This is a contribution from *Cultus: the Intercultural Journal of Mediation and Communication* 2020: 13

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Cultus

THE JOURNAL OF INTERCULTURAL MEDIATION AND COMMUNICATION

MEDIATING NARRATIVES OF MIGRATION

2020, Volume 13

ICONESOFT EDIZIONI - GRUPPO RADIVO HOLDING
BOLOGNA – ITALY

CULTUS

the Journal of Intercultural Mediation and Communication

MEDIATING NARRATIVES OF MIGRATION

2020, Volume 13

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The mediation of subtitling in the narrative construction of migrant and/or marginalized stories

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Abstract

Media products, cultures and the arts have recently been transformed by migration, and these cultural and aesthetic transformations have contributed to re-shaping identities, ethnicities, distant societies, and minority groups. The growing interest in migratory aesthetics has brought into representation marginalized subjectivities in ways that depart from migrant depictions in the conventional media (e.g., the news bulletins) and the oversimplified and manipulated stories of marginalization in networked mainstream platforms. Against the backdrop of narrative theory and accessibility as a new terrain of human rights practice, this study examines the subtitling activity of what I identify as "emergency cinema", according to the perspective of the Abounaddara collective spread across the web. As audiovisual products are easily uploaded, posted, and screened on the Internet, subtitles have acquired the role of activist spaces, frames of re-narration, and self-translation, where marginalized stories are mediated and hegemonic practices contested. By focusing this scrutiny on the sphere of the aesthetics of migration for the purpose of dissemination of marginalized identities, namely, within a selected corpus of subtitles produced for the Abounaddara short films *and* The Mirror Project *video interviews, subtitling is viewed as an instrument that stimulates the mediation of narratives of resistance and conflict recounted against the normative background of subtitles in English Lingua Franca (ELF).*

Keywords: activist subtitles; counter narrative; emergency cinema; ELF; accessibility

1. Introduction

This study falls within the context of media activism coupled with the visual arts, understood as the result of disseminated computer-mediated artistic works that actively intervene in public and private areas through narrative productions that make use of audiovisual translation (AVT) in

English. Attention is paid specifically to two distinct groups of aesthetic digital series: (i) the Abounaddara film series (2011-17), belonging to the Abounaddara collective (Abounaddara meaning "the man with glasses"[1], the group of filmmakers who first introduced the concept of "emergency cinema"[2]), released both with English and French subtitles, and (ii) the short video interviews produced by the German artist Kevin McElvaney under the title *The Mirror Project* (2016-17), which only contains English subtitles. These products have been disseminated through the Vimeo and YouTube platforms, and have given voice to the lives of Syrian and Iraqi-Kurdish communities with the purpose of narrating what these people have gone through, and of providing "a glimpse behind the Western world's often one-sided perspective" (McElvaney, 2017a). Drawing on Baker's (2005; 2006) narrative theory relating to translation and interpreting studies, the Arab and Iraqi-Kurdish artistic products are conceived as audiovisual narratives or stories aimed at informing and denouncing, all through the use of English subtitles, chiefly perceived as ELF subtitles (i.e., this concerns the fact that English is used as the means of communication among people from different first language backgrounds across linguacultural boundaries, and as the international language). In this sense, subtitles occupy a strategic and functional role as narrative devices that contribute to the international diffusion of marginalized stories involving exiled people, migrants or citizens who risk their lives every day in their countries of origin. In these stories subtitling is an integral part of the filmic productions, and is normally carried out by non-professional translators-as-activists who participate in the projects. Narrative theory (Bruner 1991; Somers and Gibson, 1994; Somers, 1997) is used as a methodological approach to shed light upon the narrative

[1] This expression is "a reference to nicknaming people according to their professions and the items associated with them in everyday Arabic culture. It is also a reference to documentary cinema and one of its early pioneers, the Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov (1896-1954), who called himself "the man with a movie camera" and inspired a filmmaker collective, the Dziga Vertov Group, in the 1960s, which in ways similar to ABOUNADDARA set out to combine art and political activism" (Mejcher-Atassi, 2014).

[2] This genre is explicitly compared with "emergency medicine", implying that artist activists must intervene quickly to save the image of their society (Lange, 2016). The "emergency" content is overtly connected with the medical field, since priority is given to concerns requiring immediate cures, and to the total rejection of human spectacularisation (Jurich, 2019).

elements that dominate the Arab and Iraqi-Kurdish stories, framed within the space of English subtitles. Nevertheless, the focus on subtitles is not meant to provide a contrastive analysis of language pairs, nor to evaluate to what extent target texts can be considered as deviances from, or alterations of, the originals. Instead, the aim is to appraise how subtitles shape English counter-narratives.

Subtitling in English becomes a meaning-making process involving collaboration between translating and filmmaking practices, where subtitles are meaningful constituents, central to the spread of "emergency cinema" on a global scale. Viewed in terms of translation as "re-narration", where re-narration implies the construction rather than the representation of the "events and characters it re-narrates in another language" (Baker, 2014: 159), the English subtitles are often produced in non-standard English, encompassing ELF interactions among non-native speakers of English. Unlike discourse studies, the most important methodological characteristic of the narrative approach is the focus on narratives as the units of analysis; that is, a narrative is "a concrete story of some aspects of the world, complete with characters, settings, outcomes or projected outcomes, and plot" (*ibid.*: 159). Light is shed upon the creation and circulation of personal and institutional narratives to construct the world, and upon the role of ELF subtitles in the process of their dissemination.

Narrative theory is specifically applied to two narratives selected from two different web series, namely, *The Woman in Pants* (2013), one of the Abounaddara collective's short films, and the video interview "Munifa Kret" (2017), one of the 12 video interviews contained in *The Mirror Project*. Against the backdrop of enclosed spaces, the interview model is the discursive narrative modality through which the two activist female characters, Suad Nofal, the protagonist in *The Woman in Pants*, and Munifa Kret, describe everyday contexts of marginalization through first- and third-person singular voices – sometimes also by using the first- and third-person plural pronouns, "we" and "they", which imply closeness and distance respectively. The two audiovisual narratives have been selected because they foreground female perspectives in the Syrian voice of *The Woman in Pants*, and in the Kurdish Yazidi voice of Munifa Kret. Both female citizens are emancipated and educated women who fight for freedom and their rights against the Islamic State (IS)[3].

[3] In the artistic products examined, the two female characters, Suad and Munifa, speak two different vernaculars: the Syrian dialect is the language spoken by the protagonist in *The Woman in Pants*, whereas the northern dialect of the Kurdish

I argue that the subtitled versions[4] of these short films disclose subject-specific narratives in English as counter-discourse, which is globally understood, read, and interpreted via superimposed subtitles. These narrative resources unlock unheard stories of lives and truths which are typically neglected or overturned in media coverage. I also maintain that web activist subtitles give voice to narrative discourses that share similar structures and contents, since activist participants, both citizens as actors and filmmakers, cohabit within a collaborative dimension[5], as will be demonstrated in *The Woman in Pants* and "Munifa Kret".

2. Activism and fansubbing through ELF

Within the realm of AVT, research on activism has begun receiving great attention, even though only a limited number of articles (Pérez-González, 2010; Buser and Arthurs, 2013; Díaz Cintas, 2018), encyclopedia entries (Baker, 2019) and dedicated books (Baker and Blaagaard, 2016; Pickard and Young, 2017; Rizzo and Seago, 2018) bear witness to the function of translation promoted by activists, translator activists, and online communities in the struggle for information transparency, recognition, and collective identities. A significant contribution to the scrutiny of activism translation has been carried out by translation studies scholars (Tymoczko, 2006; Boéri and Maier, 2007). Nevertheless, an increased number of works focusing on activism and participation through and within translation refer specifically to AVT. In particular, the field of non-professional translation, also known as amateur translation, has gradually developed and reinforced activism-related issues through the application of translation procedures to digital aesthetic products such as

languages, Kurmanji, also known as Northern Kurdish, is the dialect spoken in the Iraqi Kurdistan, where Munifa is from. This implies that the use of subtitles is also useful to some Arab viewers, who may not be familiar with the dialects used by the female characters.

[4] All subtitles have been faithfully transcribed as they appear in the videos.

[5] Collaboration also includes the world of subtitlers as active participants in the selection and transmission of messages transferred in narratives that "*construct*" human existences through the re-narration in another language (Baker, 2014: 159). Seen as embedded within a 'revolutionary' framework powered by digital devices and English subtitling for a global spread, the artistic digital narratives under scrutiny can potentially unsettle social order, resist mainstream narratives, and propose new accounts of the world (Jiménez-Crespo, 2017).

documentaries, videos, short films, and the like. Aesthetic products and their subtitled versions in English, as counter narratives to mainstream stories, have been acting as political interventions, in which importance is given to language and translingual practices as tools to disseminate globally unheard or oversimplified stories about marginalized peoples. Against this backdrop, subtitling has become the space of narrative negotiation in English, which is the product of meaning-making processes resulting in the choice of what type of content artists aim to prioritize in their narrative spaces.

This affects in particular the digital dissemination of films, documentaries, and videos produced within the context of Arab countries, where audiovisual products act politically using English as a pivot language across networked spaces. English has made the language of cinema universally accessible across networked platforms thanks to its being recognized as the language of communication and, consequently, has been involved in the translation of dialogues, monologues, in-vision and display captions from Arabic, its related dialectal variants, and minority languages.

Within this setting, the practice of subtitling in English has come to occupy the "centre stage of the digital world" (Díaz Cintas, 2018: 127). Subtitling activities have been imbued with social significance, while exploiting "the opportunities offered by the affordabilities and democratization of technology", and contributing to reinforcing "the pursuit of individual freedom and the breakdown of hegemony". Thus, in addition to their commercial utility, subtitles have become a means by which collectives and activists can benefit in terms of both "recreational purposes" and aid in "advancing campaigns of cultural and political resistance against the establishment and in favour of militant causes" (*ibid.*: 129). In line with the belief that the incorporation of English interlingual subtitles within web artistic products in non-European languages has to be recognized as a fundamental practice for entering the global world, I argue that the role of English is even more crucial when it is used to spread what has been identified as "emergency cinema", a term used by an anonymous collective of Syrian self-taught filmmakers (Abounaddara 2015), whose nature is explained further on in this study. In this context, AVT has turned into an instrument that not only gives voice to social fragmentation and diversification in the language of the coloniser, but also challenges the traditional understanding of national identities, and is thus instrumental in bringing towards the centre what has normally occupied peripheral positions. In the production of emergency cinema, subtitling is

a fundamental component in meaning-making processes, an essential device for transferring information across languages, where English has been recognized as the lingua franca.

As abundantly shown in scholarly research, "an important part of media activism in the contemporary world happens in the networked spaces of digital media" (Yang, 2017: 62), where activism expressed in non-westernized languages is potentially dependent upon the centrality of narratives in which translation becomes a form of mediation. As a mediator, the translator of Arab films and videos into English must possess competencies in both the SL and TL, including a certain degree of familiarity with a generalized and universal approach to English as a language crossing a multitude of countries and communities. In a nutshell, the Syrian and Kurdish narratives are constructed within aesthetic spaces, and through the voice of English subtitles that are expected to be very close to the source cultures, since this is the scope of amateur translation. In fact, the act of mediating social interactions, and cultural and political encounters, configures online translation activism as a "doubly mediated form of activism" (Yang, 2017: 62), where translators share non-hierarchical spaces of community participation (Baker, 2016), in which subtitling becomes "a site of interventionist practice" (Pérez-González, 2014: 58).

In the Abounaddara short films and in McElvaney's video interviews, translation seems to be conceptually and cognitively part of the filmmaking and interviewing processes, in line with the concept of accessible filmmaking, which does not involve, in this specific context, "the integration of audiovisual translation and accessibility" as effectively taking place during "the filmmaking process" (Romero-Fresco, 2017). Instead, translation in the form of subtitling is recognized as an essential and fundamental practice for the diffusion of niche films and videos, whose original languages are usually unknown to the target users. In brief, AVT and accessibility in the audiovisual products under scrutiny are not integrated during the filmmaking process, but thought of *ex post* by the non-professional translators and creative team involved in the projects. Their mission is to reflect upon the modalities and strategies for the dissemination of contents by means of subtitling. Thus, the production of English subtitles in this context commonly entails a collaborative system that involves scriptwriters, filmmakers, ordinary citizens, and translators, where translation is endowed with subjective aesthetic preferences relating to the filmmakers' choices, and where narrative functions refer to the spread of cultural contents on a global scale. On a technical level, these

subtitles are the result of non-professional subtitling activities (e.g., in "Munifa Kret", only one-liners are used, typos are recurrent, and spotting is frequently lousy). They are not integrated at either the pre- or the post-production stages, but are used to globally disseminate common topics such as resistance, forced exile, and social and gender marginalization.

3. Cybersubtitles and the dominance of English: tools of accessibility

As Díaz Cintas (2018: 132) has pointed out, the spread of the web 2.0 has encouraged the users' production and distribution of their materials with the purpose of achieving visibility through amateur subtitling. In Díaz Cintas's classification of subtitles in cyberspace, "volunteer subtitle" seems to be "a fit candidate to be used as an umbrella term to refer to this reality", although the term "crowdsubtitles" also exists to refer to subtitles commissioned by private platforms.

Since the interaction between subtitlers and viewers has grown and become more dynamic in the various mediascapes, "cybersubtitling" [6] is a most appropriate expression to refer to the massive presence of subtitles occurring "via decentralized communication modes on the internet, semi-direct or direct interaction between translators and viewers" (*ibid.*: 140). The English subtitles that translate the Syrian and Kurdish narratives examined here are spaces of re-narration, acts of interventionism and resistance, and can be ideologically identified with the "guerrilla subtitles" type, sometimes also referred to as "activist subtitles" (*ibid.*). Thus, the translation of emergency cinema is an act of political significance of its own, a creative transposition of the filmic content into ELF as the dominant language, often taking the form of subversive counter information available on the Internet, where subtitles are transformed into active spaces for marginalized social groups to circulate counter discourses in contrast with hegemonic practices (*ibid.*). Emergency cinema becomes a practice of accessibility of niche contents by the implementation of online

[6] "Cybersubtitles", which can be generated on a voluntary basis either by amateurs or professionals, include three main types of subtitles (Díaz Cintas, 2018: 132), namely, "fansubs", "guerrilla subtitles", and "altruist subtitles". They can also be classified as "genuine" or "fake" subtitles. "Guerrilla subtitles" are identifiable as those produced by "individuals or collectives highly engaged in political causes" (*ibid.*: 134), with the objective of spreading counter narratives that challenge the truth reported in mainstream contexts (Sinha, 2004).

translation practices whereby English subtitles function as concrete political devices. These subtitles make emergency documentary films and videos accessible by actively maximising knowledge diffusion and the inclusivity of information, thus establishing themselves in a new terrain of human rights practice (Greco, 2018) as depositaries of counter information which complement images of authentic narrative sequences of life experiences in a state of emergency.

The subtitles under scrutiny, which make Arabic and Kurmanji networked film series accessible to speakers of English, involve processes of either direct interlingual translations or the translation of translations via the use of a pivot language[7].

On the basis of what has been said, the spread of Arabic multimodal web aesthetics relies on the participative function of English guerrilla subtitles as tools of accessibility and inclusion. This phenomenon conceptually integrates AVT and accessibility services into filmmaking processes, while instrumentally fostering the collaboration between filmmakers, translators, and citizens. The role of the analysed subtitles is thus twofold: identifying the specific linguacultural source domain, and transferring narratives and their hidden truths. Besides, these subtitles introduce types of "narratives in and of translation" (Baker 2005: 4), which, while rendering unknown contents in English, attempt to reduce cultural misunderstanding, thus sensitizing viewers to cultural differences. In this sense, narratives in translation through subtitles are forms of social practices, where knowledge and information are instrumental in mediating conflict and deconstructing stereotypes against marginalized, often exiled, communities.

4. Data: general features

The corpus consists of stories embedded in socio-political realities in Syria and Kurdistan. These are told from newish perspectives by people who are personally experiencing them, where ordinary citizens are interviewed on all sides of the conflict, children are filmed in the streets in silent scenes, clearly attacking local TV news broadcasts. The short films and

[7] In emergency cinema, subtitles in English can also coexist with subtitles in a third target language, for example, Italian. This can be seen as an attempt to minimize the role of English as the most widespread instrument of communication, as well as to empower non-dominant languages which are otherwise considerably disadvantaged.

video interviews share common features, among which are the presence of English subtitles, ordinary citizens as actors, and close-ups of people looking straight at the audience, with no background at all or with very little context. In both networked artistic series, close, long, static shots are employed, involving wordless scenes of daily life and multi-part confessional interviews, which call into question the role of the artist in the face of unfolding socio-political events. Both aesthetic products seek to give their regions and people not only a voice, but many voices, an approach that seeks to counteract the idea of the Arab world as a cohesive entity, and aims to capture images and words that make the heterogeneity of the Syrian and Kurdish realities and identities more easily comprehensible, despite their complexity. In both cases, the subtitles have been incorporated in the post-production stage, and this is evident in the videos themselves.

In the two audiovisual narratives, both female citizens ask for respect for human dignity and overtly proclaim their positions in their respective places of origin, where women are persecuted and offended by IS. The protagonist of *The Woman in Pants* is a Syrian activist who used to work as a teacher before being deprived of her job, whereas Munifa is a student who, after witnessing the kidnapping of women, girls, and children, has become a Peshmerga fighter against IS. Personal experiences, inner conflicts, and cultural aspects of Syrian and Kurdish existences are recurrent topics in these video collections. Moreover, both narrative frameworks are embedded within similar linguistic structures. The topic of one's own profession becomes crucial, as well as the question of one's own mission in life, as shown in the clauses reported in the following English subtitles: "I am a teacher", "I demonstrate" (*The Woman in Pants*, henceforth, *TWiP*), and "I am a student", "I became a Peshmerga fighter" ("Munifa Kret", henceforth, "MK").

The Mirror Project is an interview-based collection of twelve videos, where the interviewer is never visible, and his voice is audible only through questions that appear encapsulated on screen within unusual subtitles (if compared with commercial ones). In all twelve videos, the font, upper case letters, and background do not follow the standard norms in subtitling. These videos are the combination of the experiences of McElvaney as filmmaker, the citizens as actors, and of a number of people who helped bring the project to life, where translation occupies a central role considering that three dialectal varieties are spoken in Iraqi

Kurdistan[8]. The interviews, which are numbered, and where each speaker has a name for identification, took place in a room where the interviewee was alone, "in front of a two-way mirror hiding the camera" (McElvaney, 2017a). The episodes, as the artist calls them, do not aim to provide alternative truths, but, rather, unique stories where people are neither victims nor heroes, but simply struggle for freedom and strive for dignity.

The stories are all preceded by background information about each storyteller taking part in the project. The narratives include two sections: the introduction, and the interview proper. In particular, the video interview of "MK" is preceded by narrative details that introduce the female protagonist as a member of the "Sun Ladies Battalion", the first female Peshmerga unit formed by Yazidi women, as shown in Figure 1.

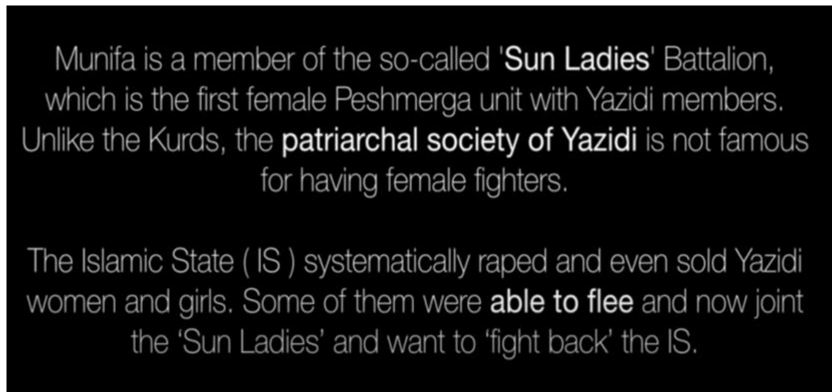

Figure 1. Textual visual section in the "Introduction" to the "Munifa Kret" video interview in *The Mirror Project*

[8] The presence of subtitles in *The Mirror Project* is the result of acts of interpreting that took place when the filmmaker was in Kurdistan thanks to local people and a translator who accompanied the artist for the realisation of his project. The act of fixing the subtitles on screen was a process accomplished by non-professional translators once the production crew had returned to Germany. Patterns of interaction and constructive relationships occurred through exchanges involving translators-interpreters, local people helping in translation, the filmmaker, and his creative team as a human network of solidarity. In the project's web section, "Who worked on this project?", McElvaney refers to two phases of translation: acts of interpreting in Kurdistan, on the one hand, and subtitling procedures in Germany, on the other (McElvaney, 2017a).

The textual visual section offers an initial political contextualization of the setting by providing cultural and historical information within superimposed in-vision texts at the opening, where key nominal and verbal phrases scroll on the screen highlighted in white. “MK” is the story included in interview #9, where attention is paid to the fact that being a “Peshmerga” is important to Munifa, even though the girl has “also doubts”. In the interview section, Munifa is sitting on a chair wearing a military uniform. The context of the room is somehow blurred, and her storytelling goes backward and forward in terms of space and time.

The background context in *TWiP* is more complex. We see a woman wearing a headscarf and jeans (as shown in Figure 2), sitting in an oversized chair in a room with a hand-written banner beside her, whose content is never translated but appears in Arabic lettering as proof of authenticity (as shown on the lower right side in Figure 2).

Figure 2. Suad and the hand-written banner in *The Woman in Pants*

The scarf and pair of jeans, the apartment, and the poster she uses as the symbol of a one-woman protest against the IS members occupying her city are all narrative elements of “selective appropriation”, to use Somers and Gibson’s terminology in narrative theory (1994). The internal context sharply contrasts with the external setting of conflict evoked by the woman’s storytelling. This shifts the listener temporally and spatially from the internal domestic environment to external spaces, where actions and facts have taken place in a non-distant past in churches and streets, and

where the woman in pants has demonstrated to persuade people to change their minds about the militant Islamic fundamentalist group, active particularly in Syria and Iraq. Suad accounts for prejudices and stereotypes by remarking that it is not the protesting that rankles the IS members as much as the fact that she is wearing jeans, which becomes one essential topic in her narrative, allowing her to ironize while providing examples of gender discrimination.

5. A narrative-theory based analysis

Narratives "constitute crucial means of generating, sustaining, mediating, and representing conflict at all levels of social organization" (Briggs, 1996: 3). Conflict is the driving force of these narratives known as narratives of marginalization. Somers (1997) and Somers and Gibson (1994) distinguish four types of narratives: ontological[9], public, conceptual, and meta narratives. In this study, the focus is on ontological narratives and their relationship with collective or shared narratives, which differ from public narratives, since they are somehow outside the canons and norms of a specific model, and can be adapted to any narrative that has "currency in a given community" (Baker, 2006: 33).

In these stories, scrutiny is focused on the narrative strategies employed in the English subtitles. In order to decipher how these narratives are constructed and function within the space of activist translation, the use of narrative theory in translation studies and its set of categories based on the works of Somers (1997) and Somers and Gibson (1994) has been central to the analysis. Narrative theory is centred upon taxonomical classifications that include selective appropriation, temporality, relationality, and causal emplotment, and a further set which draws upon Bruner's work (1991), where the features of particularity, genericness, normativeness, and narrative accrual are also incorporated. Selective appropriation is the first element to be considered, since it tells readers about the narrative location of each storytelling. It involves decisions related to the inclusion or exclusion of certain settings, and to the minimization or maximization of narrative elements (e.g., details relating to events, character identification, and contextual frameworks).

[9] *TWiP* and "MK" are ontological narratives since they are focused on the self, although they are also interpersonal and social in nature, that is, the person who tells the story is situated in the immediate world and is a "located self" (Baker, 2006: 28).

In the English subtitles[10] in *TWiP*, a story is told from the perspective of a Syrian woman who does not hide her feelings and reactions against the Islamic State and the foreigners who support it. At the same time, she is the voice of Syrian resistance and testifies to what extent the Syrians suffer as victims of IS. The woman is courageous, clever, and projects an image of Syrian women as having strong character, in contrast to the image usually disseminated in mainstream media. She provides the viewer with a detailed description of her activism (i.e., being a woman, an activist woman, wearing the veil and a pair of jeans, demonstrating against IS, encouraging them not to use masks because they scare the population, giving people freedom to dress as they wish). In terms of selective appropriation, the protagonist of *TWiP* includes in her narrative important figures of Arab culture (e.g., she refers to the presence of sheikhs and explains who they are and what they are expected to be) and, in less than 5 minutes, she provides information on a wide range of issues from the critical perspective of an ordinary educated Syrian woman. Cultural contents are selected twice: first, the Syrian woman, Suad, decides what she wants to select and transmit to her audience, and then, the public receives the impact of the translator's choices. In the transfer from the Syrian and Kurmanji dialects to English, we may presume that the translator would have had to select some details from the foreign language varieties and disregarded others. Unless the target viewers have adequate competence in Arabic (i.e., the Syrian dialect), the audience's acceptance of meanings is based upon a trustful relationship towards voluntary non-professional translators. This procedure involves the interpretation of contents via English as a form of mediation from a lingua franca (Gambier, 2003), where the transmission of the Syrian and Kurdish stories via ELF can be viewed as the most productive means of inclusion for cultural frameworks from peripheral cultures (Pięta, 2019).

The subtitled narratives in *TWiP* unfold through simple clauses that are usually constructed through the use of Subject + Simple Present or Present Continuous formulations (in most cases, the protagonist uses first- and third-person singular and plural narrative voices: "I", "a girl", "my clothes") in order to place the actions and events in the present time, and to focus the attention on the character and on her ordinary life (i.e., religion, education and the professional world, politics, and female roles in Arab societies). On other occasions, Suad's narratives are formulated

[10] The use of italics in the quoted subtitles has the purpose of signalling off-screen voices or thoughts, and direct speeches.

through the use of existential processes, empty subjects, and third-person plural narrative voices ("They"), which are employed to project the protagonist's subjectivity (and, implicitly, to express the Syrians' feelings) through unmarked patterns of detachment (i.e., "They think if someone claims their opposition […]"; "there aren't more people like me"). Suad's concept of religion emerges in pieces of stories encapsulated in sentences such as "I usually go during the afternoon prayer time"; "They can't imagine that I'm wearing pants"; "My clothes don't fit with my religion", which demonstrate that Suad's faith is not based upon the passive respect of rigid norms, but rather upon the selective appropriation of religious rules according to her own interpretation (e.g., she is religious but she wears pants).

Suad informs her audience about issues concerning politics by shedding light upon the conditions of a woman who wants to be an activist in her country. She introduces politics from her female viewpoint, and shows what happens to a woman when coping with civil commitment through demonstrations and activism against the regime and IS. She explains how she tries to fight in a country where powerful people take "advantage of people's fear": "I demonstrate there for an hour and half"; "A girl all by herself facing the Islamic State"; "Talk about a state!"; "It's like a small gang that…". Suad also criticizes her society when it proves to be a sexist one: "They can't imagine that I'm wearing pants"; "What bothers them is that I am a woman." All this seems to contradict the Arab cultural system, which is described through constructions such as "There are these…so-called sheikhs… because a sheikh to me […] is supposed to be an eminent dignitary in Islam"; "It takes a lot of studying to deserve this title". Criticism towards the system emerges again when she affirms that "they give 10-12-year-old kids the title of sheikh". Social and gender recognition is blended with themes of character identification and professional success in sentences in which Suad imagines herself conversing with someone who is against her political commitment, and who was also a student of hers when she was a teacher: "He replied: *you have taught us religion and ethics*"; "*how can you present yourself this way?*"; "I am a teacher, but I was suspended."; "*How could I not respect them?*"; "*I am your teacher who have* [sic] *taught you virtue and ethics*". The Syrian world of ethics, values, and stereotypes is introduced by the use of a mixture of grammatical categories involving first-person singular and third-person plural narrative voices (implying either closeness to or distance from the audience) as shown in the following sentences: "They can't imagine that I'm wearing pants."; "My clothes don't fit with the religion."; "*I don't ask*

you why you are wearing a mask!"; *That mask behind which you hide your face…*"; "Masked people, they're up to no good in the area."; "They kidnap, they steal, they arrest.", "How can pants be sinful and not the mask?!".

In contrast to *TWiP*, Munifa's selective appropriation on a narrative level includes aspects concerning memories in which girls, women, and children were kidnapped, and men killed by IS, when the Kurdish people were forced to escape into the mountains, having had their dignity trodden upon. This makes Munifa's activism more aggressive, as the subtitled narratives show. Munifa's stories give access to certain socio-cultural contents as expressed through switches from more inclusive first-person plural narrative voices (i.e., the personal pronoun "we"), which refer to a general collective environment united by the same fate of uncertainty, to first-person singular narrative voices (i.e., the personal pronoun "I"), which put emphasis on individual destinies of women in Munifa's country, such as Munifa's own future. Among the examples are: "We had no idea, we didn't know that one day we would have to use weapons. To be honest, we never thought that one day, we would, like a man, have to take weapons in our hands". Selective appropriation, pertaining to the description of cultural features of Munifa's origins, and symbolising the destiny of numerous women like Munifa, is expressed by the use of linguistic constructions, where the personal pronoun "I" dominates in the stories: "I am a Yazadi girl"; "I come from Khanasor" (Sjniar); "The most important moment was, that I became a Peshmerga fighter and the school, my studies, to become a Peshmerga fighter is so important". Munifa's voice in the English narratives is marked by the use of relational and material processes, followed by participants and circumstances that indicate relations in terms of attribution, possession, and locations: "I'm a Peshmerga fighter"; "At the moment I'm living in a camp in Scharia"; "I'm a student and I came here to become a Peshmerga fighter"; "We are all comrades here"; "We are closely knitted together, just like sisters". Terms such as "fighter", "student", "comrades" (the last one also uttered by the Syrian narrator, Suad), and "sisters", are all words that reinforce the dimension of conflict in the Syrian and Kurdish narratives, and the idea of comradeship and brotherhood (sisterhood) among the protagonists in the narratives and the citizens who live in their countries. Munifa's stories also consider and narrate torture by IS: she tells her audience about the genocide by chiefly using material processes that emphasize conditions of movement and transition, on the one hand, and relations, on the other. Following are some examples from subtitles: "The Genocide began and we had to escape into the mountains"; "We had to

escape into the mountains, the Islamic State (IS) captured women, girls and children and killed the men"; "As the families came hungry, thirsty and barefoot in the mountains, the IS took the girls and children as prisoners"; "They were only 14 years old".

Subtitling in *TWiP* is the result of choices which may be typical of non-professional translation, where norms in standard subtitling are often replaced with choices aiming at ensuring audience understanding and making the SL context explicit. In *TWiP* the protagonist creates imaginary dialogues with people she usually meets in the street when she goes out to demonstrate or to pray. On a technical level, the reproduction of the original imaginary dialogues occurs and is signalled in the subtitles through expedients such as the use of direct speech, which provides the reader with the words and expressions uttered by the people themselves, as if those dialogues were taking place at that specific moment in time. Although the audience does not know who the imaginary interlocutors are, these seem to be there in flesh and bone thanks to the subtitled narrative descriptions which depict contextualized situations. Besides, specific typographical devices are used in the subtitling of these dialogues: the utterances of the woman in pants' interlocutors and, in some cases, also the protagonist's thoughts (pronounced aloud), as shown in Figure 3, are all stressed through the use of italics, even though the statements and questions are examples of direct speech, which, in commercial subtitling, would be indicated by the use of inverted commas, as occurs in standard writing. This choice indisputably echoes the convention applied in standard subtitling when characters are not visible on screen but only audible, or are thinking without speaking (e.g., "*How are you miss? What are you doing here?*"; "I said: *the "Islamic state" is arresting our comrades" … "peace activists";* He replied: "[…] *how can you present yourself this way?*"; "He said to me: *but I'm surprised you're here*"; "*No one is allowed to talk to her; by order of the Emir!*").

Figure 3. A screenshot from *The Woman in Pants* with italicized subtitles

In Munifa Kret's video interview, the alternation of capital letters (signalling the voice of the filmmaker-interviewer) and small print (signalling Munifa's narrative voice) on grey backgrounds reinforces the non-professional translation dimension, since these techniques appear to be new, and different from standard subtitling norms. The interview itself is a very special type of interview, where the power of the interviewer is fully entrusted to the subtitles that "speak" in capital letters. These elements provide McElvaney's video collection with a certain degree of experimentation in relation to the way in which the topic has been dealt with from a technical and textual perspective. It would be impossible to listen to and understand the questions without the presence of subtitles. In the *TWiP* video, the subtitles are poor technically (i.e., lack of synchronization, some of them are too fast) and, in terms of layout; there are lots of typos, and the lack of competence as far as the English language conventions are concerned is exemplary of non-professional subtitling.

Temporality, as the second category in narrative theory, is regularly present in both stories. It is not chronological, but follows the inner self of the protagonists, whose streams of consciousness go backward and forward. In *TWiP*, the temporal-spatial dimension is signalled by the use of italics and strengthened by the presence of certain grammatical categories, such as direct speech, to report dialogues that took place in a non-specified past, or to voice the thoughts of the protagonist (i.e., "He

replied: *you have taught us religion and ethics, how can you present yourself this way?;* "*How could I not respect you?*"; *I am your teacher who have* [sic] *taught you virtue and ethics.*; "*What's your name?*"). The viewer learns that the woman in pants worked formerly as a teacher, but no longer does so because of the current political situation in Syria. Suad's spatial context is marked by the interior where she is seen in the short video, which signals her current life. At the same time, her italicized imaginary dialogues and memories preserved in the subtitles depict the period in which she was a teacher, on the one hand, and the present in which she publicly demonstrates with her banners, on the other. Temporality is identified as the category that highlights sequences of events as an organising principle in the experiential interpretation. The set of facts, relationships and characters constituting any narrative is embedded in a sequential context and in a specific temporal and spatial dimension that make it possible to interpret past and present as running together in the stories. As mentioned above, Suad was a teacher at some point in her life, but no longer because of the political situation in Syria ("I am a teacher, but I was suspended."). She is still a devoted Muslim ("I usually go during the afternoon prayer time.") and also an activist demonstrator. In the case of Munifa, the viewer learns that she is a student, who has become a Peshmerga fighter, although she considers herself both a student and a fighter, and she lives in a camp with her sisters from the Peshmerga community ("On one side I am a Peshmerga fighter, on the other hand I am a student."; "To be honest I can't choose between the two."; "We are all comrades here, we are closely knitted together, just like sisters.").

The temporal and spatial dimensions are not clearly marked in her narrative, since three different states of being seem to coexist in her life. This makes it possible for past and present to become fused together in Munifa's existence, rendering it the sum of these significant elements in her temporal and spatial dimensions: she is a fighter, a student, and a comrade in specific temporal-spatial frameworks.

The spaces in which these Arab stories are constructed is an aspect of temporal ordering, but this does not mean that the narratives are recounted chronologically. Rather, the stories are organized topically, in relation to specific subjects. The sequence in which each narrative is recounted represents the constitutive element of the narrative itself, in which the elements, whether temporally or spatially ordered, create networks of relations and exchanges that are transformed from isolated episodes into coherent narrative accounts. In the cases under analysis, sets of utterances transcribed in the English subtitles correspond to the

different meaningful moments described by the protagonists, resulting in meaning-making processes within narrative sequences organized according to subject matters (i.e., prayer, demonstration, home, women and politics, the Peshmerga fighting training, teaching and studying, IS, genocide). The time is set by the exact moment in which the two women start talking in their rooms, and they then return to facts and events of their everyday life connected with their historical present. Their present is revealed through subtitles that act as narrative spaces, where ordinary realities of marginalized women unfold. This encourages the belief that subtitles produced for niche products such as *TWiP* and "MK" can be viewed as depositaries of independent stories, as if they had been narrated for the first time in the *lingua franca*, English. Reference can also be made here to the phenomenon of translation as an act of interpretation that derives from each target reader's understanding of the subtitled narratives[11] (Schulte and Biguenet, 1992: 9).

The third category, relationality, involves the relationship between the different elements that compose the narrative – such as imagery, linguistic items, register, slang, and dialects. On a lexical level, in particular, the presence of certain topical words such as "comrades" and "IS" in both the Syrian and Kurdish narratives is evidence that the concept of Syrian and Kurdish brotherhood against IS and its terrorism is what the locals want to transmit globally.

The fourth non-secondary element in narrative theory is the causal emplotment device, which gives each narrative sequence its own narrative meaning by signalling the links and relations between narrative meanings within a framework of non-neutral unfolding. These categories, relationality and causal emplotment, go hand in hand. Bruner's (1991) categories reflect upon the levels of genericness, particularity, normativeness, and narrative accrual. Genericness implies that narratives make sense if they are elaborated within frameworks of narration that are recognisable as genres (i.e., in the cases analysed, such a framework is provided by the video clips uploaded to YouTube and Vimeo in their English subtitled versions, in which marginalized citizens – migrants, asylum seekers, civilians in war conflicts, women and children – ask for attention and tell their stories). Particularity refers to the fact that the stories make sense when they move from the general to the specific, that is, when they involve facts and events constructed by characters and their

[11] This perspective is rooted in the German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer's thoughts as far as the relationship between the act of reading and the translation process is concerned.

scenarios. In the case of the subtitled version of *TWiP*, Suad initially moves from the general situation where she goes to church as her routine, then she examines the criticism she receives because of the way she dresses when she goes to demonstrate (i.e., "*If you want to come out and demonstrate, sister, at least, put on some decent clothes.*") and, finally, she decries at the worrying situation where everyday citizens become alarmed at seeing unknown people around wearing masks (i.e., "*Take that mask off so you can reassure people!*"). Shifts from generic to particular cases also take place in Munifa's subtitled narratives, where from initial descriptions portraying the protagonist's origins, the focus moves to the details of the experience of the Genocide in 2014, and ends with the depiction of Munifa's new status as a Peshmerga fighter. The subtitled narratives appear to be thematically and linguistically connected by means of what Bruner refers to as narrative accrual, or the attempt to link stories "in a whole of some sort" (Bruner, 1991: 18) in order to "form larger and larger narratives over time" (Baker, 2014: 170). The category of narrative accrual is a key element in the audiovisual series selected in this study, since it proves that an infinite number of individual stories from the same geographical areas and from different parts of the world are the collective voices that denounce acts of violence and marginalization, and which create global narratives of denunciation and resistance.

6. Conclusions

The use of English subtitles for the translation of Arabic films and videos constructed through the adoption of the interview as the chief narrative model involves acts of translation of social repertoires. In these scenarios, translation is undertaken primarily by volunteers who are usually also political activists, and who mediate linguistically between fellow activists: activist non-translators (i.e., filmmakers, video creators, artists) and activist translators (i.e., interpreters, subtitlers, cultural mediators). Subtitling is thus perceived as a creative and necessary procedure that encourages the dissemination of authentic voices talking about controversial topics to a majority of viewers who do not speak the language of the interviewees, and who are not familiar with the original cultural codes. In this sense, subtitling becomes the instrument that widens the horizons within worlds that are basically oversimplified and manipulated across mainstream media (Baker, 2016: 11).

In practices of digital media activism, non-professional translators interact with activist filmmakers and have an active role in the process of language and culture transfer as they are usually permitted to have a greater degree of freedom and experimentation. In fact, amateur translators can potentially amplify the original messages, if they want to strengthen the political message of the project beyond the confines of the source language film or video. These choices cannot be assessed within the restrictive framework of the translation model governed by faithfulness and equivalence to the source text, but have to be approached within a radical rethinking of the parameters of translation, involving the re-conceptualization of translators "as full participants within non-hierarchical, solidary activist communities" (*ibid.*: 11), and the attention to the public as the interpreter of cultural concepts transmitted through English subtitles.

In brief, the challenge of translating Arabic and Kurdish narratives into English has transformed the experience of translating in a state of emergency into an act of political intervention. In this context, the Abounaddara films and *The Mirror Project* represent narratives in translation based on the revelation of affective experiences, where subtitling has come to represent a narrative practice within filmmaking, rendered through structured text understood as "guerrilla subtitles" and built to contrast and resist mainstream media.

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