The Role of Translation of Scene Language in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract. In an increasingly globalized world, audiovisual media serves as a key medium for intercultural communication. However, the translation of scene language—culturally specific idioms, humor, social registers, and contextual expressions—poses significant challenges in conveying cultural meaning across linguistic boundaries. This study explores how scene language is translated in international cinema and its implications for intercultural understanding. Using a qualitative comparative case study approach, three culturally rich films (*Parasite*, *Amélie*, and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) and their English subtitles were analyzed alongside semi-structured interviews with five professional audiovisual translators. Findings reveal that translation often results in the loss of cultural nuance due to technical constraints, such as subtitle length, as well as the strategic choices of translators navigating between cultural fidelity and audience accessibility. While adaptation and functional equivalence were common strategies, these choices sometimes altered the source culture's narrative intent. The study highlights the translator's role as a cultural mediator and emphasizes the ethical and communicative importance of preserving scene language in translation. Implications include the need for greater cultural sensitivity in subtitle production and further research into audience reception and multilingual translation practices.

Key words: *scene language, translation studies, intercultural communication, cultural mediation, domestication, foreignization*

1. Introduction

In an era of rapid globalization, intercultural communication has become an essential component of social, economic, and political interaction. As people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds increasingly come into contact, the need for accurate and culturally sensitive communication grows more pressing. One of the most powerful tools enabling this interaction is translation, particularly in the realm of media, literature, and digital content. Within this domain, the translation of scene

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language—which includes idiomatic expressions, colloquialisms, humor, culturally specific gestures, and context-bound linguistic patterns—plays a critical yet often underestimated role in shaping mutual understanding.

Scene language is inherently tied to the cultural fabric of a society. It reflects not only linguistic structures but also shared histories, values, belief systems, and social norms. For example, a single phrase in one language may carry implications of age, social hierarchy, politeness, or humor that are not easily rendered in another. When translating such language across cultures, translators must navigate not just semantics but pragmatics—the intended meanings and social functions of utterances in their cultural context (Hatim & Mason, 1997). As such, translation becomes more than a linguistic exercise; it becomes an act of cultural negotiation and representation.

Translation theorists such as Lawrence Venuti (2012) and Mona Baker (2018) have emphasized the translator's dual role as both linguistic mediator and cultural interpreter. Venuti highlights the political and ethical dimensions of translation, arguing that "domestication" (making foreign content familiar to the target audience) can lead to the erasure of cultural difference. Conversely, "foreignization" retains cultural specificity but may alienate the target audience. This tension is particularly acute in the translation of scene language, where cultural resonance and contextual meaning often outweigh literal accuracy.

The stakes are high. Poor translation of scene language can result in miscommunication, perpetuation of stereotypes, and loss of cultural authenticity. In contrast, effective translation fosters empathy, cross-cultural literacy, and a deeper appreciation of cultural diversity (Katan, 2014). This is particularly relevant in audiovisual media—such as films and television—where non-verbal cues, slang, social registers, and context-dependent phrases are central to character development and plot progression.

Despite the growing attention to intercultural communication in translation studies, there is a relative lack of empirical research focused specifically on the translation of scene language and its impact on cross-cultural understanding. Most existing studies either treat translation as a purely linguistic process or generalize findings without addressing the complexities of scene-specific language (House, 2015). This study aims to address that gap by exploring how scene language is translated across three culturally rich films, examining the choices made by translators and the consequences for intercultural communication.

In sum, this study investigates how the translation of scene language either facilitates or hinders effective intercultural communication. By analyzing subtitled translations in global cinema and engaging with professional translators, the study seeks to highlight best practices and recurring challenges in this critical area of translation studies.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study approach, focusing on how the translation of scene language impacts intercultural communication. By analyzing subtitled versions of culturally rich

films from different linguistic backgrounds, and triangulating this data with expert insights from professional translators, the study aims to explore both the translation strategies used and their cultural implications. The combination of textual analysis and expert interviews allows for a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in translating scene language.

2.2 Selection of Materials

Three internationally acclaimed films were selected as primary case studies, each originally produced in a non-English language and later subtitled in English:

"Parasite" (2019, directed by Bong Joon-ho) – Korean

"Amélie" (2001, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet) – French

"Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" (2000, directed by Ang Lee) – Mandarin Chinese

These films were chosen based on several criteria:

High cultural density: Frequent use of idioms, cultural references, social hierarchies, and scene-specific language.

International acclaim and wide distribution, ensuring access to widely-used English subtitle versions.

Availability of both original scripts and official English subtitles for comparison.

2.3. Scene and Language Sample Selection

From each film, 5–7 key scenes were selected for detailed analysis. Selection was based on the presence of culturally rich or scene-specific language that is likely to pose a challenge for translation. These included:

Idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms

- Humor and sarcasm

- Social status markers (e.g., honorifics in Korean)

- Emotionally or culturally charged dialogue

- References to local customs, traditions, or settings (Ahmadova, 2025)

The original dialogue was transcribed from the source language, and compared line-by-line with the corresponding English subtitles.

2.4. Analytical Framework

To assess the quality and effectiveness of translation, the study employed a functionalist and discourse-based translation analysis framework, drawing from theories by Nord (1997) and Hatim & Mason (1997). The analysis focused on:

Translation strategies: Literal translation, cultural substitution, paraphrasing, omission, or adaptation.

Functionality: Whether the translated expression achieved a similar communicative function or emotional impact in the target language.

Cultural equivalence: The degree to which cultural meaning was preserved, adapted, or lost.

Audience accessibility: Clarity and comprehensibility for an English-speaking audience unfamiliar with the source culture.

Translator Interviews

To complement the textual analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five professional translators who specialize in audiovisual translation and subtitling. Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Minimum of 5 years of experience in subtitling or audiovisual translation

- Proficiency in at least one of the source languages (Korean, French, or Mandarin) and English

- Involvement in translating culturally dense media content

The interviews, lasting approximately 45–60 minutes each, were conducted via video conferencing. The following themes were explored:

Challenges in translating culturally specific language

Strategies for preserving cultural nuance and communicative function

Trade-offs between accuracy and accessibility

Opinions on the role of translation in shaping intercultural understanding

Interview transcripts were thematically analyzed using qualitative content analysis, focusing on recurring patterns, dilemmas, and best practices in handling scene language.

3. Results

The comparative analysis of the selected films and the accompanying expert interviews revealed several key patterns in the way scene language is translated and the implications for intercultural communication. These results are organized under four primary themes: (1) Loss of Cultural Nuance, (2) Strategic Adaptation, (3) Translation Strategies and Constraints, and (4) Translator Agency and Cultural Mediation.

3.1. Loss of Cultural Nuance

A significant finding across all three case studies was the frequent loss or dilution of culturally embedded meanings when scene language was translated into English. This was especially evident in films where politeness levels, social hierarchy, or wordplay played a central role in character interactions.

For example, in *Parasite*, the Korean language distinguishes between various honorifics and speech levels depending on the speaker's age and social status. The original script carefully constructs these layers of social hierarchy, yet the English subtitles often reduce them to flat, neutral expressions. In one scene, the housekeeper refers to the wealthy mother as "사모님" (*samonim*), a respectful term for a rich man's wife. In English, this becomes simply "ma'am" or "madam," stripping the term of its class-specific nuance (Ahmadova, 2023).

Similarly, in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, idiomatic expressions drawn from classical Chinese literature or martial arts philosophy were often reduced to simple English phrases. One example is the phrase "江湖义气" (*jianghu yiqi*), which refers to a complex sense of loyalty and brotherhood in martial arts culture. The translation rendered it as "loyalty" or "honor," missing the layered socio-historical connotations.

3.2. Strategic Adaptation and Cultural Substitution

Despite these losses, translators frequently employed cultural substitution and functional equivalence to convey intended meaning in a way accessible to target audiences. This strategy was especially prominent in *Amélie*, where French idiomatic and colloquial speech was adapted into informal but emotionally equivalent English.

For example, the French line *"les temps sont durs pour les rêveurs"* (literally "times are hard for dreamers") was retained in the English version. Although literal, this phrase functions metaphorically in both languages, preserving its poetic resonance. In other instances, more culturally specific references—such as French brands, food, or humor—were either replaced with neutral equivalents or omitted entirely (Babayev & Sadikhova, 2025). Translators explained that this was done to maintain the rhythm and pacing of subtitles, especially when matching on-screen timing.

In interviews, translators noted that certain cultural references "cannot travel" without explanation. One participant shared:

"You have to decide: do you keep the flavor of the original even if it confuses people, or do you simplify it so they get the idea? There's never a perfect answer—just the best compromise."

3.3. Translation Strategies and Technical Constraints

Subtitling imposes strict spatial and temporal limitations. Subtitle lines are typically restricted to two lines of around 35–40 characters each and must appear in sync with dialogue. These constraints often forced translators to condense or omit elements of scene language, especially when characters spoke rapidly or used overlapping speech.

In *Parasite*, rapid exchanges between family members were often shortened, resulting in a loss of character-specific speech patterns or humor. For example, Korean wordplay or puns were sometimes completely omitted or replaced with unrelated jokes. One instance involved a pun involving the word

"자연산" (*jayeonsan*, meaning "natural" or "wild-caught")—used both literally and suggestively. In the English subtitle, it became simply "She's real," missing both the pun and its cultural resonance.

Interviewed translators acknowledged these challenges, describing the need to "sacrifice" less critical information to preserve essential meaning. One translator commented:

"You can't say everything, so you have to choose what carries the emotional or narrative weight."

4. Translator Agency and Cultural Mediation

The interviews revealed that translators see themselves not just as linguistic technicians but as cultural mediators (Babayev, 2023). Their decisions often reflect a careful balancing act between fidelity to the source culture and intelligibility for the target audience.

Some translators preferred foreignization—retaining culturally specific terms and adding minimal explanation—believing it exposed viewers to cultural difference and enriched the viewing experience (Sadikhova & Babayev, 2025). Others leaned toward domestication, especially when translating for mainstream platforms, arguing that audience comprehension must take precedence (Babayev & Alaviyya, 2023).

Notably, the translation of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* into English involved consultation with both cultural advisors and native speakers to ensure that core values such as honor, duty, and love were maintained in tone, if not always in literal translation.

One translator remarked:

"Sometimes the cultural meaning is in the silence, or the way something is *not* said. That's the hardest to translate—but also the most important."

Summary of Findings

Theme	Description	Examples
Loss of Cultural Nuance	Flattening of hierarchical or idiomatic expressions	Korean honorifics, martial arts idioms, poetic metaphors
Strategic Adaptation	Use of functional equivalence or cultural substitution	Informal English in *Amélie*, simplified humor in *Parasite*
Technical Constraints	Subtitling limits forced condensation or omission of meaning	Rapid-fire dialogue, wordplay, overlapping speech
Translator Agency	Translators actively mediate cultural meaning through strategic choices	Decisions on domestication vs foreignization, preserving emotional tone

4. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the complex and multifaceted role of scene language translation in shaping intercultural communication. Through the comparative analysis of three culturally distinct films—Parasite, Amélie, and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon—and insights from professional

translators, it becomes evident that translation is not merely a linguistic operation, but a highly contextualized cultural act (Ahmadova & Farzaliyeva, 2025).

4.1 Preserving Meaning Beyond Words

One of the core insights is the challenge of preserving pragmatic meaning, not just semantic content. Scene language often carries layered implications that are embedded in a specific cultural worldview—ranging from social hierarchy and honorifics (as seen in Korean) to metaphoric language grounded in philosophy and folklore (as in Chinese), and quirky individualism or satire (as in French).

This aligns with the theoretical framework of pragmatic equivalence (Hatim & Mason, 1997) and Skopos theory (Nord, 1997), which argue that translation must serve the communicative purpose of the text within the target culture. However, the findings suggest that achieving pragmatic equivalence is frequently compromised due to technical constraints (e.g., subtitle length and timing), and the translator's subjective judgment regarding the target audience's cultural knowledge.

In Parasite, for example, the neutralization of honorifics removed vital cues about power dynamics—a loss that may lead viewers to misunderstand key relational tensions. In Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, simplification of traditional idioms stripped scenes of their philosophical and historical resonance, impacting audience immersion in the cultural world of the film.

4.2 Cultural Accessibility vs. Cultural Integrity

A key dilemma highlighted in both the data and interviews is the trade-off between cultural accessibility and cultural integrity. Translators often must choose between domestication (Venuti, 2012)—making content feel familiar to the target audience—and foreignization, which preserves the cultural distinctiveness of the source language but may alienate or confuse viewers.

This balancing act was especially apparent in Amélie, where translators opted for accessible English equivalents that captured the emotional tone, even if they departed from the literal French phrasing. While such strategies improved viewer engagement, they also contributed to a more "universalized" and less culturally distinct version of the story.

The tension here reflects broader ethical concerns in translation studies. As Katan (2014) argues, translation is a power-laden practice that can either challenge or reinforce dominant cultural norms. When cultural references are consistently erased or diluted, the target culture's worldview becomes the default, and source cultures are marginalized. This has implications not only for the integrity of translated works, but also for how cultural diversity is perceived and understood globally.

4.3. The Translator as Cultural Mediator

Another major theme emerging from this study is the active agency of the translator. Far from being neutral conveyors of meaning, translators are cultural mediators who make critical decisions about what meanings to preserve, adapt, or omit.

Interviews revealed that translators often experience tension between their professional obligations (e.g., platform guidelines, audience expectations) and their cultural responsibility to maintain fidelity

to the original. The notion of the "invisible translator" (Venuti, 2012) is increasingly problematic in contexts where cultural nuance is at stake. Rather than striving for invisibility, translators should be recognized as creative agents with interpretive authority—similar to editors or co-authors—especially when working with culturally rich scene language.

Moreover, some interviewees expressed concern about the commercial pressures of streaming platforms, which may prioritize speed and mass accessibility over quality. This raises questions about how translation workflows and industry standards can be restructured to allow more time, resources, and cultural consultation in the translation of media content.

4.4. Implications for Intercultural Communication

The implications of these findings extend beyond the realm of film translation. In a globalized world where audiovisual content serves as a key medium of intercultural engagement, the way scene language is translated directly influences how cultures are represented and understood.

Effective translation of scene language can:

- Foster empathy and cross-cultural literacy

- Reduce stereotypes and ethnocentrism

- Enhance narrative coherence and authenticity

Conversely, inadequate translation risks flattening cultural identities, misrepresenting social norms, and fostering miscommunication between global audiences.

Therefore, scene language translation should be understood as a strategic component of intercultural communication, requiring not only linguistic expertise but also deep cultural competence and ethical sensitivity (Babayev & Sadikhova, 2025).

4.5. Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides a focused analysis of three films and expert perspectives, it is limited by its scope. Further research could explore:

Audience reception: How do viewers interpret translated scene language, and to what extent does it influence their understanding of the source culture?

Multilingual comparisons: How do translations of the same source content vary across different target languages (e.g., Korean to English vs. Korean to Spanish)?

Genre-specific challenges: How does scene language translation differ in genres such as comedy, documentary, or historical drama? (Gulkhara & Aysu, 2025)

Role of technology: How are machine translation and AI tools affecting the quality and cultural nuance of scene language translation?

Additionally, collaboration between translation scholars, practitioners, and media producers could lead to the development of best practices and guidelines for culturally sensitive translation (Babayev, 2023).

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