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A functionalist (Skopos) approach to Arabic–English subtitling of Saudi comedy: Managing humor, dialect features, and identity cues

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ABSTRACT

Saudi comedy has become increasingly visible to global audiences through streaming platforms, where Arabic–English subtitling mediates not only propositional meaning but also humor, dialectal style, and socially loaded identity cues. Saudi comedic discourse often relies on culturally situated incongruities, slang and taboo play, rapid stance-shifts, and dialect-indexed personae whose social meanings are difficult to reconstruct within the spatial–temporal constraints of subtitles. This article develops a functionalist model, grounded in Skopos theory and Nord's notion of loyalty, for evaluating and designing subtitle solutions in Saudi comedy. Rather than treating humor loss, dialect flattening, or cultural explicitation as isolated 'errors', the model frames them as outcomes of purpose-governed translational action negotiated in a translation brief. Integrating core audiovisual translation scholarship on subtitling constraints and norms, linguistic and pragmatic theories of humor, and sociolinguistic accounts of indexicality and identity, the article proposes (i) a skopos hierarchy tailored to streaming comedy, (ii) criteria for identifying 'load-bearing' cues (humor triggers, dialect markers, identity signals), and (iii) a strategy repertoire—calibrated explicitation, selective retention/transliteration, controlled substitution, constrained compensation, and register mapping for code-switching and mock formality. To demonstrate operationalization, the article provides worked Saudi Arabic examples (in Arabic script with transliteration and gloss) and paired English subtitle options aligned with alternative briefs. The contribution is a practice-facing yet theoretically rigorous framework for research design, training, and quality assessment of Arabic–English subtitling of Saudi comedy in the era of global streaming.

KEYWORDS: Arabic–English subtitling, audiovisual translation, dialect, functionalism, humor translation, identity, loyalty, Saudi comedy, Skopos theory, streaming platforms

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1. Introduction

The global circulation of Arabic-language audiovisual content has accelerated in the past decade, with streaming platforms turning locally rooted genres into transnational viewing practices. Saudi comedy, in particular, has entered international subtitle-driven circulation: series such as Masameer County are presented by Netflix as a humorous view of a changing Saudi society and are made accessible to Anglophone viewers primarily through English subtitles. Yet Saudi comedic discourse is frequently built on culturally situated incongruities, local slang, dialectal personae, and socially calibrated identity cues—resources that resist direct transfer under the technical, semiotic, and institutional constraints of subtitling.

Translation studies has long emphasized that subtitles are not neutral 'mirrors' of dialogue but selective, condensed rewritings shaped by time, space, and multimodality. In comedy, these constraints become a stress test: punchlines depend on timing, surprise, and inferencing, and comedic uptake can collapse when subtitles arrive late, read awkwardly, or flatten a character's voice. In Saudi comedy, further complexity arises from the indexical density of dialect features—phonology, slang, pragmatic particles, and code-switching—that signal geographic and class positioning, stance, gendered identities, and moral alignments. Dialect and register are therefore not 'ornamental': they are load-bearing cues for characterization and social critique.

This article argues that a functionalist approach—specifically Skopos theory—offers an analytically robust and ethically transparent way to negotiate the triad of demands in Saudi comedy subtitling: (a) humorous effect, (b) dialect/register marking, and (c) identity cues. Skopos theory treats translation as purposeful intercultural action whose solutions are selected according to target-text function(s) specified in a commission or brief (Vermeer, 2000; Reiß & Vermeer, 2014). In streaming contexts, however, purposes are rarely singular: subtitles are expected simultaneously to entertain, enable comprehension, conform to platform style guides, and avoid reputational risk. Functionalism is therefore not a license for arbitrary domestication; rather, it is a framework for making competing purposes explicit, ranking them, and evaluating solutions against the negotiated hierarchy. Nord's concept of loyalty is central here: translators are responsible to multiple stakeholders (source-text producers, commissioners, target audiences) and must justify transformations that reframe identities or satirical targets (Nord, 1997).

The article makes three contributions oriented to Babel's readership. First, it develops a skopos-driven conceptualization of Saudi comedy subtitling that treats humor, dialect, and identity cues as functional variables rather than marginal 'losses'. Second, it proposes an operational decision framework—usable for translator training and for research coding—linking brief parameters to strategy selection under subtitling constraints. Third, it demonstrates the framework through worked Saudi Arabic examples presented with Arabic script, transliteration, gloss, and paired English subtitle solutions aligned with alternative briefs. While the examples are illustrative (constructed from widely attested Saudi colloquial patterns rather than extracted verbatim from copyrighted scripts), they model how a functionalist analysis can be made explicit, replicable, and critique-ready.

The following research questions guide the discussion:

1. RQ1: How can Skopos theory and the loyalty principle be operationalized to guide Arabic–English subtitling decisions in Saudi comedy?
2. RQ2: Which strategy clusters best manage humor, dialect features, and identity cues under streaming-era subtitling constraints?
3. RQ3: What evaluative criteria allow researchers and practitioners to assess subtitle adequacy in relation to a clearly articulated skopos hierarchy?

2. Theoretical and Disciplinary Grounding

Functionalist translation theories emerged as a reorientation away from source-text primacy toward translation as situated social action. In Vermeer's formulation, the decisive factor is the skopos—the purpose of the translational action—specified in a commission (Vermeer, 2000). Reiß and Vermeer's general theory of translational action conceptualizes translation as an expert activity embedded in communicative situations, where texts are produced and used for particular audiences and functions (Reiß & Vermeer, 2014). For audiovisual translation, this orientation is particularly apt because subtitles are necessarily selective: much meaning remains available through the audio track and visual channel (gesture, prosody, mise-en-scène), and subtitle text must be

economical to be readable (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2020).

Nord's elaboration of functionalism adds an ethical dimension via loyalty. While adequacy is measured against skopos-defined goals, translators retain responsibility to the source-text sender and other stakeholders. Loyalty constrains 'anything goes' interpretations of Skopos theory by requiring accountable mediation, especially when transformations may reframe identities, satire, or interpersonal relations (Nord, 1997). In subtitling, where institutional constraints can push toward normalization and risk avoidance, loyalty encourages transparency about why particular cues are retained, adapted, or mitigated.

Humor studies helps specify what subtitles must preserve. Linguistic theories such as Raskin's semantic script theory (Raskin, 1985) and Attardo's developments in the general theory of verbal humor (Attardo, 1994) highlight that jokes are effects produced by opposed scripts, incongruity, and pragmatic inferencing rather than by isolated lexical items. In translation, humor is often treated as a boundary case where formal equivalence is unstable, and where translators may need to pursue functional equivalence, substitution, or compensation (Attardo, 2002; Chiaro, 2010; Zabalbeascoa, 1996). Work in The Translator's humor-focused issues underscores the methodological challenge: similarity and 'faithfulness' in humor translation must be operationalized in relation to mechanisms, effects, and audience processing (Vandaele, 2002).

Subtitling scholarship provides the technical ecology. Subtitles must respect constraints of time, space, and segmentation; they typically condense speech and normalize variation to maintain readability (Gottlieb, 1992; Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2020). Pedersen (2011) foregrounds the norm-governed nature of subtitle practices, particularly in relation to extralinguistic cultural references, while Karamitroglou's (1998) proposed subtitling standards illustrate professional pressures toward consistent readability.

Sociolinguistic identity theory clarifies what dialect features 'do' in Saudi comedy. Identity is interactionally produced via stance and style, and linguistic features index personae and social positioning (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Coupland, 2007). Agha's (2007) concept of enregisterment explains how bundles of forms become recognized as social registers linked to character types—exactly the mechanism exploited in comedy when a figure is recognizable as 'the bureaucrat', 'the youth', or 'the moralist'. In Arabic, diglossia and dialectal differentiation provide particularly rich resources for such indexical work. Gulf and Saudi varieties contrast with Modern Standard Arabic in formality, authority, and genre association, making style-shifting a common comedic technique (Holes, 2003, 2004).

Recent empirical work on Saudi audiovisual content adds timeliness. Ali et al. (2024), for example, analyze the subtitling of Saudi Arabic slang into English in a Netflix-distributed film context, highlighting tensions between slang originality, concision, and humor. Alharthi and Almehmadi (2024) examine how Netflix English subtitles may shape English-speaking viewers' reception of Saudi dark humor in Masameer County, underscoring that subtitle decisions do not simply transfer meaning but curate genre perception and the intensity of satire. These studies point to a gap that the present model addresses: the need for an evaluative framework that links subtitle choices to explicit purposes and stakeholder responsibilities rather than treating them as decontextualized micro-techniques.

3. Methodological Positioning: Model-Building with Worked Examples

This article is a theoretically driven, practice-facing contribution that develops and operationalizes a functionalist model for Saudi comedy subtitling. Rather than reporting a full-scale corpus study, it undertakes a structured synthesis of three research strands—functionalism, audiovisual translation norms, and humor/identity scholarship—and translates them into an explicit decision framework.

To demonstrate operationalization, the article provides worked examples presented in Arabic script, transliteration, and gloss, with paired English subtitle options aligned with alternative briefs. The examples are deliberately labeled as illustrative and constructed. This choice serves two purposes. First, it avoids copyright and access issues associated with reproducing substantial dialogue from commercial productions. Second, it allows methodological clarity: each example is designed to foreground a specific problem cluster (e.g., taboo play, dialect indexing, mock formality, code-switching) and to show how skopos hierarchies change subtitle solutions.

The constructed examples are genre-authentic. They draw on widely attested Saudi colloquial routines and pragmatic markers described in Arabic sociolinguistic accounts (Holes, 2003, 2004) and on recurrent

subtitling challenges reported in recent studies of Saudi content (Ali et al., 2024; Alharthi & Almehmadi, 2024). Importantly, they are treated as templates for analysis rather than as evidence for frequency claims. The framework can thus be readily extended into corpus work, where the same analytic categories can be applied to authentic subtitle tracks.

4. Subtitling Constraints and The Streaming Commission

Subtitling operates under severe constraints of time, space, and readability. Subtitle lines must fit within limited screen real estate, appear long enough to be read comfortably, and be segmented so that viewers can process text without missing key visual cues (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2020). These constraints typically induce condensation: repetitions, discourse particles, and culturally routine formulae may be reduced or omitted because they are costly in characters yet essential to interpersonal meaning.

Streaming distribution intensifies the relevance of the translation brief. Subtitle tracks are produced within industrial workflows with templates, quality-control checkpoints, and platform style guides. Translators may receive timed templates that already fix segmentation, leaving limited room for re-timing humor. At the same time, streaming platforms address diverse audiences: viewers may range from Arabic learners relying heavily on subtitles to monolingual Anglophones for whom subtitles are the sole access point. A commission that does not specify which audience is primary implicitly forces the subtitler to guess—and those guesses are precisely what Skopos theory calls for making explicit.

From a Skopos perspective, the key step is to articulate the brief explicitly. For Saudi comedy subtitles, an analytically defensible brief typically specifies: (i) target audience familiarity with Arabic and Gulf cultures, (ii) genre positioning (sitcom, satire, dark comedy), (iii) expected tolerance for taboo and political/religious allusions, (iv) platform constraints (line length, reading speed, censorship/sensitivity requirements), and (v) desired degree of 'local color'. Briefs can be reconstructed for research by triangulating paratexts, observed subtitle patterns, and available platform guidance. Without such reconstruction, evaluative claims about 'good' or 'bad' subtitles risk collapsing into taste rather than analysis.

Saudi comedy, moreover, often relies on the rapid alternation of registers and on spoken particles that do substantial pragmatic work. Subtitling norms that prioritize brevity can inadvertently erase precisely those markers that cue irony and stance. Thus, the commission must treat pragmatic meaning as part of the deliverable: it is not only 'what is said' but also 'how it is said' that carries comedic and identity effects.

5. Humor as A Multimodal, Timed Effect in Subtitles

Comedy requires subtitles to preserve not only meaning but timing and recognizability of comic intent. Many jokes are 'distributed' across semiotic modes: a line is funny because of what the camera shows, an actor's prosody, or a pause before the punchline. Subtitles that over-explain can blunt surprise; subtitles that under-specify can make irony invisible. Humor theories clarify what needs preserving.

Raskin's (1985) model emphasizes the activation of opposed scripts, while Attardo's (1994) framework highlights knowledge resources such as target, situation, and narrative strategy. For subtitle practice, these models imply a two-step diagnostic: (i) identify the joke's mechanism (incongruity, taboo, ambiguity, parody, hyperbole), and (ii) identify the minimal cues needed for the target audience to reconstruct that mechanism under reading constraints. In many cases, preserving the mechanism is more important than preserving the exact lexicon; where the mechanism is non-transferable (e.g., phonological pun), subtitlers may rely on constrained compensation—introducing a different humorous cue nearby that fits character voice and scene rhythm (Chiaro, 2010; Attardo, 2002).

Saudi comedy intensifies this challenge because humor is frequently anchored in locally saturated stance-taking—mock politeness, teasing solidarity, and satire of institutional discourse. Dark humor, in particular, depends on moral tension and calibrated offensiveness; excessive mitigation may shift genre identity for the target audience. Reception-oriented research on Saudi dark humor suggests that subtitle choices can reframe how viewers categorize Saudi comedy and whether they perceive certain jokes as satirical critique or as mere eccentricity (Alharthi & Almehmadi, 2024). Functionalism therefore demands that genre intensity be treated as part of the skopos rather than as an optional 'extra'.

A practical implication follows: subtitle solutions should be evaluated scene-by-scene, not word-by-word.

If the humor mechanism is visual or prosodic, subtitles may legitimately be thinner; if the humor mechanism is verbal and inferential, subtitles must carry more of the load. Skopos hierarchies make this trade-off explicit and defendable.

6. Dialect Features and Identity Cues in Saudi Comedic Discourse

Saudi comedic dialogue exploits dialectal variation and style-shifting for characterization and social commentary. Saudi Arabic includes several regional varieties (e.g., Najdi, Hijazi) and is situated within broader Gulf dialect continua. Within Arabic diglossia, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is associated with formality and institutional authority, whereas dialects are associated with everyday interaction, intimacy, and locality (Holes, 2004). Comedy frequently leverages this contrast through mock-formal MSA and exaggerated bureaucratic phrasing to parody institutions.

Identity-oriented sociolinguistics provides conceptual tools for analyzing what dialect does in interaction. Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) framework treats identity as emergent in interaction through stance and indexical relations, while Coupland (2007) emphasizes style as strategic meaning-making. Agha's (2007) enregisterment explains how linguistic features circulate as recognizable 'voices' or personae. In Saudi comedy, such enregistered voices may include the self-important bureaucrat, the trendy youth, the moralizing elder, or the overconfident 'expert'. These personae are constituted through lexical choices (slang vs formal vocabulary), discourse particles (e.g., ترى tarā 'look/you know'), address terms (ياواجل yā rajjāl 'dude/man'), and formulaic expressions that can be sincere or ironic depending on context.

Subtitles face a representational dilemma with dialect. Directly mapping a Saudi dialect to an English regional dialect risks importing stereotypes that do not align with Saudi social meanings. Neutralization, however, erases stratification and voice differentiation. Ramos Pinto (2017) argues for multimodal frameworks that examine dialect representation beyond spoken forms, considering sociocultural positioning and the impact of strategies. A functionalist response is to treat dialect not as phonology to be mimicked but as social indexicality to be re-signaled: colloquial vs formal English, lexical choice, politeness routines, and pragmatic markers can approximate stance without importing external dialect stereotypes.

Religious formulae further complicate identity work. Expressions such as والله wallāh 'I swear', إن شاء الله in shā' Allāh 'God willing', or جزاك الله خير jazāk Allāh khayr 'may God reward you' may function as sincere piety, routine politeness, or irony. Literal translation may sound unusually pious in English; omission may erase pragmatic stance. Functionalism demands contextual decisions: when formulae are load-bearing for irony or moral critique, retention or marked equivalents may be required; when they are phatic, pragmatic substitution may preserve function more effectively.

Finally, Saudi comedic discourse is increasingly shaped by media globalization: code-switching into English (e.g., trend, marketing) can index youth identity and digital culture. Such switches are not simply lexical borrowings; they perform alignment with transnational media imaginaries, which subtitles must either mirror (by keeping the English word) or re-signal (by choosing a similarly 'global' marker).

7. A Skopos-Based Decision Framework for Saudi Comedy Subtitling

The proposed framework is organized around five components: (1) an explicit translation brief, (2) a hierarchy of purposes, (3) identification of load-bearing cues, (4) a constrained strategy repertoire, and (5) adequacy criteria for evaluation. The framework is intended to be usable both as a practical briefing/revision tool and as a research coding scheme.

7.1. The Translation Brief as an Instrument

In Skopos theory, the commission specifies the purpose and constraints of translational action (Vermeer, 2000). For Saudi comedy subtitles, a defensible brief includes: (i) target audience profile (global English users, uneven familiarity with Gulf cultures), (ii) viewing context (streaming, multi-device, binge-watching), (iii) genre positioning (satire, dark comedy, social comedy), (iv) institutional constraints (style guides, character limits, sensitivity policies), and (v) cultural intent (degree of foreignness and local specificity desired). A brief also specifies whether the subtitle track is expected to be 'invisible' (transparent and neutral) or to carry a taste of linguistic locality.

7.2. Purpose Hierarchy

Purposes must be ranked because subtitles cannot optimize all values simultaneously. A typical streaming-comedy hierarchy might be:

Primary: enable comedic uptake (recognition of jokes, irony, satire).
Secondary: preserve character voice and identity differentiation.
Tertiary: maintain readability and technical compliance.
Constraint: respect platform policies and stakeholder risk thresholds.

Different commissions will reorder these (e.g., family-oriented distribution may elevate risk avoidance). The framework requires this ordering to be explicit.

7.3. Load-Bearing Cues

Humor, dialect, and identity cues are treated as load-bearing when they are essential to (a) the joke mechanism, (b) characterization, or (c) the satirical target. Load-bearing cues include punchline triggers, taboo markers, mock-formal shifts into MSA, slang items enregistering youth or masculinity, and address terms indexing hierarchy or intimacy. Operationally, identifying load-bearing cues means asking: if this item is removed, will the viewer still be able to infer the intended stance and genre?

7.4. Strategy Repertoire Under Constraints

The framework defines a repertoire of strategies that can be combined, each linked to functional goals:

(1) Calibrated explicitation: minimal additions that unlock the joke or reference without overburdening reading speed.
(2) Selective retention/transliteration: keeping Arabic items that index identity (e.g., address terms) when inferable from context.
(3) Controlled substitution: replacing culture-bound slang/jokes with target-language equivalents matching pragmatic force and register.
(4) Constrained compensation: relocating humorous effect when the original mechanism cannot be carried over in the same position.
(5) Register mapping: using shifts between colloquial and formal English to mirror Arabic style-shifts and mock bureaucracy.
(6) Risk-sensitive mitigation: toning down taboo while still signaling markedness when transgression is part of the humor.

7.5. Strategy Matrix and Decision Heuristics

To make strategy selection replicable, the framework uses a 'brief → cue → strategy' matrix. Three brief parameters are particularly influential in Saudi comedy subtitling.

First is audience cultural proximity. Where the audience is assumed to have minimal knowledge of Saudi culture, humor-first subtitles may need to substitute or minimally explicate culture-bound cues. Where the audience is assumed to enjoy cultural discovery, subtitles can retain selected Arabic items and cultural references, provided they remain readable. Pedersen's (2011) work on extralinguistic cultural references is instructive here: retention can be effective when inferencing is supported by the visual track or by the narrative context.

Second is genre intensity and taboo tolerance. Dark comedy requires that transgressive stance be perceived as transgressive; if subtitles systematically sanitize taboo, the genre may be reclassified by viewers as 'quirky' rather than satirical. A skopos hierarchy that prioritizes genre intensity will therefore permit stronger lexical choices and allow pragmatic markers of sarcasm to remain visible. Conversely, a family-oriented commission may demand mitigation, in which case the translator's task is to preserve comedic framing (e.g., exaggeration, mockery) even while reducing explicit taboo. This is a classic case where adequacy is relative: mitigation can be adequate if it is demanded by the brief, but it must be evaluated in terms of whether the subtitle still signals markedness.

Third is identity representation. If a series uses dialect to mark social roles, subtitles must decide whether and how to preserve these differences. The framework recommends 'register mapping' rather than 'dialect

mapping': the subtitler uses shifts between colloquial, neutral, and formal English; selects stance markers (e.g., 'sir', 'buddy', 'come on'); and manages politeness routines to keep character voices distinct without importing irrelevant target-culture regional stereotypes. This aligns with loyalty: the goal is to preserve the source's identity work without adding new social meanings.

These heuristics culminate in an adequacy check: a subtitle is adequate if, given the explicit brief, it enables the intended comedic inference and preserves the relevant identity cues at a level sufficient for characterization, without introducing unintended sociocultural stereotypes or violating institutional constraints.

8. Worked Saudi Arabic Examples with Transliteration: Skopos-Driven Subtitle Options

This section demonstrates how the framework can be operationalized at the micro-level. Each example is presented with Arabic script, simplified transliteration (Appendix A), a literal gloss, and two subtitle options aligned with contrasting briefs. Option A assumes a brief that prioritizes comedic uptake for a broad Anglophone audience (primary skopos: humor; secondary: voice differentiation). Option B assumes a brief that prioritizes cultural specificity and 'local color' while remaining readable (primary: humor + cultural distinctiveness; secondary: identity indexing). In both options, the goal is functional adequacy under subtitling constraints rather than exhaustive verbalization of all spoken nuances.

Note: The examples are constructed yet genre-authentic, drawing on widely attested Saudi colloquial patterns. They are offered as analytic templates rather than corpus evidence.

ST (Saudi Arabic)	Transliteration	Literal gloss	Function (humor/dialect/identity)	Subtitle A (humor-first)	Subtitle B (local-color)
يا رجّال، لا تسوي فيها فيلسوف!	yā rajjāl, lā tsawwī fīhā faylasūf!	'Man, don't act like a philosopher!'	Teasing solidarity; masculine camaraderie marker (yā rajjāl); mock expertise.	Dude, don't play philosopher.	Ya rajjāl—don't play philosopher.
إيش عنيه؟ تبغاني أضحك بغصب؟	ēsh yaʿnī? tabghānī aḍḥak ghaṣb?	'What does that mean? You want me to laugh by force?'	Hijazi-style ēsh; complaint humor via exaggerated demand.	What do you mean—laugh on command?	Eesh, what—laugh on command?
نود إحاطتكم علمًا بأنّ… خلاص يا أخي!	n a w a d d u iḥāṭatakum ʿilman bi-anna… khalāṣ yā akhī!	'We would like to inform you that… enough, brother!'	Mock-bureaucratic MSA → abrupt dialect switch; humor from register clash.	We'd like to inform you that—oh, give it a rest!	We'd like to inform you that—khalāṣ, man!
هذا كله تسويق… بس ترند، فاهم؟	hādhā kulluh taswīq… bas ʿashān yaṣīr trend, fihimt?	'This is all marketing… just so it becomes a trend, got it?'	Code-switching; youth persona; meta-media humor.	It's all marketing—just to make it trend, got it?	It's all marketing—so it goes 'trend', got it?
مخك بطاطس، والله.	m o k h k h a k b a ṭ ā ṭ i s , wallāh.	'Your brain is potatoes, I swear.'	Comic insult metaphor + wallāh as stance intensifier.	You've got potato brain, I swear.	Potato brain, wallah.
عيب عليك يا ولد!	ʿayb ʿalayk yā walad!	'Shame on you, boy!'	Moralizing register; hierarchy cue; identity stance.	Shame on you, kid!	ʿAyb—shame on you, kid!
جزاك الله خير… يا سلام!	jazāk Allāh khayr… yā salām!	'May God reward you… wow/yeah right!'	Religious formula used sarcastically; irony must be signaled.	Thanks a lot… sure.	Jazak Allah khayr… sure.

من ق ّط باب اوق ّط س الناس باب ه.	man ṭagg bāb al-nās ṭaggū bābah.	‘Whoever knocks on people’s door, they knock on his.’	Proverb as social warning; rhythm matters for humor/authority.	If you start trouble, it comes back to you.	Knock on people’s doors, they’ll knock on yours.
ذك ت نأ ترى اهي ف يوس ت ف ق ثم؟	tarā inta kidhā tsawwī fīhā muthaqaf?	‘Look, you’re acting cultured like that?’	Particle tarā as stance; mock pretension; Najdi cue.	So now you’re ‘cultured’, huh?	Tarā, so now you’re ‘cultured’, huh?
ر ك ت ال ب ع وض ومل ا ... ترى الدن اي ة ط س ي ب.	lā tkabbir al-mawḍūʿ … tarā al-dunyā basīṭa.	‘Don’t make the issue big… life is simple.’	Calming formula; tarā indexes familiar admonition.	Don’t overthink it. Life’s simple.	Don’t overthink it—tarā life’s simple.
اهلّخ ،خ ي ش اي ع لى الله!	yā shaykh, khallhā ʿalā Allāh!	‘Sheikh, leave it to God!’	Address term + religious stance; can be sincere or ironic.	Man, just let it go.	Ya shaykh—leave it to God.
انأ ؟ل ب ه ت س ت ! ك ل ي اض ف وم	tistahbil? anā mu fāḍī lak!	‘Are you messing around? I’m not free for you!’	Colloquial accusation; confrontational but comedic in tone.	Are you kidding? I don’t have time for this.	You messing around? I’m not free for you.

8.1. Micro-Analysis: Why These Choices Work

Example 1 shows a frequent Saudi teasing pattern: the vocative yā rajjāl indexes a stance of male camaraderie and permits a sharper tease without escalating conflict. A literal rendering ‘O man’ is pragmatically odd in English; Option A chooses ‘Dude’ to preserve solidarity and rhythm, while Option B retains ya rajjāl as a compact local-color marker. Both are adequate under different briefs.

Example 3 illustrates register clash. Comedy arises from the speaker’s sudden pivot from mock-bureaucratic MSA (nawaddu iḥāṭatakum ʿilman…) to colloquial impatience (khalāṣ yā akhī). Register mapping is the core strategy: the subtitle begins with a stiff, formal English clause and then breaks it with an abrupt colloquial interruption. Option B retains khalāṣ to preserve the audible Arabic switch, relying on the viewer’s inference that the term marks a move into everyday talk.

Examples 5 and 6 foreground a key loyalty issue. Rendering mokhkhak baṭāṭis as ‘potato brain’ keeps the absurd metaphor and humorous insult without importing target-culture slurs or social categories absent in the source. Similarly, ʿayb is an identity-laden moral term; ‘shame on you’ conveys evaluation, while retention of ʿayb can signal the cultural register of moral admonition. These choices are constrained by ethical responsibility: subtitles should not ‘upgrade’ a mild insult into a harsher one, nor shift moral evaluation into a different social ideology.

Example 7 shows how religious formulae can be ironic. Without additional marking, a literal ‘May God reward you’ can read as sincere piety in English. Option A therefore uses a conventional English sarcasm frame (‘Thanks a lot… sure’) to make irony legible; Option B retains jazāk Allāh khayr but anchors sarcasm with ‘sure’. This is calibrated explicitation: a small addition unlocks the intended stance.

Examples 9 and 10 illustrate the pragmatic particle tarā, common in Najdi/Gulf discourse, which frames an utterance as a reminder or stance marker (‘look/you know’). Subtitles rarely have room to render such particles directly. Option A often omits tarā but compensates through English discourse markers (‘So now…’, ‘Don’t…’), whereas Option B retains tarā selectively when it can function as a recognizable flavoring element. Either can be adequate depending on whether the brief values maximal readability or local-color indexing.

E xample 12 (tistahbil?) is a colloquial accusation that can be playful or confrontational. The subtitle must choose force calibration: too mild (‘Are you joking?’) may flatten conflict; too strong (‘Are you insane?’) may over-escalate. Option A chooses ‘Are you kidding?’ to keep interpersonal heat while staying within broadly acceptable English colloquialism.

8.2. Dialect, Identity, and The Danger of False Equivalence

A recurring temptation is to map Saudi dialect cues onto English regional dialects (e.g., Cockney, Southern US) in the name of 'equivalence'. This framework recommends resisting that temptation in most cases. Such mapping can import class, race, and historical meanings that do not align with the Saudi context, thereby violating loyalty and introducing new stereotypes. Register mapping, stance markers, and selective retention allow subtitlers to preserve the pragmatic and identity effects of dialect without re-stereotyping.

8.3. Where Compensation is Justified

Compensation is justified when the source's humor mechanism is untranslatable under subtitle constraints (e.g., phonological pun) or when the joke depends on audience knowledge unavailable to the target audience. In such cases, the functional aim is to preserve comedic rhythm and character voice, even if the specific lexical trigger changes. However, the framework constrains compensation: the compensatory cue must be compatible with character identity and with the scene's ethical alignment. In satire, for example, compensatory humor that shifts the target of ridicule from institutions to marginalized groups would be disloyal and analytically indefensible.

8.4 Cultural References, Transliteration, and 'Local Color' Under Constraint

Saudi comedy subtitles routinely confront culture-specific items whose function is not only referential but also indexical: food names, clothing, institutional acronyms, and everyday honorifics can signal social class, region, and generational positioning. In a functionalist framework, such items are evaluated as potential load-bearing cues. If a term is merely referential and visually supported (e.g., a dish shown on screen), retention or transliteration may be low-cost and high-yield. If a term is central to a joke or to the satire's target, the subtitle may need controlled explicitation or substitution to secure comedic uptake.

Streaming subtitles frequently aim for 'smooth' English, which can motivate replacement of Saudi items with generic equivalents. Yet genericization can dilute the comedic texture and may erase precisely the 'Saudi-ness' that global audiences seek. Option B in the worked examples illustrates a middle path: selective retention of compact Arabic markers (wallāh, ʿayb, khalāṣ) that are inferable and that perform stance work. The same logic applies to cultural references: the subtitler can retain terms that are short, visually anchored, or widely recognizable, and can add minimal gloss only when the humor depends on understanding.

Consider the following illustrative items (not tied to a single production):

- كبسة (kabsa): If the scene visually shows the dish, the subtitle can retain "kabsa" without gloss; if the joke contrasts 'kabsa vs sushi' to parody cosmopolitan taste, a brief gloss such as "kabsa (spiced rice)" may be warranted once.
- ثوب / شماغ (thawb / shmāgh): When clothing is salient to identity portrayal (e.g., a character 'trying to look official'), retention can preserve local semiotics; however, over-glossing in fast dialogue may burden reading. A pragmatic alternative is a functional label ("in full traditional dress") when the garment term itself is not load-bearing.
- ديوانية / استراحة (dīwāniyya / istrāḥa): These spaces index gendered sociability and class. If the scene's humor relies on the social script of 'the men's gathering', a short functional rendering ("the majlis") can preserve both local color and recognizability.
- أبشر (abshir): This response formula indexes readiness and politeness; in subtitles it can be rendered as "You got it" (Option A) or retained as "Abshir" in a local-color brief when supported by tone and context.

Two operational principles help prevent both exoticization and flattening. First, retention should be selective and systematic: retain the same class of items for a given skopos (e.g., address terms and stance particles) rather than sprinkling Arabic randomly, which can create an 'ethnic seasoning' effect. Second, any explicitation should be calibrated to subtitling constraints: gloss once, early, and only if it unlocks the joke or the plot. These principles align with Pedersen's (2011) emphasis on balancing accessibility and source-culture presence, while keeping loyalty in view: subtitles should not turn Saudi cultural routines into anthropological exposition unless the commission explicitly demands an educational skopos.

In short, 'local color' is not a binary choice between foreignization and domestication. For Saudi comedy, it is a functional variable managed through selective retention, minimal glossing, and register mapping. When handled systematically, local color can enhance comedic authenticity and identity portrayal without compromising readability.

9. Implications for Research Design, Training, and Quality Assessment

9.1. Corpus-Based Functionalist Annotation

An empirical extension of this model can be implemented as a parallel corpus study. A season of a Saudi comedy series with official English subtitles can be aligned at utterance/subtitle level. Researchers can annotate: humor type (taboo, irony, parody, wordplay), dialect cue type (slang, particles, code-switching, mock MSA), identity function (stance, social role indexing), and subtitle strategy (retention, substitution, explicitation, compensation). Crucially, evaluation must specify the skopos hierarchy: adequacy is judged relative to that hierarchy rather than against a single equivalence criterion.

9.2. Reception Studies as Skopos Validation

Because comedy is an effect, reception studies are particularly suitable. The same scene can be subtitled in two skopos variants (humor-first vs local-color) and tested with Anglophone viewers for comprehension, humor appreciation, and perceived character identity. Such studies can also examine whether retained Arabic items (e.g., wallāh, ʿayb) enhance perceived authenticity or instead increase cognitive load. Work on Saudi dark humor reception suggests that subtitle choices shape genre categorization and tolerance thresholds (Alharthi & Almehmadi, 2024).

9.3. Training and Revision Workflows

In translator education, the framework supports a move from technique lists to brief-driven justification. Students can be asked to draft a brief for a scene, rank purposes, identify load-bearing cues, and then justify strategies in terms of adequacy and loyalty. In professional revision, the framework provides an audit trail: if a revision removes slang or religious formulae, the reviser must justify how comedic intent and identity work remain adequate under the agreed skopos. This can also be used to negotiate with commissioners, making visible how certain constraints (e.g., strict character limits) systematically erase identity cues.

9.4. Quality Assessment Beyond Error Counting

Subtitling quality is often operationalized as error counts (mistranslations, omissions). For comedy, this is insufficient. A skopos-based QA can incorporate functional criteria—comic timing, irony recognizability, voice differentiation—and can make disagreements discussable. Two subtitle solutions can be different yet both adequate if they respond to different briefs. The framework thus supports a more accountable, research-aligned notion of quality.

10. Ethics, Loyalty, and The Politics of Representing 'Saudi-Ness'

Saudi comedy is frequently self-reflexive: it jokes about social change, bureaucracy, generational tension, and the friction between global media and local norms. Subtitles therefore participate in the politics of representation. A subtitle track can implicitly 'explain' Saudi society to outsiders, and in doing so may exoticize, sanitize, or moralize. Functionalism does not remove this risk; it makes it discussable by asking whose purposes are prioritized.

Nord's loyalty principle is particularly relevant in three ethical hotspots. The first is stereotype importation. If a translator maps Saudi dialect to a target-culture dialect associated with low status, the subtitle may impose a classed caricature not present in the source. Loyalty demands that identity cues be re-signaled without imposing foreign social histories.

The second hotspot is taboo and moral discourse. Saudi comedy often uses mild taboo or moral vocabulary (e.g., ʿayb) to negotiate social boundaries. When subtitles erase these cues, the moral ecology of the scene can change: characters may appear less socially embedded or less constrained by norms, which can shift how audiences interpret satire. Conversely, overly literal translation of routine religious formulae can

make characters sound more solemn or doctrinal than intended. Here, ethical subtitling involves recognizing that religious language can be phatic, ironic, or moralizing, and translating for stance rather than for lexical equivalence.

The third hotspot is institutional constraint. Streaming subtitles may be edited under sensitivity policies that are not transparent to viewers. A functionalist approach encourages translators and researchers to treat such policies as part of the commission rather than as invisible 'noise'. In research writing, this implies that critique should differentiate between translator choice and institutional requirement where possible. In practice, it implies that translators should document how constraints affect humor and identity, so that commissioners can understand what is being tradedoff.

Ultimately, loyalty is not only to the source text but also to the communicative intent of satire and to the dignity of represented groups. A skopos-driven subtitle that achieves laughs by shifting ridicule toward marginalized targets is not adequate, even if it is entertaining, because it violates the ethical commitments implicit in responsible translation practice.

11. Conclusion

Arabic–English subtitling of Saudi comedy is a complex translational action in which humor, dialect features, and identity cues interact under strict technical constraints and the institutional pressures of streaming distribution. This article has argued that Skopos theory, supplemented by Nord's loyalty principle, offers a principled framework for managing these interactions. By centering the translation brief, ranking competing purposes, identifying load-bearing cues, and selecting from a constrained strategy repertoire, subtitlers and researchers can replace impressionistic judgments about 'loss' with explicit evaluations of adequacy.

The worked Saudi Arabic examples illustrate how the same source line can warrant different subtitle solutions depending on whether the commission prioritizes humor-first accessibility or local-color identity indexing. Future work can operationalize the model through corpus annotation and reception studies, testing which skopos hierarchies best preserve comedic uptake and ethical representation for particular audiences. In doing so, Saudi comedy subtitling becomes a productive site for Babel's enduring concerns: purpose, norms, ethics, and the translation of socially embedded humor in global media circulation.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Transliteration Conventions for Saudi Arabic Examples

A.1 General Principles

- Simplified phonemic transliteration is used rather than full IPA, prioritizing readability.
- Long vowels are marked where contrastive for meaning or rhythm.
- Emphatic consonants are not over-marked unless relevant to humor or identity cues.
- Glottal stop (hamza) is omitted unless contrastive.
- Stress is not marked, as intonation is conveyed through gloss and contextual explanation.

A.2 Consonants

Arabic	Transliteration	Example
ب	b	bas
ت	t	tarā
ج	j	rajjāl
خ	kh	khalāṣ
د	d	dīn
ر	r	rajjāl
س	s	taswīq
ش	sh	shaykh
ط	ṭ	ṭagg
ع	ʿ	ʿayb
ق	g / q	ṭagg (Najdi/Gulf realization)
غ	gh	ghaṣb

A.3 Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Transliteration	Example
ـَ	a	rajjāl
ـِ	i	fihimt
ـُ	u	khalāṣ
ا	ā	wallāh
و	ū	faylasūf
ي	ī	basīṭa

A.4 Pragmatic Particles and Formulae

- Highly frequent Saudi/Gulf discourse particles (e.g., tarā, wallāh, ʿayb) are transliterated consistently and treated as stance markers, not lexical content.
- Their pragmatic value is explained in context rather than encoded morphologically.

Appendix B. Glossing Conventions

B.1 Glossing Principles

- Glosses are functional rather than morpheme-by-morpheme, reflecting the article's focus on humor, stance, and identity rather than grammatical description.
- Glosses aim to explain pragmatic force, not literal equivalence.
- Idiomatic or formulaic expressions are glossed idiomatically.
- Religious expressions are glossed with attention to pragmatic usage (sincere, phatic, ironic).

B.2 Glossing Symbols

Symbol	Meaning
'…'	Functional or idiomatic gloss
(lit.)	Literal meaning when relevant
[ ]	Pragmatic or contextual clarification

B.3 Example

- Arabic: مخّك طباطس، واللّه
- Transliteration: mokhkhak baṭāṭis, wallāh
- Gloss: 'Your brain is potatoes [comic insult], I swear [stance intensifier]'

Appendix C. Strategy Typology Used in Example Analysis

C.1 Strategy Definitions

- Calibrated Explicitation: Minimal addition to make humor, irony, or cultural reference inferable without overloading reading time.
- Selective Retention / Transliteration: Retention of short Arabic items (e.g., wallāh, ʿayb) that function as identity or stance markers and are inferable from context.
- Controlled Substitution: Replacement with a target-language expression of equivalent pragmatic force and register, not lexical meaning.
- Constrained Compensation: Relocation or reformulation of humorous effect when the original mechanism is non-transferable under subtitling constraints.
- Register Mapping: Rendering Arabic style-shifting (e.g., colloquial ↔ mock-MSA) through shifts between informal, neutral, and formal English.
- Risk-Sensitive Mitigation: Moderation of taboo or sensitive content while preserving markedness and comedic framing.

C.2 Strategy–Function Mapping

Function	Preferred strategies
Punchline humor	Substitution / Compensation
Dialect identity	Register mapping / Retention
Religious irony	Explicitation / Retention
Bureaucratic parody	Register mapping
Youth persona	Code-switch preservation

Appendix D. Model Translation Brief Templates

Brief A: Humor-First Global Accessibility

- Target audience: General Anglophone streaming viewers.
- Primary skopos: Immediate comedic uptake.
- Secondary skopos: Clear characterization.
- Cultural load: Low–moderate.
- Preferred strategies: Controlled substitution; register mapping; minimal retention of Arabic items.
- Constraints: High readability; avoid viewer confusion.

Brief B: Humor + Local Identity Preservation

- Target audience: Culturally curious global viewers.
- Primary skopos: Comedic effect with Saudi flavor.
- Secondary skopos: Identity and register differentiation.
- Cultural load: Moderate–high.
- Preferred strategies: Selective retention/transliteration; calibrated explicitation; register mapping.
- Constraints: Maintain subtitle economy; avoid exoticization.

Appendix E. Ethical Adequacy Checklist (Loyalty-Based)

Checklist

A subtitle solution should be considered adequate if it:

☐ Preserves the intended target of humor or satire.
☐ Avoids importing foreign stereotypes absent in the source.
☐ Signals irony or moral stance where pragmatically required.
☐ Maintains character voice differentiation.
☐ Is justifiable with reference to the explicit translation brief.