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## Between Sarcasm and Subtitles: The Mutability of Iraqi Satire in English Translation

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the auto-generated translation of Arabic satirical content, specifically from Iraqi Instagram and YouTube creators Amer Al-Jazie and Ahmed Albasheer, into English for global audiences. Focusing on audiovisual satire that critiques Iraqi political and social life, it explores the challenges of rendering multimodal, performative humor across languages and platforms.

The study illustrates how meaning in social media satire is not only verbal but distributed across gesture, tone, editing, and visual elements. It presents two case studies: one featuring a satirical Instagram reel by Amer Al-Jazie critiquing nationalistic propaganda around women's attire, and the other from Albasheer's YouTube show "Nathala" highlighting translation failures in subtitled Iraqi dialect.

Through critical multimodal analysis, the paper shows how literal or automated translations often flatten humor, distort political critique, or misrepresent key cultural references. These examples demonstrate the limitations of AI-based translation systems and emphasize the translator's evolving role as a cultural mediator. The paper concludes that in digital contexts, translation must move beyond equivalence toward curatorial, context-sensitive strategies that preserve the political and ideological force of satire.

**Keywords:** Iraqi satire, Multimodal translation, AI subtitling, Digital discourse, Humor, Arabic–English translation.

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## 1. Introduction

In an era marked by the digital saturation of public discourse, translation is no longer restricted to static, textual products. It increasingly occurs across platforms like Instagram and YouTube among others, where audiovisual and performative content dominate. These platforms have emerged as powerful spaces for social and political commentary, particularly in regions where traditional media may be constrained or censored. This paper explores how Arabic satire, particularly from Iraqi social media creators such as Amer Al-Jazie and Ahmed Albasheer, is transcribed and translated—often through automatic captioning features integrated with the social media apps—into English for wider audiences.

Satirical content presents a unique challenge for translation due to its reliance on cultural references, rhetorical irony, regional dialects, and performance-based delivery. These elements, when rendered through machine-generated translations, are frequently flattened or misinterpreted. This paper focuses on how meaning, humor, and political critique are negotiated in such translations, and what is lost, reshaped, or unintentionally censored in the process. The visibility and impact of Iraqi satire beyond its local context depend on how well translation captures the multimodal character of these performances.

Using detailed case studies, the paper examines the limitations of automatic translation tools in rendering culturally embedded sarcasm, idiomatic expressions, and performative nuances. It interrogates how subtitling fails to preserve the layered meaning of politically charged humor, and how this reflects broader issues of modality, mutability, and mobility in translation. Ultimately, the paper argues that satire translation is not merely a linguistic task but a deeply cultural and ideological negotiation—one that automated tools alone are unequipped to manage.

## 2. Theoretical Background

In the age of technology and AI, linguistic content is no longer in text mode; it is an interplay between multiple ones such as image, sound, video, interface in addition to text as Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) describe it. When operating in multimodal spaces like social media, translation becomes a layered act which requires the translator to interpret not just the verbal message, but also its visual and auditory context. The translator's task extends beyond interlingual transfer and the translator must face farther questions like for whom is s/he going to translate and what tools or applications to use. This shift calls for an expanded competence, encompassing audiovisual literacy and cultural interpretation.

Cronin (2013) and Pérez-González (2014) emphasize that digital platforms alter the temporality and fluidity of translation. Content is short-lived, fast-moving, and context-sensitive. The translator becomes less of an invisible conduit and more of a visible mediator or curator. Machine-generated captions and subtitling tools add complexity: while they enable rapid circulation, they often miss nuance, misrepresent colloquial dialects, or render culturally inappropriate substitutions.

A more important question to be asked is not only for whom to translate but by whom the translation is done! How international daily content is adapted to local arenas and who adapt it? As Cronin (2013) notes, the advent of digital media has introduced novel textual forms, temporal frameworks, and production methodologies, necessitating a redefinition of translation practices. In digital environments, translation assumes a transient and frequently collaborative nature. Additionally, the advent of machine translation and AI-assisted subtitling tools introduces an additional layer of variability. While these technologies expedite the dissemination of content, they also engender epistemic tensions: Who exercises control over the translation? What elements are lost or distorted in automated processes? How are

nance, tone, and humor negotiated in Arabic, a language characterized by diglossia and regional variation?

The dissemination of ideas across spaces and minds, facilitated by translation, has intensified. In digital contexts, this mobility is further enhanced, allowing content to traverse boundaries more swiftly and reach wider audiences than previously possible. The concept of mobility (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990) becomes central in this context. When Iraqi satire is translated and viewed by international audiences, it gains transnational visibility. However, that visibility is filtered and reshaped—sometimes unintentionally censored—by the translation process itself. Translation thus operates not only as a tool of access but as a gatekeeping mechanism.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, multimodal discourse analysis approach to examine the translation of Iraqi satirical content from Arabic into English on digital platforms. Two case studies were selected: one featuring an Instagram reel by Amer Al-Jazie, and another from a YouTube episode of Ahmed Albasheer’s program “Nathala (Chaotic).” These creators were chosen for their public popularity, cultural relevance, and the distinct ways they use humor to critique Iraqi social and political structures.

The videos analyzed were publicly accessible and selected based on their thematic focus on political critique and their use of colloquial Iraqi Arabic. The researcher transcribed the Arabic speech manually in the first case study due to the failure of Instagram auto-captioning tools.

The analysis was guided by key principles from multimodal discourse analysis, particularly the frameworks established by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), focusing on how meaning is constructed through the integration of visual, auditory, and linguistic modes. The study also draws on translation theories from Cronin (2013)



Trump and he is wondering about this woman as apparently no Iraqi have any idea about who is she. The original poem was added as a sound to the reel. The reel mimics the tone of nationalist propaganda and highlights the absurdity of attributing geopolitical significance to clothing choices. It also mocks the exaggeration in the election campaign as if U.S is afraid of this candidate where the truth is that she is not even popular in Iraq.

Examining this reel reveal the complex nature of translating humor and critique across linguistic and cultural boundaries. This video, rich in colloquial language, performative gestures, and audiovisual layering, embody the hybrid modality that defines much of today's digital content. In this context, translation is not merely a textual task; it becomes a multimodal reconstruction of tone, irony, and cultural resonance.

The shift from Arabic into English often entails a loss of rhetorical density. Iraqi Arabic humor relies heavily on wordplay, repetition, exaggerated performance, and intertextual references to local politics — elements that resist direct translation. Subtitles, particularly when constrained by platform tools or auto-generated systems, struggle to capture this layered meaning. As it is clear in this reel, literal translation could render some of the meaning, but auto-generated subtitles failed to render all the elements of the reel as it contained a text, gestures, and an audio.

In some cases, no matter what is the language pair is, users tend to read captions written along the reel to understand the message of the post, the problem here is that such types of content cannot be attached to a detailed captions as it will ruin the work; cartoons are supposed to be understood without any or little explanation.

Because Instagram failed to subtitle the idea of the cartoon with all its elements, the researcher resorted to another transcribing tool, and this was the result:

**Transcript (Iraqi Arabic):**

"هاي المرشحة... أمريكا خايفة منها، لأن لابسة عباية!

يااااا، شنو هالعقلية!

أمريكا ما تعرف تنام، لأن لابسة چادر؟

أبويا، أمريكا أسقطت دول، ما راح ترتبك من چادرك".

**English Translation:**

"This candidate? The U.S. is terrified of her because she's wearing an 'abāya!

Seriously? What kind of mindset is this?

You're telling me the U.S. can't sleep at night... because she's wearing a headscarf?

Bro, the U.S. has toppled entire countries — they're not going to panic over your cloak."

The transcription goes very far away from the meaning of the cartoon; it was never meant to defend U.S or glorify its power nor to underestimate the importance of the traditional clothes – abaya as the transcription suggests rather than criticizing the inappropriate election campaign and the exaggerating praise for the candidate.

For cultural accuracy, the transcription used the word چادر (Chaader: a cloth used in Iran) instead of Abaya which is the traditional Iraqi woman cloth. The same goes for consistency as the transcription and translation used عباية و چادر or Abaya, headscarf and cloak to refer to Abaya, where each one of them is used in a different context/ country.

This mutability reflects both a linguistic limitation and a broader epistemic challenge. As Cronin (2013) and Pérez-González (2014) note, the shift from stable, print-based textuality to ephemeral, screen-based communication has fundamentally altered the logic of translation. Meaning is no longer tied to fixed textual forms but to dynamic,

context-dependent performances. The translator's role in such spaces becomes improvisational — less a faithful reproducer of content and more a curator of affect, humor, and cultural nuance.

Thus, when an Iraqi critique of governance, for example, is AI auto-subtitled into English, it becomes part of a global discourse. However, this mobility is uneven: while it offers visibility into local communities, it also flattens meaning or shift interpretive power to external audiences unfamiliar with that local context, especially if it was transcribed based on a preset or biased agenda.

#### 4.2. Ahmed Albasheer YouTube video

Ahmed Albasheer is an Iraqi satirist and television host, best known for his politically charged satirical program Albasheer Show. Drawing inspiration from global figures in political satire such as Jon Stewart and Bassem Youssef, Albasheer uses humor and irony to critique corruption and the failures of governance in Iraq although seen as biased by many.



Figure 2: Screenshot from Ahmed Albasheer YouTube video Ahmed Albasheer's episode named "Demands" which presents the requests of certain citizens directed towards media personnel, urging them to address the hardships inflicted by politicians, religious leaders, and others.

In one of his YouTube series titled "Nathala (Chaotic)," an episode named "Demands" presents the requests of citizens directed towards media personnel,

urging them to address the hardships inflicted by politicians, religious leaders, among others. Concurrently, these citizens request that not all individuals be criticized, advocating for the exclusion of certain figures from such critique. The episode seeks to underscore the notion that some citizens may remain dissatisfied regardless of the actions taken by media representatives, and that some individuals may lack clarity regarding their own desires from the outset.

When utilizing YouTube's features for auto-generating Arabic subtitles followed by auto-translation into English, errors specific to cultural and contextual nuances were identified as shown below:

- **يسكننا** is transcribed into **يسكنه** and translated into is being housed while the word means being assassinated in colloquial Iraqi dialect
- **شيوخ العشائر** is transcribed into **شيوخ العش** but translated correctly into Sheikh of the clan.
- **رجال الدين** was translated into clerics meaning a priest which limits the religious diversity that exists in Iraq.
- **فمنست انت** is transcribed into **في من انت** and translated into who are you while he was referring to someone believing in feminism which is used in Iraq to refer to someone who defends women's rights blindly.
- **لا تجيبهم بالطاري** was transcribed correctly while translated as Bring batteries which is incorrect, the appropriate translation should be something close to: do not talk badly about them.
- **ميخالف** was transcribed correctly while translated into They do not disagree which is incorrect, the appropriate translation should be: It is okay or it does not matter.
- **بنج** was translated literally as anesthesia while it means a mouthpiece.
- **واكع بطلابه** is translated into he is addicted to his students while it means he is facing serious problems.

## 5. Discussion

The case studies demonstrate how the act of translation—particularly through automatic subtitling tools—can distort, oversimplify, or even misrepresent culturally embedded satire. In Amer Al-Jazie's Instagram reel, the sarcasm directed at inflated nationalistic rhetoric around a female candidate's abaya was largely lost in automated subtitles. Terms like "abaya," "چادر" are reduced or flattened when translated literally or inconsistently. The video's humor relies on layered modality—visual caricature, audio layering of a popular poem, and ironic tone—all of which demand sensitive cultural translation.

In Ahmed Albasheer's YouTube episode from "Nathala (Chaotic)," automated subtitles fail to interpret Iraqi dialect. Phrases like "يصكنا" (meaning assassinate) are rendered as "is being housed." Cultural idioms like "لا تجيبهم بالطاري" are misrepresented as irrelevant phrases like "bring batteries." These errors result not just from weak language recognition, but from a lack of cultural awareness in machine systems.

Both examples show the limits of AI in capturing layered social critique and demonstrate how the translator must adopt the role of an active cultural negotiator. Furthermore, the failure to accurately translate such content can dilute or misrepresent political intent—undermining the satire's purpose.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the translation of Iraqi satirical content across platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, with a focus on how humor, performance, and ideology are encoded and negotiated in English translation. Through the analysis of Amer Al-Jazie's cartoon reel and Ahmed Albasheer's political satire video, it has shown that translation in digital contexts is highly multimodal, transient, and politically charged.

Translation in these cases becomes a form of cultural authorship. It requires not only fluency in language but literacy in context, ideology, and performance. The translator's role extends beyond the mere transfer of meaning; it involves interpreting tone, reconstructing social critique, and ethically engaging with complex cultural materials.

The findings highlight the persistent limitations of automated subtitling tools, which frequently misrepresent colloquial Iraqi Arabic, reduce rhetorical impact, or omit key ideological cues. These failures point to the pressing need for human-led, context-sensitive translation practices in online spaces, particularly when dealing with politically and culturally rich satire.

Ultimately, this study contributes to ongoing discussions about the future of translation in digital environments. As multimodal content continues to shape how political narratives and humor circulate globally, translators must act not only as linguistic intermediaries but also as cultural gatekeepers. Their ability to preserve nuance, irony, and resistance in translation will remain central to ensuring that diverse voices and local critiques are heard and understood across linguistic and national boundaries.

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