then he glanced at both of his daughters while talking to them.

OC	DC	Translation Strategy Used
Tenzin: You must promise me your teenage years won't be like this. The oldest daughter: I will make no such promises	تينزين: عدني ان سنوات مراهقتك لن تكون هكذا ابنته الكبرى: لا يمكنني ان أعد بهذا	Literal translation

Tenzin is worried about how his own daughters will act when they become teenagers. The same pragmatic meaning as the OC is kept however the translation implies that he's only talking to his oldest daughter. The use of Literal translation kept the main pragmatic meaning which is Tenzin being worried about his daughters' teenage years however the use of عدني implies he is only talking to his oldest daughter rather than both although the glances in the scene tells the audience that he is talking to both daughters. It seems that the translator used عدني because the oldest daughter replied to her father but the younger did not but using the same strategy the translator could have opted to using عداني which would have included both daughters.

Table 8

Scene: Before starting dinner, Pema asks where Korra is then Tenzin tells her how he and Korra had a fight and how difficult it is to deal with her. Then he glanced at both of his daughters while talking to them.

OC	DC	Translation Strategy Used
Lin: I have every nook and cranny covered, now leave me alone and let me do my job.	لين: انا احمي البوابات والسطح وكل المداخل. المؤدية للحلبة ولان اتركني لأداء عملي.	Literal translation

The tone that Lin is using and the context shows that she is annoyed with Tenzin. The tone and the context of the translation kept the same pragmatic meaning as the OC. Using Literal translation here helped with the lip syncing process as the words sequence of the overall conversation in the scene has been changed in the DC. It allowed for the pragmatic meaning to be fully delivered.

Table 9

Scene: Bolin and Korra and having dinner at a restaurant when they spot another team. The other team approaches them headed by their leader whom is known for his bad personality. So Bolin tells Korra not to mess with him.

OC	DC	Translation Strategy Used
Bolin: Now don't mess with this guy he's a nasty dude.	بولين: لا تعبثي مع هذا الفتى أنه سيئ	Literal translation

Within the context this implies that Bolin knows that the other team leader is coming to antagonize them and that Korra's strong personality might fight him. It also shows Bolin's dislike for him. The pragmatic meaning of the OC is kept the same. The use of Literal translation helped to deliver the pragmatic meaning correctly.

Table 10

Scene: During a match Mako accidentally hit Bolin. It is important to note that before this match they were arguing.

OC	DC	Translation Strategy Used
Hey watch it	أنت احتس	Calque

The tone and context showcases Bolin frustration and anger towards his brother. The tone and the translation did a great job at keeping the same pragmatic meaning as the OC. The Calque was a good choice for this speech act as it kept the pragmatic meaning but Literal Translation would have done the same. It seems translator selected Calque for lip syncing purposes.

Table 11

Scene: During a match in which all of Korra's team member are at odds with each, Korra was attacking a member of the other team roughly out of frustration, so the referee stopped the game.

OC	DC	Translation Strategy Used
Referee: Unnecessary roughness. Move back one zone!	الحكم: عنف مبالغ فيه، تراجع للوراء!	Literal translation

There is no pragmatic meaning beyond the semantic meaning. There is no pragmatic meaning beyond the semantic meaning. The meaning delivered in the DC as is in the OC. It is good to note that the phrase (one zone) was omitted in the transition as the visual scene was enough for the audience to understand.

Table 12

Scene: Mako and Korra are looking for the kidnapped Bolin. Korra and Mako are confronting a protester who is affiliated with the group that kidnapped Bolin.

OC	DC	Translation Strategy Used
Korra: Shut your yapping and listen up	كورا: أغلق فمك وأستمع الي	Equivalence

The tone and the setting present Korra as threatening. The use of the word yapping also implies that Korra doesn't care about the protester's beliefs and is against them. The tone and the setting in this version also present Korra as threatening. The translation also kept the implied meaning of Korra not agreeing with the protester. Equivalence here allowed for the pragmatic meaning to be kept while making big changes to the OC speech.

Table 13

Scene: Korra, Mako and Bolin made an escape for the villains. As the villains were about to chase after them they were stopped by their leader.

OC	DC	Translation Strategy Used
Villain leader: Let her go, she's the perfect messenger to tell the city know my power.	قائد الأشرار: دعوها تذهب. انها أفضل وسيلة لتعرف المدينة مدى قوتي.	Literal translation

The tone used within this context shows his calmness and his confidence. The use of the tone also preserved the pragmatic meaning of the OC. Literal translation kept the meaning in the DC as in the OC.

Table 14

Scene: Korra is heading to face the main villain of the series. Tenzin just arrived in hopes of trying to stop her.

OC	DC	Translation Strategy Used
Korra: Don't try and stop me and don't follow me.	كورا: لا تحاول منعي ولا تأتي خلفي.	Literal translation

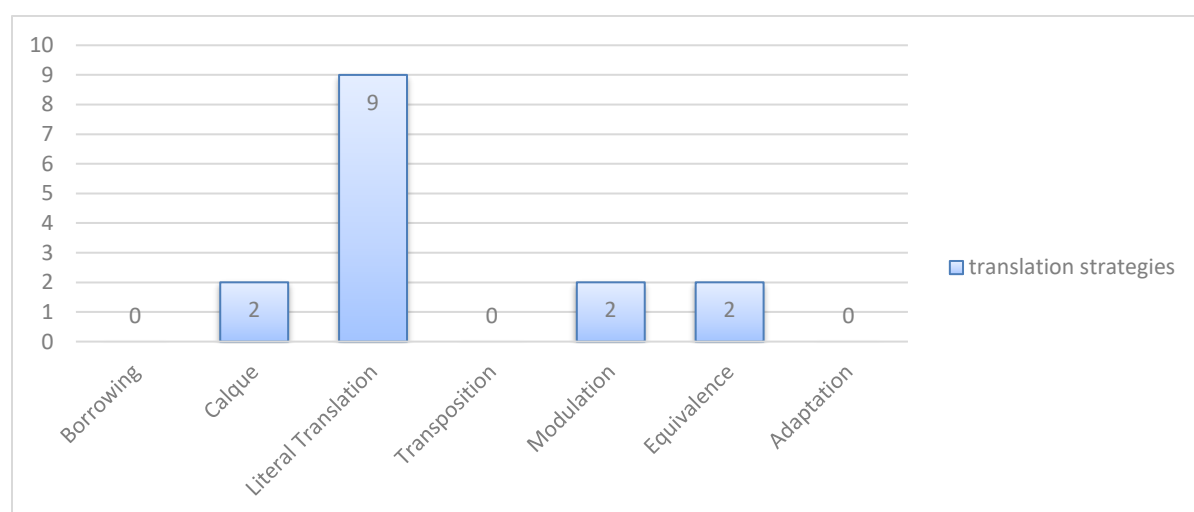
In the tone the audience can feel Korra's determination to prove to herself and others that she is not afraid. Like the in the OC Korra's determination can be felt in the DC due to the voice tone. Literal translation kept the meaning in the DC as in the OC.

Table 15

Scene: Tenzin and Korra are arguing about why Korra came to the city and she mentioned that Katara (Tenzin's mother) agreed with her.

OC	DC	Translation Strategy Used
Tenzin: Don't bring my mother into this.	تينزين: لا تقحمي أمي في هذا	Equivalence

Here Tenzin's anger is very visible and that implies that he doesn't want to be against his mother's opinions, as he thinks highly of her wisdom. The anger is also implied and for the same reasons as the OC. The use of equivalence was great way to deliver the meaning fully.

**Figure 1** The Used Strategies

The figure shows how many times each translation strategy was used in the samples analyzed, the highest being Literal Translation and lowest borrowing, Transposition, and Adaptation.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The results show that in fact the speech act of commands and orders is occurrent in the selected cartoon (Avatar: The Legend of Korra). The identified translation strategies in each sample did affect the pragmatic meaning to some degree; however, each case was different depending on other factors like the pronouns selected for example in tables 4 and 7 in which the translation strategies had the potential to deliver the same pragmatic meaning as the OC but due to of the pronouns selected by the translator it was not. In other cases, the reason the pragmatic meaning changed was due to the voice actors' performance example of that are tables 5 and 3. It is important to note that the process of lip syncing might have also played part in the reason why some translation strategies and translation choices were made whoever this cannot be clarified without a statement for the dubbing company. Overall, it seems that the use of literal translation is more frequent and delivers the main intended meaning but the use of equivalence produced the best outcome (Fägerman, 2022).

The results of the current research is to shed light on the field of Language Teaching and TESOL, in particular. Language Pragmatics and Pragmatic competence have recently gained a great deal of attention. As stated by McCombie and Al-Masaeed (2025) 'Many teachers are well poised to benefit from such resources, but many are less prepared and may need a thorough grounding in the principles of instructional pragmatics.' The outcome of the study will probably raise more awareness in English language instructors and curriculum designers to pay closer attention to indirect meaning and pragmatic aspects of the language in their approaches, methods and classroom techniques. Yang (2024) accentuates that language instructors need to be professionally prepared in the field in order to efficiently deliver pragmatic instruction, such as good appreciation of pragmatics, enhanced awareness in cross-cultural pragmatics, skilful mastery of instructional techniques and digital tools, to name a few. Thus, the results of this paper help them recognize the integral importance of pragmatics and indirect meaning.

Although the main theme of this research is translation, there is a direct liaison between translation and language teaching. While translating sentences, the competence and input linguistic experts or language students gained in teaching and learning procedure, are illustrated in their performance while translation texts (Zou & Guo, 2024); that is, if pragmatics is not incorporated by English Instructors, prospective translators will not be able to gain insights into the indirect meaning and pragmatic aspects of the languages while translating texts (Liu, et al, 2022).

Given that pragmatics is deeply rooted in the culture, different results might be gained if the same methodology is implemented in a different cultural and linguistic context. Besides, the researchers did not manage to have the participation of the English-major university students due to some limitations encountered. Prospective research in the same area may target TEFL or Translation students in order to assess their pragmatic competence.

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