

## Pragmatic and Semantic Errors of Illocutionary Force Subtitling

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### **Abstract:**

This paper is an interface between speech act theory and audiovisual translation theory. It explores the translation of illocutionary acts in film subtitling from English into Arabic, and looks into the errors that might occur at the level of the illocutionary force of speech acts when subtitled across the two languages. The illocutionary force, that is to say the intention of any speech act as communicated by the speaker, will be assessed in the subtitled American film “Kingdom of Heaven” wherein English speech acts uttered by actors will be contrasted and compared with their corresponding Arabic subtitles on-screen. For this purpose, a pragma-linguistic analysis of speech acts will be undertaken in order to spot the different types of pragmatic and semantic errors that occur in the course of the subtitling process. Subsequently, a typology of shifts will be listed under each error type then explained to figure out how the intentions initially stated in English speech acts are affected during the subtitling process.

**Key words:** errors, force, illocutionary shifts, speech acts, subtitling

## 1. Introduction

Subtitling has been chosen for this paper among other modes of audiovisual translation such as dubbing or voice-over, because it is the common mode utilized to translate English-speaking films intended for Arabic audience. Subtitled films are broadcast regularly in several Arabic TV stations which commit themselves to transmit various subtitled programmes such as films, series, documentaries, or shows. Nonetheless, the film subtitling mode has often been prone to criticism regarding the linguistic transfer of original utterances (Luyken 1991), which would possibly affect the perception of films and the quality of the audiovisual product. In general, the multidimensional nature of a given subtitled film such as the multiplicity of concomitant channels of communication (Gottlieb 2004; Perego 2003; Hajmohammadi 2004), and language transfer from a spoken discourse to a written discourse make film subtitling ingrained into constraints, mainly “technical and linguistic” ones (Gottlieb 1997). The linguistic constraints which have been referred to as ‘translation practices mistakes’ (Cintas 2001) are the most problematic. Consequently, the focus in this paper is mainly on the linguistic and pragmatic transfer of speech acts from English to Arabic. This type of constraint is mainly about the assessment of translation errors and mismatches that occur in the output product, i.e. subtitles. In particular, the transfer of illocutionary force when subtitled from English into Arabic is assessed. This type of assessment is an error analysis where the source text (ST) is contrasted with the target text (TT) to focus on error types in the TT.

Accordingly, speech acts are compared across the original English version and the subtitled Arabic version through “a contrastive speech acts analysis” (Olshtain & Cohen 1989: 57) in order to detect the resultant errors. For this purpose, a qualitative analysis will be carried out by means of an eclectic theoretical model of translation assessment devised by Pedersen (2008) to spot the pragmatic and semantic errors of illocutionary force subtitling from English into Arabic.

## 2. Speech acts

The theory of speech acts emerged in the sixties with Austin (1962), for whom language is used to perform actions, and utterances are divided into ‘constatives’ and ‘performatives’. Subsequently, this constative/performative distinction was rejected by Austin himself who proposed a theory of Speech Acts and broke down the speech act into locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. According to this theory, a given utterance embodies the three related different acts. Grundy (2000) explains that the first act determines the sense or propositional meaning, the second performs an act, and the perlocutionary act is the effect that an utterance might have. The illocutionary act is the type of act that transmits the communicative purpose and the force of a given utterance. Illocutionary acts, most commonly referred to as speech acts, were classified by Searle (1975) into five categories: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations. Each act represents, in the mind of the speaker or writer, a specific illocutionary force (IF) that has a particular effect on the hearer or reader. It is believed that pragmatic quality is contextually determined by many variables among which the illocutionary force of the message (Kopsczyński 1992). This force is amplified in the field of pragmatics along with translation, and researchers are trying to better figure out this force in communicative acts, interactions and dialogues.

## 2.1 The Illocutionary Force

The illocutionary force is regarded as the “pragmatic meaning” of an utterance (House 1981). It is the intention of the speaker that might be to inform, to command, warn, complain or praise, among others. The intention behind a given utterance constitutes the IF upon which the success of the communicative act is based. Speakers, when uttering a sentence, do not always mean literally what they say; thus, they are performing an illocutionary act with a set of intentions directed at a possible hearer (Searle 1999). The speaker’s intended meaning would be inferred by the hearer who is supported by many cues, like linguistic and non-linguistic triggers.

An IF could in fact be related to its context to infer the right intention of the speaker/writer. Inference and construction of the implied meaning are at the core of the dynamics of conversation and communication strategies. Seeing the communicative properties of the translation process, one cannot rely exclusively on the structural features of speech acts but also on the pragmatics of utterances, including the hearer, speaker, their social status, their relationship, the context etc. Most significantly, the different linguistic items in speech acts are not translated in isolation, but in context and with regard to the adjacent items to which they are related in meaning. The context limits the interpretation of the IF, steers the translator’s interpretations, and defines the target audience’s beliefs and expectations. The context is important during the subtitling, and can be identified in different ways following the IF indicating device.

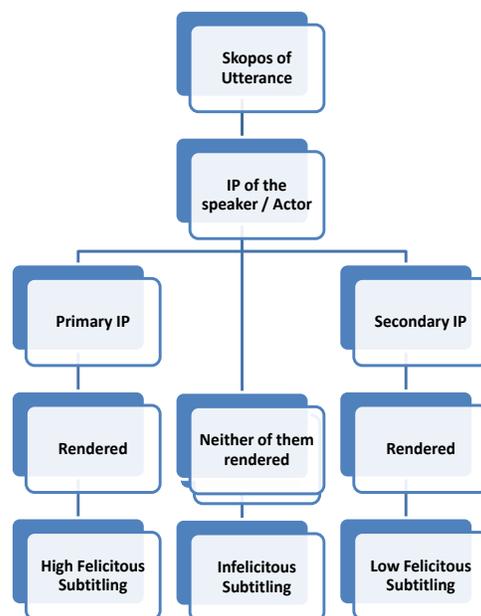
## 2.2 Illocutionary Force indicating device

The assessment of the IF will be processed following the IF context. House (1997), for instance confirms that the illocutionary force of an utterance may be predicted from two main features: either grammatical features (including word order, verb mood, stress, intonation and performative verb) or context. Formerly, Searle (1969) stated the same scale of illocutionary force prediction. He maintained that the IF may be expressed by the Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID) such as: intonation, stress, word order, punctuation and performative verbs. Searle (1975) stresses the importance of other implicit IFIDs to indicate what sort of illocutionary act is to be performed. Therefore, he diverged from Austin whose theory relies only on explicit performatives. In reality, when the speech act is not explicitly stated, the IF may be inferred from the context which may well determine the intention.

Accordingly, within the framework of film subtitling, the context from which the IF can be inferred is the film itself. Utterances of actors, scenes, images and snapshots altogether contribute to provide a linguistic and a para-linguistic context for subtitling speech acts. Therefore, the linguistic/verbal and para-linguistic/non-verbal signals of actors’ utterances make up the IFID and are decisive with respect to speakers’ intentions.

## 3. Research design and corpus data

A qualitative and quantitative analysis was carried out to evaluate the translation of IF in film subtitling and explain the errors of IF. The qualitative analysis is meant to account for the negative shifts of IF across both languages, and come up with their corresponding typology as detected in the film corpus. Accordingly, a theoretical framework proposed by Pedersen (2008) to assess speech acts in film subtitling was used.



[Model of Speech acts Assessment in film Subtitling Following Jan Pedersen \(2008\)](#)

Pedersen (2008) has devised a speech act approach to quality assessment in subtitling. He set up a scheme combined between the Skopos theory and the speech act theory. The model is based on the illocutionary point (IP) which is the purpose of every speech act. It is the basic component of IF and by far the most important one (Searle & Vanderveken 2005). Its importance was previously highlighted by Searle (1976: 3) who stated that “The notion of illocutionary force is the resultant of several elements of which illocutionary point is only one, though, I believe, the most important one”. Most importantly, the model above accounts for the felicities and infelicities of IF in subtitling, and gives prominence to the IP which is the basic component of the IF in order to justify the errors. The evaluation scheme mainly evaluates the transfer of the IF from the source language (SL) to the TL and gives priority to the primary IP over the secondary IP in order to achieve a felicitous translation. If neither primary nor secondary IP is transferred, then the subtitling is erroneous and infelicitous.

English and Arabic subtitled speech acts are assessed in the English film “Kingdom of Heaven” the English speech acts will be contrasted with their Arabic counterparts in a binary way. The bilingual corpora include 881 pairs of speech acts. First, the pairs will be assigned their relevant speech acts categories (assertives, expressives, directives, declarations and commissives) and each category will be further coded in terms of the three variables of the translation quality assessment (high felicitous subtitling, low felicitous subtitling, infelicitous subtitling).

Since analyzing the three aforementioned categories of subtitling goes beyond the range of this article, the analysis will be restricted to the infelicitous subtitled speech acts. Ninety three

cases of semantic and pragmatic errors were spotted in the corpus and some samples are next analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

#### 4. Qualitative analysis

The infelicitous subtitled Arabic utterances are the errors spotted in the database across English and Arabic and brought about by negative shifts. The latter occur when “information is incorrectly translated, due to unfamiliarity with the language or structure of the original” Bassnet-McGuare (1980: 138). They are infelicitous because the illocutionary force was not rendered in the TL and the intended purpose of the utterance was not identified. This produces an inventory of pragmatic and semantic errors as well as a pragma-linguistic failure. In the next section, each example illustrating errors will be listed in the target language first, then followed by the Arabic subtitle. Each English-Arabic pair of speech acts will be analyzed according to its IFID including verbal and non-verbal behavior of actors.

#### 4.1 Pragmatic errors

This type of errors has been brought about by two major causes: the illocutionary act shift and literal translation.

##### 4.1.1 Illocutionary Act Shift

The shift of illocutionary acts when subtitled from English into Arabic is principally caused by the change from one speech act type to another, which entails the production of a different illocutionary force from that intended by the original English actors.

(1) Stone the walls!

حجر هي الجدران

The English utterance is a directive speech act with the IF of order. Balian was ordering some workers who are digging the land to search for water and when they reached it, he ordered them to stone the well's walls. The IF was erroneously transferred into the TL since there is a change of speech act category from the original directive type to the assertive one. Consequently, the IF shifted from an order to a mere description.

(2) I shall go to Cyprus.

سأذهب إلى قبرص؟

The English speech act is of a commissive type. The speaker, Tiberias who is the Marshal of Jerusalem was desperate after the king's death, and thought that “there is no more Jerusalem”. The IF is that he is intending to travel to Cyprus after being deceived by Guy de Luisignan who decided to declare war on Saladin despite the truce between the Muslims and the Christians. However, this intention is mistranslated and the intention to travel turns into a question. The speech act category shifts from assertive to directive. When one reads the Arabic subtitle, Tiberias seems to wonder whether he will go to Cyprus, thus effacing the IF of intending and the determination effect of leaving to Cyprus.

Obviously, the shift from one speech act type to another entails necessarily a shift from one IF to another with a different intention from the one initially stated in the English context.

Another cause leading to pragmatic errors is the literal translation.

#### 4.1.2 Literal translation

In this category of speech acts, as opposed to the previous set, the subtitled speech acts abide by the same illocutionary act category, but the IF is different and therefore the subtitling is erroneous. What is transferred into Arabic is the secondary illocutionary point (the literal meaning of the utterance act) not the primary one. There is a pragmatic failure because the English speech act is literally subtitled into Arabic by means of word for word translation; thus, without inferring the implied meaning. Subtitles which are subject to this kind of errors are cases of mistranslations that are likely to be the outcome of being translated in isolation with no reference to the preceding speech acts or the illocutionary force indicating device. Thereby, the IF is not inferred and the Arabic subtitles are infelicitous.

The following acts illustrate this type of shift.

(3) Are you with me?

هل أنت معي؟

This directive speech act is uttered by Balian who was addressing the soldiers to defend the villagers against Saladin's army. The IF of his utterance (yes/no question) was aimed at asking whether the soldiers are siding with him or not. This intention was not transferred into the Arabic subtitles and instead a literal meaningless translation was produced in the TT through translating the secondary IP of the original utterance. A more successful rendering would be either "هل أنت معي؟" or "هل أنتم في صفي؟".

(4) It has fallen to us to defend Jerusalem.

لقد وقع علينا أن ندافع علي القدس

This is an assertive speech act uttered by Balian when delivering his fervent speech to convince the Christians to go into war with Saladin. The illocutionary act "it has fallen to us" is literally translated into "لقد وقع علينا", without inferring the right intention, that is "we are fated to defend Jerusalem".

The next part, which deals with another type of erroneous shift, is about semantic error .

## 4.2 Semantic errors

### 4.2.1 Propositional content shift

When subtitling speech acts, semantic errors could bring about a shift of propositional content (PC) of speech acts from English into Arabic, which leads to a mistranslation or mis-subtitling. Crystal defines a proposition as "the unit of meaning that identifies the subject matter of a statement; it describes some state of affairs" (2003: 107). In speech act theory, the PC is an important component and "an illocutionary act consists of an illocutionary force *F* and a propositional content *P*" (Searle & Vanderveken 2005: 109). The IF and the PC are mutually dependent since it's the PC that determines the interpretation of the speech act and the type of the IF.

The following examples illustrate a pragmatic failure caused by the semantic shift:

(5) That should be easy!

مهلا

(6) He says that is his horse

لم يكون هذا جواده؟

Both English assertive acts are mistakenly translated and the resultant PC in Arabic subtitles is not the same as in the English utterances. Neither the speech act type nor the IF is the same when subtitled as they both shifted negatively in the TT.

The next type of semantic errors occurs at the level of word choice.

#### 4.2.2 Word choice errors

Sometimes subtitlers fail to pick up the right word from the large lexicon of their native language, this in turn paves the way for a range of errors at the level of collocation, polysemy and idiomatic expressions.

##### 4.2.2.1 Collocation

These errors occur at the syntagmatic level of speech acts, and they are due to a wrong choice of vocabulary that does not retain the IF initially expressed in the English speech act. This engenders a negative shift at the level of collocational meaning, as the verbs used in the Arabic subtitles do not normally co-occur with the sequenced nouns or predicates as in the following example.

(7) Give me a war

أعطني حربا

Guy de Luisignan is eagerly pleading war against Saladin and Raynald would help him to do so. However, the subtitles “أعطني حربا” do not convey this intention since the original directive speech act was literally transmitted into Arabic, and consequently the IF of request was not rendered in the TT because of the wrong choice of the verb “أعطني”. This imperative verb was not carefully selected to collocate with the noun “war”. The appropriate verbs would be “أريد أن” or “أخوض حربا” or “أريد أن أشن حربا”. The two verbs (خاض / شن), whereby the IF of pleading for war would be successful, collocate perfectly with the noun “حرب”.

Other types of semantic errors originate in idiomatic expressions.

##### 4.2.2.2 Idioms

What follows are cases of literal and erroneous subtitling of idiomatic expressions that cause semantic errors.

(8) You are your father's son.

إنك ابن أبي

The original English expressive speech act “you are your father's son” is uttered by Tiberias and has the IF of praising. He was praising Balian who declined his invitation to join him for Cyprus, and preferred to stay in Jerusalem to ensure its defense. Tiberias used an idiomatic expression to mean that Balian is as brave as his father. But when literally subtitled, the IF of praise becomes meaningless in Arabic for it's not the accurate equivalent. Hence the intended meaning of praise conveyed by the idiomatic expression is lost.

Polysemous words also could create errors in subtitling.

##### 4.2.2.3 Polysemy

English words are particularly polysemous as they have more than one meaning. Therefore, in order for the hearer or reader to infer their exact denotation, they have to consider the context in which they are pronounced or written. This set of errors is the result of choosing the meaning that does not fit the IFID of the original illocutionary act was produced for:

(9) Why did you retire?

لماذا تقاعدت؟

A knight is reproaching Saladin for having retreated from a planned battle to regain Jerusalem. The verb “retire” is polysemous and could mean, among others, withdraw or stop working and take a family pension when someone turns 60. In the Arabic subtitling, the appropriate meaning of “retire” was not inferred since it was decontextualized, and subsequently there is a mismatch between on-screen subtitles and the corresponding film images. A felicitous alternative would be “لماذا تراجعنا”, for it is the equivalent of the English idiom

### 5. Quantitative analysis

The table below includes a typology of errors that affects the IF by altering the intention in the subtitled speech acts.

**Table 1**

*Figures of semantic and pragmatic errors per speech acts categories*

Error types	Sub-types	Assertives	Directives	Commissives	Expressives	Declarations	Total	
Pragmatic errors	Illocutionary Act shift	0	13	1	1	0	1	43
	Literal translation	8	14	3	3	0	2	8
Semantic Errors	Propositional content	15	7	6	3	1	3	50
	Word choice	14	2	1	1	0	1	8
<b>Total</b>		<b>37</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1</b>		<b>93</b>

Concerning pragmatic errors, there is a high rate shift within directives: 27 cases (62 %) out of 43 total pragmatic shifts versus eight cases (18 %) of negative shifts in the assertive category, and four cases each for the commissive and expressive categories. The declarations are error-free. The illocutionary point of directives is to make others do something for the speaker, and the IF could be a request, an order, advice, a recommendation, a command etc. The IF are obviously misunderstood and not rendered in the TT. Moreover, 28 of errors (65 %) are caused by means of literal translation, for the secondary IP has been rendered instead of the primary one.

Semantic errors are particularly featured within the assertive category where 29 cases (58 %) out of 50 are erroneous. The point of assertive speech acts is to state how things are and the propositional content or meaning of assertive speech acts are more likely to be misconceived and

misunderstood. In 32 cases (64 %) out of 50 of semantic errors are caused by the propositional content shift.

Most significantly, semantic errors (50) override pragmatic errors (43), which further confirms the importance of the propositional content in translation. The context and the PC of the utterance have not been taken into consideration, and the secondary IP has been rendered instead of the primary one. Therefore, the subtitling of a given illocutionary act is intertwined with the consideration of the locutionary act which is the PC proper for that illocutionary act in order to subtitle the IF successfully.

## 6. Discussion

All the aforementioned pairs of speech acts illustrate the infelicitous shifts of the IF from English to Arabic and bring about pragmatic and semantic errors that were featured within the directives and assertives respectively. In a similar vein, Haverkate (1983) argues that assertive and expressive speech acts produce in the hearer's mind a mental change; while directive speech acts produce the same change, and the hearer performs the action specified by the propositional content of the speech act. The abovementioned high rates among directive and assertive speech acts might be due to the mental change that can be produced in the mind of the subtitler since the meaning can get across in the wrong way.

Pragmatic errors were mainly caused by literal translation, lack of inference of the implied meaning and lack of reference to the IFID of the English utterances. Pragmatic errors were referred to by James (1998: 167) as "receptive errors" caused by "misprocessing". The latter "arises when unintended forces of discourse are identified or intended forces are not identified". Likewise, in the above examples of pragmatic errors, the intended IF was neither identified nor well processed.

Moreover, in Pedersen's theoretical model (2008) used for qualitative analysis, whenever a secondary illocutionary point is not rendered in the TL, the translation is considered as low felicitous. On the other hand, when the primary IP is rendered, the translation is highly felicitous. In the above types of pragmatic shifts, the secondary IP is rendered instead of the primary one, yet the Arabic subtitles cannot be considered as low felicitous. They are still errors and cases of infelicities; therefore, literalism may cause not only low felicity but also infelicity. In a similar vein, Searle and Vanderveken argue that the IP of any act type "could not be a successful act of that type if it did not achieve that purpose" (1985: 14). Equally, in subtitling procedures, when comparing the IF across two languages, it has been found that in translation if the point is not achieved then the act is unsuccessful or "infelicitous". A negative shift of the IF and a pragmatic failure are produced because the IF has not been inferred correctly. Thus, when comparing languages, it's not enough to have the same IP for there are other linguistic features that count in order to arbitrate between felicity or infelicity in speech acts translation.

As for semantic errors, they are caused by propositional content change, decontextualizing the English speech acts in the case of idioms and polysemy; and wrong choice of words in the case of collocation. According to James (1998: 167), these types of errors are "receptive errors" caused by "misunderstandings". These errors "involve retrieving non-intended references (or failing to pick up intended ones) from texts". If the PC of speech acts is misunderstood, the transfer of the IF into the target language will come to nothing.

On the whole, I would argue that subtitlers' misunderstanding of the PC in English speech acts would ensue the above types of semantic errors that cause the PC shift. The PC variable is important in translating the IF in subtitling. Searle & Vanderveken have emphasized

that “the character of the whole illocutionary act is entirely determined by the nature of its illocutionary force and propositional content” (1985: 8). Having the same IF in English and Arabic with a different PC can neither ensure a successful transfer of data nor a felicitous subtitling. Therefore, the PC stands out in film subtitling, and both the PC and the IF are interdependent since it would not only suffice to have similar IF across the TT and the ST but the PC should also be identical.

## 7. Conclusion

The paper aimed at assessing pragmatic and semantic errors in an English film subtitled in Arabic by undertaking a pragma-linguistic analysis of infelicitous speech acts in the target text. The quantitative and qualitative results have proved that in the case of infelicitous subtitling, the semantic errors, caused by negative shifts of the PC, collocation, idioms and polysemy, took precedence over the pragmatic ones like literal translation and illocutionary act shifts. Overall, this research has revealed an interdependence between the illocutionary force and the propositional content. In fact, without understanding or inferring the propositional content of a given speech act, the illocutionary force would not be transferred correctly, which would result into an infelicitous subtitling. This indicates that semantic attributes of a speech act are as important as pragmatic ones in order to reach pragmatic equivalence. Accordingly, the illocutionary force, illocutionary point and propositional content are all substantial elements that should be considered cautiously when transferring the IF of speech acts from one language to another in order to achieve felicitous subtitling and equivalence between speech acts.

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