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A Comparative Analysis of One Piece Dubbing: Arabic and English Localization, Cultural Adaptation, and Ideological Mediation

Mohammed Kasmi

Mohamed First University, Oujda, Morocco.

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***Corresponding author:** Mohammed Kasmi

Abstract

The present study is a case study that explores the Arabic and English dubbing of the Japanese anime 'One Piece' from a translation studies perspective. It examines the linguistic, cultural, and ideological shifts that take place in the dubbing of One Piece for two target languages, drawing on Venuti's (1995) concepts of domestication and foreignization, Nida and Taber's (1969) functional or dynamic equivalence, Toury's (1995) descriptive approach to translation norms, and Even-Zohar's (1990) polysystem theory. Based on a qualitative contrastive analysis of selected episodes as well as character dialogues and cultural references, this study concludes that Arabic and English dubbing are very different in translation policies. The findings reveal that the original 4Kids English version depends heavily on domestication, while the later Funimation version is more source-oriented. The Venus Centre/Space Power Arabic dubbing indicates a special adaptation in terms of ideas, ideology, and culture, such as the depiction of alcohol, violence, and visuals. The article argues that these differences should be interpreted in relation to the target audiences, broadcasting institutions, and translation norms governing each version rather than through an absolute notion of fidelity.

Keywords: Audiovisual translation; dubbing; domestication; foreignization; functional equivalence; translation norms; censorship; localization.

1. Introduction

Japanese anime has become one of today's most commercially and culturally significant genres in audiovisual media over the last three decades (Huang, 2016). Originally serialized as a manga by Eiichiro Oda in Weekly Shōnen Jump magazine beginning in 1997, and adapted into an anime television series by Toei Animation in 1999, One Piece is one of the longest-running anime franchises and most widely distributed anime series in history ("One Piece,"

2026). The process of popularizing it from Japan to other parts of the world, hence, offers a productive case for the study of audiovisual translation (AVT) and localization, especially for examining how linguistic and cultural references are reconstructed for different audiences.

Dubbing, which is the replacement of the original dialogue track with voice performances in a target language (Luyken & Herbst,

1991), is one of the most used audiovisual modes through which anime reaches international audiences. The Arabic and English dubs of *One Piece* provide a particularly significant comparative case, as they were created in different institutional contexts, for different audiences, with distinct cultural backgrounds, linguistic norms, and contexts of reception. The English dub, which was largely produced by Funimation Entertainment, is produced for North American audiences and has undergone many changes in its dubbing practices since the controversial 4Kids version (Daniels, 2008). The Arabic dub produced by the pan-Arab satellite channel Space Toon and later MBC3 is aimed at children and youth in the Arabic-speaking area of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which is particularly sensitive to content, religion, and cultural values (Khalil & Kraidy, 2009).

This article situates its analysis in the context of the general theoretical framework of translation studies and AVT, highlighting how the two dubs represent different norms and strategies of translation. It assumes, as Lawrence Venuti (1995) argues, that translation is not a neutral process but always involves choices, which are ideologically and culturally embedded. Therefore, the comparison of the Arabic and English dubbing reveals the politics of cultural mediation in the globalized anime industry.

2. Theoretical Framework

AVT refers to the various modes used to translate audiovisual texts, such as movies, TV series, animation, and cartoons, into a different language and culture (Al Sharif, 2025; Bell, 1984). Among these modes, dubbing is very common in many European, Middle Eastern, and Latin American markets, as listeners prefer to hear screen characters speak their language (Chaume, 2020). Dubbing is a form of translation that requires isochrony, balancing between semantic fidelity, lip-sync, and prosodic fit (Chaume, 2012); and it takes into consideration what Patrick Cattrysse (1992) calls “semiotic constraints” of the audiovisual medium.

The concept of diagonal translation developed by Henrik Gottlieb (1994) is particularly relevant to the dubbing of anime, which suggests that the source text has not only a verbal but also a visual, musical, and kinetic meaning. Therefore, the dubbing translator has to work within the constraints of the image track and make sure that the target-language performance is synchronized with the characters' mouth movements, gestures, and actions to avoid compromises on semantic and stylistic fidelity.

2.1 Domestication and Foreignization

The binary of domestication and foreignization proposed by Venuti (1995) has been one of the most effective tools for the analysis of translation products. Domestication is a strategy that promotes the foreignness of the source text to meet the cultural expectations of the target readership, resulting in a translation that reads and sounds fluent and natural in the target culture. Foreignization, however, leaves traces of the otherness of the foreign culture visible in the domestic context.

In the context of anime dubbing, domestication often refers to the replacement of Japanese cultural references with equivalents that are more common in the target culture, such as food, places, and character names. Foreignization, on the other hand, may preserve Japanese honorifics, untranslated terms, or culturally specific concepts. As will be illustrated in the corpus of this study, the Arabic and English dubs of *One Piece* instantiate the adoption of these strategies.

2.2 Functional Translation

Nida (1969) holds that translation should produce an effect equivalent to that of the source text in its readers. This refers to functional equivalence, which is relevant to the analysis of the corpus of this study. When it comes to dubbing anime for younger viewers, functional equivalence can mean that the emphasis is on humour, emotion, or story rather than on literal meaning in the source text. However, as Chesterman (1997) points out, the term equivalence is not the same in all cultures and situations, as it depends on the norms, expectations, and goals of the target culture

2.3 Polysystem Theory and Translation Norms

The two dubs can also be placed in their cultural and institutional settings by adopting Even Zohar's (1990) polysystem theory. Translation occupies a peripheral or central position in the cultural polysystem of a given society, and its norms are shaped by the broader dynamics of that system. In markets where translated products are more widespread than locally produced animation. The Arab world is a case in point, as dubbed anime occupies a central position in youth culture, which, however, undergoes significant pressure to adapt foreign content to local norms.

3. The Two Dubs: Institutional and Historical Contexts

3.1 The English Dub: From 4Kids to Funimation

4Kids Entertainment (2004-2007) was the first English dubbing company to make the anime infamous for its aggressive domestication dubbing approach (“One piece,” 2026).

4Kids removed references to death, alcohol, and weaponry, changed nationalities and character names, replaced Japanese music with original compositions, and edited the visual track to remove images found culturally inappropriate, such as cigarettes. Sanji's cigarette, for example, was replaced with a lollipop, which garnered special attention for its strange incongruity with the character's grown-up persona and culinary identity. The Funimation, which took the license in 2007, adopted an entirely different approach (“One Piece,” 2026). Its dubbing pursued a translation strategy that was much more faithful to the tone, characterization, and cultural particularism of the source text. The characters' names were re-introduced, death was not euphemized, and Sanji's lollipop was canonized as a cigarette. The Funimation dub thus represents less radical domestication than it is a balance, one that Venuti (1995) sees as moving toward foreignization as opposed to its predecessor (4Kids).

3.2 The Arabic Dub: Localization for the MENA Market

The Arabic dubbed version of *One Piece* was marketed towards a young Muslim audience in the MENA area, through the broadcasting channel Spacetoon, followed by other pan-Arab children's channels (“One Piece Wiki,” 2025). This context, however, imposed unique constraints on the translation process, both commercial and socio-cultural. The Arabic dub was made during the period when the Pan-Arab satellite TV market was growing rapidly, including channels such as Spacetoon, Majid, and more recently the MBC 3 network, which were competing for the children's market. By the early 2000s, anime, including *One Piece*, was already hugely popular in the Arab world (“One Piece Wiki,” 2025). The creative challenges faced by the Arabic dubbing team were to create performances that would captivate and entertain young viewers, while the normative challenges were to ensure that

the content would be deemed appropriate by parents, broadcasters, and regulatory bodies in a variety of MENA contexts.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case-study approach, which combines descriptive translation analysis, contrastive textual analysis, and multimodal analysis of some selected dubbed scenes. The goal is to discover the recurrent patterns of translation and then interpret them based on the norms and institutional situations of the target culture.

The study follows four stages of analysis. First, the dialogue from the Japanese source is set as the starting point of analysis. Second, the equivalent Arabic and English dubbed dialogues are investigated at the lexical, syntactic, pragmatic, and stylistic levels. Third, verbal changes are compared with visual and acoustic contents to identify whether these modifications are reinforced or motivated by the dubbing context. Fourth, the observed strategies are analysed in terms of the concepts of domestication, foreignization, functional equivalence, translation norms, and ideological mediation.

The corpus is a purposive selection of scenes taken from *One Piece* versions. These episodes have been chosen to represent common translation phenomena and do not form a representative sample of the series as a whole. The scenes are taken from Episode 1 (Luffy's introduction and Shanks's drinking), Episode 3 (Axe-Hand Morgan), Episode 20 (Sanji's cigarette), Episode 36 (Bell-mère's death), and Episode 44 (religious exclamation).

Since the aim is to capture an analytical depth, purposive sampling is appropriate because the scenes are chosen for their cultural, ideological, pragmatic, or multimodal salience in terms of the translation decisions they make. The study does not assert that all episodes exhibit the same pattern. Rather, the examples are provided in order to illustrate recurring patterns explored in light of the institutional development of the versions.

The main unit of analysis is the audiovisual translation unit, that is, an utterance or a series of utterances in which the source dialogue and the realization in the target language can be considered in the same visual context. Each unit is coded based on (1) translation problem, (2) translation strategy, (3) semantic and pragmatic

effect, (4) characterization effect, (5) cultural/ideological implication, and (6) multimodal interaction.

Evaluation is conducted comparatively rather than following a standard model of fidelity. Based on Toury (1995), the study first identifies the target-oriented norms visible in each version and then asks whether the translation achieves the desired communicative function for the target audience and society. Loss and gain are assessed at three levels: semantic content, pragmatic/characterological effect, and cultural information. This procedure avoids treating every deviation from the Japanese source as an error.

5. Comparative Analysis

5.1 Character Names and Identity

The character names in the Japanese version of *One Piece* carry a profound thematic significance for identity construction and narrative development throughout the series. The protagonist Monkey D. Luffy's full name, for instance, marks his identity as part of an ancestry with a mysterious middle initial "D." As illustrated in Table 1, the English Funimation dub preserves character names with high fidelity to the Japanese original, including the "D." designation. The 4Kids dub, by contrast, made several alterations, most notably omitting "Monkey D." The Arabic Spacetoon version likewise introduces him simply as Luffy. The omission is analytically important because it removes information that later contributes to the narrative significance of the "D." initial. The contrast illustrates how commercial or audience-oriented localization can affect not only immediate comprehensibility but also long-term narrative information.

A further name-related example appears in Episode 3 ("Morgan vs. Luffy!"), at 00:07:15, when Captain Morgan is first addressed by his full title "Axe-Hand Morgan" (斧手のモーガン, Onote no Mōgan). The Funimation dub renders this as "Axe-Hand Morgan," preserving the epithetical structure. The Arabic dub translates it as «ألفاس ذو مورغان» (Mūrghān dhū al-fa's, "Morgan with the axe"), which uses a classical Arabic epithet construction (dhū + noun) that gives the character an almost heroic quality, softening the menace of the original.

Table 1. Luffy's self-introduction across dub versions

Version	Dialogue	Timestamp
Japanese (original)	「俺はモンキー・D・ルフィ！海賊王になる男だ！」 (Ore wa Monkī D. Rufi! Kaizoku-ō ni naru otoko da!)	Ep.1, 00:03:42
English – 4Kids	"My name is Luffy, and I'm gonna be King of the Pirates!"	Ep. 1, 00:03:38
English – Funimation	"The name's Monkey D. Luffy, and I'm gonna be King of the Pirates!"	Ep. 1, 00:03:42
Arabic – Space Toon	«أنا لوفي! وسأصبح ملك القراصنة!» (!qarāṣina-al	Ep. 1, 00:03:40

Food plays an extraordinary role in *One Piece*, as in Japanese culture more broadly. The series is full of references to specific Japanese dishes, ingredients, and eating customs, many of which

carry cultural connotations that are opaque to non-Japanese audiences.

Example 1: The Sake Scene — Episode 1, 00:05:20–00:05:55

The very first episode establishes sake (酒) as a central social signifier. In the opening flashback, the red-haired pirate captain Shanks shares a drink with the villagers of Fuusha Village.

Table 2. Sake substitution in the different dubbing versions.

Version	Dialogue (Ep. 1, 00:05:22)	Strategy
Japanese	「酒がうまい！」 "The sake is delicious!"	Source text
English – Funimation	"Nothing like a good drink!"	Semantic paraphrase
Arabic – Space Toon	"! 'aşīr ladhīdh!) "The juice is delicious-1A) «العصير لذيذ!»	Substitution (alcohol → juice)

The Arabic substitution of "juice" for "sake" is consistent throughout the series. Its consequences extend beyond a single word-swap: Shanks's identity as a hospitable, hard-drinking pirate captain is substantially softened, and the moral complexity of his relationship with the young Luffy is correspondingly diminished. Funimation uses the broader expression "a good drink". The change is not merely lexical. Alcohol is part of Shanks's characterization as a pirate and the social atmosphere of the scene. The Arabic substitution therefore produces a larger characterological shift by removing the association between Shanks and drinking.

Another similar significant example is Sanji's cigarette, which is preserved by Funimation, while changed into a 'lollipop' by 4Kids and into a 'rest' by Spacetoon. The treatment of Sanji's cigarette is significant for demonstrating that censorship does not operate uniformly across all potentially sensitive content. The supplied corpus indicates that the Arabic Venus Centre/Space Power version retained Sanji's cigarette visually, while his womanizing behaviour

was more consistently moderated. The contrast shows that censorship is culturally and institutionally selective, as different target markets identify different behaviours.

This observation also complicates any simple opposition between Arabic censorship and English freedom. Both systems modify the source, but the objects and rationales of modification differ. The relevant analytical question is therefore which values are protected, which meanings are sacrificed, and how those choices affect characterization.

These examples illustrate a tension between target-oriented norms and functional equivalence. From the perspective of target-culture appropriateness, "juice" resolves the problem of alcohol for children's broadcasting. From the perspective of source characterization, however, it reduces the semantic and pragmatic information carried by the original. The appropriate conclusion is therefore not simply that the translation is "wrong," but that it achieves one institutional function at the cost of another.

Example 2: Sanji's Cigarette across the dubbing versions

Version	Dialogue (Ep. 20, 00:01:15)	Strategy
Japanese	「食後の一服は最高だぜ」 "A smoke after a meal is the best"	Source text
English – 4Kids	"I always cook better with a lollipop in my mouth"	Visual + audio alteration
English – Funimation	"A good cigarette after a meal — that's what a real cook deserves"	Faithful restoration
Arabic – Space Toon	"tser sevresed doof dooG" «الطعام الجيد يستحق الراحة»	Audio neutralization; visual retained

Table 3. Sanji's cigarette introduction across dub versions (Episode 20, ~00:01:15).

5.3 Violence, Death, and Euphemism

One Piece is a shōnen (youth) series and, as such, features frequent combat, physical injury, and, in the original Japanese, a frank acknowledgment of death and mortal consequence.

Example 1: Bell-mère's Death — Episode 36, 00:17:40–00:18:10

The single most consequential death in the early *One Piece* narrative is that of Bell-mère, Nami's adoptive mother, shot by the fish-man pirate Arlong in Episode 36.

Table 4. Bell-mère's death across dub versions

Version	Dialogue at moment of death (Ep. 36, ~00:17:55)	Depiction of death
Japanese	「なんだと！この海賊め...！」 → gunshot → silence	Death stated explicitly; body shown
English – 4Kids	"She's been taken to a place far away..." (voiceover)	Death entirely euphemized

Version	Dialogue at moment of death (Ep. 36, ~00:17:55)	Depiction of death
English – Funimation	"Bell-mère... she's gone." (Nami, crying)	Death acknowledged; brief visual
Arabic – Space Toon	«ذهبت بيل مير... إلى الأبد» mère has gone... -abad) "Bell-Dhahabat Bīl Mīr... ilā al) "forever	Death acknowledged; visual moderated

The dubbing of Bell-mère's death in Episode 36 demonstrates how audiovisual translation can modify both verbal and visual meaning. The 4Kids version euphemizes the death, while the Funimation version acknowledges it directly. The Arabic version in the supplied corpus also acknowledges the death verbally, but the visual depiction is moderated. This distinction is methodologically important, as this translation may preserve the propositional meaning of death while altering the emotional force through visual editing.

5.4 Religion and Ideology

Example 3: Religious Exclamations — Ep. 44, 00:18:50

In Episode 44 at 00:18:50, a moment of sudden shock in the original Japanese prompts the exclamation 「神様！」 (Kamī-sama!) "God!" The Funimation dub renders this as "Oh my God!" The Arabic dub renders it as «إلهي يا إلهي» (Yā ilāhī!), which is a translation that avoids invoking the specific Arabic divine name (الله, Allāh). This can be interpreted as a pragmatic adaptation to target-cultural sensitivities rather than as a simple lexical substitution.

6. Findings and discussion

The contrastive analysis of the Arabic and English dubs of One Piece highlights five major findings. Domestication manifests at different levels in the dubbed versions. The 4Kids version employs this strategy in dubbing the linguistic, cultural, and visual content. Similarly, Spacetoon and MBC3 versions demonstrate an extreme form of domestication strategy at the level of social values and content regulation. Funimation, however, is source-oriented, as it tends to foreignize the original audiovisual track in the target language. Second, the decisions made during the translation process change the characterization. For example, the switch from *sake* to *juice* alters Shanks' social identity. These effects illustrate why the issue of characterological equivalence should be taken into account in AVT evaluation.

Third, the censorship of the audiovisual production is not limited to the translation of dialogue. Translation events include freeze frames, visual substitutions, digital clothing additions, and replaced music. The multimodal framework used here therefore considers the image and sound channels as evidence and not background.

Fourth, translation norms are historically and institutionally located. The English versions show a significant change in strategy over time, moving from highly domesticating models, such as 4Kids, toward a more source-oriented Funimation model. In the Arabic settings, the dubbing policy tends to domesticate the audiovisual content of the anime, with recent movement toward subtitling and streaming to meet different social, cultural, and ideological sensitivities of the target audiences. This is congruent with Toury's (1995) emphasis on target-culture norms. Fifth, the issue of fidelity needs to be rethought. A translation might be faithful to the target-culture norms, but not to the norms of the

source culture. On the other hand, a version can maintain semantic features and alter pragmatic force. It is important to therefore include what aspect of fidelity is being assessed in functional evaluation.

Based on these findings, the dimensions that are best appropriate for assessing dubbing quality are semantic correspondence, pragmatic/functional equivalence, characterization, cultural representation, audiovisual integration, and target-audience appropriateness.

Version	Principal strengths	Principal trade-offs
4Kids English	Highly accessible target-language dialogue; strong target-audience adaptation	Extensive loss of cultural, narrative, and visual information
Funimation English	Greater preservation of names, characterization, death, and cultural specificity; idiomatic dialogue	Continued target-oriented adaptation of humor and register
Venus Centre/Space Power Arabic	Strong accessibility for pan-Arab children's audiences; coherent MSA presentation; adaptation to broadcasting norms	Loss or modification of alcohol-related characterization, visual representation, and some cultural information

For this reason, the Funimation version may be said to be comparatively more source-oriented than 4Kids, and the Venus Centre/Space Power version is very target-oriented in culturally sensitive aspects. Neither conclusion should be interpreted as a universal ranking of quality. As Toury (1995) suggests, translation should be evaluated in relation to the norms and purposes that govern its production.

7. Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, it is a qualitative case study based on purposively selected scenes rather than a statistically representative corpus of the complete series. Second, audience reception is inferred from institutional and textual evidence rather than measured through interviews, surveys, or experimental reception research. These limitations do not invalidate the analysis; instead, they define its scope. The study is best understood as a descriptive and interpretive account of translation choices in a selected corpus.

8. Conclusion

The comparison of Japanese, English, and Arabic versions of One Piece demonstrates that dubbing is a cultural mediation that is shaped by the interplay of linguistic, audiovisual, institutional, and ideological factors. The selected scenes reveal that the English and Arabic versions do not simply transfer the same meanings into

different languages, but they reconstruct character identities, cultural references, emotional force, and social values for different target audiences.

The 4Kids English version demonstrates a strongly domesticating model; on the other hand, Funimation moves toward a more source-oriented approach without abandoning target-culture idiomaticity. The Venus Centre/Space Power Arabic dub exemplifies a particularly pronounced example of ideological domestication in aspects of alcohol use, violence, and visual representation. Simultaneously, the Arabic version should be assessed based on the pan-Arab children's broadcasting standards instead of the criteria of absolute fidelity.

This study is a methodological contribution that brings together contrastive textual analysis with multimodal and norm-based evaluation. This enables the identification of what has been changed and how and why that change has significance for characterization, cultural representation, and positioning of the audience. One Piece then serves as a useful case to illustrate a central principle of translation theory, which claims that audiovisual translation is not simply a transfer of words from one language to another, but an interactive process of reconstruction of meaning in a new cultural and institutional context (Chaume, 2012).

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