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Linguistic and Cultural Mediation in Subtitling Three Films into Indonesian

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Abstract:

Film subtitling is a form of audiovisual translation in which linguistic transfer, cultural mediation, and technical compression operate simultaneously. This study examines how subtitle translation into Indonesian negotiates these demands across three films with contrasting registers and narrative styles: Pride and Prejudice (2005), Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019), and Little Women (2019). Using a qualitative descriptive design, approximately 200 source-target subtitle pairs were examined through thematic coding of translation strategy, functional adequacy, pragmatic equivalence, multimodal support, and technical constraint. The analysis shows that effective subtitling is not governed by literal fidelity alone. In Pride and Prejudice, poetic and functional reformulation helps preserve period register and interpersonal nuance; in Portrait of a Lady on Fire, compression and reliance on visual context support restrained dialogue and emotional silence; and in Little Women, explicitation and functional adaptation help maintain ideological and interpersonal force. Across the three films, domestication and source-oriented retention operate as complementary rather than mutually exclusive choices. The findings further show that subtitles depend on image, sound, gesture, and timing to distribute meaning across modes. The study concludes that subtitlers function as linguistic and cultural mediators whose decisions must balance semantic accuracy, cultural accessibility, register, and audiovisual economy.

Keywords:

Audiovisual translation; cultural mediation; Indonesian subtitles; multimodality; subtitling

INTRODUCTION

The rapid circulation of films across streaming and digital platforms has made audiovisual translation a central site of contemporary cross-cultural communication. Subtitles provide access to dialogue while remaining constrained by screen space, exposure time, reading speed, and the simultaneous presence of image and sound. Consequently, a subtitle is not simply a written equivalent of spoken dialogue; it is a compressed component of a multimodal text whose meaning is distributed across verbal, visual, and auditory channels. Recent scholarship describes audiovisual translation as an increasingly diverse field shaped by changing technologies, audiences, and modes of consumption (Valdeón, 2022; Wang et al., 2020). Research on film subtitling likewise emphasizes that pragmatic meaning emerges from the interaction between translated wording and cinematic context rather than from lexical substitution alone (Guillot, 2020).

These conditions become particularly visible when subtitles mediate culturally marked language. Cultural references, idioms, historical registers, humor, politeness, and ideological positioning may not have direct equivalents in Indonesian. Studies on cultural references show that translators routinely move between retention, substitution, generalization, explicitation, and omission according to the communicative demands of the scene and the presumed knowledge of viewers (Alfaify & Ramos Pinto, 2022; Mantika & Nurochman, 2023). Indonesian-focused research similarly demonstrates that foreignization and domestication are not fixed opposites but strategic options used in response to the cultural distance of particular items (Puspitasari et al., 2020). Corpus-based evidence also indicates that English-Indonesian translation can preserve high levels of semantic or constructional equivalence while still showing patterned variation in how meanings are packaged (Rajeg & Rajeg, 2022).

Despite this growing literature, many subtitle studies isolate a single problem, such as translation shift, idiom transfer, or culture-specific items. Fitria (2020), for example, identifies structural shifts in English-Indonesian film subtitles, whereas Agung (2022)shows that idiomatic expressions require different strategies in subtitling and dubbing. Such studies are valuable, but a narrower analytical lens can understate the fact that subtitle choices are simultaneously linguistic, cultural, pragmatic, technical, and multimodal. The source study for the present article also contains a methodological inconsistency that requires clarification: two selected films are English-language productions, whereas Portrait of a Lady on Fire is French-language. For that reason, this journal version frames the object more accurately as interlingual film subtitling into Indonesian rather than as exclusively English-Indonesian translation.

A comparative design can close this gap by examining how different genres and registers generate different translation pressures. Pride and Prejudice requires sensitivity to formal historical diction and socially encoded politeness; Portrait of a Lady on Fire relies on sparse dialogue, visual narration, and affective silence; and Little Women combines intimate family talk with explicitly gendered and ideological discourse. Research on subtitle processing shows that viewers continuously divide attention between text and image, which makes condensation and line design central to comprehension (Szarkowska & Gerber-Morón, 2018, 2019). At the same time, intercultural studies stress that translated screen language must manage linguacultural difference without erasing the identity of the source text (Monti, 2022).

Accordingly, this study investigates how subtitle translators balance linguistic fidelity, cultural accessibility, pragmatic force, and

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audiovisual constraints across the three films. Its novelty lies in integrating functional, cultural, pragmatic, and multimodal criteria within one comparative reading rather than treating translation technique as an isolated label. The study also considers the representational consequences of translation decisions, particularly when dialogue encodes social hierarchy, gendered agency, intimacy, or culturally sensitive meaning. The expected contribution is a more context-sensitive account of subtitling as mediation: a process in which translators do not merely transfer sentences but redistribute meaning across languages, cultures, and audiovisual modes.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative descriptive design in audiovisual translation studies. The corpus comprised subtitle data from three feature films: Pride and Prejudice (2005) , Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019), and Little Women (2019). The films were selected because they present contrasting linguistic and cultural demands: formal and historically marked English, visually driven and minimalist French dialogue, and a mixture of intimate, literary, and feminist discourse. Because the corpus includes more than one source language, the analysis focuses on interlingual subtitling into Indonesian. The original data record states that source-language and Indonesian subtitle files were obtained from reputable film releases and extracted with Aegisub and Subtitle Edit. Approximately 200 source-target subtitle pairs were compiled. The source manuscript, however, does not preserve platform or release-version identifiers; therefore, the findings are interpreted as applying to the documented corpus rather than to every commercial subtitle version of the films.

Data selection prioritized subtitle pairs containing idioms, culturally bound references, historical or literary language, irony, sarcasm, humor, register shifts, gender-related discourse, or other expressions whose meaning depended strongly on context. The researcher served as the principal instrument and conducted repeated comparison between dialogue, subtitle wording, and audiovisual context. Each item was coded through five analytical dimensions: translation strategy, functional adequacy, pragmatic equivalence, multimodal support, and technical constraint. Translation strategy captured procedures such as literal rendering, paraphrase, domestication, source-oriented retention, explicitation, omission, and compression. Functional adequacy considered whether the Indonesian subtitle maintained the communicative purpose of the utterance. Pragmatic equivalence examined tone, implicature, interpersonal stance, and speech-act force. Multimodal support assessed how visual action, facial expression, sound, or silence carried information that could be reduced in the verbal subtitle. Technical constraint considered brevity, synchronization, and the economy required by subtitle display.

The analysis proceeded through thematic coding and cross-case comparison. Representative examples were first interpreted within their local scenes, after which recurrent patterns were compared across the three films. Interpretive notes were used to document the reasons for assigning each category and to avoid treating a translation technique as automatically successful or unsuccessful. The analysis therefore evaluates strategy in relation to purpose and context rather than according to literal similarity alone. To strengthen credibility, the source study reports cross-checking of coded items, reflexive memoing, theoretical triangulation, and expert review. The present journal version retains these procedures while concentrating only on the most analytically informative examples.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis indicates that subtitling quality depends on coordination rather than on a single preferred translation strategy. Across the corpus, the strongest Indonesian subtitles preserve the communicative function of a line while adjusting lexical form, cultural reference, or degree of explicitness to the needs of the audiovisual moment. This finding is consistent with research showing that subtitling is a distinct pragmatic mode of meaning-making (Guillot, 2020) and that cultural references are best evaluated in relation to viewer processing and multimodal context (Alfaify & Ramos Pinto, 2022). The results are organized below around the

three films and then synthesized across linguistic, cultural, and multimodal dimensions.

Pride and Prejudice: Register and Rhetorical Equivalence

Pride and Prejudice presents the clearest pressure to preserve social register and rhetorical elegance. The source manuscript identifies poetic equivalence, cultural reframing, and functional translation as recurrent solutions. The line "You have bewitched me, body and soul," for example, is rendered as "Kau memikatku sepenuh jiwa dan raga." The Indonesian choice avoids a mechanically literal representation of "bewitched" while retaining its emotional intensity and balanced poetic structure. The translation is therefore target-oriented at the lexical level but source-sensitive at the level of function and tone. A similar process appears in "I could easily forgive his pride, if he had not mortified mine," translated as "Aku bisa memaafkan kesombongannya, jika saja dia tak melukai harga diriku." Here, "melukai harga diri" reframes the culturally and historically marked wording into a natural Indonesian expression without removing the interpersonal conflict.

These examples show why domestication cannot be equated with cultural loss. Puspitasari et al. (2020) found that subtitle translators move between foreignization and domestication according to the nature of the cultural item, while Mantika and Nurochman (2023) demonstrate that retention and established or official equivalents can coexist within the same film. In Pride and Prejudice, accessibility becomes most effective when the subtitle preserves relative formality and emotional restraint. Over-simplification would risk flattening class and politeness distinctions, whereas excessive archaism could make the subtitle difficult to process within limited screen time. The translated line must therefore achieve what may be called register-functional equivalence: not the duplication of nineteenth-century English form, but the recreation of its social effect in contemporary readable Indonesian.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire: Compression and Multimodal Restraint

Portrait of a Lady on Fire creates a different problem because its meaning is frequently carried by silence, gaze, physical distance, and visual framing. In such scenes, subtitles do not need to verbalize every interpretive detail. The source analysis classifies "Don't regret, remember" → "Jangan sesali, ingatlah" as compression that preserves emotional direction with minimal verbal load. Other examples are treated as literal translation with clarification when philosophical wording requires a small increase in explicitness. Most importantly, the film demonstrates multimodal support: a silent look between characters can carry affective information that would become redundant or intrusive if verbalized in the subtitle.

This pattern supports empirical evidence that viewers can distribute attention between subtitles and images even at relatively high reading speeds, although layout and density influence how comfortably this is achieved (Szarkowska & Gerber-Morón, 2018, 2019). It also supports Guillot's (2020) argument that subtitled film discourse has expressive resources of its own. In a visually restrained film, omission or compression is not automatically a deficit; it can be an appropriate recognition that the image already communicates part of the message. Monti (2022) similarly shows that screen translation mediates linguacultural difference through the orchestration of multiple semiotic resources. For Portrait of a Lady on Fire, the most successful subtitles are therefore those that remain semantically sufficient without competing with the film's deliberate visual silence.

Little Women: Ideological and Interpersonal Force

Little Women foregrounds interpersonal voice and ideological meaning. The source manuscript identifies literal translation, paraphrase, explicitation, and functional adaptation in passages associated with women's agency and intimate family relations. "Women, they have minds and souls, as well as just hearts" is rendered as "Perempuan juga punya pikiran dan jiwa, bukan hanya hati." The subtitle is direct but also slightly explicit in its contrastive structure, preserving the argumentative force of the statement. In "I've had lots of troubles, so I write jolly tales" → "Aku punya banyak masalah, jadi kutulis kisah ceria," paraphrase produces a natural Indonesian line while retaining the contrast between hardship and cheerful writing.

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The key issue in these examples is not whether the translator is formally literal but whether the subtitle preserves stance and agency. This is especially important when dialogue carries ideological or identity-related meaning. Guillot (2023) shows that choices in subtitling socially marked language can reshape pragmatic indexing across languages, while Agung (2022) demonstrates that idiomatic meaning often requires strategies that differ from direct lexical transfer. In Little Women, a subtitle that is concise but neutralizes assertion, irony, or emotional alignment may be linguistically correct yet functionally weak. The data therefore support a pragmatic criterion of adequacy: a target subtitle should reproduce what the line is doing in the scene, not merely what its words denote.

Table 1. Analytical Coding Framework

Dimension	Analytical Focus	Application in the Corpus
Translation strategy	Form of transfer used in the subtitle	Literal rendering, paraphrase, domestication, retention, explicitation, omission
Functional adequacy	How effectively the subtitle performs the scene's communicative purpose	Maintaining warning, intimacy, irony, assertion, or persuasion
Pragmatic equivalence	Preservation of tone, implicature, stance, and speech-act force	Keeping sarcasm or politeness without over-explanation
Multimodal support	Contribution of image, sound, gesture, or silence to meaning	Reducing text when facial expression or action supplies information
Technical constraint	Effect of screen time, line length, and synchronization on wording	Compression or omission of redundant modifiers

Table 2. Representative Subtitle Mediation Patterns

Film	Source Line	Indonesian Subtitle	Dominant Strategy
Pride and Prejudice	*"You have bewitched me, body and soul."*	*"Kau memikatku sepenuh jiwa dan raga."*	Poetic / functional reformulation
Pride and Prejudice	*"I could easily forgive his pride, if he had not mortified mine."*	*"Aku bisa memaafkan kesombongannya, jika saja dia tak melukai harga diriku."*	Cultural reframing
Pride and Prejudice	*"You are too generous to trifle with me."*	*"Kau terlalu baik untuk mempermainkanku."*	Functional translation
Portrait of a Lady on Fire	*"Faire des étincelles."*	*"Saling jatuh cinta."*	Domestication
Portrait of a Lady on Fire	*"Don't regret, remember."*	*"Jangan sesali, ingatlah."*	Compression
Portrait of a Lady on Fire	*[Silent gaze]*	—	Multimodal support / no subtitle
Little Women	*"Women, they have minds and souls, as well as just hearts."*	*"Perempuan juga punya pikiran dan jiwa, bukan hanya hati."*	Explicitation / direct rendering
Little Women	*"I've had lots of troubles, so I write jolly tales."*	*"Aku punya banyak masalah, jadi kutulis kisah ceria."*	Paraphrase
Little Women	*"Do you think love is enough?"*	*"Apakah menurutmu cinta saja cukup?"*	Literal translation

Note. Representative subtitle pairs are those reported in the source manuscript; exact commercial release identifiers were not recorded in the original data documentation.

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Cross-Film Synthesis: Fidelity, Culture, and Audiovisual Economy

Across the three films, four broader patterns emerge. First, fidelity operates at more than one level. A subtitle may depart from surface wording while remaining highly faithful to communicative purpose, register, or emotional effect. This is consistent with the Indonesian corpus evidence reported by Rajeg and Rajeg (2022), where equivalence is measurable but not identical to one-to-one form matching. Fitria (2020) likewise shows that structural shifts are a normal feature of English-Indonesian subtitle translation rather than evidence of failure in themselves.

Second, domestication and source-oriented retention are complementary resources. The comparative data do not support a rigid preference for one pole. Culturally familiar reformulation is useful when literalness would obscure meaning, but retention can be preferable when a foreign cultural term is central to characterization or setting. Alfaify and Ramos Pinto (2022) demonstrate that audience reception of cultural references depends on both translation strategy and multimodal support, and Puspitasari et al. (2020) similarly report mixed treatment of culture-specific items. The translator's task is therefore selective: preserve difference when it is meaningful, adapt it when comprehension would otherwise collapse, and avoid unnecessary explanation when the image supplies the missing information.

Third, technical constraints shape linguistic decisions but do not mechanically determine them. Subtitle timing and line density require economy, yet compression should remove redundancy rather than communicative force. Eye-tracking research indicates that viewers can process fairly fast subtitles when information is efficiently presented (Szarkowska & Gerber-Morón, 2018), while preferences concerning line number and subtitle presentation show that readability remains sensitive to visual design (Szarkowska & Gerber-Morón, 2019). The qualitative data in the present study reinforce this point: successful condensation is context-sensitive and relies on what the soundtrack and image already make available.

Fourth, genre and ideology influence what must be protected in translation. Pride and Prejudice requires social and rhetorical register, Portrait of a Lady on Fire depends on multimodal restraint, and Little Women requires preservation of interpersonal and gendered stance. Audiovisual translation scholarship increasingly recognizes that subtitles participate in cultural representation rather than merely transmitting dialogue (Valdeón, 2022; Wang et al., 2020). The translator consequently acts as a mediator with interpretive responsibility. This does not mean that every subtitle should become explanatory or politically corrective; rather, decisions should be transparent at the analytical level and defensible in relation to the source scene, the target audience, and the audiovisual constraints.

The main contribution of the study is therefore methodological as well as descriptive. Instead of treating translation strategy as an end point, the analysis uses strategy as one layer in a broader evaluation that also includes function, pragmatics, multimodality, and technical economy. This integrated approach better explains why the same strategy can be effective in one scene and inadequate in another. It also prevents the familiar academic ritual of declaring a

translation "accurate" simply because the dictionaries are satisfied, as though viewers watch films with dictionaries instead of eyes, ears, memory, and cultural expectations.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that subtitling into Indonesian is best understood as linguistic and cultural mediation under multimodal constraint. The three films demonstrate different but related translation priorities. Pride and Prejudice requires preservation of historical register, social nuance, and rhetorical elegance through poetic or functional reformulation. Portrait of a Lady on Fire shows the importance of compression and restraint because visual narration and silence already carry substantial meaning. Little Women demonstrates that subtitle adequacy also depends on maintaining interpersonal stance, ideological force, and character agency. Across the corpus, literal translation, paraphrase, domestication, source-oriented retention, explicitation, omission, and compression are not inherently superior or inferior. Their effectiveness depends on how well they preserve the communicative function of the scene while remaining readable and synchronized.

The findings also show that fidelity is multidimensional. A subtitle may alter lexical form yet remain faithful to tone, pragmatic purpose, cultural identity, or emotional impact. Conversely, a formally literal translation can fail if it obscures a cultural reference, neutralizes interpersonal meaning, or overloads the viewer. Translators therefore operate as mediators who coordinate verbal transfer with image, sound, timing, and audience knowledge.

For future research, the subtitle corpus should be documented with exact platform, release, and version identifiers so that examples can be independently reproduced. Audience-reception testing with Indonesian viewers would also strengthen claims about accessibility, domestication, and ideological interpretation. Quantitative coding of the full corpus could further show how frequently particular strategies occur by film and genre. These steps would extend the present qualitative findings without reducing subtitling to a simple count of techniques.

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