



# The Use of Condensation Strategy in Audio Visual Translation: A Pedagogical Study of Modern English-Arabic Subtitles

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## Abstract

The strategy of condensation involves shortening the source text while maintaining the intended meaning. In subtitling, it is a widely used strategy to meet the spatial and temporal limitations. However, improper use of this strategy may result in semantic loss, reduced clarity, or cultural misrepresentation. Drawing on the subtitling strategy framework of Gottlieb (1992), this research investigates the use of the condensation strategy in English-Arabic subtitling through a pedagogical study involving 20 student translators. The study examines how students apply condensation techniques when subtitling modern audiovisual content and explores the impact of targeted training on their performance. The participants were third year students from the Department of Translation, College of Arts, University of Mosul, took part in a subtitling task from English into Arabic, using a 4-minute excerpt from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story", a video rich in cultural and linguistic content. Their renderings were analyzed using Gottlieb's (1992) model within a descriptive qualitative framework. The results show that subtitling classes clearly improved the students' ability to condense content effectively while maintaining meaning and cultural sense. Moreover, the study found that some students did not apply condensation, highlighting the need for furthermore training.

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## استخدام استراتيجيات الاختزال في الترجمة السمعية المرئية: دراسة بيداغوجية للترجمات الحديثة للنصوص الإنجليزية-العربية

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### الخلاصة

تتناول هذه الدراسة إستراتيجية الاختزال (Condensation) التي تعمل على تقليص نص المصدر مع الحفاظ على المعنى المقصود، باعتبارها إحدى أكثر الإستراتيجيات شيوعاً في ترجمة العناوين الفرعية (Subtitling) لضمان عدم الإخلال بقيود المكان والزمان. ومع ذلك، فإن سوء استخدام هذه الإستراتيجية قد يؤدي إلى فقدان المعنى أو تقليل الوضوح أو إساءة تكيف البعد الثقافي. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل تطبيق إستراتيجية الاختزال في الترجمة السمعية المرئية بين الإنجليزية والعربية، بالاستناد إلى نموذج إستراتيجيات الترجمة المرئية الذي وضعه جوتليب (1992)، وذلك ضمن دراسة بيداغوجية على عشرين طالباً من المرحلة الثالثة في قسم الترجمة، كلية الآداب، جامعة الموصل. تم تكليف المشاركين بترجمة مرئية (إنجليزية-عربية) لمقطع فيديو مدته أربع دقائق من منصة TED للكاتب تشيماماندا نغوزي أديتشي بعنوان "خطر القصة الواحدة"، وهو مقطع غني بالمصطلحات الثقافية واللغوية. جرى تحليل ترجمات الطلبة باستخدام منهج وصفي. أظهرت النتائج أن تدريبات الترجمة ساهمت في تعزيز قدرة الطلبة على الاختزال مع الحفاظ على المعنى والبعد الثقافي، كما كشفت أن بعض الطلبة لم يستخدموا هذه الإستراتيجية، مما يبرز حاجتهم إلى مزيد من التدريب.

## 1. Introduction

Effective translation often depends on the ability to distill the text, a skill particularly vital in practical domains like subtitling. In these contexts, space-time limitations and constraints, particularly when rendering text containing rich cultural terms or complex linguistic structures, require that their meaning be conveyed not just accurately but in the shortest possible character combinations. To achieve both accuracy and conciseness, subtitlers must use some strategies. One of these strategies is condensation by Gottlieb (1992) (1), which includes several procedures: simplifying verb tenses, embracing contractions, restructuring text, simplifying idiomatic expressions, and omitting politeness markers. These procedures are important tools for helping audiences fully comprehend the message and preserving the speaker's tone and sense.

Kruger & Steyn (2014) (2) investigated subtitlers' training within audiovisual translation through classroom case studies. The research checked how condensation strategies were used by students to overcome the space-time limitations. Results indicated that focused training improved students' renderings to condense information without altering meaning. Almahasees (2022) (3) presents English-Arabic translation research employing a comparative analysis of three software's utilizing machine translation. The analysis concludes that condensation frequently results in fuzzy or oversimplified texts. This shows the importance of human decision-making in subtitle translation and the necessity for efficient training machines to utilize it more specifically.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Audiovisual Translation and Subtitling

Audiovisual translation (AVT) is a process of conveying verbal content within audiovisual media from the SL into the TL. Subtitling, a core AVT mode, involves presenting written translations of spoken dialogue and other audio elements on the screen. In a similar vein, Gottlieb (2001, p. 219 4) defines subtitling as the "positioning of text in the lower section of the screen to transcribe spoken material into written format, ensuring alignment with the audiovisual context."

According to Díaz- Cintas and Remael (2021) (5), subtitling requires not only linguistic expertise but

also technical and cultural knowledge to manage the spatial and temporal limitations. Technically, subtitles must include two lines on screen and ideally remain visible for no more than six seconds for readability (Gottlieb, 1992) (1).

Subtitling, particularly into Arabic, causes extra challenges due to differences in language structure, writing direction, and grammatical compactness. As Al-Adwan (2015) (6) argues, subtitling in Arabic often requires condensation to preserve meaning while adhering to on-screen constraints.

### 2.2 Condensation as a Subtitling Strategy

Condensation is a strategy for shortening the original dialogue without omitting essential meaning. Gottlieb (1992) (1) identifies condensation as a central strategy in subtitling that helps reconcile the tension between verbal excess and limited screen space. This strategy involves reformulating or paraphrasing speech segments to preserve the core message while eliminating redundancy or culturally opaque expressions.

Condensation does not mean omitting words, it demands the translator's skill in simplifying structure, rephrasing ideas, and distilling meaning. As Perego (2008) (7) emphasizes, successful condensation enhances comprehension and viewer engagement by offering clarity and fluency.

### 2.3 Pedagogical Relevance of Condensation

In a subtitling classroom, teaching condensation helps students develop competence in summarization, prioritization, and rephrasing. These are especially crucial in English-Arabic subtitling, as Arabic is known for its greater redundancy than English. Talaván (2013) (8) stresses the role of subtitling in language education, noting that teaching strategies like condensation helps the student's textual analysis and decision-making skills.

Furthermore, Díaz-Cintas (2021) (5) indicates that subtitling training helps students balance fidelity to the original meaning with the technical demands of the medium. This balance is especially critical when subtitling high-density or abstract discourse, as shown in the two samples analyzed in this study.

### 2.4 Condensation and Meaning Preservation

The primary goal of condensation is meaning preservation, not content omission. When students must render complex expressions—such as "I had

become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them”—they must identify the sentence’s core idea and retain it in a shorter form. Gottlieb (2004) (9) refers to this as a micro-strategy in which omission and reformulation are subordinate to communicative efficiency.

In cross-cultural subtitling, this strategy is even more necessary. As Baker (1992) (10) notes, cross-linguistic and cultural asymmetries often necessitate text reduction to maintain accessibility and relevance for the target audience.

## 2.5 Condensation and Technical Limitations in Subtitling

One important factor affecting appropriate subtitles is technical limitations, which are greatly influenced by the use of the condensation strategy. Technical limitations, however, are reduced nowadays due to the high number of subtitling software programs like Aegisub, Subtitle Edit, and others (Karamitroglou, 2000, p. 59) (11). The technical constraints can be summarized with the following: -

- A- Character number per line
- B- Font type and size
- C- Synchronization and time adjustment
- D- Subtitling display time on-screen

## 2.6 Challenges of Applying Condensation in English-Arabic Subtitling

Applying condensation in English-Arabic subtitling is a pedagogical and linguistic challenge. Arabic typically requires more words to express ideas that English conveys concisely. According to Khuddro (2010) (12)

, this expansion often leads novice subtitlers to struggle with how much to omit or simplify without distorting meaning. For example, “*You should not have done that.*”, might be rendered as “*ما كان ينبغي عليك ان تفعل ذلك*” which shows more words used in Arabic.

Moreover, *Arabic script direction* (right-to-left) and font size can further limit subtitle space. Therefore, as Al-Adwan (2015) (6) suggests, teaching condensation becomes not only a strategic skill but also a necessity for producing effective Arabic subtitles within real-world AVT constraints.

## 2.7 Linguistic Condensation Procedures in Subtitling

Subtitlers often *simplify complex verb tenses* to improve readability and reduce subtitle length, a necessity given time and space constraints; for example, “*She had been working on the report all night.*” is rendered to “*عملت طوال الليل على التقرير*”.

In the same vein, Pedersen (2011, p. 92) (13) notes that *reducing complex modality procedures*, improves subtitle clarity and viewer comprehension. In English-Arabic subtitling, this simplification is particularly important due to Arabic’s rich modal system and syntactic differences (Yahiaoui, 2015, p. 107) (14). For example, rendering the phrase “*It might have been a mistake*” into “*ربما كانت غلطة*”

Likewise, *shifting from direct to indirect speech* and *changing passive to active voice*. These procedures improve readability while retaining meaning. Gottlieb (1992, p. 165) (1) notes that using the active voice helps reduce character count, as long as it does not affect comprehension. E.g., Rendering the phrase “*He was told to leave the building*” into “*طلبوا منه ان يغادر*”

## 2.8 Cultural Adaptation Procedures in Subtitling

Replacing idiomatic and culturally specific expressions is essential to enhance clarity and fit within space constraints. Baker (2011, p. 270) (10) notes that idioms are challenging and often require shortening or substitution in subtitle. Chiaro (2009, p. 118) (15) emphasizes reducing idiomatic expressions in audiovisual translation to prevent confusion and avoid length. E.g., “*He kicked the bucket.*” is rendered into “*توفي*”

Similarly, *omitting politeness markers and honorifics* is a common condensation procedure in subtitling. Díaz -Cintas (2021, p. 86) (5) notes that such forms are often dropped when the communicative intent remains clear, enhancing readability. Karamitroglou (2000, p. 59) (11) adds that this omission reduces visual clutter and keeps the focus on the main message. Similarly, Shunnaq (1993, p. 89) (16) points out that formal titles and polite particles are frequently omitted in Arabic subtitling when they are redundant. E.g.

“*Would you mind stepping outside, sir?*” into “*ممكّن تطلع؟*”

## 2.9 Textual Condensation Procedures in Subtitling

Simplifying complex or compound sentences into shorter, clearer ones is an essential procedure in condensation. Chaume (2012, p. 189) (17) emphasizes that breaking down complex structures leads to more accurate and accessible subtitles. For example the sentence “*He came in, sat down, and started talking about his day.*”, can be rendered into “*دخل وبدأ الحديث عن يومه*”

As well as, *replacing nouns with pronouns* is a common subtitling procedure and a key aspect of

condensation. This technique simplifies subtitles, improving readability while preserving clarity. Laviosa (2000, p. 96) (18) notes that pronoun substitution supports textual cohesion and coherence. E.g., *"The manager gave the manager's opinion at the meeting."* is rendered into *اعطى " المدير رأيه "*

### 3. Methodology

After receiving instruction in subtitling strategies, 20 third-year students from the Department of Translation, College of Arts, University of Mosul, were selected to participate in a subtitling task. They received a three-minute English video via their Google Classroom, where they often do their assignments, in May 2025. The students were informed about the subtitling task, but not about the video's title. Moreover, a post-task questionnaire was sent to them, asking about translating the linguistic and cultural elements expected to pose problems for the students. They used Subtitle Edit as a subtitling tool, which served as the main software for training during the course. They conducted the task individually and uploaded the video with the subtitles to Google Classroom. All the videos and questionnaires were collected by the instructor and sent to the researcher via email. Gottlieb's (1992) (1) model was applied to analyze five extracts that included linguistic and cultural embedded content. The students' outputs were qualitatively analyzed in line with the descriptive translation studies (DTS) approach and Gottlieb's focus on function-oriented strategies. Moreover, the effectiveness of training on the use of condensation, which works well when evaluated through Gottlieb's strategy-based lens was identified through the analysis of the subtitles.

### 4. Data Analysis

The following extracts were analyzed using Gottlieb (1992) (1) strategy of condensation.

#### ST (1):

*"I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them ...."*

#### TTs:

1. " لقد أصبحت على قناعة ان الكتب بطبيعتها يجب ان تحتوي على شخصيات اجنبية "
2. " لقد صرت مقتنعة ان الكتب بطبيعتها على طبيعتها يجب ان تحتوي على شخصيات اجنبية داخلها "
3. " لقد اقتنعت ان الكتب يجب ان تحتوي على شخوص اجنبية، "

### Discussion

The essential SL meaning that must be preserved in the subtitles is "all books had to include foreign

characters". This seems to be the core idea that the subtitle must include. Other components like "by their very nature." or " (Al-Adwan, 2015) (6) had to have" are deemed to be condensed depending on constraints.

The analysis shows that most students applied condensation effectively by omitting or simplifying nonessential phrases, such as "by their very nature." In other words, 9 students applied simplification and omission when they produced *اعتقدت أن كل الكتب فيها أجانب "I believed that all the books have foreigners."* Similarly, 5 students used reduction when they provided *ظننت أن الكتب دائماً تحتوي على أجانب "I believed the books always include foreigners."* In the same line, 4 students applied heavy condensation when they rendered this extract into *اعتقدت أن الكتب فيها أجانب "I believed the books have foreigners."* In contrast, 2 students produced no condensation when rendering the SL literally. أصبحت مقتنعة أن الكتب بطبيعتها يجب أن تضم أجانب *"I became convinced that the books with their nature should include foreigners."*

#### Text No. (2)

*"Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person."*

#### TTs

1. "القوة هي القدرة ليس فقط على رواية قصة شخص آخر، بل على جعلها القصة الحاسمة لذلك الشخص"
2. "القوة هي القدرة ليس فقط على القاء القصص لشخص آخر فقط، بل على جعلها القصة المحددة لهذا الشخص"
3. "القوة تعني فرض رواية واحدة على الآخرين"

### Discussion

In this context, power allows one not only to narrate someone else's story but also to define or control that narrative, making it the only accepted version. Thus, power is the main idea that should be conveyed, even if the language is simplified or shortened. Other additions, like "not just... but also" or the repeated phrase "of that person", are supposed to be condensed to fit within the constraints of subtitles.

The analysis of the students' renderings shows that 8 students resorted to condensation using reduction and simplification of the TL. They produced *القوة هي القدرة على رواية قصة الآخر وجعلها القصة الوحيدة* "Power is the ability to tell someone else's story and make it the only story.". In the same line, 6 students used heavy condensation when they reportedly

maintained the core meaning. Hence, they provided  
 “القوة في رواية قصة الآخر وفرضها” Power lies in telling  
 someone else's story and imposing it."

. In contrast, 6 students used no condensation when they followed the ST structure: “القوة هي القدرة ليس فقط على لقاء القصص شخص آخر فقط، بل على جعلها القصة المحددة لهذا الشخص

**Text No. (3)**

*“Unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner.”*

1. “ لا يملكون صوتاً للدفاع عن انفسهم ”
2. “ غير قادرين على التحدث عن انفسهم ”
3. “ غير قادرين على التعبير عن انفسهم ضد المعاناة ”
4. “ مقمعون ”

## Discussion

The core meaning of this sentence is that there is a group of people who cannot determine their fate, dependent on a foreigner for salvation. This idea must be preserved; this sentence contains a cultural phrase that can be condensed into one word. Other components, such as “to be,” are expected to be condensed due to subtitling limitations. The analysis shows that 9 students used omission of “white” and “kind”, which refers to condensing the ideological critique. Hence, they provided "غير قادرين على الدفاع عن أنفسهم وينتظرون من يقيدهم" "they were unable to defend themselves and waiting for someone to save them. Similarly, 6 students applied heavy condensation when they provided "لا يستطيعون الدفاع عن أنفسهم وينتظرون المساعدة" "they can't defend themselves and waiting for help". On the contrary, 5 students resorted to word-for-word rendering, which negatively affects the TL. In other words, they produced "غير قادرين على التحدث بأنفسهم وينتظرون أن يُقدهم أجنبي، أبيض، طيب".

This example explains how condensation can affect cultural meaning and predicts that students require training not just in technical condensation, but in critical cultural awareness.

**Text No. (4)**

*"She asked if she could listen to what she called my 'tribal music,'"*

## Discussion

When subtitling, the core meaning must be preserved in the TL text, and here it is: ***“She asks to listen to my tribal music.”*** This sentence uses indirect speech, which seems lengthy and less natural. Arabic prefers direct speech, which enhances clarity and comprehension.

The analysis of the students renderings shows that 10 students effectively applied condensation and simplification by shifting the indirect “she asked”

into direct "she asked me"; 5 students applied heavy condensation, omitting the clause "what she called", rendering it into "طلبت سماع" *"she asked to listen to my tribal music"*; in contrast, 5 students used no condensation when they applied literal translation in their renderings: *"هي سألت اذا كان بإمكانها الاستماع لما تسميه موسيقى القبلية"*.

**Text No. (5)**

*“People who were fleecing the healthcare system, sneaking across the border...”*

## Discussion

The TL viewer must retain the core message, "They are fleeing the healthcare, sneaking across the border." This description seems to be enough to come up with a perfect subtitle in the TL; other components like "people, system, and who were" are left to be condensed at the subtitler's discretion.

The analysis reveals that 7 students successfully applied heavy condensation by shifting the theme from the “people” to the action “fleeing”, rendering it into يهربون عبر الحدود. ويستغلون الضمان الصحي

Similarly, another 7 students replaced nouns with pronouns as **هم يهربون عبر الحدود ويستغلون النظام الصحي**

*They are sneaking across the border, fleeing the healthcare system.*” which also contributes to simplification and a more concise structure. On the contrary, 6 students kept the structure and the form of the SL, rendering it literally into

"اشخاص يستغلون نظام الرعاية الصحية ويتسللون الى البلاد"

Those students reportedly believed that condensation was not necessary to be applied in this context.

## 5. Findings

This study comes up with the following:

1. After training on the use of condensation strategy when subtitling from English into Arabic, the students have developed condensation skills. Most of the students showed significant improvement in condensing lengthy spoken SL content into accurate, readable TL subtitles. They were able to maintain the core message while adhering to the time and space constraints of subtitling.
2. It is clearly evident that the students have enhanced their cultural awareness, as they showed great sensitivity to cultural differences between the SL and the TL. In this regard, they managed to avoid literal translations of idiomatic or culturally embedded content. This contributed to more precise and appropriate subtitles.

3. The study revealed that despite the overall improvement in the use of condensation strategy, there were inconsistent applications of techniques. This reflects differing levels of understanding and skill transfer among the students.
4. The presence of weak or underdeveloped subtitles by some students stressed the need for more intensive training. It is necessary to engage students in more strategy-based classes

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