

The Translation of Disney Comics in the Arab World: A Pragmatic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The vast majority of studies drawing on pragmatics have focused on conversation and face-to-face interaction, with little or no attention paid to written text. Like much of pragmatic theory, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory also focuses on spoken discourse. At the same time, politeness theory claims to offer a universal framework for the study of politeness across different cultures and, one would therefore assume, across different genres of discourse. This study attempts to examine the applicability of the Brown and Levinson model to a particularly challenging genre, namely Disney comics, and to extend the model beyond monolingual and monocultural contexts, to look at politeness strategies in translation between two very different cultures. The study thus sets out to test politeness theory to ascertain whether it can offer credible and coherent explanations of the potential for comics in translation to threaten the face(s) of Arab readers, and whether it can provide a robust framework for describing the pragmatic strategies employed by translators seeking to maintain the face(s) of Arab readers.

The study argues that Brown and Levinson's politeness theory can be fruitfully applied to Disney comics translated from English into Arabic, provided we can demonstrate that (a) it is possible to identify a composite speaker and composite hearer in Disney comics, and (b) Disney comics can be read as face threatening texts (FTTs). Disney comics are simply texts that have writers and readers. However, the complex nature of this discourse and the attempt to contextualise it within a totally different culture – Arab culture – point to certain limitations of the Brown and Levinson model. At the same time, they enable us to propose ways in which the model may be refined to read the nuances of complex discourses, such as Disney comics, that are normative and manipulative in nature while presenting themselves as benign entertainment.

278 Disney comic stories provide the data used in this study: 140 English stories and 138 Arabic stories translated and published by Dar Al-Hilal in Egypt, Al-Futtaim/ITP in Dubai, and Al-Qabas in Kuwait. The English stories appeared between 1962 and 2000. The Arabic stories appeared between 1993 and 2003. Most of these comics are aimed at 6-13 year-olds.

The starting point of the analysis is a conventional application of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory to original and translated Disney comics, looking specifically at three sources of face threat in this context: verbal and/or visual signals that can be considered taboo or at least unpalatable to the reader; the raising of sensitive or divisive topics (e.g., Jewish and Christian imagery and colonial ideologies, stereotyping and ridiculing the target reader); and the use of address terms and other status-marked identifications that may be misidentified in an offensive or embarrassing way, either intentionally or accidentally. Politeness strategies used by Arab publishers and translators in the data examined in this study include all three categories proposed by Brown and Levinson: Don't do the FTA; Do the FTA on record with mitigation; and Do the FTA baldly with no mitigation. However, the study also reveals a number of weaknesses inherent in the Brown and Levinson model and highlights the need to refine politeness theory in order to

make it more applicable to the analysis of complex genres such as comics and complex types of face threat encoded in discourses which are normative in nature but which present themselves as benign.

KEYWORDS: Arabic, children's literature, Disney comics, politeness theory.

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