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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Subtitling Oath Language from Arabic into English: A Study of the Saudi Comedy Series Jak Al Elm

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| ABSTRACT
This study investigates how oath expressions are subtitled from Saudi Gulf Arabic into English in Season 2 of the comedy series Jak Al Elm (MBC Shahid, 2025). Oath language — expressions such as wallah (by God) and ali al-talaq (I swear by divorce) — is deeply embedded in Arabic everyday speech and carries religious, social, and performative weight that poses a considerable challenge for subtitlers. Despite this, it has received little systematic attention in audiovisual translation (AVT) research. This study analyses 124 oath instances drawn from fifteen episodes, applying Vinay and Darbelnet's (1995) translation procedures to classify subtitling strategies, Al-Khawaldeh's (2018) extended pragmatic function typology to identify source-text functions, and Baker's (2018) pragmatic equivalence framework to evaluate translational outcomes. Modulation emerges as the dominant strategy (38.7%), most often rendering wallah as 'Actually' or 'really' — a domesticating move that preserves surface fluency while erasing the oath's religious and social dimensions. Partial equivalence is the most common outcome (50%), confirming a systematic loss of illocutionary force. Oaths deployed for comedic exaggeration are particularly vulnerable: in eleven of fourteen cases, the comedy depends on the incongruity between a solemn oath form and a trivial claim, and modulation removes that incongruity entirely. Two outright mistranslations highlight a Gulf Bedouin dialect competence gap in professional subtitle production. The study concludes that domestication is the structural default, and that translating oath language effectively requires a pragmatic, function-aware approach rather than a purely lexical one.

| KEYWORDS
Audiovisual translation; subtitling; oath language; pragmatic equivalence; domestication

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1. Introduction

One of the most distinctive features of Arabic everyday speech is the frequency and variety of oath expressions. Phrases like *wallah* (by God), *ali al-talaq* (I swear by divorce), and *hayatak* (by your life) appear across all social contexts — formal or casual, intimate or public. They're more than rhetorical devices. They assert truth, soften requests, signal sincerity, and reinforce interpersonal bonds. According to speech act theory, oaths are performative utterances: they don't merely describe social reality, they constitute it (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). When a speaker says *ali al-talaq*, they are publicly committing to a decision with simultaneous social and religious force. A single form like *wallahi* can serve up to ten distinct pragmatic functions — request softening, apology introduction, conversational filling, and more — depending entirely on context (Al-Khawaldeh, 2018).

Despite this pragmatic richness, AVT research has given oath language very little systematic attention. Most Arabic-English subtitling studies focus on broad categories such as taboo words, cultural references, or humour, rather than treating oaths as a distinct class. Al Salem et al. (2025) examined how *wallah* is rendered in Jordanian Arabic drama on Netflix and found it frequently

omitted or recast as intensifiers and fillers, losing most of its pragmatic specificity. Qarabesh et al. (2023) found that while some structural equivalence exists between English and Arabic oath particles, the social force of many Arabic oaths is tied to shared cultural knowledge that has no natural English equivalent, making word-for-word transfer inadequate. Saideen et al. (2024) similarly found that religious expressions and oaths in Jordanian cinema were most commonly handled through adaptation, deletion, and generalization, often at the cost of their cultural and emotional register. Taken together, these studies reveal a consistent pattern: oath language is among the most pragmatically demanding challenges in Arabic-English subtitling, yet it remains far less studied than taboo or humour translation.

This gap is especially pronounced in Saudi Gulf Bedouin content. English has no equivalent system of divinely grounded, socially embedded oath-taking in casual everyday speech. When a subtitler removes *wallah*, they do more than delete a word — they erase a social act, and the viewer loses a dimension of meaning that shaped the original utterance. Baker's (2018) pragmatic equivalence framework is the appropriate tool for measuring this loss: it asks not whether the words match, but whether the target text performs the same communicative act as the source.

This study addresses the following research questions:

- What types of oath expressions occur in Jak Al Elm Season 2?
- What strategies do the subtitlers use to render them in English?
- To what extent is pragmatic equivalence achieved?
- How does the comedic register affect subtitling strategy choices?
- What are the practical implications for subtitlers working with Saudi Gulf Arabic content?

The study makes several contributions to Arabic AVT research. It is the first to examine oath language as a distinct pragmatic category in Saudi Gulf Bedouin dialect subtitling, extending inquiry that has so far focused on Levantine and Jordanian varieties (Al Salem et al., 2025; Qarabesh et al., 2023). It introduces *Jak Al Elm* — a widely viewed Ramadan production — into the AVT research corpus for the first time. It develops a three-dimensional analytical model combining Vinay and Darbelnet's (1995) strategy taxonomy, Al-Khawaldeh's (2018) pragmatic function typology, and Baker's (2018) equivalence framework. It foregrounds the comedic register as a variable in subtitling decision-making — an angle that prior Arabic AVT research has left largely unexamined. And it provides evidence-based grounds for quality-control recommendations for streaming platforms commissioning Arabic subtitle work (Al Salem et al., 2025; Farghal & Al-Mufleh, 2025; Qarabesh et al., 2023; Saideen et al., 2024).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations: AVT, Translation Strategies, and Pragmatics

Audiovisual translation occupies a distinctive position within translation studies because its products operate across verbal, visual, and audio channels simultaneously. Unlike literary or technical translation, subtitling is governed by strict technical constraints — a two-line maximum on screen, synchronization with the image track, and reading-speed limits (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2014) — that frequently require reduction, paraphrase, or deletion. The denser the cultural and pragmatic content of the source text, the more these constraints bite. Oath language is exactly the kind of expression where a technically sound subtitle can fail communicatively, because what matters isn't the words but the act they perform.

Vinay and Darbelnet's (1995) taxonomy remains the study's primary procedural framework. Their seven procedures — borrowing, calque, literal translation, transposition, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation — span a continuum from source-language fidelity to target-language naturalness, and subtitlers move among them based on the expression at hand. But the taxonomy alone says nothing about whether a given choice preserves the source utterance's communicative power. That requires a pragmatic perspective. Baker's (2018) pragmatic equivalence framework provides exactly this: it asks whether the target text performs the same communicative act for the target-language reader as the source text does for the source-language audience. For oath language — where meaning lies in what the words *do*, not just what they *say* — this is the right question.

Venuti's (1995) domestication/foreignization axis addresses the broader cultural-ideological dimension of translation choices. A domesticating approach absorbs source-culture material into target-culture conventions, producing a natural-sounding text at the cost of cultural specificity. A foreignizing approach preserves that specificity at the risk of alienating the audience. In Arabic-English AVT, the domesticating tendency is well documented. Alkhatib et al. (2024) found that subtitlers of the Saudi comedy series *Alkhallat* relied primarily on cultural substitution, omission, and paraphrasing when handling culture-specific expressions, reducing their Islamic and regional specificity in the English output. Ali et al. (2024) found similar patterns in the subtitling of Saudi Arabic slang. Neither study examines what this domesticating default does specifically to oath language — the gap this study directly addresses. Domestication may be appropriate for cultural items with functional English equivalents. For oath expressions, which

have no equivalent system of divine social swearing in everyday English, domestication doesn't translate the phenomenon. It erases it.

2.2 Oath Language in Arabic: Sociocultural and Pragmatic Dimensions

Al-Khawaldeh's (2018) corpus-based analysis of *wallahi* in spoken Jordanian Arabic identifies ten pragmatic functions for this single oath form: acceptance marker, apology introducer, threat framer, compliment vehicle, request softener, elaboration marker, continuer, confirmation marker, compliance signal, and conversational filler. This finding matters for subtitling because it shows that oath expressions aren't semantically fixed units that can be handled with one procedure. Their function must be read from context before a strategy can be chosen. A subtitle that renders every instance of *wallah* uniformly as 'I swear' gives the same answer to ten different communicative acts, ranging from a sincere divine guarantee to a comic filler. The present study adopts and extends Al-Khawaldeh's framework by adding three functions specific to *Jak Al Elm*'s comedic Bedouin register: comedic exaggeration, denial/exoneration, and commitment/vow.

2.3 Arabic-English Subtitling on Streaming Platforms: The Research Gap

Studies of Islamic cultural items in Arabic film subtitling add a further dimension to this picture. Al-Shlool and Alkhomayes (2025) demonstrate that comedy films have the highest density of Islamic cultural items among Arabic film genres — 1.5 per minute, even higher than documentaries. This density reflects how deeply Islamic expressions are embedded in everyday comic discourse. Notably, comedy also shows the highest omission rate for those items (42.3%) across the genres they examined, suggesting that subtitlers frequently treat Islamic expressions in comedic contexts as non-essential or culturally opaque. Oath expressions are among the most frequent and pragmatically loaded items in that category, which gives this finding direct bearing on the present study. Al-Shlool and Alkhomayes do not, however, examine oath expressions as a separate analytical category, and Saudi Bedouin comedic discourse — with its distinct register, tribal oath forms, and rural cultural references — remains entirely unexamined in prior research.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive research design within the framework of Descriptive Translation Studies (Toury, 2012). It is corpus-based and product-oriented: the aim is to describe what professional subtitlers produced and evaluate the pragmatic consequences of those decisions. A qualitative approach is appropriate because oath language is context-dependent — its meaning can't be captured by frequency counts alone. Each instance must be examined in its communicative context before the subtitle can be assessed. Quantitative frequency data support the qualitative analysis by identifying patterns across the corpus.

3.2 Corpus and Data

The corpus is drawn from Season 2 of *Jak Al Elm* (جاك العلم), a Saudi comedy series produced by MBC Studios and broadcast on the Shahid platform during Ramadan 2025. The season comprises 30 episodes of approximately 30 minutes each, yielding a total runtime of roughly 15 hours. The series follows Abu Samel and Umm Samel, a Gulf Bedouin couple, through domestic and social situations, with dialogue consistently delivered in Gulf Bedouin Arabic dialect. The English subtitles were professionally commissioned for Shahid and are publicly accessible to subscribers, making them a verifiable and authentic translation product rather than fan-produced or machine-generated output.

Data were drawn from a purposive sample of fifteen episodes (Episodes 1, 2, 4, 11, 13, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 27, 29, and 30), selected to cover a range of social contexts — domestic conflict, social visiting, comedic confrontation, family tension, and sports commentary — within which oath language occurs with high frequency. Episodes were chosen to ensure coverage of different character constellations and narrative registers across the full season arc, from the opening episodes through to the finale.

The unit of analysis is the oath instance, defined as any utterance in which the speaker invokes a divine name, a sacred object, the life of a living or deceased person, or a binding commitment formula — such as a conditional divorce vow — as a guarantor of truth or sincere intention. This encompasses both standalone oath markers, such as a single *wallah* functioning as a conversational filler, and oath-prefaced propositions such as *wallah al-'azim inni ma'ah haq*. Two categories were systematically excluded: curses and imprecations (e.g., *Allah yakhsak* — God disgrace you), which invoke divine power as an expression of hostility rather than as a sincerity guarantor; and conventional religious formulae that have undergone full lexicalization as social greetings (e.g., *assalam alaykum*), where no sincerity-guarantee function is detectable in context. After applying these criteria, the final corpus comprises 124 oath instances.

3.3 Analytical Framework

Three analytical frameworks are applied sequentially to each oath instance. Together, they address the study's five research questions from complementary theoretical perspectives.

Al-Khawaldeh (2018**)** provides the primary functional classifier. His ten-function typology of *wallahi* in Jordanian spoken Arabic is extended here by three additional functions that emerged inductively from the present corpus: Comedic Exaggeration, Denial/Exoneration, and Commitment/Vow. These three extensions account for 59 of the 124 analyzed instances (47.6%), supporting their inclusion as empirically grounded additions to the original framework.

Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) provide the primary strategy classifier. Their seven procedures — Borrowing, Calque, Literal Translation, Transposition, Modulation, Equivalence, and Adaptation — are supplemented here by two oath-specific categories: full Omission, where the oath expression is completely absent from the subtitle, and Partial Omission, where the oath marker is removed while propositional content is retained. Seven of the nine categories appeared in the corpus; Borrowing and Calque were not attested.

Baker (2018) provides the evaluative framework, operationalized at three levels. Full equivalence is assigned when the subtitle reproduces both propositional meaning and illocutionary force, allowing the target-language viewer to receive a communicative effect comparable to the source-language audience. Partial equivalence is assigned when propositional content is preserved but one or more pragmatic dimensions are lost — most commonly the religious framing, the force of social commitment, or the comedic effect. Zero equivalence is assigned when the oath's illocutionary force disappears entirely, and the subtitle reduces the utterance to a purely propositional statement.

Throughout the analysis, Díaz Cintas and Remael (2014) serve as a moderating reference. Whenever partial or zero equivalence is identified, the analysis considers whether the loss results from genuine subtitling constraints — such as two-line limits, synchronization requirements, or reading-speed restrictions — or whether sufficient subtitle space was available, making the loss more likely attributable to translator choice. This distinction matters because constraint-driven loss and choice-driven loss carry different implications for subtitling quality, translator agency, and professional practice.

3.4 Analytical Procedures

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, all fifteen sampled episodes were viewed with English subtitles enabled; each potential oath instance was identified, checked against the exclusion criteria, and entered into a data spreadsheet with its source-text expression, episode timestamp, and corresponding English subtitle. Second, each instance was coded for pragmatic function, subtitling strategy, and equivalence level, with a brief analytical note justifying each coding decision. Third, frequency counts and percentage distributions were calculated and cross-tabulated to identify recurring patterns of co-occurrence, with particular attention to the relationship between strategy and equivalence outcome across different pragmatic function types. Fourth, a qualitative close-reading analysis was conducted on selected examples to illustrate the full spectrum of translation outcomes, from successful full equivalence to outright pragmatic failure.

4. Results

4.1 Oath Category Distribution

The 124 oath instances were classified into four categories according to their primary invoking element. Table 1 presents the full distribution.

Table 1. Distribution of Oath Categories (N = 124)

No.	Category	N	%
1	Divine Oath	97	78.2%
2	Conditional Vow	13	10.5%
3	Lexicalized Filler	12	9.7%
4	Religious Oath	2	1.6%
Total		**124**	**100%**

Four in five oath instances invoke God or a divine attribute. This confirms that *wallah* and its variants are the structural backbone of Gulf Bedouin oath-taking — consistent with Al-Khawaldeh's (2018) findings for Jordanian Arabic. Conditional vow oaths (10.5%), primarily *'ali al-talaq* and related variants, concentrate in Episode 2, which centres on an escalating marital dispute and records the highest oath density in the corpus. Prophetic oaths (*wa-l-nabi*) and life oaths (*hayatak*) are entirely absent from the sampled episodes, distinguishing this Gulf Bedouin corpus from Jordanian Arabic data in which both forms appear with noticeable frequency (Al-Azzam et al., 2024; Al Salem et al., 2025). Lexicalized fillers (9.7%) are cases where *wallah* has lost most of its semantic weight,

functioning as a discourse marker or turn-holder rather than a genuine act of divine invocation. These instances gave subtitlers the widest range of plausible options — and, as the data show, the least predictable outcomes.

4.2 Translation Strategy Distribution

Table 2 presents the distribution of translation strategies across the 124 oath instances.

Table 2. Translation Strategy Distribution (N = 124)

Strategy	Description	N	%
Modulation	Shift in point of view; oath form replaced by discourse marker	48	38.7%
Equivalence	Functionally equivalent target expression	28	22.6%
Omission	Oath expression completely absent from subtitle	16	12.9%
Partial Omission	Oath marker removed; propositional content retained	14	11.3%
Literal Translation	Word-for-word rendering of oath formula	9	7.3%
Adaptation	Context-sensitive English expression used	8	6.5%
Transposition	Grammatical category change	1	0.8%
Total		**124**	**100%**

Modulation is the dominant strategy at 38.7%, and most of it comes down to one move: rendering *wallah* as 'Actually', 'really', or 'indeed'. In Venuti's (1995) terms, that's domestication — a religiously marked expression absorbed into a neutral target-culture discourse particle. The confirmatory surface function is kept, but the divine dimension, the social weight, and the force of commitment are gone. The English reads fluently; pragmatically, it's hollow.

Equivalence (22.6%) produces better outcomes. Subtitlers who chose it typically opted for 'I swear', which at least partially recreates the illocutionary force of the original oath. Omission and partial omission together account for 24.2% of all instances and generate the majority of zero-equivalence outcomes: full omission removes the oath entirely; partial omission preserves the propositional content while deleting the oath marker. Borrowing and Calque — the two strategies that would have retained *wallah* in recognizable Arabic form — don't appear at all, confirming a consistent preference for domesticated solutions over strategies that foreground the source expression's cultural distinctiveness.

Literal translation (7.3%) is used almost exclusively for conditional vow oaths, particularly *'ali al-talaq* rendered as 'I swear by divorce'. This suggests that subtitlers recognise culturally alien oath objects as requiring an explicit formulaic rendering rather than a loose equivalent — and the equivalence data confirm that this instinct is broadly correct. Adaptation (6.5%) handles short, standalone oath markers where emotional tone matters more than form, rendering a single *wallah* as 'Really?' or 'That's a good one!' depending on context.

4.3 Pragmatic Equivalence Assessment

Table 3 presents the distribution of pragmatic equivalence outcomes across the corpus.

Table 3. Pragmatic Equivalence Assessment (N = 124)

Level	N	%
Full Equivalence	33	26.6%
Partial Equivalence	62	50.0%
Zero Equivalence	29	23.4%
Total	**124**	**100%**

Partial equivalence is the most common outcome at 50.0%. Half the time, the English viewer gets the content — but not the communicative act. Full equivalence is achieved in only 26.6% of cases — one in four — meaning adequate oath subtitling is the exception rather than the rule. Zero equivalence occurs in 23.4%, and a review of those instances against available subtitle space indicates that most of them reflect a preference for brevity over pragmatic completeness rather than genuine technical necessity. The space was available. The subtitler chose not to use it.

A clear pattern runs across all three tables. The Equivalence strategy generates the highest proportion of full-equivalence outcomes. Modulation results mainly in partial equivalence. Omission produces almost exclusively zero equivalence. The dominant strategy in this corpus is also the one most consistently associated with pragmatic loss.

4.4 Selected Examples

Five examples are examined below, selected to illustrate the full range of strategy-equivalence outcomes and to show how the pragmatic function of an oath determines the appropriateness — or inadequacy — of a given translation choice.

Example 1: Full equivalence (Equivalence strategy)

ST: والله مرتاح لين افتح الجوال واشوف وش اللي فيه

TT: "I swear I won't rest until I unlock the cellphone and see what's in it"

Umm Samel swears by God that she won't rest until she checks her husband's phone. The oath form *wallah* functions as a vow of commitment. The subtitler's choice of 'I swear' is a direct functional equivalent — the binding force of the original oath carries through intact. It's one of the cleaner decisions in the corpus, and it demonstrates what's possible when the oath is treated as a performative act rather than an optional intensifier.

Example 2: Partial equivalence (Modulation strategy)

ST: والله يابوي معاها حق

TT: "Actually, she's right, Dad"

A character uses *wallah* as a confirmation marker in a family dispute. The subtitler renders it as 'Actually' — the single most frequent modulation move in the corpus. 'Actually' does part of the job: it signals confirmatory intent. But in the Arabic, the speaker is invoking God as guarantor of their agreement. In English, they're adding a filler word. These are not the same communicative act. The equivalence is partial, and this single pattern — *wallah* → 'Actually' — accounts for the largest group within the modulation category.

Example 3: Zero equivalence (Omission strategy)

ST: والله فتح

TT: "It's unlocked"

When Umm Samel discovers her husband's phone is unlocked, she exclaims *wallah fatah* — 'By God, it opened!' Here the oath functions as an excited confirmation marker. In the subtitle, it's gone. What remains is a bare factual statement. The astonishment, the relief, and the religious exclamation are all absent. Adequate subtitle space was available for an equivalent expression. This was a choice for brevity, not a technical constraint — consistent with the deletion tendency Saideen et al. (2024) identified in their study of oath subtitling in *The Alleys*.

Example 4: Comedic function preserved (Literal Translation)

ST: وعلي الطلاق ثم علي الطلاق إني ماعد أطلق

TT: "and I swear by divorce// that I'll never swear by divorce again"

Abu Samel swears by divorce that he'll never swear by divorce again — a self-referential conditional vow used for comedic exaggeration. The literal rendering preserves the paradoxical structure. The comedic irony comes through in English. This is one of only three such instances achieving full equivalence in the comedic exaggeration category. In the remaining eleven, the oath form disappears and only the hyperbolic content remains. As Qarabesh et al. (2023) observe, removing culturally specific oath forms from comedic contexts can significantly weaken or neutralize the intended humour in the target text — because the oath isn't decorating the comedy, it *is* the comedy.

Example 5: Mistranslation

ST: عاد والله أنه يذاكر يابو صامل

TT: "My God forgive you, Abu Samil"

The Arabic means 'By God, he's studying, Abu Samel' — a surprised confirmation. The subtitle produces something else entirely: a benediction addressed to the wrong person. This isn't pragmatic loss. It's a comprehension failure. The Gulf Bedouin particle *'ad* (roughly: 'now / actually / so') was apparently misread, producing a completely different illocutionary act. Al Salem et al. (2025) call for greater dialectal competence in Arabic subtitling for exactly this reason: general Arabic proficiency doesn't catch errors like this. Dialect fluency does.

4.5 Pragmatic Function Analysis

Table 4 presents the distribution of pragmatic functions across the 124 instances.

Table 4. Pragmatic Function Distribution (N = 124)

Pragmatic Function (Al-Khawaldeh 2018 + extensions)	N	%
Denial / Exoneration*	25	20.2%
Confirmation Marker	22	17.7%
Commitment / Vow*	17	13.7%
Comedic Exaggeration*	17	13.7%
Compliment Vehicle	15	12.1%
Elaboration Marker	14	11.3%
Filler Marker	5	4.0%
Request Softener	4	3.2%
Compliance Signal	2	1.6%

Threat Softener	2	1.6%
Apology Introduction	1	0.8%
Total	**124**	**100%**

* Comedic Exaggeration, Commitment/Vow, and Denial/Exoneration are extensions of Al-Khawaldeh's (2018) original typology, added for this study.

Denial and exoneration are the most frequent function at 20.2%. *Jak Al Elm* is heavily driven by domestic disputes and social confrontations, in which characters must publicly assert their innocence or reject a claim. In Austin's (1962) terms, these oaths are declarations — they don't describe exoneration, they perform it. Instances in this category tend to achieve better equivalence than the corpus average, because the Equivalence and Partial Omission strategies most often applied here at least preserve the assertive force of the utterance, even when the religious dimension is lost.

Confirmation (17.7%) fares worse. It's the function most frequently handled by the *wallah* → 'Actually' pattern, which evacuates the divine guarantee entirely and reduces a sincere religious affirmation to a discourse particle. The result is linguistically fluent but pragmatically hollow. 'Actually, she's right' and 'By God, she's right' aren't the same communicative act. One hedges. The other commits.

The most revealing contrast in Table 4 is between Comedic Exaggeration and Commitment/Vow, which share the same raw frequency — 17 instances each — but diverge sharply in their equivalence outcomes. Commitment/Vow achieves relatively strong equivalence because subtitlers typically apply either Equivalence ('I swear') or Literal Translation ('I swear by divorce'), both of which preserve the binding illocutionary force of the vow even when cultural specificity is lost. Comedic Exaggeration fails to achieve full equivalence in eleven of fourteen cases (78.6%).

The reason is structural. Gulf Bedouin comedic exaggeration works through incongruity: a maximally serious oath form — swearing by God Almighty — applied to something trivial or absurd. The joke lives entirely in that gap. When the subtitler renders *wallah al-'azim* as 'Actually', or drops it entirely, the incongruity disappears. English viewers receive a deadpan claim where Arabic viewers heard a comic oath. The comedic register, far from making oath language easier to translate, makes it harder — because the oath form isn't incidental to the humour. It's constitutive of it.

5. Discussion

5.1 Domestication as the Structural Default

The central finding of this study is that modulation is the dominant subtitling strategy (38.7%), with the most common single pattern being the rendering of *wallah* as 'Actually', 'really', or 'truly'. According to Venuti (1995), this is textbook domestication: a religiously marked source-culture expression is absorbed into a neutral target-culture discourse particle. Oath expressions, as speech act theory establishes (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975), are both commissive and representative — they create genuine social obligations while invoking a divine guarantor of truth. Substituting 'Actually' for *wallah* converts a commissive act into a discourse filler, reducing Baker's (2018) pragmatic equivalence from full to partial in a single word choice.

This finding confirms and extends the domesticating trend documented for Saudi subtitling by Alkhatib et al. (2024) and Ali et al. (2024). The contrast with Farghal and Al-Mufleh's (2025) findings on Arabic swear words is striking: approximately 60% of swear words are preserved or intensified in English subtitles, whereas approximately 63% of oath instances in this corpus are omitted or modulated. Subtitlers appear to operate with an implicit hierarchy — treating religious invocation as optional texture and offensive language as requiring faithful representation. The theoretical implication, as Baker (2018) would frame it, is that subtitlers are applying a lexical calculus rather than a pragmatic one: asking whether a word is prohibited rather than whether it is performative.

5.2 When Full Equivalence Is Achieved

Full equivalence is achieved in 26.6% of cases, and two conditions reliably produce it. The first is the application of the Equivalence strategy using the performative formula 'I swear' in commitment, denial, and exoneration contexts. This works because 'I swear' is itself commissive in English — it performs the illocutionary act of binding the speaker to a truth claim, even without invoking a specific divine guarantor. The second condition is the literal translation of conditional vow oaths, particularly *'ali al-talaq* rendered as 'I swear by divorce'. It's notable that subtitlers didn't domesticate this culturally alien formula. The oath object — divorce — is apparently transparent enough in English to signal that something binding is being invoked. This aligns with Qarabesh et al.'s (2023) argument that oath translation succeeds when the translator preserves the oath's social force and pragmatic context, not

merely its wording — and with Saideen et al.'s (2024) finding that the emotional and cultural specificity of Arabic oaths must be maintained to preserve meaning.

5.3 Comedy as a Site of Maximum Pragmatic Loss

Eleven of fourteen comedic exaggeration instances fail to achieve full equivalence — making this the function most vulnerable to translation failure. In Gulf Bedouin comedy, the humour of a sworn exaggeration depends on Gricean implicature (Grice, 1975): the speaker deliberately flouts the maxim of quality by swearing with maximum religious solemnity about something trivially unimportant, and the listener derives the comic meaning from the gap between form and content. When the subtitler renders *wallah al-'azim* as 'Actually' or removes it entirely, the maxim violation disappears. The English viewer receives only the absurd content — no signal of the comic overstatement that frames it. Al-Shlool and Alkhomayes (2025) documented that comedy shows the highest omission rate for Islamic cultural items (42.3%) among Arabic film genres, and the present data provide a precise mechanism for why: the oath form isn't incidental to the joke. It's the engine of it.

5.4 Zero Equivalence: Choice or Constraint?

Zero equivalence occurs in 23.4% of cases (29 instances). In most of these, the subtitle space was sufficient to include at least 'I swear' — two words, easily accommodated within standard character limits. This suggests that zero-equivalence instances in this corpus largely reflect translator choice rather than technical necessity: a preference for target-language fluency over source-language pragmatic completeness.

Díaz Cintas and Remael (2014) caution that subtitlers face real and legitimate constraints — spatial and temporal limitations are genuine — but also note that experienced subtitlers develop strategies for managing them without sacrificing communicative content. The present analysis suggests that, for oath language specifically, deletion is being treated as a default rather than a last resort. A more pragmatically informed approach — one that recognises oaths as performative speech acts rather than optional intensifiers — would produce better outcomes for English-speaking viewers.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how professional subtitlers handle oath language in *Jak Al Elm*, analysing 124 oath instances from fifteen episodes of Season 2 using a three-framework model of pragmatic function (Al-Khawaldeh, 2018), translation strategy (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995), and pragmatic equivalence (Baker, 2018). The findings consistently point in the same direction: oath language in Saudi Gulf Bedouin comedy is systematically under-translated. Five conclusions emerge.

First, divine oath forms dominate the corpus (78.2%), confirming that *wallah* and its variants are the structural backbone of oath-taking in this register. Second, modulation (38.7%) — especially the *wallah* → 'Actually' pattern — is the default strategy and consistently produces partial equivalence by erasing the divine and social dimensions of the oath. Third, full pragmatic equivalence is achieved in only 26.6% of cases; zero equivalence occurs in 23.4%, the majority of which reflect translator choice rather than technical constraint. Fourth, comedic exaggeration is the function most vulnerable to translation failure (eleven of fourteen instances), because the comedy depends structurally on the juxtaposition of solemn oath form and trivial content. Fifth, two outright mistranslations signal a Gulf Bedouin dialect competence gap that quality-control processes haven't yet addressed.

The study's primary contribution is the first systematic analysis of oath language as a distinct pragmatic category in Saudi Gulf Bedouin comedy subtitling, using the first AVT corpus drawn from *Jak Al Elm*. The tripartite analytical model is demonstrated to be a replicable tool for analysing oath subtitling in other Arabic dialect contexts. Three limitations should be noted: the study draws on a single season of a single series on a single platform; all coding was conducted by a single researcher without inter-coder reliability testing; and audience reception — whether English viewers notice or miss the oath function — remains entirely unexamined.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies of oath-language subtitling across multiple platforms and genres, systematic audience reception analyses, and the development of evidence-based pedagogical frameworks for training subtitlers in religious-expression translation. As Arabic-language content continues to gain visibility through international streaming platforms, the quality of oath subtitling will increasingly shape how English-speaking audiences interpret Arabic-language narratives and cultural values (Almahfali & Alfattah, 2025; Al Salem et al., 2025).

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