

# Subtitling Arabic humour into English: the case of Arabic stand-up comedies on Netflix

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## Abstract

*This article examines how humour in Arabic stand-up comedies is translated into English in an audio-visual context. The study uses a case study of Arabic stand-up comedies streamed on Netflix, including Live from Beirut by Adel Karam and Comedians of the World/ Middle East. The shows which are subtitled into English involve a variety of Arab comedians speaking different dialects, including the Levant dialect (Lebanese, Jordanian, and Palestinian) and Gulf dialects, particularly the Saudi dialect. While several studies were conducted to examine the translation of English humour into Arabic, very few explore the translation of Arabic humour into English, especially in the realm of audio-visual translation. Arabic and English are two different languages reflecting different norms and cultures and, therefore, many linguistic and cultural challenges are expected to arise in the process of translation between them. The study draws on Pederson's (2005) strategies for translating cultural references and Díaz-Pérez's (2013) strategies for translating wordplay and puns. The study identifies two types of humour used in the Arabic stand-up comedies, namely language-restricted jokes (wordplay, puns, language variation, and taboo language) and culture-restricted jokes which require knowledge about the concept or character being referred to. Several translation strategies were used by Netflix subtitlers to render these types of jokes into English, including paraphrasing, generalizing, specification, substitution, and omission.*

*Keywords: translating jokes, stand-up comedy, audio-visual translation, subtitling, types of humour.*

## **1. Introduction**

Humour and culture are intertwined; humour is the product of culture. It mirrors people's norms, attitudes, and perceptions of life. Therefore, what is considered funny in one culture might not be so in another. Some types of humour are pure linguistic, such as puns and wordplay. They are created based on the subtle features and peculiarities of each language. Thus, understanding the joke in the source language (SL) and being able to transfer its meaning and humorous effect into other languages is rather difficult, especially when the language pair involved are vastly different as the case in Arabic and English.

Tackling humour in audiovisual translation (AVT), particularly subtitling, creates another challenge because subtitling is governed by temporal and spatial constraints. According to Luyken et al. (1991, pp. 43-44), the viewers' average reading speed is "generally considered to be between 150 and 180 words per minute," which means 2.5 to 3 words per second. The space constraint, on the other hand, refers to "the limit of the number of characters that can be fitted into a line of subtitling, normally between 36 and 40 these days including punctuation marks and blank spaces, and a normal maximum of two lines" (Pedersen, 2011, p. 19). Therefore, providing written explanations or extra information which might help the receiver decode cultural and linguistic aspects in the SL is not always attainable.

Nowadays, it is common for streaming services, such as Netflix, in addition to satellite channels, to air audiovisual materials subtitled in many languages including Arabic. However, subtitling from Arabic into English is not as common (Al-Adwan & Thawabteh, 2021). Due to the scarcity of materials subtitled from Arabic into English, most studies in the audiovisual field are focused on investigating subtitling between European languages or from English into Arabic. Little research has been conducted to explore the phenomenon of subtitling humour from Arabic to English let alone exploring humour in Arabic stand-up comedies. Arabic stand-up comedies, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, have not been covered yet in the audiovisual field.

The present study investigates types of jokes found in Arabic stand-up comedies and the strategies used by subtitlers to translate them into English. Two Netflix stand-up comedy shows are included in the study: *Live from Beirut* by Adel Karam and *Comedians of the World/ Middle East* which features four performers: Moayad Al-Nefaie and Ibraheem Al-Khairallah from Saudi Arabia, Adi Khalefa from Palestine and Rawsan Hallak from Jordan. The study also aims to identify the subtitling strategies used by Netflix subtitlers to convey these jokes into English and to uncover whether these strategies were effective to overcome the linguistic and cultural problems of subtitling humour.

It is worth mentioning that the current study focuses only on the verbal aspects of audiovisual translation. In other words, non-verbal features of jokes, such as voice quality, intonation, pauses, facial expressions, body language, and gestures will not be discussed.

## **2. Review of related work**

The following sections provide an overview about subtitling in relation to the rise of video streaming services, Arabic-English subtitling problems, main theories of humour, types of jokes used in stand-up comedies, and strategies of translating humour in audiovisual contexts.

### **2.1. Subtitling and video streaming services**

Streaming services, such as Netflix, have become popular in the last decade. A wide variety of material have become just a click away from millions of people across the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has also boosted business of streaming services with a 26% increase in online

video subscribers in 2020 as people, who could not go outside due to lockdowns, subscribed to streaming services looking for indoor entertainment (Adgate, 2021).

Netflix is one of the most popular streaming services which was founded in 1997 in the United States as an online movie rental/sale service. Ten years later, it began its online video transmission with subscribers being able to watch shows instantly on their electronic devices. Nowadays, Netflix stands as the most widely used streaming service with the best original content (De Silva, 2021). According to De Silva (2021), the broad selection of content, good original programming, and appealing content for a variety of audiences, are among the top reasons for subscribing to Netflix.

As the competition began to rise among streaming services, Netflix began to invest billions of dollars into creating content in local languages in several different foreign countries to maximize its global reach and prove that being global means producing content in languages other than English (De Silva, 2021). The boom of new viewers accompanied by the surge in the quality of content probably explain why Netflix started to produce local shows, such as *Comedians of the World*, with a special part dedicated for Middle Eastern stand-up comedies. It is the first time this new genre in the Middle East has received recognition by a global platform.

This rapid growth of video streaming services goes hand in hand with AVT, especially subtitling. Subtitles allow more people from different parts of the world to access and enjoy the content created by these online platforms. People, thanks to subtitles, have the option to choose the language they speak when they watch their favourite shows and movies. Therefore, it is almost impossible for an online streaming service to compete and stand out without offering subtitles in a wide range of languages.

Nevertheless, the efforts invested in training and qualifying subtitlers in the Arab world fall short of the demand (Al-Adwan & Al-Jabri, 2023). AVT is vastly viewed as a dependent discipline in many universities where it is usually offered as an elective course under the undergraduate or postgraduate translation programs (Al-Adwan & Al-Jabri, 2023). Even in Arab academia, AVT does not receive the required attention. Gamal (2009, p. 7) argues that “AVT is not examined at Arab academia and its research is not even examined at translation conferences”. Such shortage in the academic and professional arenas takes its toll on the subtitling industry; subtitlers may not be fully prepared on how to employ adequate tools and strategies to tackle challenges and problems expected to arise in the process of subtitling. The following section attempts to illustrate the problems and challenges subtitlers normally encounter in the process of subtitling particularly when working from Arabic into English.

## **2.2. Arabic-English subtitling problems**

Online streaming services, as discussed before, made Arab culture available and accessible to many international viewers through subtitling. Many studies on AVT demonstrated that subtitlers encounter multiple difficulties and restrictions when translating audiovisual materials. Some of these difficulties are purely technical, particularly due to spatial and temporal constraints which were discussed in the introduction. In addition to that, Pedersen (2015) points to another technical constraint relating to the shift in semiotic mode from speech to writing. The subtitler adapts and modifies the spoken message in the SL to written text in the TL where “many oral features, such as pauses, repetitions, false starts, etc. that are very common to spoken discourse, get ‘cleansed’ to adapt to the code of written language” (Pedersen, 2015, p. 167). Moreover, subtitlers must synchronize the subtitles with the moving images on screen; if the spoken language is faster than the subtitles can be read, condensing or deleting parts of what is being said might be necessary.

Other challenges are linguistic and cultural which arise due to differences between languages. However, the strategies adopted by the subtitlers to tackle linguistic and cultural challenges are largely affected by the technical constraints; in written translation, the translator can overcome many linguistic and cultural obstacles by employing a variety of translation strategies, including definitional extensions, paraphrases, translation footnotes, etc. (Thawabteh et al., 2022). In AVT, however, subtitlers may resort to other strategies, such as literal translation, substitution, adaptation, euphemisms and many others.

The direction of subtitling may also pose another challenge; the majority of subtitlers who work between English and Arabic are Arabic native speakers. While they do subtitling work from English (B language) into Arabic (A language), they are also required to work in the opposite direction i.e. from A language into B language which, according to many scholars, is not the ideal situation (Al-Jabri, 2017). Subtitlers working into their B language are likely to be less sensitive to the context and have limited ways of expression which jeopardises the intelligibility of their output producing, therefore, unnatural, inaccurate, and ungrammatical translations (Bahaa-Eddin, 2006). A competent subtitler demonstrate adequate linguistic and cultural knowledge of both the source and target languages. According to Leppihalme (1996, p. 203), the translator is expected to be “sufficiently bicultural” so that s/he acts as a “competent reader” in the SL community and a “competent text producer” in the target language (TL) community.

Moreover, dealing with Arabic language material may yield the problem of dialect for some subtitlers. In a study conducted by Al-Adwan and Al-Jabri (2023), masters students of AVT in Hamad University pointed out that dialect is a significant issue in subtitling from Arabic into English. Two levels of Arabic are used in almost every Arab country; Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) which is mainly used in the domains of academia, literature, religion and the media, and colloquial Arabic which is a dialect spoken by people in their daily communication. It differs from one country to another and even from a region to another in the same country. Therefore, subtitlers may find difficulties trying to understand a dialect different to theirs. The performances examined in the current study feature four different dialects which can pose a problem for the subtitlers in addition to other ones outlined earlier.

### **2.3. Translating jokes in audiovisual contexts**

Many theories have been introduced over the years to account for humour and explain what makes people laugh. Among these theories is the Superiority Theory which explains that laughter expresses the emotions of superiority resulting from comparing ourselves with someone else or with our former selves, and in that comparison, we must scorn the other persons and judge our current selves superior. After that, Relief Theory emerged and according to it, laughter operates in the nervous system the way a safety valve operates in a steam pipe; it releases built-up nervous energy (Morreall, 2011).

However, the most recent theory of humour is the Incongruity Theory. It explains that laughter is the perception of something incongruous that violates our mental patterns and expectations. Not only do we experience incongruity, but we enjoy it. This theory of humour accounts for some techniques used by stand-up comedians today. For example, they normally build up their jokes to have the set-up and the punch line. The set-up which is the first part of the joke creates the expectation while the punch line, the last part, violates that expectation. In the Incongruity Theory, the joke’s ending is incongruous with the beginning. However, the Incongruity Theory makes humour look irrational, even psychologically perverse (Morreall, 2011).

Jokes can be classified into three types: linguistic, cultural, and universal. Linguistic jokes are based on the language itself like wordplay; cultural jokes are based on an idea or belief

shared in one culture; and universal jokes which are considered funny in two or more cultures (Raphaelson-West, 1989).

Zabalbeascoa (2005), on the other hand, introduces a more exhaustive taxonomy consisting of seven types of jokes: (1) international jokes which are perceived and understood by both the source and TL users since they have the same shared knowledge and values required to appreciate the joke, (2) culture-and-institutions jokes which are accessible only by users of the SL because they involve cultural or institutional references, (3) national jokes which are more popular in some countries than in others, (4) linguistic-formal jokes which rely on wordplay, such as polysemy and homophony, (5) non-verbal jokes in which humour is derived from what is displayed on the screen, (6) paralinguistic jokes which result from paralinguistic elements, such as foreign accents, a voice tone or imitation of a celebrity's way of talking, and (7) complex jokes in which two or more types of jokes are combined.

Abomoati (2019), on the other hand, simply divides jokes in audiovisual contexts into two categories: language-restricted jokes (including wordplay, puns, and taboo language), and reference-restricted jokes (including any reference to knowledge, culture, script, or visual image). The current study adopts the same classification of Abimoati's

As discussed earlier, translation in audiovisual contexts has its special requirements and restrictions. When tackling humorous elements in audiovisual translation, the restrictions aggravate due to the cultural and linguistic complications expected to arise in the process. Comedians often rely on subjects and routines that are familiar to their audience so that the recipients would appreciate and get the joke. Therefore, many jokes involve cultural references and language specific aspects that are only accessible by users of that language. As a result, translating jokes into a different culture, even if the translator is talented, can be extremely challenging. Ioppi (1999, pp. 167-168) states that "almost everything regarding translation involves differences in culture, but the bid challenge concerning humour is not only to keep the meaning of a joke but also to provoke the same effect without compromising the text cohesion and coherence".

Several scholars argue that linguistic jokes are the most difficult to translate into other languages due to the peculiarities of each language. Schmitz (2002, p. 93) states that word-based jokes which draw on phonology, morphology or syntax of a particular language may not always be humorous in translation. In other words, the literal meaning of the joke might be transferred to other languages, but the humorous effect will be lost.

However, wordplay and puns can be translatable. Jakobson (1959, p. 234), argues that "all cognitive experience and its classification are conveyable in an existing language". He proposes using strategies including loan-words or loan-translations, neologisms or semantic shifts, and circumlocutions. Given Jakobson's observation, translating wordplay and puns is possible if the translator adopts the appropriate strategy.

Similarly, Díaz-Pérez (2013) maintains that although puns pose a difficulty in translation, they are not untranslatable. He proposes several strategies for dealing with wordplay and puns. These include: (1) Punning correspondence which is finding the punning correspondence in the TL that reflects the same semantic content and the same semantic ambiguity as the SL counterpart; (2) Change of pun entails replacing the original pun with a new pun in the TL with a different meaning; (3) Sacrifice of secondary information is rendering only one meaning of the pun, which is deemed to be more important than the other meanings; (4) Separate explanation involves explaining the original pun with a TL solution that contains no pun, but the two meanings of the pun are retained; (5) Diffuse paraphrase is paraphrasing the original pun into a TL solution that contains no pun, and the meanings of the pun are totally lost; (6) Editorial means involves the use of footnotes, endnotes, glosses in parenthesis, or translational comments in an introduction or epilogue to explain the original pun; (7) Omission

involves omitting the original pun entirely in the translation; (8) Addition is adding a pun in the TL where there is no pun in the SL.

Similar to language-restricted jokes, humour that relies on cultural references “may be likely to respond easily to adequate translation, but the target culture may be lacking in a corresponding cultural reference necessary to understand it” (Bassnett, 2002, p. 28).

Pedersen (2005) presents seven strategies for translating cultural references in audiovisual contexts: (1) Official equivalent which does not require any intervention by a translator as the equivalent is decided by people in authority. Thus, the translation process is bureaucratic rather than linguistic. (2) Retention suggests preserving the cultural reference used in the SL. It is considered the most foreignizing strategy. Pederson maintains that, despite its common use in subtitling, retention is not the most effective one as it offers no guidance to the TL recipients. (3) Specification involves maintaining the cultural reference used in the source text but making it more specific through explicitation or addition. Explicitation means expanding the text by making all implicit items in the source text explicit in the target text, such as adding someone’s first name to uncover the ambiguous reference for the target audience. (4) Addition, on the other hand, means adding new information to the target audience that was not used in the source text. For example, a subtitler may add the profession of a person referenced to give guidance to the target audience. (5) Direct translation is a strategy that can be used to render names of companies and official institutions. There are two subcategories of this strategy in which nothing is added or subtracted: calque and shifted. A calque (loan translation) is the result of a literal translation which can seem exotic to the TL audience, while shifted direct translation is more common and less exotic. (6) Generalization is a strategy that involves replacing the cultural reference used in the source text by a more general item. (7) Substitution is a strategy that involves replacing the cultural reference used in the source text by a different cultural reference that is expected to be known by the TL audience. Therefore, it is considered a domesticating translation strategy. The subtitler may also paraphrase the cultural reference with either sense transfer in which the sense or relevant connotations of the original cultural reference are kept, or situational paraphrase in which every sense of the ST reference is completely removed and replaced by something that fits the situation regardless of the original sense. (8) Omission is a translation strategy that involves deleting the cultural reference and adding noting instead.

The current study will draw on the translation strategies suggested by Díaz-Pérez (2013) for analysing language-restricted jokes and Pederson’s (2005) translation strategies for culture-restricted jokes because they both present comprehensive models of translation strategies and can be applied in audiovisual contexts.

### **3. Methodology**

As previously discussed, the current study aims to identify the strategies used to subtitle jokes used in Arabic stand-up comedies into English. The shows selected for this study are performed in different Arabic dialects, particularly the Lebanese, the Palestinian, the Jordanian, and the Saudi. Data for the study were collected by watching the original stand-up comedies on Netflix with their English subtitles. Only verbal jokes are selected for this study i.e., non-verbal jokes which are stimulated by the performers’ actions and expressions are disregarded.

The study adopts Abomoati’s (2015) approach in detecting jokes. After collecting the data, it appeared that Abomoati’s approach serves the purpose of the current study; she applied her approach to classify jokes and identify translation strategies used to subtitle them from English into Arabic which works well for the aims of the current study. To identify jokes in her study, she relies on the laughter track which is a separate soundtrack for a recorded comedy

show containing the sound of audience laughter; in the current study, all extracted examples generated the laughter of the audience in the original shows. The detected jokes are classified into two types: Language-restricted jokes and culture-restricted jokes. The Language-restricted jokes include wordplay, such as puns, language variation, and taboo language. The culture-restricted jokes refer to jokes involving a reference to something or someone. The study investigates the translation strategies used to subtitle the language-restricted jokes and culture-restricted jokes into English drawing on Díaz-Pérez's (2013) strategies for translating wordplay and puns and Pederson's (2005) strategies for translating cultural references in audiovisual contexts which were discussed in section 2.4.

Arabic examples of wordplay (examples 1 and 2) are transliterated in English letters to reflect the punning and wordplay for non-Arabic speakers, while all other jokes are provided with a literal translation in English to explain how they were originally told.

### **3.1. Data description**

The data in this study consist of two stand-up comedy shows streamed on Netflix. The first show, streamed in (2018), is *Live from Beirut* by Adel Karam, a Lebanese actor and comedian. The other one is *Comedians of the World* which consists of four performances, streamed in 2022. The show features four comedians from The Middle East: Moayad Al-Nefaie and Ibraheem Al-Khairallah from Saudi Arabia, Adi Khalefa from Palestine and Rawsan Hallak, a female comedian, from Jordan. Thus, the total number of stand-up comedies considered for this study is five, which are the only ones available on Netflix.

Karam's performance *Live from Beirut* is Netflix's very first original show from the Middle East. In his one-hour long show, Karam tackles controversial subjects which he describes as "a little bit shocking for the Arab audience"<sup>1</sup>. He draws on topics such as sex, pornography, having a colonoscopy procedure, among other topics which were not discussed before by an Arab comedian. In addition to that, he widely uses insults and taboo words which are not welcome in the Arabic public arena describing this as "surprising" for many Arab viewers.

The other four performances, less than 30 minutes each, are more conservative and tackle less controversial topics. The comedians mainly discuss subjects like marriage, weight loss, bullying at school, workplace stories, and family issues. The fact that two performances are delivered by Saudi comedians and one by a female Jordanian comedian means that certain topics and words could not be used because both countries are known to be conservative.

Previous Jordanian shows streamed on Netflix, such as *Jinn*, sparked fierce backlash and rejection from the Jordanian people because they discussed taboo topics, such as love relationships among school students, in addition to using taboo insults (Al-Jabri et al., 2021). This indicates that attempting to tackle such subjects by a Jordanian comedian let alone a female one like Rawsan Hallaq, will have only caused her disapproval and rejection among her own people.

As for the Palestinian comedian Ady Khalefa, his performance enjoys more freedom than the other three although he is more conservative than Adel Karam. He uses some taboo words and insults but does not discuss taboo topics similar to the ones discussed by Adel Karam. His show is mainly about school friends, his relationship with his mother, and some stories from his career.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/television/from-netflix-honour-to-the-oscars-adel-karam-big-week-ahead-1.708309>

### 3.2. Data analysis

The following two sections demonstrate the analysis of the extracted examples classified into language-restricted jokes and culture-restricted jokes.

#### 3.2.1. Language-restricted jokes

##### Example 1

Arabic version	English version
<p>ولقى طريقة كثير ذكية عشان يذكر صحابه إنه صار محاسب. صار كل ما يروح على مطعم هو يروح يدفع الحساب عشان لما حد يطلب الحساب يقوله الويتر لأ لوي صار محاسب.</p>	<p>He found a very smart way to remind his friends that he'd <b>become an accountant</b>. Whenever he went to a restaurant, he'd pay the bill so that when someone else asked for it, the waiter would say, "Louay <b>settled the account</b>".</p>
<p>He found a very smart way to remind his friends that he'd become an accountant (<b>s<sup>ʿ</sup>a:r mħa:sib</b>). Whenever he went to a restaurant, he'd pay the bill so that when someone else asked for it, the waiter would say, "Louay had already paid the bill (<b>s<sup>ʿ</sup>a:r mħa:sib</b>)".</p>	

This extract demonstrates an example of wordplay, particularly punning, which is defined by Sherzer (1978, p. 336) as "a form of speech play in which a word or phrase unexpectedly and simultaneously combines two unrelated meanings". The comedian uses the phrase *صار محاسب* *s<sup>ʿ</sup>a:r mħa:sib* twice; the first use means "he had become an accountant", and the second one, in informal Arabic, means "he already paid the bill". The pun, thus, is a result of combining both words together: *صار* *s<sup>ʿ</sup>a:r* which means either *become* or *already* and *محاسب* *mħa:sib* which means either an *accountant* or a *person who paid a bill*.

In the English version, becoming an accountant and paying a bill are expressed using different phrases. The subtitler here explained the original pun with a TL solution that contains no pun, but the two meanings of the pun are retained. However, the subtitler tried to compensate for the pun by playing on the English affixes. *Accountant* is in fact derived from *account* where both words have the same root. Therefore, the effect here is shifted from homonymy and placed on the sound effect of both words.

Example 2

Arabic version	English version
<p>اطلعت في وجهه كذا أعطاني نظرة اللي شو بيبي هالدب الحين. فوراً وعلى طول قتلته وإزا بدك بعملك أحلى سوشال ميديا كان بدك فيسبوك يلا تع تع تع خلصت بعملا هلا بعملها.</p>	<p>I looked at his face that seemed like what this fat-ass is on about?</p>
<p>I looked at his face and he gave me this look of “what does this bear want?” I immediately and right away said <b>and if you’d like I’ll prepare the best social media campaign if you want Facebook. Come come come Done! I’ll do it right away”.</b></p>	<p><b>I immediately switched to Lebanese</b> “but if you’d like we’ll prepare the best social media campaign. Done! I’ll do it right away”</p>

In this example, the joke is produced from language variation. Zabalbeascoa (2012, p. 325) points out that some forms of language variation are often used in television series to produce humour. The same note can be applied to stand-up comedies.

The comedian here is telling a joke about when he was trying to convince a client to hire him as his marketing agent. The client did hire the comedian only when he shifted his dialect from the Saudi to the Lebanese. The Lebanese dialect is widely known as the sexiest and the softest accent in the Arab World. By shifting his dialect from the Saudi to the Lebanese, the comedian aimed to achieve a humorous effect on the audience by manifesting the charm the Lebanese dialect had on the client.

Subtitling the shift of dialect into English is rather difficult because humour here is a result of the emotional effect this shift created on the source audience. The subtitler added the explanatory sentence “I immediately switched to Lebanese” to indicate to the target audience where the shift started. Although this sentence draws the attention of the target audience towards why the source audience have laughed, it does not in fact create the same emotional and humorous effect on them, nor does it explain the charm of the Lebanese dialect on the client.

All stand-up comedies in this study showed several instances of language variation whether shifting into another Arabic dialect or shifting into another language like English and French. In all instances of shifting into another Arabic dialect, except this one, the English subtitle did not reflect the shift at all. In the case of shifting into English, the subtitlers did not need to use any strategy. However, shifting into French was either subtitled in French or in English.

### Example 3

Arabic version	English version
<p>إذا قررت تكتبتك مسج عالواتساب، بدك مترجم. خببي جيز خبر.</p>	<p>If she decides to write you a message on WhatsApp, you will need a translator.</p> <p><b>“Honey, get bread”</b></p>
<p>If she decides to write you a message on WhatsApp, you will need a translator.</p> <p><b>xabibi: dʒi:z xubir</b></p>	

In this example, the comedian, Rawsan Hallaq, is telling a joke about how mothers deal with cell phones and text messages. She says that mothers often make hilarious mistakes when they text others because they are not used to using modern electronic devices; therefore, they sometimes confuse some letters producing misspelled messages that need translation as if they were written in a completely different language. To demonstrate her point, she pronounces a hypothetical message sent by a mother to her son as *خاببي جيز خبر* *xabibi: dʒi:z xubir* instead of the correct version *خاببي حيب خبر* *habibi: dʒi:b xubiz*.

In the English version, the subtitler left out the misspelled version of the message and used instead the correct one “Honey, get bread” as if the mother did not commit any spelling mistakes losing, therefore, any humorous effect on the target audience. The target audience would have no clue as to why this joke is funny and why one would need a translator to understand it.

The subtitler could have easily replaced the wrong Arabic message with one that is misspelled in English to convey the joke to the target audience instead of losing the joke altogether.

#### 3.2.2. Culture-restricted jokes

##### Example 1

Arabic version	English version
<p>إذا بتلاحظ دايمًا بس توصل عالطوارئ اذا واصل انت بالأمببولانص بيوصل فيك عالطوارئ بيضرب فريم دغري بفتح الباب هيدا بستلقوك بكرسي دغري بكرسي مثل كأنك شي منقوشة بدن يفوتوا عالفرن دغري.</p>	<p>If you go there in an ambulance, the minute they reach the ER they press the brakes and open the door and they dump you on a wheelchair like you were <b>a pizza ready for the oven.</b></p>
<p>If you notice always when you arrive the ER, if you arrive in an ambulance, it takes you to the ER and they press the brakes and immediately open the door and they dump you on a wheelchair like you were <b>some mankousha they want to get in the oven.</b></p>	

In this extract, the comedian tells a joke describing how a patient is treated in a Lebanese hospital. He compares a patient being placed on a wheelchair by the paramedics to *منقوشة*, a type of pastry known in the Levant region, being placed on a baking tray ready for going into the oven.

The subtitler resorted to substitution where the cultural reference *منقوشة* is replaced by *pizza* which is a successful substitution as it is familiar to the target audience maintaining the same meaning and creating the same humorous effect.

### Example 2

Arabic version	English version
قلته علوش ع بالي أتعرف ع شي مره أفريقية لأنه يتعرفوا هذول بيجوا بيلد إن مش معمولين. ما واصلين عند نادر صعب لسه.	I said “Aloush, I want to meet an African woman”. Everything is naturally built in <b>no plastic surgery</b> .
I said “Aloush, I want to meet an African woman”. You know these come built not made. <b>They have yet to meet Nader Saab.</b>	

In this extract, the comedian is telling a story about one of his adventures in Africa when he asked a friend of his to set him up with an African woman. He describes African women as being naturally attractive without any interference by *Nader Saab*, a popular Lebanese plastic surgeon, who happens to be sitting in the audience.

In the English version, the subtitler resorted to generalization as the reference to *Nader Saab* is omitted and replaced by *plastic surgery*. Although the meaning is conveyed in the English rendition, the humorous effect is not. The Arabic joke is funny because the reference is known to the source audience as a skilful plastic surgeon who is capable of transforming women into attractive figures. Also, being in the audience watching the live show, the humour effect is doubled as the audience is involved in the joke.

### Example 3

Arabic version	English version
وين بالصين 17 سانتى بتعملك بطل هونيك. روكو أنا بالصين.	In China, 17 centimeters, you’d be a champ! <b>Rocco the stud!</b>
In China, 17 centimeters would make you a champ. <b>I’m Rocco in China.</b>	

In this extract, the comedian is discussing the subject of penis size. He previously mentioned that his 17 centimetres long penis is considered too small for an African woman while in China it would be considered too big. So, in China, he would be like *Rocco*, an Italian pornographic

actor. Although the reference here is not Lebanese, the comedian referred to it on purpose; when some people in the audience laughed hearing the name Rocco, the comedian addressed them, particularly a woman, saying that as long as she laughed hearing Rocco, she must have watched Rocco's pornographic movies, which caused the audience to laugh.

Looking at the English version, the subtitler resorted to specification through adding the word *stud* which refers to a sexually active man. The addition here clarifies the reference which might not be known for so many people in the target audience. The strategy seems successful as both the meaning and the humorous effect are preserved in the English translation.

#### Example 4

Arabic version	English version
لا في وحدة تانية هيدا ع طول السؤال بسألوني إياه وينه عباس؟ كان المفروض أنا وعباس نمرض سوا يعني؟	Then another one... a question they always ask me. "where's <b>Abbas</b> ?" <b>Abbas</b> and I should be sick together!
Then another one... a question they always ask me. "where's <b>Abbas</b> ?" <b>Abbas</b> and I are supposed to get sick together?!	

In this example, the comedian, Adel Karam, is referring to Abbas Chahin, a Lebanese actor who along with Karam acted in the popular Lebanese series "Mafi Metlo". Both Karam and Chahin have been known as a successful duet ever since. Therefore, in this joke, the comedian is telling the audience how people always ask him about Abbas when they see him; even when he is sick in the hospital, they expect Abbas Chahin to be with him.

The subtitler chose here to retain the reference without any change. As Pederson (2005) maintains, this strategy is not successful because it offers the target audience no guidance and, therefore, the humorous effect of the original joke is lost in the English rendition.

#### Example 5

Arabic version	English version
بعتهم على طول بريالين.	I immediately snitched on them, <b>for peanuts</b> , of course.
I sold them out immediately for <b>two Riyals</b> .	

In this example, the comedian is telling a story about when his mother was interrogating him along with his two brothers regarding the "kidnap" and "murder" of his sister's doll. He describes how his mother took the incident seriously believing whoever did this was a psychopath. The comedian, when hearing his mother's description "psychopath", immediately

decided to confess; he snitched on his brothers who “kidnapped” and “murdered” the doll. The expression *بريالين for two Riyals* signifies that he sold his brothers out and exposed them to his mother for his own benefit. Riyal is the official currency of Saudi Arabia, and two Riyals is a very small amount of money.

The subtitler here resorted to substitution where the cultural reference was replaced by the expression *for peanuts* which means a very small amount of money. The strategy seems successful as it both delivers the meaning and maintains the original effect on the target audience.

The table below illustrates the types of jokes appeared in the material, along with the translation strategies used in each case.

### Example 6

Arabic version	English version
بس بلشوا هني رقص وكذا قامت هي لترقص بقا. شلكة عادي.	The music started and she got up. <b>So cool!</b>
When they started dancing and so on, she got up to dance. A complete <b>slut!</b>	

In this joke, Karam is describing a woman dancing in her ex-boyfriend’s wedding pulling provocative moves as if she was a slut, indicating that by dancing this way, her ex would regret breaking up with her. The humour in this joke is produced through employing the unexpected taboo word *شلكة* which is a slang Lebanese word that describes an ill-mannered woman. As explained before, the Arab audience are not used to hearing insults and offensive language in public performances because it is a taboo which Adel Karam intended to break in his show. Therefore, the audience are surprised and amused hearing this word.

Looking at the English version, the subtitler chose to omit the taboo word and added instead the phrase *so cool* which does not transfer the meaning, nor does it create the same effect on the target audience. The English phrase is rather toned down compared to the original and does not express the comedian’s shock towards the woman’s exaggerated dance movements.

The two tables below illustrate all language and culture-restricted jokes detected in the data and the subtitling strategies employed by the subtitlers to render them from Arabic into English.

### Language-restricted jokes

Arabic Joke	English Subtitle	Type	Subtitling strategy
ولقى طريقة كثير ذكية عشان يذكر صاحبه انه صار محاسب. صار كل ما يروح على مطعم هو يروح يدفع الحساب عشان لما حد يطلب الحساب يقوله الويتر لألوي صار محاسب. He found a very smart way to remind his friends that he’d become an	He found a very smart way to remind his friends that he’d <b>become an accountant.</b> Whenever he went to a restaurant, he’d pay the bill so that when someone else asked for it, the waiter would say, “Louay <b>settled the account</b> ”.	pun	sacrifice of secondary information

<p>accountant (s<sup>ʕ</sup>a:r mħa:sib). Whenever he went to a restaurant, he'd pay the bill so that when someone else asked for it, the waiter would say, "Louay had already paid the bill (s<sup>ʕ</sup>a:r mħa:sib)".</p>			
<p>اطلعت في وجهه كذا أعطاني نظرة اللي شو يبني هالدب الحين. فوراً وعلى طول قتلته وإزا بدك بعملك أحلى سوشال ميديا كان بدك فيسبوك يلا تع تع تع تع خلصت بعملها هلا بعملها.</p> <p>I looked at his face and he gave me this look of "what does this bear want?" I immediately and right away said <b>and if you'd like I'll prepare the best social media campaign if you want Facebook. Come come come Done! I'll do it right away</b>".</p>	<p>I looked at his face that seemed like what this fat-ass is on about?</p> <p><b>I immediately switched to Lebanese</b> "but if you'd like we'll prepare the best social media campaign. Done! I'll do it right away".</p>	<p>language variation</p>	<p>addition of explanatory sentence</p>
<p>بنمحيه عن بكرة أبيه للخاروف.</p> <p>We make <b>it vanish off the face of earth</b> (<i>bnimħei:h ʕan bukrit ʔabi:h lil-xa:ru:f</i>)</p>	<p>We make it disappear!</p>	<p>language variation</p>	<p>paraphrase</p>
<p>إزا قررت تكتبك مسج عالواتساب، بدك مترجم.</p> <p><b>خببي جيز خبر.</b></p> <p>If she decides to write you a message on WhatsApp, you will need a translator.</p> <p><b>xabibi: dʒi:z xubir</b></p>	<p>If she decides to write you a message on WhatsApp, you will need a translator.</p> <p><b>"Honey, get bread".</b></p>	<p>wordplay</p>	<p>omission</p>
<p>هيك طوال حلوين سيكسي فليكسي كورن فليكسي حلوين.</p> <p>They're tall, beautiful, <b>sexy flexy, corn flexy,</b> beautiful.</p>	<p>Tall, beautiful, sexy, <b>you could just eat them up!</b> Gorgeous.</p>	<p>wordplay</p>	<p>paraphrase</p>

بس شو وحدة مقدمة ومؤخرة. What a woman. <b>Front and back</b> ( <i>muqaddima wa mu?axxira</i> ).	What a woman. Very beautiful. <b>She has large breasts and a large ass.</b>	wordplay	explicitation
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*Culture-restricted jokes*

Arabic Joke	English Subtitle	Type	Subtitling strategy
<p>إذا بتلاحظ دائما بس توصل عالطوارئ اذا واصل انت بالأمبيولا نص بيوصل فيك عالطوارئ بيضرب فريم دغري بفتح الباب هيدا بستلقوك بكرسي دغري بكرسي مثل كأنك شي منقوشة بدن يفوتوا عالفرن دغري.</p> <p>If you notice always when you arrive the ER, if you arrive in an ambulance, it takes you to the ER and they press the brakes and immediately open the door and they dump you on a wheelchair like you were <b>some mankousha they want to get in the oven.</b></p>	<p>If you go there in an ambulance, the minute they reach the ER they press the brakes and open the door and they dump you on a wheelchair like you were a <b>pizza ready for the oven.</b></p>	cultural reference	substitution
<p>قلتله علوش ع بالي أتعرف ع شي مره أفريقية لأنه يتعرفوا هذول بيجوا بيلد إن مش معمولين. ما واصلين عند نادر صعب لسه.</p> <p>I said “Aloush, I want to meet an African woman”. You know these come built not made. <b>They have yet to meet Nader Saab.</b></p>	<p>I said “Aloush, I want to meet an African woman”. Everything is naturally built in <b>no plastic surgery.</b></p>	cultural reference	generalization
<p>وين بالصين 17 سانتني بتعملك بطل هونيك. روكو أنا بالصين.</p> <p>In China, 17 centimeters would make you a champ. <b>I’m Rocco in China.</b></p>	<p>In China, 17 centimeters, you’d be a champ! <b>Rocco the stud!</b></p>	cultural reference	specification

<p>بعثهم على طول بريالين. I sold them out immediately for <b>two Riyals</b>.</p>	<p>I immediately snitched on them, <b>for peanuts</b>, of course.</p>	<p>cultural reference</p>	<p>retention of reference</p>
<p>هديك اليوم عم ببوس بواحد عرفان كاني شكيت عن صخرة الروشة. That day I was kissing a sweaty person; it was as if I jumped off <b>Raouché</b>.</p>	<p>It is like kissing someone in the rain at <b>Roucha</b>.</p>	<p>cultural reference</p>	<p>retention of reference</p>
<p>لبستني أول مشد. ثاني مشد. تالت مشد. كل الدهون صارت لفوق. صرت شبه قصر الحلابات. She put on the first corset, the second corset, the third corset. All the fat went up. I was like Qasr al-Hallabat.</p>	<p>She put on the first corset. Second corset. Third corset. All the fat went up.</p>	<p>cultural reference</p>	<p>omission</p>
<p>يقوم هاد يغلط ويسأله انت دخلك إدوارد كيف متت. بقله قوصت حالي لأرتاح منها للشرموطة. He made a mistake asking him Edward, how did you die?" He said I shot myself to get rid of that <b>bitch</b>.</p>	<p>So he asks him, "Edward, how did you die?" "I killed myself to get away from that <b>bitch!</b>"</p>	<p>taboo word</p>	<p>literal translation</p>
<p>بس بلشوا هني رقص وكذا قامت هي لترقص بقا. شلكة عادي. When they started dancing and so on, she got up to dance. A complete <b>slut!</b></p>	<p>The music started and she got up. <b>So cool!</b></p>	<p>taboo word</p>	<p>omission</p>

#### 4. Conclusion

The current study aimed to investigate the types of jokes used in Arabic stand-up comedies streamed on Netflix. It also aimed to detect the strategies used to subtitle the jokes from Arabic in English and whether the strategies used prove effective or not in preserving the humorous effect.

The analysis shows that the Arabic stand-up comedies considered for the current study demonstrate different types of jokes including language-restricted jokes, like wordplay, puns, language variation, and taboo language. Reference-restricted jokes were also commonly used in the shows, whether the reference is concept-based or character-based.

A wide range of translation strategies were used to translate jokes used in the Arabic-language stand-up comedies into English. The translation strategies detected in the English-subtitled version of language-restricted jokes included paraphrasing the joke, addition through

providing a sentence to help the target audience understand the joke, omission, and substitution which involved replacing the offensive word with a toned-down phrase. None of the strategies used to subtitle language-based jokes seems effective in producing the same humorous effect on the target audience. Humour in most examples was lost due to the difficulty of transferring the linguistic aspects of the jokes in English but mostly due to the inappropriate solutions resorted to by the subtitlers.

As for reference-restricted jokes, the strategies observed in the English versions included substituting the cultural reference with one that is familiar to the target audience, generalizing, specification through adding a more specific information to clarify the reference, and retention of the cultural reference. The discussion revealed that retention was the least successful strategy in subtitling reference-based jokes because it contributed to the loss of the humorous effect in the target version. The other strategies, however, were effective as they maintained the meaning and the funny aspect of the jokes.

Therefore, the analysis indicates that tackling reference-based humour in audiovisual translation is easier than language-based jokes, as most strategies used to deal with the former case proved effective while most strategies used to tackle the latter seemed ineffective in preserving similar humorous effect on the target audience. In conclusion, the subtitlers have carried out a successful job dealing with reference-based jokes.

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