

The Prefigurative Politics of Translation in Place-Based Movements of Protest

Subtitling in the Egyptian Revolution

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The idea of prefiguration is widely assumed to derive from anarchist discourse; it involves experimenting with currently available means in such a way that they come to mirror or actualise the political ideals that inform a movement, thus collapsing the traditional distinction between means and ends. Practically all the literature on prefiguration has so far focused on structural, organisational and interactional issues – specifically, how activist communities attempt to create in their own interactions and in the way they organize their work the kind of society they envision: non-hierarchical, non-representational, inclusive, respectful of diversity. This article explores the extent to which volunteer subtitling undertaken by disparate individuals for collectives connected with the Egyptian Revolution supports or undermines the prefigurative agendas of these collectives. In doing so, it tentatively extends the current definition of prefiguration to encompass textual, visual and aesthetic practices that prefigure activist principles and actualise them in the present, focusing in particular on the level of experimentation involved in such practices.

Keywords: prefiguration, protest movements, volunteer subtitling, activism, Egyptian Revolution, Arabic.

The Egyptian Revolution has captured the imagination of audiences across the world and provided a model of citizen activism that is widely thought to have inspired other movements of protest in the US and Europe, including the Occupy and 15-M movements (Teleb 2014, Della Porta and Mattoni 2014:125). Despite the large volume of articles and books written about the Revolution (Soueif 2012, Korani and El-Mahdi 2012, Gregory 2013, Golson *et al.* 2014, Shenker 2016, among others), one aspect that has received no attention in public or academic circles so far concerns the language-based practices that allow Egyptian protestors to contest dominant narratives of the events unfolding in Egypt since January 2011¹ and, importantly, to connect with, influence and learn from other place-based movements and from global movements of collective action.

This article attempts to shed light on some of these practices, with particular reference to subtitling and the extent to which it undercuts or prefigures the political principles to which many collectives involved in the Egyptian Revolution – as well as those involved in the broader, global movement of collective action – broadly adhere. It reports on interim findings from a study of the use of subtitling by two collectives whose documentary videos have played an important role in providing an alternative record of events and given voice to a broad spectrum of participants engaged in this momentous period of Egyptian history: *Mosireen* and *Words of Women from the Egyptian Revolution*. In examining the translational dimension of the output of these two collectives, my point of departure is that translation has to be critiqued and its contribution understood within the specific political landscape in which it is embedded, and in terms of the contribution it makes – or fails to make – to fulfilling activist goals and enacting specific political values and principles.

The Study and the Collectives

The study on which I report here examined the contribution and positioning of subtitlers in *Mosireen* and *Words of Women from the Egyptian Revolution*.² To the best of my knowledge, these are the only two collectives linked to the Egyptian Revolution that consistently subtitled their videos into English (in the case of *Mosireen*), into English and Spanish (in the case of *Words of Women*), and less consistently into a wide range of other languages in both cases.

Mosireen, the larger and better known of the two collectives, presents itself on Facebook as follows:³

Mosireen is a non-profit media collective in Downtown Cairo born out of the explosion of citizen media and cultural activism in Egypt during the revolution. ... founded in the wake of Mubarak's fall by a group of film makers and activists who got together to found a collective space dedicated to supporting citizen media of all kinds. We film the ongoing revolution, publish videos that challenge state media narratives, provide training, technical support, equipment, organise screenings and events and host an extensive library of footage from the revolution.

As *Mosireen*'s public narrative of the group's goals and activities goes on to highlight, the collective became "the most watched non-profit youtube channel in Egypt of all time, and in the whole world in January 2012",⁴ a mere three months after it began publishing its documentary videos online (see also Trew 2012).

Mosireen has its own Youtube⁵ and Vimeo⁶ channels, Facebook page and Twitter account (@mosireen). It also has a dedicated website⁷ that hosts all

its output and announces and documents the events it organizes. Most of these events used to be hosted at Mosireen's downtown office, which has been closed since March 2014, following the brutal crackdown on all forms of activism that followed the military takeover in July 2013.

Words of Women from the Egyptian Revolution is a much smaller collective, with Leil-Zahra Mortada – who describes himself as “(trans)Feminist queer, Arab, and an anarchist”⁸ – as its main founder and powerhouse. At the time the collective was producing videos (2011/2012), the production team consisted of Sandy Chamoun (Sound Recordist), Ziyad Hawwas (Editor), Layla Sami (Director of Photography) and Nazly Hussein (Producer), with Leil-Zahra Mortada as Director (Mortada 2016).⁹ The collective does not have a dedicated website, but it maintains a Youtube channel, in the name of its main founder,¹⁰ and a Facebook page.¹¹ Piecing together various scattered descriptions of the initiative, Mortada (2015:126) describes *Words of Women* as an “‘audio-visual Herstory project’ which set out ‘to remind history’ of the vital role women have played in shaping the events that unfolded in Egypt before and since January 2011”. The project, he continues,

created two sets of resources: an archive that is only accessible via direct contact with the team, and which includes full interviews with a wide range of Egyptian women who have participated in the revolution; and an online Youtube channel that provides public access via a Creative Commons Licence to shorter, edited versions of a subset of these interviews, 11 in total.

Although much smaller in size and less prolific in output, *Words of Women* predates *Mosireen* (Leil-Zahra Mortada, Interview with author [28:17]), at least as an idea: it initially started as a collection of photos of Egyptian women, before taking its final shape as video testimonies [31:50]. More importantly, there is considerable overlap and interaction between the two collectives, specifically in relation to translation work. For example, Leil-Zahra Mortada was introduced to *Mosireen* activists by Sandy Sham'oun, the Sound Recordist for *Words of Women* videos [19:32]. His “first offer of help [to *Mosireen*] was translation because they had written some kind of communiqué” about the eviction of protestors from Tahrir Square on 9 March 2011 and wanted to have it translated into English [19:20]. Mortada had in the meantime already started his own list, ‘Translating Revolution’, to support various activist initiatives, and later “moved people [from it] to the *Mosireen* translation list”, which coordinated the collective's subtitling work [24:40].¹²

A cornerstone of the political activities of these two, closely connected collectives is the production and circulation of audiovisual material – documentary video clips that are made available on various platforms on the Internet, shown in activist events across the world, and often screened in street gatherings in Egypt

prior to the military intervention in July 2013. Most of the videos produced by *Mosireen* document police and army abuse,¹³ Muslim Brotherhood-incited atrocities,¹⁴ street protests against the successive regimes that controlled Egypt since 2011,¹⁵ and areas of persistent social inequality.¹⁶ Many also remember and honour martyrs¹⁷ and campaign for the release of detainees.¹⁸ *Words of Women* videos are much fewer in number but also more restricted in purview, focusing as they do on documenting the experiences of a diverse range of women who have been involved in street protests, to highlight the central role they played in the uprising.

Between December 2013 and April 2014, I conducted a total of fourteen semi-structured interviews with film makers and subtitlers from both collectives, extending to between 34 minutes and just over two hours each in length. These, together with subtitled videos produced by the collectives (11 in the case of *Words of Women* and several hundred in the case of *Mosireen*), constitute the core sources of data I draw on in my analysis. The choice of interviewees was relatively straightforward in the case of film makers and other activists involved in *Mosireen*: film makers like Khalid Abdalla, Philip Rizk and Omar Robert Hamilton, as well as high profile activists such as Sharif Koddous (an independent journalist) are well known and easy to identify as prominent players in *Mosireen*. Salma Said and Lobna Darwish are not film makers but are core members of the collective; like everyone involved with *Mosireen* and several other collectives such as *No to Military Trials*, they learned to use a camera to record events on the street and they feature in several news reports covering the revolution. All were also based in Cairo and responded positively to my request to interview them.

Conversely, subtitlers on the *Mosireen* subtitling list (to which I initially had no access) were not immediately identifiable, and many did not live in Egypt, nor were there enough of them living in a single city to justify a trip to interview them. They did not get involved in filming events on the street either, though many took part in demonstrations regularly. I began with two subtitlers I knew personally, Samah Selim, a friend and translation studies scholar who lectures at Rutgers University, and Katharine Halls, who was completing an MA in Translation Studies at the University of Manchester when the research started. Katharine coordinated *Mosireen's* subtitling list and put me in touch with Sarah Hawas,¹⁹ Leslie Piquemal and Marwa Meshref, three subtitlers who were particularly prolific and active on the *Mosireen* list. Katharine herself was an obvious choice given her key role in coordinating the subtitling work and her heavy involvement in subtitling videos by both *Mosireen* and *Words of Women*, as well as revising subtitles produced by others. Mia Jankowicz, the last person I interviewed from the subtitling team, is a writer, editor and curator who lives partly in Cairo and partly in London. I identified her as a particularly active 'reviser/proof reader' on the mailing list, and felt it would be interesting to talk to someone who specifically assumed this role within the group.

In the case of *Words of Women*, Leil-Zahra Mortada was an obvious choice: he is easily recognizable as the founder and key player in the project and, as already noted, is closely connected with *Mosireen*. Leil doubled up as both film maker and subtitler of almost all *Words of Women* videos into English (Mortada, Interview [46.48]). Sandy Shamoun and Nazli Hussein were not available to interview. When I contacted Leil to arrange an interview, he explained that only two translators worked with the project to produce subtitles into Spanish: Ethel and Elena. He kept no track of subtitlers of the videos into other languages, and did not necessarily always know who produced the different language videos available on the Internet. Of the two subtitlers into Spanish, Ethel was available to interview but Elena was not. As is clear from this account, and from interviews I conducted with members of both collectives, practically all film makers contributed some subtitling at some point, and much of the subtitling done into languages other than English and Spanish was not coordinated by the collectives themselves. This fluidity of roles and lack of central control is consistent with the ethos of horizontality and non-hierarchy that characterizes contemporary activism and that I comment on later.

Access to different types of data in the context of high risk activism is heavily dependent on trust. Having already interviewed Samah Selim, Sarah Hawas, Sharif Koddous, Khalid Abdalla, Leslie Piquemal, Lobna Darwish and Salma Said and having become better known to the group, I was allowed access to the *Mosireen* subtitling list on 17 January 2014, and was later able to contribute to and experiment with the subtitling of a small number of short videos. The list had some 31 members, including several film makers who alerted the rest to new videos being uploaded but rarely took on subtitling work. No background information on members is available, but those I managed to contact and interview came from different walks of life: they were academics, artists, students, writers and curators of art work. A few had professional level expertise in translation but in the absence of more details it is difficult to make generalizations across such an amorphous group. Importantly, they were a mixture of Egyptians and non-Egyptians who seemed equally invested in using their linguistic skills to support the Revolution. Those I managed to locate and interview reflected this mix: Samah Selim, Sarah Hawas and Marwa Meshref are Egyptian; Katharine Halls, Leslie Piquemal and Mia Jankowicz are non-Egyptian. Among the other interviewees, Philip Rizk and Omar-Robert Hamilton were active on the subtitling list and engaged regularly with the subtitlers. Lobna Darwish did some subtitling, occasionally (Katharine Halls, Interview [34.30], because “in *Mosireen*, most people do everything” (Lobna Darwish, Interview [12:59]). Of those who subtitled regularly, Katharine Halls and Sara Hawas were heavily involved with the collective at different stages and had a history of interaction as political activists with the film makers who founded *Mosireen* – a history that predates the Revolution, going back at least to 2009. Their positioning within the group is somewhat different from that of subtitlers and revisers who had little interaction with the collective outside the subtitling list.

Some members of *Mosireen* have also been interviewed by various oppositional media outlets such as *Commonware* (Marchesi and Scotini 2014), literary and cultural magazines such as *ArtTerritories* (Rizk 2013) and *Wasafiri* (El Hamamsy 2012), as well as mainstream outlets such as *BBC News* (Abdalla 2013), *The Lede/New York Times Blog* (Mackey 2012) and *ABC News* (Corcoran 2011). I draw on these published interviews and other media and online coverage of the two collectives where relevant as background data.

Based on the above sources, the overall project aims to offer some insight into the extent to which the two collectives are embedded in the culture of global movements of collective action, and what subtitling contributes or fails to contribute to actualizing the values that underpin this culture and the work of the collectives. Before proceeding with the analysis, however, it is important to stress that the arguments I make are provisional and open to refinement in the future, given the volume and richness of the data to be analysed as well as its fluidity. More importantly, any apparent criticism of subtitling strategies and practices must be understood within the wider context of a revolution unfolding in real time, and of activists – including film makers and subtitlers – working under extreme conditions, with little or no time to think about finer issues of aesthetics or the nuances of a specific register. Selim (2016:83) offers a powerful vignette of a subtitler's experience during that period:

In the heat of the battles, many of which lasted for days, new videos would be uploaded to Youtube by the Mosireen filmmakers and sent on via email link to the translators' network for immediate subtitling, sometimes as many as five or six a day. I would often find myself rushing back from the fighting and tear gas to whichever friend's apartment I would be squatting in at the time to do a speedy subtitling job on a video document of the battle I had just left at the doorstep, with panicked people coming and going in a steady buzz of TV, laptops, cell phones and frantic discussions all around. The emergency was out on the streets, but it was also a central part of the translation process.

My interrogation of subtitling practices and of the positioning of subtitlers within the *Mosireen* and *Words of Women* collectives must therefore be understood as part of an ongoing, supportive conversation with activist film makers and subtitlers in Egypt and elsewhere, rather than a detached, scholarly critique of decontextualized practices intended to score academic points. Throughout the discussion that follows, as well as the research project as a whole, I remain deeply aware of the pressures and dilemmas faced by activists connected to the collectives under study, and by those operating in similar political environments in other areas of the world.

Contemporary Activism and Prefigurative Politics

The political values that inform today's global culture of activism are described in detail in numerous publications, including della Porta (2005), Tarrow (2006), Maeckelbergh (2009a) and Lievrouw (2011). They are generally traced to the Zapatista's uprising in 1994, the alter-globalization movement of the late 1990s, and before that to the prefigurative politics of the 1960s movements and to anarchist philosophy (Maeckelbergh 2009a:8, 2009b). Maeckelbergh (2009a:8) sums up the most important of these values as follows:

participation, an aversion to representation, horizontality, diversity, decentralized notions of power, *autogestion* [workers's self-management], consensus, carnival as subversion, rejecting individualism, an acceptance of conflict as constructive, critical reflexivity, non-reified approach to knowledge, an emphasis on the importance of the 'grassroots', an internationalism based on strong solidarity and communication between activists all over the world.

In terms of how subtitling choices and patterns of practice might actualize or undermine a political project, the most important of these values are solidarity; commitment to diversity; and, to a lesser extent, horizontality and non-representational, participatory modes of governance. I explore these values and their implications for subtitling practices in more detail below. First, however, it is important to discuss the overarching principle that underpins all these values and distinguishes contemporary movements most clearly from traditional politics, namely, the strategic use of prefiguration.

The growing literature on prefiguration generally traces the concept to anarchist thought (Maeckelbergh 2011, Luchies 2015) and summarizes its ethos in the Gandhian principle 'be the change you want to see in the world'.²⁰ Put simply, prefiguration means attempting to construct (aspects of) the ideal society envisioned by activists in the present, rather than at some point in the future when the conditions for building a more equitable society may be more conducive to effecting positive change. It means that political principles are embodied in current behaviour, not put on hold until the time is deemed right for them to be deployed. Nunes (2005:304) suggests that in this sense the commitment to prefigurative politics "is construed as a lynchpin of the distinction between 'new' and 'traditional' leftwing politics, since the latter would tend to defer questions of means and practices to a post-revolutionary future".

The most distinctive feature of prefiguration is the emphasis on experimentation, identified by Yates (2015:15) as "what differentiates prefigurative politics from other political logics". The willingness to explore alternatives, to create anew, to depart from and subvert conventions is key to the practice of prefigurative politics by new social movements, which explains why Melucci describes them as

“laboratories of experience” (1989:208). Juris (2008:3) thus argues that contemporary movements are not just involved in fighting poverty and inequality but are also actively “generating social laboratories for the production of alternative democratic values, discourse, and practices”. This means that both the vision and the means by which the vision is actualized deliberately depart from mainstream ethos, practices and conventions, and that prefiguration and the experimentation involved in practising it are strategic (Maeckelbergh 2009a:88-98, 2011:7) because they create alternatives to these practices.

So far, the literature on prefiguration has confined the concept to interactional and organizational matters, focusing on what is involved in creating non-hierarchical modes of interaction within an activist community or initiative, adopting decentralized decision-making processes, ensuring that decisions are reached by consensus rather than majority voting, and avoiding all forms of representation, whereby one or more members of a group come to speak for the group as a whole. While incorporating this dimension of prefiguration where relevant, I wish to extend the definition of prefigurative politics to encompass textual, visual and aesthetic practices in the project of each collective – *Mosireen* and *Words of Women* – as well as in the subtitling practices that provide an interface between each collective and other movements and publics outside its immediate locale.

As explained above, the most relevant for our current purposes of the values that inform contemporary activism are solidarity and commitment to diversity and inclusiveness. These and other values that I do not discuss in detail here for lack of space are enacted prefiguratively in the work of both collectives, and to some extent in the subtitling that accompanies their video output. Importantly, they are not just enacted in terms of organizational and interactional practices, the focus of the existing literature on prefiguration, but also in terms of filmic and textual experimentation. Two examples, one relating to each collective, demonstrate what forms non-organizational, non-interactional prefiguration might take, beyond the two, interdependent principles of solidarity and diversity that I illustrate in more detail in the following section.

In terms of the rejection of representational practices for instance, Mortada (2016) explains that *Words of Women* was in part a response to the hijacking of the revolution by academic and media figures who took on the task of ‘representing’ protestors on the street, attributing motives and beliefs to them and drowning their voices in the process.²¹ In an effort to avoid the same surreptitious representational tactics in filming their interviews with various women, the production team reduced cutaway images to the bare minimum, opting to reveal editing cuts and modifications rather than obscure them for artistic effect. They did so, Mortada explains, “in order to be transparent about where we intervened in editing a testimony”. In this sense, *Words of Women* “privileged transparency

over artistic quality” and lay bare the residue of the ultimately unavoidable representational act for scrutiny by the viewer (2016:132).

A particularly interesting example of textual and visual prefiguration can be seen in *Mosireen*'s conscious choice of the name of the collective. The word *Mosireen* in Arabic, specifically as written in the logo of the collective (Figure 1), is full of possibilities and open to a range of potential interpretations, all empowering and all resisting reductive, facile representations of the group and the events they document.



Figure 1: *Mosireen* logo

First, *Mosireen* (مصيرين), a verbal noun that belongs to the formal register of language, generally means ‘determined’ or ‘resolute’, a meaning that has strong political connotations in the context of the Revolution. As a single word it would be in the nominative case as a default: مصرون (*musirrun*). The ending *-in* (rather than *-un*) clearly connects it with the spoken, informal register of Egyptian Arabic.²² The mixing of formal and informal registers of Arabic is characteristic of the language of the Egyptian Revolution and is prefigurative in its democratizing potential.

More importantly, *مصيرين* (*Mosireen*) can also be read as a misspelling of مصريين (*Misriyeen*), meaning ‘Egyptians’. Khalid Abdallah explains the appeal of this aspect of the visual pun (Interview [29.10]):

Bearing in mind we were being accused of not being Egyptian and anyone who had this position which was anti-authority somehow their culture, you know their national identity or whatever was under question, I liked the idea that the word looked like it was an apparent misspelling of مصريين [Egyptians].

Second, the word as written in the logo includes vowels written above and below the letters to guide pronunciation. Vowelling is rarely used in Modern Arabic, and its use here is therefore highly marked. What is even more marked is that the vowelling instructions (verbs that tell the reader/writer what vowel to add or pronounce) are written out in full under the logo. Khalid Abdallah explains the effect (Interview [28.40]):

You take تشكيل [vowelling] and turn it into a sentence, it becomes ضُم، اِكسر، شيد which I roughly translate in English—and I don't know if this is fair—but as “Assemble, break, pull together”, and which as time passed, it began to form actually a cycle, again, again we would go through.

In addition to communicating roughly the meaning of “assemble, break, pull together”, as noted by Abdalla above, ضُم، اِكسر، شيد (*dumm/iksar/shidd*) are also vowelling instructions whose technical meaning is ‘add the vowel *u*’, ‘add the vowel *i*’, and ‘double the consonant (r)’, respectively.

Abdalla continues (29.30):

So there were all these aspects of it [*Mosireen*] which I liked as a word and plus obviously fundamentally was the idea of determination, which I think is one of the most essential concepts inside it and for me is related to notions of change and how things happen is that I believe change happens in that moment when things are darkest and you keep walking. That's the moment in which the biggest change happens. And somehow the name encourages you when things feel like they're... they're over... to push that little bit further and when you push that little bit further, you sometimes hit the bit where it starts, you know.

This example of textual prefiguration draws on the concepts of steadfastness and determination as qualities that are important to hold on to in order to effect change. The choice of the name for the collective, and the visual punning with vowels and imperative verbs below the name, all actualize principles the group believes in and wants to hold on to: the inclusiveness that embraces Egyptians with varying political positions, the rejection of false divisions, and the steadfastness that activists need in order to survive the repeated cycles of revolution, despair, and return to revolution.

To the best of my knowledge, this kind of textual, visual and aesthetic prefiguration has received no attention in the literature, despite widespread acknowledgement of “the symbolic capacity to reverse meaning” in contemporary activism (Melucci 1996:358). In discussing the two, interdependent core values that I find most relevant to issues of activist subtitling – solidarity and diversity – I

will therefore be prioritizing symbolic rather than organizational examples of prefiguration in the original work of the collectives and in the subtitles of their output.

Solidarity, Diversity and Subtitling Practices

Solidarity is a key value that has been reconceptualized in contemporary activism. Its reconceptualization derives from the Zapatistas' concept of *acompañamiento* (accompaniment), which means that people in different places conduct their own fights against the injustices prevailing in their own location, but do so with the knowledge that they are ultimately part of the same struggle against a global system of oppression (Maackelbergh 2009:174-176). Solidarity today means that the struggle of many movements involves both defending local models of social life and mobilizing globally by developing coalitions at different scales (Stephansen 2013:511). In the case of *Mosireen* and *Words of Women*, the scales are both regional and international, involving coalitions with regional movements of protest in Sudan, Tunisia, Bahrain, Southern Sahara,²³ as well as protest groups in Oakland (California), Argentina, Greece, and elsewhere.

Activists involved in *Mosireen* and *Words of Women* share the same understanding and underlying logic of solidarity that informs global movements of protest, as Philip Rizk from *Mosireen* makes clear (Rizk 2016:230):

If the world's superpowers politically support one dictator after another and supply the Egyptian police and military with weapons, and if software developers from Silicon Valley make part of their profits by supplying the regimes that lock us up and torture us with the tools they need to spy on us, then how can we speak of a strictly Egyptian revolution? Unless we frustrate these political alliances, stop the weapons shipments and shut down the corporations that supply our overlords with the tools that crush us, the counter-revolution will continue to be armed to the teeth, while we take care of our dead. ... we have to recognize the dimensions of our battle, which certainly cross national boundaries and de facto make them obsolete.

This understanding of solidarity means that activists need to connect, to share experiences, to challenge mainstream systems and media together, and to support local campaigns at a global level. Rizk (2013) hence stresses that screenings of subtitled *Mosireen* videos in different parts of the world are "part of [the collective's] responsibility to disseminate images of protest in an attempt to enhance the dissemination of imaginations for resistance". In this context, he argues elsewhere, "translation becomes a vital tool to link people together and wipe out the colonial boundaries created to contain our common struggles" (Rizk 2016:230). Mortada (2016:132-133) makes a similar case for *Words of Women*:

Just as we were inspired and empowered by other struggles and had access to them through translated videos, articles and communiqués, we felt an obligation to communicate our struggle to similar movements abroad by subtitled the videos we were producing, often in the midst of a heated revolutionary moment. We needed to tell the world, and fellow revolutionary movements, what was happening in Egypt. Our subtitled videos were also a clear call for solidarity at a time when the Egyptian regime(s) and the mainstream media locally and internationally were undermining and misrepresenting our struggle.

The choice and range of languages in which videos produced by both collectives can be made available clearly have an impact on the form of solidarity they are able to offer and receive. Unsurprisingly, given the ready availability of English-speaking volunteer subtitlers and the acknowledged reach of English as lingua franca, the default language into which all videos are first subtitled is English. Beyond that, it all depends on who is available to subtitle into what language. Katharine Halls, who coordinated *Mosireen's* subtitling list throughout 2012/2013, explains that the collective did not prioritize looking for volunteer subtitlers in any specific language, except Spanish (Interview [37:35]), presumably because of the reach of Spanish as well as the connections that *Mosireen* activists seem to have established in some Spanish-speaking countries like Mexico and Argentina, where events in Egypt seem to have had particular resonance.²⁴ Occasionally, *Mosireen* would put out a call on social media asking volunteers to subtitle a particularly important video into a wider range of languages. Indeed some videos are available with Greek, Turkish, Italian and even Swedish subtitles, and more are now also available with German and French subtitles. All 11 *Words of Women* videos are subtitled into Spanish, in addition to English, mainly because Leil-Zahra Mortada had been living in Barcelona for nine years and, as he explains in the Interview [42:50] “I feel like this is my home. And so I wanted my other home to know my original home”. The odd *Words of Women* video is available with subtitles in other languages, especially French.

What does this mean for solidarity? Katharine Halls points out one implication: “I don’t know if anybody anywhere in Africa has ever heard of *Mosireen* or the Egyptian revolution” (Interview [37:00]). I would add that there is more to the choice and range of subtitling languages than publicizing the work of an individual initiative or even a single protest movement. Solidarity is most desperately needed among activists located in areas of the world where the system of oppression is at its most brutal, its most destructive. And while English remains the most widely understood language in the world, there are huge areas of Africa and other regions where the majority of people either do not understand English at all or have such a rudimentary understanding of it that it cannot offer them much insight into the nuances of a complex revolutionary context such as the one depicted in the videos of *Mosireen* and *Words of Women*.

Another aspect of the subtitling practices of both groups that undercuts the political principle of solidarity – as well as the principle of diversity – is that most subtitling into languages other than English is done indirectly via English, rather than directly via the original Arabic. This practice, which is widely adopted in corporate media and the film industry, inadvertently reproduces the same structures of power the videos are meant to challenge. It does so by allowing a colonial language that is deeply implicated in the processes of subjugation and misrepresentation activists are fighting against to function as a filter for values expressed by the diverse characters depicted in the videos. English is of course not the only imperial language, historically or regionally: Arabic itself may be considered a colonial language in relation to Tamazight in North Africa. However, English is today *the* global imperial language par excellence, and there is now a wealth of literature on its impact on other languages and cultures and the role of translation in this process. Against this background, Mortada provides an insight into the dilemma of using English as an intermediary language in *Words of Women* (2016:128-129):²⁵

Our dependence on English to connect with others was not accepted uncritically: we were aware of the inherent problems of using an imperial language to communicate with the world. Indeed, not only did we prioritize subtitling into English, but we also used it as an intermediate language, on which to base other sets of subtitles. In other words, given our own linguistic limitations and the pressure we were working under, we decided, rightly or wrongly, to put our reservations aside and invite volunteers to subtitle from English into their own languages, thus compounding the problems associated with relying on an imperial language to communicate what is essentially an anti-imperial message.

Dilemmas and contradictions are inherent in all protest movements, and some may not be resolvable under any circumstances. Nevertheless, it is important to reflect on their implications, even with hindsight, and to try to envision ways of containing or reducing their negative consequences in future initiatives.

Diversity means a commitment to inclusiveness and pluralism, and respect for the individual voice and life experience. It is a cornerstone of new social movements, as the *Social Movements' Manifesto* drawn up at the first World Social Forum meeting in Porto Alegre makes clear (2001; reprinted in Fisher and Ponniah 2003:346):

We are diverse – women and men, adults and youth, indigenous peoples, rural and urban, workers and unemployed, homeless, the elderly, students, migrants, professionals, peoples of every creed, colour and sexual orientation. The expression of this diversity is our strength and the basis of our unity.

Both collectives under study explicitly adopt diversity and inclusiveness as core principles. An article published in *Jadaliyya* on a presentation by *Mosireen* member Sherif Gaber at the American University in Cairo in 2014 reports him as saying that “*Mosireen’s* work ... focuses on fracturing the currently-rigid binary perspectives by showcasing the diversity of experiences arising from a single event” (Middle East Studies Centre at AUC 2014). *Mosireen* videos provide a space for enacting this principle by covering diverse types of struggle, not only the much publicized demonstrations in Cairo, particularly Tahrir, but also protests outside Cairo, and other struggles in the region and beyond, including the struggles in Sudan, Turkey and Oakland. More importantly, they give voice to a diverse cross section of the population: old, young, uneducated, highly educated professionals, poor, rich, men, women, children, Muslims, Christians, devout, non-devout, etc. Likewise, *Words of Women* enact the principle of diversity in the very choice of women interviewed by the collective. The eleven women whose interviews are available on the Internet include old and young (the youngest being 18 and the oldest 52 years old), different types of Muslim women (unveiled, veiled and one wearing a *niqab*), a Christian woman who speaks about the difficulty of living in a majority Muslim society, and a young woman from upper Egypt who speaks about the Nubian struggle.

The commitment to diversity enacted at this level is occasionally undercut through subtitling choices that prioritize semantic content over nuances of register, that focus on the core message of the speaker and ignore the specificities of their individual voice. For example, in the *Mosireen* video ‘Why Riot’²⁶ (Figures 2.1 and 2.2), one speaker talks passionately about the way the regime tries to confuse the real issue and claim that the demonstrations are violent because they are infiltrated by thugs, not because of the brutality of the police. She says, in simple Arabic:

في كل موقع وفي كل حته تحاربونا
تقتلوا بالخراطيش وبالسلاح الحي، وتموتوا وتعوروا
والاخر تقول ده مش احنا
ده ناس مدسوسه من اللي هم واقفين، بتوع الثوار
عايزين يركبوا الموجه ويتحكموا فينا
ويؤمر بالدستور كمان
احنا اللي نؤمر، هو متوظف عندنا

Literally: Everywhere, in every location you fight us
You murder with rubber and live bullets
You kill and injure
And then say it’s not us?
It’s people who are sneaked in [infiltrators], among those who are standing, those
with the revolutionaries?
They want to ride the wave and rule over us

And rule with the constitution too?
We rule, he [meaning Morsi] works for us



Figure 2.1 'Why Riot' – Choice of 'provocateurs'



Figure 2.2 'Why Riot' – Choice of 'fig-leaf'

The level of register used in the subtitles, especially the choice of *provocateurs*²⁷ and *use x as a fig leaf*, makes the speaker sound more educated than she is and places her in a social class to which she clearly does not belong. The language jars with her appearance and facial expressions. Such choices cumulatively suppress the expression of diversity the film makers built into the *Mosireen* project, by streamlining them into the homogenous voice of an articulate, educated representative of the Egyptian Revolution. It is worth noting that the set of guidelines *Mosireen* make available to their volunteer subtitlers explicitly warn against using formal language in subtitles: "Don't be afraid to be 'street'. We don't

need to be too formal – this is dialogue after all!” (Philip Rizk, *Mosireen* subtitling list, 27 May 2012).

A similar effect is achieved by ignoring the phenomenon of codeswitching in subtitling *Words of Women* interviews, in both English and Spanish. A small number of interviewees – specifically Hanan Sadek and Mona El-Sabbahy²⁸ (mother and daughter) – use many English expressions in their speech, which sets them off from other interviewees with a different social and educational background. There is no attempt to reflect this codeswitching, either by italicizing the English expression in subtitles into English, or reproducing it in subtitles into Spanish (Figures 3.1 and 3.2, where the English expression used in the original Arabic speech is *sort of a joke*).



Figure 3.1: *sort of a joke* in English subtitles



Figure 3.2: *sort of a joke* in Spanish subtitles

These choices cumulatively homogenize the voices of speakers featured in the videos and undercut the principle of diversity that informs the political project.

One area in which the subtitling departs from this emphasis on semantic content and functions as a political space in its own right, one in which the principle of diversity is prefiguratively enacted and enhanced, is the treatment of gender in *Words of Women* videos subtitled into Spanish. Like Spanish, and unlike English,

Arabic is heavily marked for gender, with every verb, adjective, noun and pronoun, whether singular or plural, having a masculine and a feminine form. As in all gender-marked languages, the masculine form is used as a default. *Words of Women* applies a consistent subtitled strategy in Spanish, across all 11 videos, which involves replacing all gender markers by an *x*, so that *amigo/amiga*, for instance, become *amigx* (Figures 4.1 and 4.2).



Figure 4.1: Prefigurative Gender (un)marking in *Words of Women*. Episode 6 – Mariam Kirollos



Figure 4.2: Prefigurative Gender (un)marking in *Words of Women*. Episode 7 – Madeeha Anwar

The choice of *x* takes the familiar feminist challenge to gender marking in Spanish, which involves replacing *o* and *a* with *@*, a step further, as Mortada explains (2016:134):

Rather than opt for this familiar strategy uncritically, ... the group paused to consider people who do not identify as men or as women, who adopt a queer politics. After all, *@* can be interpreted as a visual combination of the masculine *o* and the feminine *a*. What about identities and genders that reach beyond the strictly-imposed binary of

Man vs. Woman? Discussions among the group led to the adoption of a different practice, which involved replacing the masculine *o* and feminine *a* with an *x* rather than *@*: *todxs*. This was felt to subvert the gender binary in the language and signal our position on the issue. All the Spanish subtitles ... reflect this commitment to queer and transfeminist politics ...

Importantly in this context, the strategy raises difficult ethical questions of the type all activists confront regularly, and highlights the potential tensions involved in negotiating the different political values that inform their project. In this case, the tension is between diversity, enacted in the subtitling choice, and the ethics of representation, and is resolved in favour of diversity. Mortada (2016:134-135) reflects on this specific dilemma:

... using the queer form (*x*) ... whether the speaker identified with the gender binary or not, could be questioned on ethical grounds. But then *Words of Women* as a project never claimed it was neutral, and all decisions, including the decision not to intervene, ultimately have ethical implications. Our decision to adopt subtitling strategies that are more inclusive in relation to gender did not conform to the dominant hetero-normative binary, but this non-conformity was very much part of the landscape of the revolution and the vision of the world we wish to create. The risk of imposition was inevitably part of that dynamic.

However we assess the ethical implications of this choice, its importance lies in recognizing the space of subtitling as a potential arena for prefiguration. Disappointingly, however, my interviews with Leil-Zahra Mortada and Ethel, the subtitler into Spanish, as well as the interviews with subtitlers working with *Mosireen*, suggest that any such experimentation is initiated by the film makers, rather than the subtitlers. Overall, the subtitlers working with both collectives seem to be positioned, and to position themselves, outside the collective proper, and therefore do not play an active part in terms of prefiguring the political principles within the space of subtitling.

Concluding Remarks

Can the positioning of subtitlers in place-based collectives like *Mosireen* and *Words of Women*, and the potential for prefiguration within the subtitling space, be renegotiated in order to enhance the political project, and if so how can this be achieved?

The problem, as I see it, is two-fold. First, as conscious as they are of the importance of translation to their project, all the interviews I carried out for this

study confirm that film makers do not build subtitling into the production process and do not think about it consciously as they edit the videos. The most obvious example of the extent of this 'blindspot' in the work of otherwise highly sophisticated and reflective groups of activists is that *Mosireen* film makers routinely used the only space available for subtitles, at the bottom of the screen, to provide information in Arabic, and in large letters – information such as the name of a speaker, which they could easily place elsewhere on the screen. As can be seen in Figure 5, this results in a rather distracting visual experience and occasionally in illegible subtitles. It also obstructs the work of subtitlers and revisers. In an exchange on the *Mosireen* subtitling list dated 20 March 2014 with Mia Jankowicz, who was revising a set of existing subtitles and couldn't decide whether 'تطهير الداخلية' should be subtitled as 'purge' or 'cleanse' the Ministry of Interior, I pointed out that the expression was a hashtag in Arabic (shown on a piece of paper held by Hany el-Gamal in that particular shot; Figure 6). Mia responded: "Oh I get it now – didn't see that the piece of paper he's holding was what's being translated (it's obscured by the translation, ironically)".



Figure 5: Overlap of Arabic and English Subtitles – 'Revolution is a crime, market rate at least two years in prison'²⁹



Figure 6. English Subtitles obscuring Arabic on a piece of paper held by Hany El Gamal – ‘The Shura Council Detainees’³⁰

Secondly, even when the film makers are aware of the political potential of subtitles and think about the translation aspect of their work consciously, as in the case of *Words of Women*, the volunteer subtitlers who work with both collectives seem to adopt a largely passive role and prioritize semantic accuracy over prefigurative principles. Any prefigurative experimentation found in the space of subtitles seems to be initiated by film makers and founders of collectives, such as Leil Zahra-Mortada, rather than by the subtitlers. This may be explained by the fact that the subtitlers do not seem to think of themselves as an organic part of either collective, nor to be regarded as such by the film makers. Even Katharine Halls, who coordinated the *Mosireen* subtitling list and had a long history of activism with members of the collective, says “I see myself and I think a lot of people see themselves as not being key people but just serving and supporting and doing what we can” (Interview [27:17]). The subtitlers I interviewed regularly referred to *Mosireen* as ‘they’ (not ‘us’), and the *Mosireen* film makers similarly think of ‘them’ as supporters of the collective rather than an integral part of it, as evident in Khalid Abdallah’s comment that “*Mosireen* is dependent on a community *outside it* predominantly to do the translations” (Interview [01.38], emphasis added). When alerted to this problematic positioning of subtitlers,³¹ Salma El-Tarzi from *Mosireen* made it clear that the responsibility cannot fall on the shoulders of film makers alone: “should the translators shoulder part of the

blame?”, she asks, “Why have none of them ever objected? Why is it that not one subtitler from the Mosireen group has protested or passed comment on any aspect of the group’s work, not even in connection with translation-related issues?” (El-Tarzi 2016:91).

I have argued throughout this article that translation, including subtitling, is an integral part of any political project, whether those involved in the project are aware of its impact or not. It either undercuts the project by failing to reflect or partake of its goals, or enhances it by providing an additional space for actualizing these goals prefiguratively. For the prefigurative potential of subtitling to be realized, both film makers and subtitlers need to renegotiate their position vis-à-vis each other and the political project (Baker 2016). As they do so, many factors will make the dialogue difficult: their physical separation across continents, given that volunteer subtitlers tend to be dispersed across cities, towns, countries and continents while film makers in place-based collectives such as *Mosireen* tend to have regular face-to-face contact, at least while they’re filming and editing; the persistent attitudes to translation that influence the way even political activists approach it, and the way subtitlers think of their role; the emotional burn out activists often experience, which leaves them little energy to reflect and act on yet another ‘problem’ that is understandably dwarfed by the momentous events they are trying to document; and the tremendous pressure and time restrictions under which both film makers and subtitlers work in the context of protracted protests and violent repression. Despite these challenges, the dialogue must be initiated and attitudes on both sides must be rethought if subtitling is to play a positive role in effecting the kind of global solidarity the world needs at this stage.

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¹ The only exception is Mehrez (2012), which reports on a collective project undertaken in 2011 as part of a seminar on 'Translating Revolution' led by Samia Mehrez at the American University in Cairo.

² The study was supported by an 18-month full time Fellowship, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK,

³ https://www.facebook.com/mosireen/info?tab=page_info (last accessed 2 February 2015)

⁴ See also <http://mosireen.org/?p=737> (last accessed 18 February 2015).

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/user/Mosireen> (last accessed 4 February 2015).

⁶ <http://vimeo.com/mosireen> (last accessed 23 January 2015).

⁷ <http://mosireen.org> (last accessed 1 February 2015).

⁸ http://www.leilzahra.com/?page_id=2 (last accessed 23 January 2015).

⁹ A slightly different list appears on the Amara subtitling platform that features the trailer for the project – see <http://www.amara.org/en/videos/jM8VojlFupS5/info/words-of-women-from-the->

[egyptian-revolution-sanaa-seif-trailer/](#) (accessed 19 January 2016). This confusion, or lack of attention to crediting individuals with specific contributions to an activist project, is a by-product of a commitment to horizontality and resistance to patterns of representation that characterise the culture of contemporary activism, as discussed later in the article.

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/user/LeilZahra> (last accessed 23 January 2015).

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/HerstoryEgypt> (last accessed 23 January 2015).

¹² Mortada also subtitled some *Mosireen* videos into English and, according to exchanges on the subtitling list dated July 2012, helped revise the subtitles into Arabic for *Heart of the Factory* (*Corazón de Fábrica*), a film about workers in a self-managed Zanón ceramics factory in Buenos Aires who “wanted to get in touch with the cerámica Cleopatra workers” in Egypt (Philip Rizk, *Mosireen* subtitling list, 15 July 2012). Katharine Halls, who coordinated the *Mosireen* subtitling list, also helped with subtitling for *Words of Women* (Mortada, Interview [46:45; 48:30]), including subtitling of the interview with the Bahraini activist Maryam Alkhwaja (exchange on *Mosireen* subtitling list, 21 July 2012). *Words of Women* is also fascinating in terms of other issues that cannot be discussed here, for lack of space. For example, it was conceived and largely managed by a Lebanese rather than Egyptian gay activist, demonstrating the centrality of the Egyptian Revolution and its powerful hold on activist imaginaries in the region and beyond. Mortada tries but fails to explain his investment in the Egyptian Revolution: “I don’t know because Egypt is Egypt. I don’t know. It’s really hard to explain to people about how important Egypt is emotionally for all of us” (Interview with [07.10]).

¹³ See, for example, ‘Crimes of Mohamed Ibrahim, Minister of Interior under Morsi and Sisi’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1422579428&x-yt-cl=85114404&v=L72HdNNRF9Q> and ‘Sexual Torture under Mubarak, SCAF, MB’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2kMzrFHT-Y> (both accessed 1 February 2015).

¹⁴ ‘Massacre at Bayn al-Sarayāt’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxjCQbHbbjQ> (last accessed 1 February 2015).

¹⁵ ‘The Revolutionaries’ Response to the Tahrir Monument’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uFqqsKPQ6Y> (last accessed 1 February 2015).

¹⁶ ‘The Right to Housing 1’. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCN_klpOxug (last accessed 1 February 2015).

¹⁷ ‘After Injury and Arrest, Bassem Mohsen Becomes a Martyr’. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bhod2FBeSrs> (last accessed 1 February 2015).

¹⁸ ‘The Shura Council Detainees’. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALBiWyQD8tU> (last accessed 1 February 2015).

¹⁹ Katharine Halls (personal correspondence, 17 September 2012) described Hawas as having “the biggest output of all the activist translators” she has come across.

²⁰ The attribution of these exact words to Ghandi is contested (Mortan 2011).

²¹ Rizk, from *Mosireen*, expresses a similar attitude to representational practices in the context of the Revolution: “Youth activists were by no means representative of the protests, but they were the dominant voice presented. We were but a handful of individuals amongst a cacophony of shouts calling for change, each person with their own concerns, complaints, desires, cause for action, and reason for revenge. Throughout the upsurge in protests there was a strong horizontal inclination, a non-centralized decision-making process, a leaderless movement that could not be represented to a centralized, individual-focused media apparatus, through a penned article, given speech, authored art work, or character driven documentary film. Such a process of representation falsifies reality” (2014:34.)

²² I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for alerting me to the mix of formal and informal registers of Arabic in this instance, an aspect of the choice of *Mosireen* that Khalid Abdalla does not comment on in the interview. In line with *Mosireen*’s and other activist groups’ own informal spellings of Arabic words, I have chosen not to use the scholarly conventions of transcribing Arabic, here and elsewhere, in discussing the work of these groups (for further discussion, see Baker 2016:13).

²³ See, for instance, *Mosireen's* documentaries on the Grifna movement in Sudan – ‘Sudan, the Resistance Continues’, <http://mosireen.org/?p=1650>, and Turkey – ‘Tahrir to Taksim We Demand the Fall of the System’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20V2pv33F-w>. See also *Words of Women's* interview of the well-known Bahraini activist Maryam Alkhwaja, Episode 9, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxUD3TUC6zM>. All accessed 4 February 2015.

²⁴ Rizk's recollection of paths of solidarity nurtured by *Mosireen* suggests that Mexico and Argentina were particularly receptive to the Egyptian experience: “Especially in times of ebb of protests in Egypt, I sought out connections with revolts around the world. On one occasion we were put in contact with members of the self-governed tile factory Zanon in Argentina, after they had watched a Mosireen video, with Spanish subtitles, on the strike of tile workers in the Ceramica Cleopatra company. On one occasion a series of Intifadat Intifadat videos was screened in a public square in Mexico City to passersby, and the artist who organized the screening handed out CDs of the films, encouraging people to organize home screenings” (2016:229-230).

²⁵ For further discussion of this issue, see the recording of Mortada's keynote at the Globalizing Dissent conference, held in Cairo in March 2015. Available at <https://globalizingdissent.wordpress.com/translation-and-solidarity/> (last accessed 13 June 2015).

²⁶ Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_ywo_XZh1s (last accessed 6 February 2015).

²⁷ Had the speaker chosen the media cliché عناصر مندسه, literally ‘infiltrators’, the choice of *provocateurs* could have been motivated, on the basis that even uneducated people sometimes recycle media phrases of a much higher register than their level of education gives them access to. This is probably what the viewer concludes here, from the choice of *provocateur* and *use the constitution as a fig leaf*.

²⁸ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnLJ4zjpXCo> (last accessed 18 February 2015).

²⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRzPHad-1eQ>, published 20 March 2014 (last accessed 18 February 2015).

³⁰ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALBiWyQD8tU> (last accessed 23 January 2016). The subtitle shown incorporates the hashtag and the choice of ‘cleanse’ following the discussion on the subtitling list.

³¹ During a workshop I organized for the collective in April 2014, with the help of Luis Pérez-González. A recording of this workshop is available at <http://www.monabaker.org/?p=1891> (accessed 21 January 2016).