

A Multimodal Analysis of the Arabic-English Translation of Selected *Juha* Animated Tales

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Introduction

In our digital age, the interplay between verbal and non-verbal elements has become more evident as web page designers and internet material uploaders make the best use of non-verbal elements to construct meaning (O'Sullivan 2013, 5). This has given rise to a multimodal approach to analyse and translate such texts. Translation is no longer viewed as being about the linguistic choices of translators. Translators are now required to examine the verbal and non-verbal elements of a text to be able to decode its meaning and render it into the target language. Elements such as images, fonts, gestures, colours, sounds, camera movements, and illustrations contribute to meaning-making and should, therefore, be heeded during the translation process.

There has been a growing interest among Translation Studies scholars in analysing translations of multimodal texts (e.g., graphic novels, comics, picture books, etc.). Among the genres that have not so far received considerable attention is that of animated folktales. The experience of watching this type of multimodal texts calls for an examination of the linguistic and non-linguistic features. Consequently, the translation of animated folktales should involve the non-verbal aspects that complement the spoken or written text. This study explores the translation of animated folktales as a kind of multimodal texts with cultural implications. Two folktales for the Arab folk character *Juha* are selected to constitute the data. The analysis mainly focuses on the visual features of the source text and elaborates on the approach of the translation agency.

This paper aims to test the hypothesis that because folktales are deeply embedded in the culture they represent, changes in their visual aspects during the process of translation can misrepresent the culture these tales are originally set in.

The following research questions are investigated:

- (1) To what extent does the visual component of animated folktales contribute to the audience's perception of the culture these tales embody?
- (2) To what extent does the change in the visual component of folktales during the process of translation compromise the cultural identity of these tales?

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Folktales as a Representation of a Nation's Identity

Folktales are defined as brief prose by an unknown author, which has been passed from one generation to another by word of mouth (Abrams and Harpham 1999, 101). Scholars interested in studying this genre have noted that preserving heritage, and passing on morals is the principal aim of folktales. Dorson (1982, 60) believes that the main target of folktales is entertainment; however, they may serve other purposes. Fuhler, Farris, and Hatch (1998, 23) maintain that folktales can make people sympathize with people from different cultures. They are also intended to forward traditions and values across generations. Muhawi (2000, 106) points out that Arabic folktales are specifically directly related to the culture from which they originate. Therefore, in his *Speak Bird, Speak Again Bird*, a collection of Arabic folktales translated into English, Muhawi resorted to footnotes to explain the symbolism and any culture-specific elements involved. Taylor (2000, 4) notes that the main aim of folktales is to “preserve” cultures. The same idea is expressed by Jenkins (2002, 269) who believes that the primary reason behind producing folktales is to share local cultures that can disappear due to globalization. Rurangwa (2006, 24) says that among the most essential objectives of folktales is to educate young generations about world cultures. Similarly, Leimgruber (2010) holds the view that folktales help transfer cultures and can raise cultural awareness among peoples. Akerejola (2012, 13) highlights the significance of folktales in nation-building by stating that they “connect” people to cultural values.

In short, one main reason that probably motivates people to share their folktales through oral, written, and digital modes is their desire to share and protect their heritage. Today, folktales are no longer ‘words of mouth’ but are printed, illustrated, animated and uploaded online.

The translation of folktales is usually for entertainment or educational purposes, and it is not an easy task. Hutson (1949) is probably among the first scholars who drew attention to the difficulties inherent in translating folktales. He points out that the translation of this text type is specifically difficult because folktales are usually translated to an audience that may have little in common with the culture where the tales are originally produced, and no matter how imaginative the translators are, they cannot convey the flavour and spirit of folktales unless they delve into the culture they are translating from (342). Nowadays, thanks to the internet, people from different cultures do connect with each other through social media or other websites and they, therefore, can easily relate to each other’s cultural experiences and identities. However, two new challenges have manifested themselves. The first one is the influence of the dominant cultures. Some cultures have much more digital flow than others. Thus, elements of less dominant cultures have started losing ground to those of the powerful cultures. Secondly, new technology gives people the freedom to disseminate their own personalized material and recirculate their personal copy of media content. Through the selection of paralinguistic features such as fonts, colours, images, or layout, publishers can frame a classical work to influence the way people

perceive it (Pérez-González 2014, 124). This is obvious in the way the tales of the Arab character Juha are translated and produced in English online videos.

Translation Studies and Multimodality

Multimodality is a relatively new approach that has received a great deal of attention from linguists and translation scholars. It started as a domain in social semiotics, but with the technological advances that have made all-verbal texts part of the good old days, multimodality has evolved into an offshoot of discourse analysis (Kress 2011, 36-38). The oft-cited definition of multimodality is “the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 20), where “mode”, as it is defined by Kress (2009, 54), refers to a meaning-making resource. In other words, the multimodal approach dictates looking at a text as the result of combining spoken or written words with images, sounds, colours, as well as other para-textual elements (Kress 2011, 36).

Since Linguistics, as Baker and Pérez-González (2011, 41) note, has always been the most significant discipline to enrich Translation Studies, the latter scholars have borrowed a multimodality framework to analyse the translations of various multimodal texts, including films, comics, and picture books. Gambier (2013, 101) emphasizes that Translation Studies needs to encompass a methodology to deal with the semiotic resources involved in the translation of audio-visual texts such as movies, songs, TV programs, theatre, and web pages. He thinks that multimodal discourse analysis is one of the effective approaches to this aim. Furthermore, Pérez-González (2014, 128) believes that following a multimodal approach can considerably benefit translators of multimodal texts that are intended for audiences from different religious and socio-cultural backgrounds. Kaindl (1999, 257) points out that applying multimodality allows translation scholars to analyse genres that scholars of other disciplines have in the past taken over due to their para-linguistic features. In the same vein, Borodo (2015, 40) thinks that this approach helps translators gain deeper insights into the nature of multimodal texts, and Martínez-Mateo (2014, 23) notes that analysing translation from a contrastive multimodal perspective sheds light on the strategies adopted by translators to account for the non-verbal elements of source texts.

Among the early studies to address the issue of translating texts that include images is that of Kaindl (1999). Though he is more concerned with the translation of comics from a cultural perspective, Kaindl makes valuable comments about how texts with para-textual features may become subject to transformation during the translation process. He notes that translating comics may involve, among others, “redrawing characters” (279).

Torresi (2008, 62) applies the multimodal approach to the translation of advertisements. She provides a number of examples from magazines to prove that the verbal and visual aspects of advertisements complement each other, and she, therefore, calls for giving translators the right to interfere in all the dimensions that contribute to meaning. Van Meerbergen (2009, 1) investigates how the multimodal

approach helps translators explore the verbal and visual modes of picture books. She mentions two main advantages of multimodality in translation: it explains the relationship between verbal and non-verbal elements and describes how the semiotic features of photos could be changed when rendered into a different culture. The examples she analyses show that sometimes translators rely on images rather than words to convey meanings to the target audience (15). Kaindl (2010) underlines the key components that are likely to pose problems in the translation of comics and should, thus, be dealt with carefully by translators: title, dialogue texts, narrations, inscriptions, onomatopoeia, images, and fonts (38-39).

Highlighting the influence of agency in the multimodal analysis of translation, Liu (2011, 210) explains that some multimodal texts, such as in-flight magazines, are produced by several agents, including editors, translators, copywriters, graphic designers, and publishers. She holds the view that the translation of such texts should be done collaboratively by all the agents involved to guarantee a seamless combination of the verbal and visual components.

Concerned with the requirements of translating digital material, Rike (2013) analyses a sample of multilingual corporate websites to learn about the duties of translators when dealing with such texts. She concludes that translators should develop their “awareness of multimodal semiotic resources” and should view their task as “trans-creation” rather than a “translation” (82).

Tylor (2013, 101) believes that multimodal transcription can help translators analyse the non-verbal dimensions of an audio-visual text. The method she suggests is based on breaking down a given text into small units represented in a table with a detailed description of images, sounds, and movements.

As for the translation of picture books, Martínez-Mateo (2014) compares the paratextual characteristics of two different translations of a Spanish picture book to highlight the relation between the text and the image. The analysis shows differences between the two translations in terms of colours, framing, and type of shots. The conclusion of the study emphasizes that the way translators deal with para-textual elements of a text affects the target audience’s perception and reflects the ideology of the publisher (53).

Mohammadi Hassanabadi and Javani (2015) analysed the choice of colours in six children books translated from and into Persian. They found out that the translators failed to interpret the symbolism embodied in the colours of the original book due to lack of cultural awareness. They concluded that translators should have adequate knowledge about what they call the “visual-cultural aspects of translation” (44). Chen (2017) compares two English translations of the Chinese picture book *Mulan* from a multimodal discourse analysis perspective. The comparison, which focuses on both the verbal as well as the visual aspects of the text, reveals that *Mulan*, through the process of translation, has been culturally transferred from a Chinese legend to an American romping young lady.

The studies reviewed suggest that translation scholars have been concerned with analysing the translations of various multimodal texts such as comics, picture books, and advertisements. However, exploring the translation of folktales in general, and

animated ones in particular, still requires careful examination due to their importance in shaping peoples' perception of cultures.

Multimodality in the Translation of the *Juha* Tales

This study combines two theoretical approaches to analyse the English translations of two Arabic animated folktales posted online. The following is an account of the theoretical underpinnings of the study.

Drawing on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) presents a descriptive framework that can be applied to the analysis of multimodal texts. The basis of their approach is that the verbal and visual modes of texts complement each other to contribute to meaning-making. They maintain that to analyse a multimodal text, one should look at the represented features, the interactive features and the compositional features of the text. The first type of features includes all the visual elements present on the page, whether animate or inanimate, such as people, things, actions, settings, and other similar elements that are utilized by visual designers to make meaning. The interactive features refer to the relation between the text producer or the image and the viewer, which could take the form of making an offer, giving an order, asking a question, providing a service, or presenting information. Such features, which include the size of the frame and the viewing angle, among others, dictate how the image is going to be perceived or interpreted by the viewer (2006, 114). Finally, the compositional features of multimodal texts refer to the layout of the page or the way the visual elements are arranged by the designer to create a sense of coherence to convey a certain meaning (176).

Concerned with the transformations that take place during the translation of multimodal texts, Borodo (2015) suggests a translation analysis approach that is based on meaning loss and gain. He adopts this approach to analyse examples from the Polish translation of a Franco-Belgian comic book from a multimodal perspective, highlighting how the verbal and the visual aspects co-build meaning. Borodo (2015, 22) believes that translators of multimodal texts not only replace source language words with target language equivalents, but their task extends to include replacing the visual elements as well (e.g., deleting visual signs, re-sketching the physical features of the characters, etc). Addressing different audiences, Borodo continues, could also require adjusting the layout of the page in terms of the size, direction of writing, and font (26). His main argument is that due to the close interrelation between the verbal and visual aspects in a multimodal text, any transformations during the process of translation do affect the interpretation of the text and may result in presenting new meanings, but they do not necessarily lead to miscommunication (29). All the examples that the author cites reveal how the translators of the selected comic book changed the text in the speech balloons, but these changes did not affect the meaning of the text thanks to the visual elements, which can always compensate for any kind of verbal omissions or reformulations (38). By the same token, Borodo argues, any changes in the visual elements (e.g.,

redrawing the characters) will not affect the meaning of the text because they will be compensated for by the verbal elements (40). It is the latter argument that is of particular interest in this study. The analysis of the translation of the selected animated folktales covers whether the visual changes made by the translation agency bring gains to the original text or instead lead to loss of meaning.

This study combines the approaches of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and Borodo (2015) to analyse the translation of folktales from a multimodal perspective. Kress and van Leeuwen's framework will be applied in order to analyse the represented, the interactive and the compositional functions of the source and the target texts, whereas Borodo's notion will be referred to in order to detect how far the visual changes made during the process of translation affect the perception of the source culture. The analysis excludes the linguistic choices of the translators to focus only on the interplay between the verbal and visual components of folktales.

The data of the study consist of Arabic and English online videos for two Arabic folktales of Juha titled "Juha, His Son, and the Donkey" and "Juha, and the Meat". These two tales are chosen because they are popular and have English animated translations on the internet. The Arabic videos are compared to their English counterparts and both are analysed according to the adopted theoretical framework.

This section explores the represented, interactive, and compositional features of two Arabic animated Juha tales and compares them to their English counterparts. The analysis focuses on the extent to which the visual dimension contributes to the meaning-making in the tales and whether this dimension is maintained or not during the translation process.

Juha, or the wise fool, is the most popular folk hero in the Arab world. He is often depicted as a middle-aged, long-bearded man wearing a turban and a kaftan (Alshbli 2022, 3). He lived during the Umayyad era in Basrah and Kufa, in Southern Iraq (Grigore 2014, 100). His funny anecdotes have been circulated orally for decades, but, according to the article "Juha, the Middle East's Heroic Everyman" published by *The Economist* in 2017, the first Arabic collection of Juha tales appeared in the ninth century. Later on, Juha "splintered" to different countries, including Turkey, Iran, and the Balkans.

The first tale to be analyzed here is that of "Juha, His Son, and the Donkey". It tells the story of Juha and his son as they were heading to a market in a nearby village and how people kept criticizing whatever they did. They first criticized Juha's son for riding on the donkey and leaving his old father to walk. Then they criticized Juha for climbing up the donkey and forcing his son to walk. When Juha and his son rode together on the donkey, people accused them of being heartless because they were too heavy for the poor donkey. And when they both finally got off and carried the donkey, everyone started laughing at them.

In the Arabic video, which is produced by the Kissasaljadda YouTube channel, Juha is drawn as a middle-aged, pot-bellied man with dark hair and a beard. He wears loose pants, a kaftan, a turban, and pointed slippers. A similar folk outfit is also worn by his son and all the male passers-by in the story. The events occur in a desert with scattered palm trees and a few houses and mosques whose minarets stand out in the

background. No verbal elements appear in the video; the story is told by a narrator, making the visual dimension the most dominant one. The camera shots are all medium, focusing on the characters while still showing the settings.

One of the websites that produced an English version of this story is KidsOut – a British website that posts animated tales to introduce kids to world cultures. In the English video, Juha and most of the other characters are portrayed with clean-shaven faces, and are dressed in casual shirts and pants with coloured *Ghutra* – a traditional headdress worn usually by men in the Gulf area countries. Unlike the Arabic video where we can see only male passers-by, the English one also shows dark-haired women. Nothing similar to the Arabic folktale background appears in English; the characters are drawn against a backdrop of a clear blue sky and light green grass. The shots are all long, showing the characters from a distance while emphasizing the surrounding environment. The whole video is silent. We neither hear a dialogue between the characters nor a narrator’s voice. The text of the story is shown on the web page where the video is posted.

The other folktale to be tackled here is “Juha and the Meat”. One day, Juha bought 3 kilograms of meat and took them to his wife to cook. Juha left the house, and while his wife was cooking the meat, the pleasant smell attracted the neighbours, and they came around and feasted on the meat together with Juha’s wife until nothing was left. When Juha came and asked for the meat, his wife and the neighbours accused the cat of eating the whole 3 kilograms. Hearing this, Juha got a scale and placed the cat on it. The scale read exactly 3 kilograms, and Juha knew that they were all lying.

The first scene in the Arabic video, produced by *Atfāl w bass*, an Arabic website for children’s stories, shows Juha at the butcher’s buying the meat. We see him only from behind, wearing a turban and a kaftan. The other scene shows both Juha and his wife, a buxom middle-aged woman wearing a long gown and a scarf. As the story continues, the next scene shows Juha’s wife and female friends sitting around a small, short-legged table, eating the meat with their hands. They are all dressed in long garments and scarves like Juha’s wife. In the last scene, we see Juha weighing the cat using a primitive, manual balance scale. The events take place in a mud house, and the colours used throughout the illustrations are all dusty, harmonizing with the desert environment Juha used to live in. The camera focuses on both the characters and Juha’s house through medium shots. The video is silent and the text of the story appears as captions in the margins.

By contrast, the opening scene in the English video, produced by Hands up Project website that aims to connect children from all over the world, shows Juha buying meat from a supermarket. Juha is drawn as a blonde, blue-eyed young man wearing a violet shirt and jeans. In the background, we can see vegetables on display and a small sign in English that reads (VEG). In the following scene, Juha leaves the house after asking his wife to cook the meat. The wife is a young blonde wearing a green shirt and a mid-length red skirt. The scene takes place in a spacious modern kitchen with a tall square table. In the third scene, Juha’s neighbours, all dressed in trendy outfits, are mesmerized by the tasty smell of the meat from Juha’s house. Later, we

see four men and women sitting at a table eating the meat with forks and knives. The following scene shows Juha entering the house and glaring at his neighbours, who are pointing at the cat. In the last scene, Juha is weighing the cat using a mechanical scale. The camera shows the characters from a distance, laying more emphasis on the location through long shots. The story is narrated by an English non-native speaker.

The two English videos modernize and westernize the selected Juha tales. The character of Juha as a bearded middle-aged man is portrayed as a clean-shaven young man in the first video and a blonde one in the second. Such changes in the physical features also include all the other characters in the stories. The folk outfit that was common at the time Juha's tales took place is replaced by casual shirts and pants. The Arab cultural settings of the stories are also westernized. The butcher's store in the Arabic video is replaced with a supermarket, and the mud house is turned into a modern one in the English version. The modernization of the second tale is also indicated through other visual elements in the English text, mainly the use of tableware and the automatic scale.

Moreover, the translated tales convey the wrong idea about Arab culture when it comes to social traditions and values. Unveiled women are shown in the English video of the first tale, and males are welcomed by Juha's wife while her husband is absent. Both of these scenes are unlikely to happen in the original context.

The Arab culture represented by the original videos is considerably transformed in the English videos due to changes in the represented features. The way the Juha stories are visually illustrated in English would probably confuse the audience who are not familiar with the Arab culture. Re-illustrating the characters and settings of the story creates a whole new image of the Arab culture and leads to a significant loss in meaning. Furthermore, the camera medium shots in the Arabic animated tales help elicit the viewer's empathy with the characters more than the long shots of the English versions.

Switching to the compositional features of the texts, one can pinpoint many differences between the Arabic and the English videos. The Arabic video "Juha, His Son, and the Donkey" has no written element. The story is narrated orally to give prominence to the image. The English video, however, separates the two elements. The web page consists of a written text and a silent video. The same applies to the videos of the second tale. The Arabic scenes again give more importance to the illustrative aspects. The slides are supplied with captions squeezed at the bottom of the page, giving the impression of being relatively insignificant. The English translation, on the other hand, splits the written aspect from the visual one.

The analysis of the English videos from Borodo's (2015) perspective reveals that a new cultural frame, or a new meaning in Borodo's terms, was introduced in the target text. The folk tale characters and milieu look nothing like those of the source text. The two English websites, whose main aim is to promote different world cultures, departed from the visual features of the Arabic videos probably to meet the expectations of the western audience. Contrary to Borodo's view, maintaining that visual transformations in translation can enrich the original text, the transformations

made here do not contribute to the Arab culture. But instead, they result in a distorted image of the culture at both the physical and social levels. Accordingly, the identity of the Juha tales, as part and parcel of the Arab heritage, is lost. This is due to the translation agency's unfaithful rendition of the visual features of the original videos, perhaps in order to target a broader audience.

Conclusion

The selected Arabic animated folktales utilize the visual mode to represent the cultural characteristics of the era in which these tales take place. The facial features, the outfit, and the colours of the surroundings all contribute to taking the viewer back in time to the age of Juha. Thus, the findings prove the hypothesis posed at the beginning of this study. In fact, the analysis reveals that the visual components of folktales are key to shaping the viewer's perception of the culture they represent and that any visual changes during the process of translation can compromise the culture that these folktales are intended to preserve. In fact, transformations in the visual aspect of folktales can cause misrepresentation of the culture of which these folktales are a major constituent. In such type of texts, both words and images are essential in meaning-making. The analysis shows that the visual component of the selected animated folktales can influence the way the audience perceives Arab culture. The re-illustration of the characters and the settings accentuate features of the western lifestyle at the expense of the Arab cultural identity these tales are intended to promote.

The findings of the study agree with those of Martínez-Mateo (2014) that the way translators deal with para-textual elements of a multimodal text affects the way the target audience interprets its meaning (53). However, they contradict Borodo's view (2015) that the verbal and visual aspects of multimodal texts are so much interrelated that the intended message of such texts would not be changed even if the translator provided "a new, liberal interpretation" of a particular scene (40). Furthermore, the findings of this study are in contrast with Torresi (2008), who believes in an interventionist approach to translating multimodal texts, calling for granting translators of such texts the right to make changes in both the verbal and the visual components (62).

Finally, the findings re-emphasize the point raised by Muhawi (2000, 106), who argues that Arabic folktales are directly related to the culture from which they originated. The findings also highlight Mohammadi Hassanabadi and Javani's (2015, 44) recommendation that translators should have adequate knowledge about the visual-cultural aspects of multimodal texts in order to carry out their task adequately.

So far, little research has been carried out to analyse the translation of folktales from a multimodal perspective. In the present study, the analysis of the English translations of the selected Arabic animated folktales shows that the translation agency has diverted from the visual features of the original story, introducing Juha to the target audience while uprooted from his Arab cultural context. Such visual transformations significantly affect the way Arab culture is presented to non-Arabs.

The findings of the research contradict some previous studies that have been conducted on the translation of multimodal texts, which see that changes in the visual components do not affect the message that the texts are intended to deliver. By re-drawing the characters and changing the settings of the story, the translation agency presents the Arab culture to the target audience in a framework that is not much different from their own. Thus, the visual mode of communication in animated folktales contributes greatly to meaning-making. It is interlaced with other modes to engender a more complex meaning than the verbal mode.

Although its primary function is to enhance communication among diverse cultures, translation in this digital era can be a tool that threatens cultural identities and a reason for the loss of their cultural heritage. Some cultures, among which is the Arab culture, are endangered due to the digital flow of other, mainly western, dominant cultures. Therefore, the study recommends further digital efforts to increase Arabic content on the internet to preserve and revitalize the Arab culture, keeping it up and running for future generations.

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