

CULTURAL ADAPTATION STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH SUBTITLES: A CASE STUDY OF THE ANIMATED FILM *THE DONKEY KING*

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Abstract

Audiovisual translation plays a vital role in facilitating communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries, and subtitling culture-specific items (CSIs) is a particularly challenging component of this process because such items encode meanings, values, and social allusions that literal translation alone cannot capture. This study examines the cultural adaptation strategies used in the English subtitles of the Pakistani animated political satire *The Donkey King* (2018). It aims to identify the types of culture-specific items present in the film's Urdu dialogue, analyze the strategies used to render them in the English subtitles, and examine how these strategies contribute to accessibility and cross-cultural understanding for international viewers. The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative, descriptive case-study design, analyzing selected Urdu dialogue from *The Donkey King* alongside its official English subtitles. The analysis focused on expressions of kinship and honorifics, colloquial language and playful insults, political and media references, religious expressions, social customs, and satirical and metaphorical language, drawing on Eugene Nida's Dynamic Equivalence Theory as the guiding framework for assessing the transfer of meaning and communicative effect. The findings show that the film contains numerous culturally dense terms that pose considerable subtitling challenges, and that the subtitler relied on a range of adaptation strategies—substitution, generalization, paraphrase, omission, modulation, and explication—to preserve narrative clarity, humor, sarcasm, and emotional impact while rendering the dialogue accessible to international viewers. Cultural adaptation in subtitling emerges from this analysis as a continual balancing act between preserving cultural distinctiveness and ensuring accessibility: while the English subtitles largely succeed in conveying the film's communicative and humorous impact, some honorific meaning and locally embedded cultural nuance is inevitably diminished. The study concludes that subtitling functions simultaneously as linguistic transfer and cultural mediation, and contributes to the underexplored literature on the English subtitling of Pakistani animated film.

Keywords: Audiovisual Translation (AVT), cultural adaptation, culture-specific items (CSIs), English subtitles, *The Donkey King*, Dynamic Equivalence Theory, intercultural communication, Pakistani animated film, subtitling strategies

Introduction

As global media circulation increases, audiovisual content has become one of the primary channels through which narratives, ideologies, and cultural values cross language and national boundaries (Rahmani, 2024). Subtitling, one of the principal modes of audiovisual translation, mediates meaning between source and target cultures under considerable technological, temporal, and spatial constraints (Fărcașiu, 2025). Because language and culture are closely intertwined, subtitles often do more than convert words from one language into another; culturally sensitive translation decisions are essential if meaning is to remain relevant and comprehensible for target audiences (Abdelaal, 2019). Culture-

specific items such as idioms, humor, social conventions, and political or intertextual allusions are especially difficult to subtitle when the source and target cultures are far apart (Fitriani et al., 2025).

Subtitlers address these challenges through a range of strategies, including retention, generalization, and substitution; unmediated literal translation risks producing cultural opacity that compromises the communicative efficiency of the subtitles (Abdelaal, 2019; Fărcașiu, 2025). By balancing source-oriented strategies such as retention against target-oriented strategies such as cultural substitution, subtitlers can preserve accessibility while accommodating the target culture's expectations (Fărcașiu, 2025). Prior research on culturally bound subtitling in feature films and documentaries has demonstrated that systematic, culture-based translation approaches can be identified and applied across a range of audiovisual genres, and has recommended combining several techniques—such as omission, specification, and calque—rather than relying on a single strategy (Abdelaal, 2019; Fitriani et al., 2025). This body of work has, however, concentrated disproportionately on Western and East Asian productions, leaving subtitling practices in South Asian, and particularly Pakistani, animated film comparatively unexamined.

The *Donkey King* (2018), a Pakistani animated political comedy, offers a striking example of culturally distinctive content that must be translated for a worldwide audience through subtitles. The film draws heavily on humor, satire, and allegory rooted in Pakistani society, requiring subtitlers to balance fidelity to local cultural reference with accessibility for viewers from differing cultural backgrounds. Understanding how such decisions are made in practice contributes to a fuller picture of subtitling as an act of cultural negotiation (Rahmani, 2024). Because subtitles are the primary point of access for non-Urdu-speaking viewers, they directly shape cross-cultural perception of the film's cultural environment; this creates a significant gap in the literature on English subtitling of South Asian animated texts that the present study addresses by analyzing the culturally unique features and translation strategies used in the English subtitles of *The Donkey King*, adopting a qualitative descriptive case-study approach informed by existing subtitling and translation research (Abdelaal, 2019; Fitriani et al., 2025).

Animated film occupies a distinctive position within audiovisual translation research because it is typically produced for a broad, multigenerational, and international audience from the outset, which places particular pressure on subtitlers to reconcile cultural specificity with universal accessibility. Unlike live-action drama, where cultural setting is visually and narratively self-evident, animated satire often layers cultural commentary into dialogue, visual gags, and character names simultaneously, meaning subtitlers must make interpretive choices about which layers of meaning to prioritize when screen time and reading speed limit what can be conveyed in text. The *Donkey King* compounds this challenge by combining a fictional monarchical setting with pointed contemporary political satire directed at recognizably Pakistani institutions and media practices, meaning viewers unfamiliar with the country's socio-political discourse depend almost entirely on the subtitler's interpretive choices to access the film's critical and comedic layers. This makes the film an unusually rich case for examining how a single subtitler's choices, applied consistently across a feature-length narrative, shape a global audience's understanding of a culturally specific comic and political text.

Problem Statement

Subtitles remain the principal means by which non-native viewers access films in a foreign language, yet translating culture-specific items—idioms, humor, political references, and social customs—continues to pose difficulties rooted in the linguistic and cultural distance between source and target audiences (Abdelaal, 2019; Rahmani, 2024). These

challenges are routinely faced by subtitlers (Motiejūnienė & Danilavičienė, 2025), since culture-specific items are often tied to local, context-specific meanings that literal translation alone cannot adequately convey. Prior research shows that subtitlers use strategies such as omission, generalization, substitution, and retention to enhance readability and overcome cultural barriers (Abdelal, 2019; Rahmani, 2024). While subtitling practices have been extensively studied in European cinema and in East and Southeast Asian documentaries and animated films, subtitling in South Asian audiovisual productions—particularly Pakistani animation, where cultural context and humor interact in complex ways—remains largely unexamined (Umairah Mohamed & Noor, 2025). The *Donkey King* (2018), a Pakistani animated political satire built on sharp humor and dense cultural reference reflecting local socio-political discourse, is well suited to examining how English subtitles mediate these features for a global audience. However, little research has examined the specific techniques subtitlers use to translate such references, or assessed their effectiveness in conveying intended meaning and cultural complexity—a gap this study addresses by systematically analyzing the cultural adaptation strategies used in the English subtitles of *The Donkey King*.

Research Questions

- Which types of CSIs make English subtitling of the Urdu dialogue of *The Donkey King* challenging?
- What cultural adaptation methods have been used to adapt these culturally unique items to the English subtitles?
- How do the cultural adaptation techniques used in the English subtitles help the foreign viewers to be accessible and to understand the culture?

Objectives of the Study

- To explore types of culture-specific items (CSIs) that create problems in English subtitling in Urdu dialogue of *The Donkey King*.
- To look at how these culturally unique objects are represented in the English subtitles using cultural adaptation techniques.
- Explore the cultural adaptation techniques used in the English subtitles and how they assist foreign audiences' access and understanding of the subtitles.

Delimitation

This study is confined to the analysis of the official English-subtitled version of *The Donkey King* (2018); Urdu dubbing and subtitles in other languages are not considered. The analysis focuses on culture-specific items—idioms, humorous items, political references, and social practices—and the translational solutions used to render them, rather than on linguistic aspects such as phonology, syntax, or morphology, which are not directly related to culture. A qualitative descriptive case-study approach was adopted, aimed at identifying and understanding the subtitling mechanisms used rather than assessing the film's commercial success or audience reception. The findings are therefore context-bound, intended to illuminate the subtitling processes used in Pakistani animated film rather than to generalize to other audiovisual translation settings. This targeted scope enables a detailed investigation of the strategies subtitlers use to render culturally embedded content, with particular attention to strategies that make culturally diverse references understandable and relevant to audiences worldwide.

Significance of the Study

As Pakistani animated films remain largely under-researched in translation studies, this work contributes to the understanding of cultural adaptation approaches in audiovisual translation, with particular focus on the English subtitling of such films. By examining how culture-specific items—idioms, humor, political allusion, and social convention—are represented in the English subtitles of *The Donkey King* (2018), the study reveals the

challenges subtitlers face in expressing culturally embedded meaning across languages, offering a reference point for translators, subtitlers, and scholars interested in cross-cultural communication, subtitling procedures, and the localization of culturally rich media content. The study also carries practical implications for promoting Pakistani animated films on international platforms, helping audiences engage with the cultural nuances, comedic elements, and sociopolitical allegories such films contain. Furthermore, it contributes to the academic discussion on South Asian audiovisual translation, a field in which research has so far concentrated overwhelmingly on Western, European, or East Asian media (Fitriani et al., 2025; Umairah Mohamed & Noor, 2025), filling a gap in the existing corpus of publications. The study can serve as a basis for future subtitling projects, inform curriculum development in translation studies, and support policy-making decisions on media localization and the international distribution of culturally significant films.

Literature Review

Subtitling as Cultural Mediation

Subtitling involves cultural mediation as well as linguistic conversion. Díaz-Cintas (2003) defines subtitling as a multimodal translation modality constrained by audience reception, timeframe, and spatial rendering, all of which make cultural adaptation difficult. In handling culturally loaded material, professional subtitlers must balance fidelity to the original against the standards of reception in the target culture. Cultural adaptation, also referred to as cultural substitution in subtitling and translation, involves changing culturally specific content—such as idioms, customs, and humor—that may be difficult for the target audience to understand, while preserving the story's genuine meaning (Pedersen, 2011).

Theoretical Frameworks in Subtitle Adaptation

A foundational debate in translation studies concerns equivalence versus relevance. Under Equivalence Theory (Nida, 1964; Newmark, 1988), the goal is to achieve the most accurate meaning correlation between source and target language, though exact equivalence is difficult to achieve in subtitling given constraints of time and space. Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986) reframes translation as an interpretive application of context, in which subtitlers aim to achieve cognitive effects—including viewer comprehension—with the least possible processing effort, a framework particularly relevant to the societal allusions and regional comedy present in *The Donkey King*. Skopos Theory (Vermeer, 1989) emphasizes the purpose of a translation: genre, distribution method, and target audience all shape subtitling choices, and in animated films, which frequently cater to children and families, the adaptation strategy may prioritize accessibility and entertainment value over literal correctness.

Cultural Adaptation Strategies in Subtitling

Researchers have identified a range of strategies subtitlers use to handle cultural content. Literal translation is used where source and target cultures share similarities, such as universally recognized gestures or concepts, though Chaume (2012) argues its use should be limited to terms that are generally known, since the resulting language may otherwise feel unnatural despite retaining the original structure. Cultural substitution replaces a source-culture reference with a comparable target-culture reference—for instance, rendering a Pakistani proverb through a functionally equivalent English expression—consistent with Pedersen's (2011) concept of acceptability-based subtitling. Omission excludes culturally specific content that cannot be satisfactorily translated within the constraints of subtitling, though excessive omission risks diminishing narrative depth (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007). Explicitation clarifies cultural information that would otherwise remain implicit—for example, slightly expanding a joke that is only comprehensible in Urdu to aid comprehension in English—a technique Toury (1995) identifies as common in target-oriented translation.

Neutralization removes or simplifies culturally sensitive content to make it accessible to a broad, international audience, a strategy O'Sullivan and Flanagan (2008) note is frequently used in animated media given its wide and varied viewership.

Humor, Audience Reception, and Cognitive Load

Humor is deeply culture-bound, and animated films rely heavily on comedy, wordplay, and cultural jokes that resist direct translation. Subtitlers address this through semantic adaptation, which rephrases jokes to conform to the target language, and pragmatic adaptation, which modifies humor to meet target-audience expectations (Gambier, 2003); The Donkey King frequently adapts jokes rooted in South Asian social satire into more culturally neutral comedy to preserve their amusing impact across cultural boundaries. Cognitive load theory further suggests that subtitles should not overload viewers with excessive information, since overly localized explanations or detailed cultural footnotes may distract the audience (Moran, 2004); Relevance Theory correspondingly frames subtitles as cognitive triggers that support comprehension with minimal processing effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Case-study frameworks addressing cultural subtitling in comparable contexts include Pérez-González's (2007) analysis of cultural adaptation procedures in the subtitling of comic films, Ballester's (2002) work on viewers' perception of cultural loss or gain in subtitled translation, and Nornes's (1999) advocacy for retaining a degree of foreignness in subtitling out of respect for the source culture—perspectives that together inform the analysis of humor adaptation undertaken in the present study.

Review of Related Empirical Studies

A growing body of empirical research examines how subtitlers manage culture-specific items across genres and language pairs. Motiejūnienė and Danilavičienė (2025) examined the translation of culture-specific references in the English-to-Lithuanian subtitles of a gourmet documentary, with particular attention to media accessibility for Deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers; they found that Proper Names and Food and Beverages were the most common CSI categories, and that direct translation and retention were the most frequently used procedures. Fărcașiu (2025) analyzed approximately five thousand subtitles from the Romanian-subtitled crime drama *Southland* using Pedersen's translation-procedure model, finding that target-language-oriented techniques (generalization, cultural replacement) were used to adapt references for Romanian viewers, while source-language-oriented techniques (retention, specification) were used to preserve cultural authenticity, with paraphrasing serving as an effective means of conveying cultural nuance.

Studies of animated-film subtitling offer especially direct points of comparison. Rababah and Al-Zoubi (2025) examined the cultural challenges of subtitling the American animated film series *Shrek* into Arabic using Fernández Guerra's (2012) classification of translation strategies, finding that subtitling such films requires careful, dual consideration of source and target cultures, with idioms and proper names presenting particular difficulty. Umairah Mohamed and Noor (2025) applied Gottlieb's (1992) subtitling-strategies framework to a Malaysian animated film and found that Imitation was the most frequently used strategy, while Transcription and Resignation were not used at all, and recommended future research extend the framework across genres and language pairs. Fitriani et al. (2025) analyzed culture-specific items in the documentary *The Mark of Empire Majapahit* using Newmark's cultural-word classification and Pedersen's subtitling-strategy typology, identifying 45 words and 73 phrases of CSIs and finding retention the dominant strategy, followed by calque, with comparatively minimal use of specification, generalization, omission, or substitution.

Closer to the linguistic pairing examined in the present study, Rahmani (2024) examined the equivalence of culture-specific items in TED-talk subtitles translated from

English to Arabic, applying Díaz-Cintas and Remael's cultural classification alongside Pedersen's and Baker's translation strategies; direct translation and retention emerged as the most common strategies for conveying the foreignness of chosen CSIs, while cultural substitution and paraphrase were used to aid comprehension of the plot, and an official-equivalent strategy was applied to institutional names. Qasim et al. (2020) examined the representation of traditional and cultural expressions in the subtitling of English-language animated films into Urdu for Pakistani audiences, applying Gottlieb's (1992) typology in a mixed-methods corpus study; they reported considerable loss of meaning when translating colloquial language into Urdu, given the differing socio-cultural and linguistic contexts of the two languages, and called for a dedicated theory of English-Urdu translation—a call the present study's use of Nida's framework partially answers for the reverse translation direction.

Other studies inform the theoretical and analytical apparatus applied here. Gao (2023) traces the development of Eugene Nida's translation theory from “dynamic equivalence” to “functional equivalence” and its far-reaching influence on translation practice. Moallemi and Samir (2023) examined allusions in the subtitling and dubbing of four animated films into Persian using Leppihalme's (1997) taxonomy, finding Retention of Name (38.3%) and Literal Translation (36.7%) the most frequent subtitling strategies, compared with Omission as the most frequent dubbing strategy—evidence that subtitling and dubbing of the same culturally dense material can favor markedly different adaptation strategies. Tsani et al. (2026) analyzed 150 culture-specific items in the Indonesian film *Ngeri-Ngeri Sedap* using Vinay and Darbelnet's (1995) classification and Pedersen's (2017) FAR quality model, finding equivalence the dominant strategy, with borrowing of local idioms used to preserve authenticity despite some risk to acceptability. Ruman and Khan (2025) examined English subtitling and Urdu dubbing strategies in the Turkish series *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, finding that low frequencies of direct transfer and direct translation indicated substantial adaptation to enhance audience reception. El Abed and Yazbeck (2025) compared children's cognitive and evaluative reception of dubbed versus subtitled animated film excerpts in Modern Standard Arabic, finding that children responded positively to both formats. Finally, Yonamine's (2022) systematic PRISMA review of 33 studies on domestication and foreignization in interlingual subtitling identified persistent gaps in empirical reception-based research and called for dedicated methods to measure how viewers process subtitled content.

Research Gap

Taken together, this literature shows that research on culturally rooted subtitling has concentrated heavily on European, East Asian, and, increasingly, Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian contexts, alongside a smaller body of work on Urdu-medium subtitling of English-language films for Pakistani audiences (Qasim et al., 2020). Despite the rich, culturally dense humor and political satire that characterizes Pakistani animated film, the reverse translation direction—Urdu-to-English subtitling of Pakistani animated productions—remains almost entirely unexamined, and no identified study has systematically analyzed the cultural adaptation strategies used in the English subtitles of *The Donkey King* specifically. The present study addresses this gap using Eugene Nida's Dynamic Equivalence Theory, applying his four-stage translation model—analysis, transfer, restructuring, and testing—to trace how culturally dense Urdu dialogue is identified, adapted, naturalized, and evaluated for communicative effectiveness in the film's official English subtitles, contributing new evidence on subtitling as cultural mediation in an underrepresented South Asian context.

A further gap concerns genre. Much of the existing animated-film subtitling literature examines Western productions distributed into other languages (Rababah & Al-Zoubi, 2025, on *Shrek*; Moallemi & Samir, 2023, on several Hollywood animated titles), meaning the direction of cultural travel typically runs from a dominant global media culture outward. The

Donkey King reverses this direction, requiring the transfer of comedy and political critique rooted in a comparatively less globally circulated cultural context into English for international consumption. This reversal raises distinct questions about which adaptation strategies dominate when the source culture, rather than the target culture, is the less globally familiar one—questions the present case study is positioned to address directly.

Methodology

Research Paradigm

This study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, under which meaning is understood as socially constructed and context-dependent. In translation research, meaning is generated through interpretation rather than existing independently of linguistic and cultural context, making interpretivism particularly suited to subtitling research, which involves interpreting the source language (Urdu) and constructing meaning in the target language (English). Working within this paradigm, the study investigates how conversations carry cultural meaning, how translation decisions must be understood in context, how cultural transfer produces shifts in meaning, and how translation strategies are shaped by audience-centered considerations.

Research Method

A qualitative research approach was applied throughout the study. Qualitative research aims to interpret meanings, interpretations, and social phenomena using non-statistical data, making it the most appropriate method for analyzing how cultural allusions are altered in subtitling—a process concerned with the interpretation of language, the mediation of culture, audience-centered rewording, and adaptation to context, all of which call for textual rather than statistical analysis. This approach enabled close comparison of the target subtitles against the source dialogue, identification of implicit cultural meanings, exploration of translation strategies, and evaluation of communicative effectiveness. The study is both descriptive, in that it identifies and classifies culture-specific items, and analytical, in that it examines the methods used to translate these items and assesses their functional equivalence. A small quantitative component was also incorporated: the frequency of different cultural-adaptation approaches was tracked to help identify prevailing methods, provide supporting evidence for the qualitative findings, and strengthen dependability, though numerical data served as supporting evidence rather than the main focus of the investigation.

Study Design

A qualitative case-study design was used, involving thorough examination of a single culturally rich audiovisual text in its real-life context; The Donkey King served as the case for this investigation. This design was appropriate because it enables thorough textual and contextual analysis focused on one culturally rich audiovisual text, allowing a detailed investigation of translation techniques rather than a cursory comparison of several texts. The film was selected for this inquiry because it incorporates a significant amount of political and cultural satire, employs colloquial and idiomatic Urdu, contains comic expressions with strong cultural roots, and reflects the contemporary sociopolitical climate of Pakistan—characteristics that make subtitling an especially difficult task and that offer a substantial dataset for studying cultural adaptation mechanisms.

Data Gathering

The primary data comprised the film's original Urdu dialogue and its official English subtitles. After transcription, the subtitles were assembled into a structured data sheet for methodical examination. The unit of analysis was the culture-specific item (CSI)—a lexical or phrasal element that indicates a particular cultural context and lacks a direct equivalent in the target language—including proverbs and idioms, expressions of religion, allusions to

politics, address forms, culturally specific humor, and social traditions and customs; the English subtitle corresponding to each identified CSI was extracted alongside it.

Technique of Sampling

The study used purposeful sampling: only dialogue segments containing clearly identifiable, culturally distinctive elements were selected for analysis, while conversations without cultural references were excluded. This method of selection ensured that the data remained closely connected to the objectives of the study.

Data Analysis Methodology

Data analysis proceeded through a systematic, multi-step procedure. Every dialogue was examined in detail to identify idioms and expressions peculiar to a particular culture, which were then categorized into themes—institutional and political allusions, religious manifestations, social and cultural customs, idiomatic language, and satire and humor. Each subtitle was analyzed to establish the translation method employed—literal translation, cultural substitution, generalization, explication, omission, or retention—and the source text and target subtitle were compared side by side to examine shifts in meaning, degree of cultural adaptation, and communicative effectiveness. The frequency of each method was computed to identify patterns and trends, providing a limited quantitative complement to the primarily qualitative analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Eugene Nida's Dynamic Equivalence Theory forms the theoretical basis of this investigation. Nida distinguishes Formal Equivalence, which emphasizes structure and form, from Dynamic Equivalence, which emphasizes equivalence of effect. Because the purpose of subtitling is to recreate a comparable communicative effect rather than to preserve structural correspondence—and because subtitles must be condensed and readily comprehensible, sometimes requiring cultural perceptions to be altered to accommodate new ideas and always requiring consideration of audience comprehension—this study adopts dynamic equivalence as its evaluative framework. Nida's model further specifies four sequential stages that structure the presentation of findings in this study: Analysis, in which culture-specific items are identified in the source dialogue; Transfer, in which an adaptation strategy is applied to render them in English; Restructuring, in which the resulting subtitle is naturalized into fluent, readable English; and Testing, in which the translated subtitle is evaluated for comprehensibility, naturalness, and functional equivalence relative to the source. Cultural adaptation strategies are evaluated against whether the intended meaning is preserved, whether satire and humor remain effective, whether cultural nuance remains recognizable, and how natural the English translation feels—criteria that together provide a practical, audience-focused method of assessment.

Findings

Consistent with Nida's Dynamic Equivalence Model, the findings are presented across the model's four sequential stages—Analysis, Transfer, Restructuring, and Testing—as applied to the culture-specific items (CSIs) identified in the Urdu dialogue of *The Donkey King* and their official English subtitles. Table 1 presents a representative, illustrative set of CSIs drawn from across these categories, together with their English subtitles and the adaptation strategy used for each; the analysis below discusses these categories and strategies in turn.

Analysis: Identification of Culture-Specific Items

The first stage of Nida's model requires a full interpretive reading of the Urdu dialogue—attending to meaning, tone, emotional intensity, humor, and cultural function rather than surface-level translation—to identify culture-specific items. The speech of the film's central characters (the King, Prince Shazad, Fitna, and Mangu) is densely interwoven

with CSIs reflecting the sociopolitical context, cultural humor, hierarchical tradition, and ideological satire of South Asian culture, each character speaking in a distinct register: the King formal and authoritative, Prince Shazad modern and emotionally casual, Mangu comic and exaggerated, and Fitna manipulative and politically strategic.

Honorifics and markers of social hierarchy recur throughout the dialogue between the King and Prince Shazad and between Mangu and Fitna, terms used consistently to construct relationships of power, respect, and authority within the royal household and beyond it. Kinship and humor-based insults, prominent in the exchanges between Mangu and Fitna, draw heavily on animal symbolism—the donkey functioning as a recurring metaphor for foolishness, obstinacy, or underestimated intelligence—built through linguistic cleverness, exaggeration, and cultural familiarity. Political and media references cluster around the character of Fitna, who represents oppression, propaganda, and control of the media within the plot, invoking sociopolitical realities such as media sensationalism and protest culture that are not instantly comprehensible to global audiences without contextual adaptation. Institutional and royal-court terms construct the film's hybrid setting of contemporary satire within a fictional monarchy, while religious and moral expressions appear within the King's guidance to Prince Shazad on leadership, responsibility, and destiny. Finally, metaphors and proverbs—for example, the idea that even a crown may sit on an unworthy head, or that even a king may face hardship—convey culturally specific commentary on the impermanence and fragility of power, relying on shared cultural understanding of symbolic meaning rather than literal interpretation.

Transfer: Application of Adaptation Strategies

Following identification, the transfer stage involves rendering these CSIs into English using a range of adaptation strategies designed to preserve humor, emotion, satire, and social meaning functionally rather than literally. Substitution, one of the most frequently applied strategies, replaces a culturally distinct idiom or honorific with a functionally equivalent English term—for example, rendering a royal honorific as “Your Majesty” to preserve regal tone and hierarchical respect, or a kinship term as “Uncle” to preserve the sense of family relation, though at some cost to the deeper cultural understanding of respect embedded in South Asian kinship terms. Generalization replaces culturally specific concepts with more broadly recognizable terms—translating a media-industry term specific to South Asian broadcasting as “ratings,” or a term for a form of political sit-in protest specific to South Asian political culture as “sit-in protest”—enabling international viewers to grasp a character's preoccupation with media control or political dissent without requiring familiarity with the underlying regional systems.

Paraphrase is used extensively for metaphors and idiomatic expressions, preserving the underlying philosophical or moral point while releasing culturally specific imagery—for instance, rendering a proverb about a crown resting on an unworthy head as “A crown does not make a king,” which retains the message that symbols of authority do not guarantee genuine leadership. Omission removes culturally dense or repetitive expressions—particularly religious interjections and polite discourse markers—to preserve subtitle clarity and avoid overcrowding the screen, as when a religious phrase invoking divine will is dropped from a subtitle reading simply “Everything will be fine.” Modulation, or softening, is applied especially to emotionally charged insults that would otherwise appear excessively harsh or incoherent if translated literally, rendering an exaggerated animal-based insult as a milder equivalent such as “you fool” or “donkey” while preserving the underlying comic and emotional intensity. Explicitation clarifies latent cultural meaning for the target audience—for example, rendering an occupational term with socio-economic connotations as “washerman” or expanding it into an explanatory phrase describing the occupation—allowing

viewers unfamiliar with South Asian occupational hierarchies to grasp the underlying social context. Across all four main characters, the transfer stage positions the subtitler as a cultural mediator rather than a literal translator, continually negotiating between preserving cultural specificity and ensuring global accessibility.

Restructuring: Naturalization into English

The restructuring stage reshapes translated content into English that is natural, fluid, and suitable for subtitling—accommodating the limited screen space and reading time characteristic of audiovisual translation. Because the film's Urdu dialogue is often lengthy, emotionally expressive, and rhetorically repetitive, particularly in political speeches and royal exchanges, the subtitler compresses and simplifies these passages into concise English subtitles that retain their essential meaning and impact—for example, condensing an extended political announcement about systemic change into the brief subtitle “We will change the system and give power to the people.” Conversational-tone adaptation renders formal or culturally specific Urdu speech into natural English discourse; humor is bent into situational or contextual comedy accessible to a wider audience even where the original wordplay does not translate directly; and hyper-local place names and institutional references are generalized into descriptions with broader international resonance. Restructuring is also applied at the level of character: Mangu's dialogue is rendered informal, humorous, and expressive; Fitna's is rendered structured, persuasive, and strategically formal; the King's is rendered dignified, authoritative, and traditional; and Prince Shazad's is rendered casual and emotionally direct—ensuring each character's distinct voice, and the technical demands of subtitle timing and readability, are both preserved in the English version.

Testing: Evaluation of Effectiveness

The final stage evaluates the translated subtitles against comprehensibility, naturalness, functional equivalence, cross-cultural accessibility, and the inevitable degree of cultural loss involved in adaptation. On comprehensibility, the English subtitles allow international viewers with no prior knowledge of South Asian language or culture to follow the plot, understand character motivation, and grasp complex themes such as social hierarchy, media manipulation, and corruption, through simplified but meaning-preserving political and comedic dialogue. On naturalness, the subtitles read as authentic English discourse—reconstructed to replicate natural English speech patterns—rather than as mechanically translated text, helping the audience feel engaged with characters who read as alive and relatable rather than linguistically distant. On functional equivalence, humor, satire, and moral or ideological weight are preserved even where linguistic form and cultural wordplay have been substantially simplified: Mangu's self-deprecating humor, Fitna's political manipulation, and the King and Prince Shazad's moral exchanges about justice and leadership all retain their communicative force in English. On cross-cultural accessibility, politically specialized South Asian terms are rendered into globally recognizable political concepts—for instance, “corruption in leadership,” “electoral process,” “ratings-driven media,” and “public protest and demonstration”—allowing viewers unfamiliar with South Asian politics to grasp the film's core themes of power, justice, ambition, and corruption.

At the same time, the testing stage reveals that some cultural features are unavoidably diminished, consistent with Nida's principle that meaning takes precedence over form. Honorific depth is substantially reduced when terms of reverence and hierarchy are simplified to “sir” or “king” or removed altogether; religious tone is generally softened, with explicit invocations of divine will replaced by neutral expressions such as “hopefully” or “everything will be fine”; and geographically distinct comic devices built on wordplay and animal symbolism lose some of their original depth when rendered into general English equivalents such as “fool” or “donkey.” Political uniqueness is similarly reduced as complex South Asian

political references are compressed into broader notions such as “corruption” or “bad leadership.” Despite these reductions, the overall evaluation indicates a high degree of dynamic equivalence: international viewers are able to comprehend the narrative, engage with humor and satire, connect emotionally with the characters, and grasp the political and social messages embedded in the film in a manner broadly comparable to the experience of Urdu-speaking viewers.

Table 1

Representative Culture-Specific Items and Their English Subtitle Adaptations

Category	Urdu Expression (Gloss)	English Subtitle	Adaptation Strategy
Honorifics/Kinship	بادشاہ سلامت (royal honorific)	“Your Majesty”	Substitution
Honorifics/Kinship	چاچا (paternal-uncle term)	“Uncle”	Substitution
Honorifics/Kinship	ابا جی (affectionate term for father)	“Father”	Substitution
Humor/Insults	او کھوتے دے پتر (lit. “you donkey's son”)	“Hey donkey, come back!”	Modulation (softening)
Humor/Insults	گدھا (donkey)	“fool” / “donkey”	Modulation (softening)
Humor/Insults	Self-referential donkey idiom (“I may be a donkey, but I am not foolish”)	“I may be a donkey, but I have more sense than all of you!”	Functional (near-literal) rendering
Political/Media	ٹی آر پی (Television Rating Point)	“Ratings”	Generalization
Political/Media	دھرنا (sit-in protest)	“Sit-in protest” / “public protest”	Generalization
Political/Media	“We are only after ratings, not the truth” (media-manipulation line)	“We are only after ratings, not the truth”	Generalization
Political/Media	یہ جمہوریت نہیں، ڈرامہ ہے (“this is not democracy, it's a show”)	“This is not democracy, it's just a show”	Paraphrase
Religious	انشاء اللہ سب ٹھیک ہو جائے گا (“God willing, everything will be fine”)	“Everything will be fine”	Omission (of religious marker)
Institutional/Royal	نخلیہ (order to clear the royal court)	“The court was cleared”	Explicitation/Paraphrase
Occupational	دھوبی (washerman, an occupational/social-status term)	“washerman” / “the man who washes clothes for a living”	Explicitation

Category	Urdu Expression (Gloss)	English Subtitle	Adaptation Strategy
Metaphor/Proverb	تاج تو مرغے کے سر پہ بھی ہوتا ہے (lit. "a crown can sit on a rooster's head too")	"A crown does not make a king"	Paraphrase
Metaphor/Proverb	بادشاہ گھاس کھائے گا (lit. "even a king may have to eat grass")	"Power is not permanent" (paraphrased in context)	Paraphrase
Emotional/Moral	میں بہت خوش ہوں، مجھے سمجھ نہیں آ رہا کیا کہوں ("I am so happy I don't know what to say")	"I am so happy that I don't even know what to say"	Restructuring (naturalization)

Note. Urdu examples and their glosses, together with the corresponding official English subtitles, are drawn directly from the source dialogue and subtitle transcript analyzed in this study.

Character Register as an Organizing Principle of Adaptation

A further pattern evident across the Transfer, Restructuring, and Testing stages is that adaptation strategy selection tracked character register as consistently as it tracked CSI category. The King's formal, authoritative Urdu was consistently rendered into equally formal, dignified English regardless of which specific adaptation strategy was applied to a given honorific or institutional term; Fitna's manipulative, media-fluent register was rendered into strategic, persuasive English regardless of whether a given political reference was generalized or paraphrased; Mangu's exaggerated comic register was rendered into informal, expressive English regardless of whether a given insult was modulated or transferred near-literally; and Prince Shazad's youthful, emotionally direct register was rendered into casual, contemporary English throughout. This suggests that, in a text with clearly differentiated character voices, cultural adaptation strategy operates at two levels simultaneously—a lexical or phrasal level, at which a specific CSI is substituted, generalized, paraphrased, or omitted, and a register level, at which the overall tone, formality, and emotional coloring of a character's speech is reconstructed consistently across the film regardless of which lexical strategy is used in any given line. This two-level pattern has not been explicitly identified as such in the animated-subtitling literature reviewed here, which tends to report adaptation-strategy frequency without examining whether strategy choice correlates with speaker identity, suggesting a further avenue through which the present case study extends existing frameworks.

Discussion

Types of Culture-Specific Items (Research Question 1)

The first research question asked which types of CSIs make English subtitling of The Donkey King's Urdu dialogue challenging. The analysis identifies six recurring categories: honorifics and kinship terms, colloquial humor and insults built on animal symbolism, political and media references, religious and moral expressions, institutional and royal-court terminology, and metaphors or proverbs. These categories align closely with those identified in prior subtitling research—Fitriani et al. (2025) similarly identify proper names, address forms, and idiomatic expressions as central CSI categories in documentary subtitling, while

Rababah and Al-Zoubi (2025) and Moallemi and Samir (2023) identify idioms, insults, and proper names as the primary sources of difficulty in animated-film subtitling. What distinguishes *The Donkey King* is the density and interdependence of these categories within a single narrative: honorifics and political satire are not separable strands but are woven through the same character exchanges, meaning subtitlers must resolve multiple layers of cultural meaning—hierarchical, political, and comedic—within a single, time-constrained subtitle.

Adaptation Strategies Used (Research Question 2)

The second research question concerned the adaptation strategies used to render these CSIs in English. Six main strategies were identified—substitution, generalization, paraphrase, omission, modulation, and explication—used flexibly depending on the communicative function of each CSI and the linguistic register of the character speaking. This pattern differs somewhat from findings in prior research: Rahmani (2024) and Fitriani et al. (2025) found retention and direct translation to be the dominant strategies in TED-talk and documentary subtitling, respectively, where many CSIs (proper names, institutional titles) have reasonably transparent equivalents. In *The Donkey King*, by contrast, generalization and paraphrase feature more prominently, plausibly reflecting the greater cultural distance between Urdu-language political satire, honorific systems, and animal-based humor and their English equivalents, relative to the more universally recognizable CSI categories (proper names, food items) that dominate in documentary subtitling. This pattern is more consistent with Moallemi and Samir's (2023) and Fărcașiu's (2025) findings that culturally dense, comedic, or ideologically loaded material draws more heavily on domesticating strategies (generalization, paraphrase, modulation) than on source-oriented retention.

Contribution to Accessibility and Cross-Cultural Understanding (Research Question 3)

The third research question examined how these adaptation strategies help foreign viewers access and understand the film's cultural content. The Testing-stage findings indicate that the subtitles achieve a substantial degree of Nida's dynamic equivalence: international viewers can follow the plot, engage with humor and political satire, and connect emotionally with characters without prior knowledge of South Asian culture or politics. This outcome is consistent with Relevance Theory's account of subtitles as cognitive triggers that support comprehension with minimal processing effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1986), and with Gambier's (2003) distinction between semantic and pragmatic humor adaptation, both of which are evident in how Mangu's comic insults and Fitna's political manipulation are rendered accessible without requiring viewers to understand the specific cultural references underlying the original Urdu. The finding also echoes Rababah and Al-Zoubi's (2025) conclusion that successful subtitling of culturally dense animated film requires simultaneous attention to both source and target cultures, rather than treating cultural adaptation as a secondary consideration to linguistic accuracy.

Cultural Loss and the Limits of Equivalence

At the same time, the findings confirm that cultural adaptation in subtitling is never without cost. Honorific depth, religious tone, and some political and comedic specificity are diminished as an inevitable consequence of prioritizing meaning and audience accessibility over form, consistent with Nida's own account of dynamic equivalence and with the broader subtitling-constraints literature on condensation and cognitive load (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007; Moran, 2004). This pattern parallels Yonamine's (2022) systematic review finding that domesticating strategies, while improving accessibility, characteristically involve some loss of source-culture specificity, and Qasim et al.'s (2020) finding of considerable meaning loss in English-Urdu subtitling given the differing socio-cultural and linguistic contexts of the two languages. Taken together, these findings suggest that cultural loss in subtitling is not a

translation failure but a structural feature of audiovisual translation under time, space, and audience-comprehension constraints—one that subtitlers actively and skillfully manage rather than simply accept.

It is also worth noting what the present analysis cannot determine about this loss: because the study relies on textual comparison of source dialogue and target subtitle rather than audience-reception data, it can identify where cultural content has been reduced or simplified but cannot establish how much of that reduction is actually noticed by, or matters to, international viewers who lack access to the Urdu original in the first place. A viewer with no Urdu proficiency cannot experience the loss of an honorific's emotional warmth as a loss, since the English subtitle is their only point of reference; the cultural loss identified in this study is therefore a loss relative to the source text and to bilingual or bicultural viewers, rather than a loss necessarily perceptible to the monolingual English-speaking audience the subtitles primarily serve. This distinction matters for how the finding should be interpreted: it does not indicate that the subtitles fail their intended audience, but rather that something of the original cultural texture is not transmitted to that audience at all—a point consistent with Nida's own framing of dynamic equivalence as oriented toward the target audience's response rather than toward preserving a form only the source audience could fully appreciate.

Conclusion

Overview

This study used Eugene Nida's Dynamic Equivalence Theory as a framework to analyze the subtitling of culture-specific items in the Urdu dialogue of *The Donkey King*. Its aims were to identify the culture-bound linguistic elements in the source text, investigate the translation techniques employed in the English subtitles, and assess the degree to which these techniques promote cross-cultural understanding and accessibility for international audiences. The analysis treats the subtitling of this film as a highly complex cultural mediation process, requiring constant compromises between the comprehensibility of the target language and the meaning of the source language.

Key Findings

The Donkey King contains a wide variety of culturally distinctive features indicative of the linguistic, social, political, and cultural realities of South Asia, spanning honorifics and kinship terms, idiomatic expressions and humorous insults, political and media references, religious expressions, and metaphorical language. These CSIs pose significant challenges for English subtitling because of their high degree of cultural distinctiveness and the absence of direct target-language equivalents. A range of cultural adaptation techniques—generalization, substitution, paraphrase, omission, explicitation, and modulation—were used to resolve these challenges, allowing the subtitler to preserve the communicative goal of the original Urdu dialogue while ensuring the subtitles remained readable and comprehensible for international viewers. These strategies were largely successful in maintaining the film's overall plot, comedic elements, emotional coloring, and satirical intent, ensuring that themes such as corruption, media manipulation, leadership, and social justice were adequately represented in the English subtitles in a manner functionally equivalent to the source text.

Limitations

This study offers useful insights into cultural adaptation in subtitling, though several limitations should be acknowledged. Because the research examined selected dialogues from *The Donkey King* rather than the entire film, the generalizability of the conclusions is limited to the scope of the conversations analyzed. The research was also concerned primarily with textual analysis and did not include actual audience-reception data to investigate how viewers themselves understand the subtitles or to assess the subtitles' effectiveness from the audience's own perspective. Translation efforts were not compared against subtitles in other

languages, which would have offered a more complete picture of the adaptation choices made, and the study's focus was confined solely to English-language subtitling. Finally, as with any qualitative analysis, the interpretive nature of the coding and categorization process may have influenced how translation choices were understood and characterized.

Implications

The findings carry several implications for translation studies and the practice of audiovisual translation. They underscore the importance of cultural understanding in subtitling film and television, indicating that translators must go beyond grammatical correctness to ensure that cultural meaning is appropriately preserved or adapted. The study also demonstrates the practical applicability of Eugene Nida's Dynamic Equivalence Theory to real-world subtitling, particularly for films rich in political satire and cultural humor. The findings further suggest that subtitlers benefit from applying translation techniques flexibly, adjusting them to the specifics of each scenario, character portrayal, and audience expectation, and that effective subtitling can substantially enhance cross-cultural communication by making culturally distinct content accessible to viewers worldwide without entirely erasing its cultural context.

Future Research

Several directions for future research follow from this study. Audience-response research could assess how foreign viewers actually read and understand subtitled content, complementing the present textual analysis. Comparative studies examining Urdu-English subtitling alongside other language pairings could offer deeper insight into cross-cultural translation processes more broadly. Future work might also evaluate the role of machine translation and AI-based subtitling tools in managing culturally distinctive content, comparing their effectiveness against human translation for this purpose. Finally, expanded research incorporating multiple films across a range of genres could help generalize the present findings and strengthen the theoretical application of audiovisual translation research.

Concluding Statement

In conclusion, the findings of this study show that the subtitling of *The Donkey King* exemplifies the successful application of cultural adaptation techniques from the perspective of dynamic equivalence. The English subtitles largely succeed in bridging the gap between languages and cultures, enabling audiences around the globe to understand, enjoy, and relate to the film's humor, satire, and socio-political critique—despite the inherent constraints and unavoidable degree of cultural loss associated with the subtitling process.

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