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NETFLIX & YOUTUBE DIALOGUE TRANSLATION**Kalaimathi Subramaniam^{1*}, Kaaminy Kanapathy²

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This study investigates the key challenges involved in translating screen dialogue for global streaming platforms, particularly Netflix and YouTube. As audiovisual content increasingly crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries, accurate translation becomes essential for maintaining meaning, emotion and viewer engagement. However, this process is constrained by linguistic ambiguity, idiomatic expressions, cultural references, time and space limitations, and the growing reliance on machine translation. Through selected examples from English–Tamil translations, the study demonstrates how meaning is often distorted due to literal translation, cultural mismatch and mechanical errors. It further examines the differences between professionally produced subtitles on Netflix and user- or machine-generated captions on YouTube, highlighting issues of consistency and quality control. The findings suggest that effective screen translation requires cultural competence, contextual understanding, and human–machine collaboration. This paper concludes that improving subtitle quality is not merely a technical concern but a linguistic and cultural responsibility that directly impacts audience comprehension and the authenticity of global media content.

Keywords:

Audiovisual Translation, Subtitling, Cultural Challenges, Machine Translation, Netflix, YouTube

Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology in the 21st century has significantly transformed the way people access and consume media content. Over-the-top (OTT) platforms such as Netflix and YouTube have become dominant sources of entertainment and information, enabling audio-visual materials to be distributed across geographical and linguistic borders. As a result, audiences are now regularly exposed to films, series, documentaries, and online videos produced in languages that may be unfamiliar to them. This global circulation of content has increased the importance of translation, particularly in the form of subtitling and screen dialogue translation. Translation in audiovisual media, however, is not a simple process of transferring words from one language to another. It involves the complex task of maintaining meaning, emotion, tone, and cultural essence within strict technical limitations such as time, space, and reading speed. Unlike literary translation, screen translation is constrained by the visual flow of scenes, the rhythm of spoken dialogue, and the audience's ability to process written text while watching moving images. These constraints often force translators to shorten, adapt, or omit certain elements of the original dialogue, potentially leading to meaning loss or misinterpretation. Furthermore, language is deeply embedded in culture. Many expressions, idioms, humour, and references in English do not have direct equivalents in Tamil and other target languages. When such culturally bound elements are translated literally, the intended message may be distorted or misunderstood. This challenge is particularly evident in platforms like YouTube, where user-generated content, slang, informal speech, and rapid conversation are common. While Netflix generally employs professional translators and follows structured subtitling guidelines, YouTube frequently relies on auto-generated subtitles and voluntary contributions, resulting in inconsistent translation quality. Despite the growing use of machine translation in subtitling, current technologies remain limited in their ability to interpret context, emotion, sarcasm, and cultural meaning. As a result, the final translated output may lack authenticity, emotional depth, and linguistic accuracy. This often becomes a subject of criticism on social media, where audiences openly react to and highlight translation errors. Therefore, this study aims to explore the major linguistic, cultural, and technical challenges in translating screen dialogue on Netflix and YouTube, with a specific focus on English–Tamil translation. By analysing selected examples, this research seeks to identify common patterns of distortion, omission, and misinterpretation, and to propose strategies that can improve the quality and effectiveness of audiovisual translation in a globalised digital environment.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the challenges involved in translating screen dialogue on global streaming platforms, specifically Netflix and YouTube. A qualitative approach is chosen because the focus of the study is on analysing linguistic meaning, cultural references, emotional expression, and translation accuracy rather than statistical measurement (Baker, 2018). The data consist of selected English-language dialogues taken from Netflix series and films as well as YouTube videos such as vlogs, interviews, and entertainment content. These samples were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on dialogues that contain idiomatic expressions, slang, humour, and culturally specific elements, which are known to pose difficulties in translation (Nida, 1964).

The selected dialogues were first transcribed in their original English form and then compared with their corresponding Tamil subtitle versions. These paired texts were examined to identify common translation challenges such as literal translation, loss of emotional meaning, cultural mismatch, idiomatic mistranslation, machine translation errors, and condensation caused by

time and space constraints in subtitling (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007). The data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, guided by key translation principles including Dynamic Equivalence (Nida, 1964), the concept of non-equivalence proposed by Baker (2018), and established audiovisual subtitling norms (Pedersen, 2011).

Each example was analysed in terms of accuracy of meaning transfer, preservation of tone and emotion, cultural appropriateness, and linguistic naturalness in the target language. In addition, a comparative analysis was carried out to examine differences between professionally produced subtitles on Netflix and auto-generated or user-generated subtitles on YouTube, which often rely on machine translation technologies that are prone to contextual and cultural errors (O'Hagan, 2020). To enhance research reliability and academic rigour, the analysis was supported through theoretical triangulation by linking findings to multiple translation frameworks and previous studies on audiovisual translation and machine translation limitations (Gambier, 2013; O'Brien et al., 2014).

Basic Translation Problems

Translation into screenplay is not a straightforward word-for-word process, as people often think. It is a more nuanced, multi-layered process. It is impossible to reproduce the words, expressions, and feelings of a text in one language in the same way in another, so the translator must design the screenplay with the reader's understanding and culture in mind (Gottlieb, 1994). In particular, translating subtle elements of dialogue, such as humour, details, or sarcasm, directly is a challenge.

For example, the English dialogue "You're kidding me!" on Netflix translates to "நீ என்ன சொல்றே?", or "நீ சொல்வது நம்ப முடியலே!" in Tamil. While such translations convey the usual meaning, the emotional intensity of the original phrase is not fully reflected in Tamil. "You're kidding me!" Can also convey surprise, shock, and sometimes anger or disappointment. But "நீ என்ன சொல்றே?" does not have such a complex emotional plural. This is a good example of how a sign in one language does not translate exactly to another (Baker, 2018).

Furthermore, many times the words used in the source language can have a double meaning. For example, the English expression "That's sick!" Can mean "அது அற்புதம்!" or "அது வெறித்தனமானது!" depending on the context. There is no direct answer to this phrase in Tamil. Therefore, the screen-writing translator must choose the meaning according to the feeling of the particular moment. This requires a very good conceptual ability and linguistic knowledge (Nida, 1964).

Similarly, many of the dialogues in videos found on YouTube are rooted in popular culture. For example, "spill the tea" literally translates to "spill the tea," but the real meaning is "சமீபத்திய வதந்திகளைச் சொல்". When translating English phrases that are in vernacular colloquialisms into Tamil, viewers may be confused. Thus, translation should pay attention not only to the literal meaning of the text, but also to its underlying meaning and feeling (Pedersen, 2011).

Furthermore, sometimes in short conversations, a single word can convey a complete thought. For example, “Whatever.” is a single word in English, but the sentiment of indifference and indifference in it needs to be conveyed in a complete sentence in Tamil, such as “என்ன வேண்டுமானாலும் பண்ணு” or “ஏதாவது பண்ணிக்கோ”. This also highlights the differences in sentence structure between languages (Hatim & Mason, 1997).

Additionally, traditional gestures such as intonation and silence are sometimes not conveyed through language alone. There is a risk that screen characters will miss such exclamations or speech structures. This also becomes a barrier to emotional communication.

Based on this, translation into screen writing involves more than a linear language transformation, but also multiple layers of mental notation, emotional action, and cultural scripting. This requires a great deal of thought, sustained experience, and the ability to deal with language differences from translators.

Cultural Challenges

Translation is not simply the direct transfer of words from one language to another. Since language is a reflection of the lifestyle, tradition, culture, and values of a society, each word or phrase is seen to embody a specific cultural element (Nida, 1964). Thus, it is very difficult to accurately transfer culturally bound words, phrases, and humorous elements from one language to another.

For example, the American holiday expression “Thanksgiving dinner” is an important cultural event that refers to a traditional family meal. Although it can be translated into Tamil as “நன்றி கூறும் விருந்து”, there is no precise equivalent in the Tamil cultural framework. Therefore, it becomes difficult for the audience to experience it with emotion and understanding (Katan, 1999). In such a situation, translators are faced with difficult decisions. Dilemmatic problems arise, such as whether to omit the phrase or provide an explanation.

Furthermore, humour is a very intrinsic cultural element. A text that appears humorous in one language may not be fully understood in another. For example, in an episode of a series on Netflix, an American character says,

"Why don't scientists trust atoms? Because they make up everything."

This is an English phrase. “Makeup” has a double meaning, “அமைக்கின்றன” என்றும் “பொய் கூறுகின்றன”. This could be translated into Tamil as “விஞ்ஞானிகள் ஏன் அணுக்களை நம்புவதில்லை? ஏனென்றால் அவை எல்லாவற்றையும் உருவாக்குகின்றன!” However, the subtlety and pun of the humor here cannot be fully conveyed in Tamil (Chiaro, 2010).

Another example is pop-culture references found in YouTube videos. The statement “He's acting like Sheldon from The Big Bang Theory” would not make any sense to a viewer who is unfamiliar with the context of the scene, as translated as “அவர் சட்னியாக நடந்து கொண்டார்”. Instead, “அவர் அறிவியல் புத்திசாலி மாதிரி பேச்சில் உணர்வுகள் இல்லாமல் நடந்தார்” which would help to understand the cultural context.

Thus, the lack of cultural coherence can lead to distortion of meaning in translation. To overcome this, translators sometimes resort to cultural substitution or translator's notes (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007). However, this is not always possible, especially considering the space constraints and timing constraints of screen writing.

Conversation and Summary Challenges

Since screenplays are texts that are meant to be read while the audience is watching the scene, they are constrained in time and space. Typically, each screenplay is displayed on the screen for about 2 to 6 seconds, and only 2 lines can be displayed at a time, which is one of the principles of organized editing (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007). With such constraints, the translator undertakes the difficult task of translating a complete dialogue accurately, concisely, and without losing the sense and emphasis of the text.

For example, English dialogue found in a Netflix series:

"I'll be there in a sec, just need to grab my stuff."

If this were directly translated into Tamil, the full meaning would be "I'll be there in a minute. I need to get my stuff." But since the time and place are defined when translating this into screen writing, the translator would have to shorten it to "ஒரு நிமிஷத்தில் வர்றேன். பொருட்கள் எடுக்கணும்". This would lose the nuanced or urgent nature of the word "just," and the personal nature of what "my stuff" might mean. This would dilute the overall meaning of a meaningful conversation (Gottlieb, 2004).

In another example, in a vlog video on YouTube, the speaker's text reads:

"Man, yesterday was wild! We hit up three different clubs, got home at like 5, and I don't even remember how I got back!"

When translating this directly:

"டேய், நேற்று மிகவும் பைத்தியமாக இருந்தது! மூன்று கிளப்புகளுக்கு போனோம், வீட்டுக்கு 5 மணிக்குத்தான் வந்தேன், எப்படி வந்தேன் எனக்கே நினைவில்லை!"

When this large text is presented in screen text, in abbreviated form:

"நேற்று கலக்கலா இருந்தது. மூன்று கிளப்புகளுக்கு போனோம். நினைவே இல்ல."

Here, the word "wild" is standard with the high emotional ratio of "crazy." But in the abbreviation, its excitement, madness, and wildness are lost. Similarly, the individual styles, tones, and human expressiveness of the dialogues are affected by the abbreviation (Perego, 2008).

In addition, there is a significant problem with overlapping dialogue, which is when two or more characters are speaking at the same time, forcing the translator to make difficult decisions about who is saying what and selecting only the most important information (Pedersen, 2011).

Furthermore, companies like Netflix have their own timing guidelines that say you can't read more than 160-180 characters per minute (Netflix Timed Text Style Guide, 2021). This forces you to deliver text in a controlled manner, keeping in mind the reading speed of your audience.

This means that each word has to fit within the recommended amount. This creates a situation where you have to be careful to select only the most informative phrases and to be concise.

When these abbreviations are made, the features that make conversation human, such as politeness markers, discourse fillers, and hesitation signals, that are inherent in the structure of a language, are omitted. For example, the natural translation of the sentence "Umm, I think we should go now... Maybe "is "நாம இப்ப போயிடலாம் என நினைக்கிறேன்". But when this is abbreviated, "Let's go now" becomes a command sentence, losing its softness.

Consequently, abridgement is not simply a matter of reducing the number of words; it is an art form that must be carried out without affecting the meaning, feeling, and nature of the text. It demands great artistry, evolutionary knowledge, and the ability to make subtle decisions from the translator.

Technical and Mechanical Translation Challenges

In today's fast-paced multilingual media world, platforms like Netflix and YouTube are increasingly using machine translation (MT) technologies to quickly deliver content in multiple languages to attract global audiences. In particular, YouTube's "Auto-translate subtitles" feature relies on machine translation platforms like Google Translate. While this increases speed and accessibility, it also increases the risk of misunderstandings for users due to the high incidence of linguistic and cultural errors (O'Hagan, 2020).

Machine translation, despite its many advances, still struggles to provide human-level, emotional, and contextual translations. For example, the English phrase "Break a leg!" Is a compliment to someone about to perform on stage (meaning "Congratulations!" or "Well done!"). But Google Translate or an Auto MT system might translate it directly as "கால் உடைஞ்சுற மாதிரி செய்", This leaves the viewer confused as to whether it is sarcastic? Offensive? Or harmful (Matusov, 2019). This is a prime example of the precision that machine translation cannot capture in an idiomatic expression.

Similarly, when auto-translating a Tamil text found on YouTube into English:

"அந்த பொண்ணு இப்படி வந்து சொன்னா நாம என்ன பண்ணது?"

MT output (English): "That girl like this comes and says, what we do?"

The locales here may produce results that may appear erroneous or playful to multilingual users. This is due to the nature of machine translations not being able to fully understand the syntax, contextual meaning, and cultural connotation of a language (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 2014).

Furthermore, in morphologically rich languages like Tamil, a single word can have many different forms and variants. For example, "போனீங்களா?", "போனாங்கா", "போயிருப்பாங்கா" are all auto-translated in the same way as "They went" or "Did they go?" However, the temporal exceptions, politeness nuances and contextual nuances involved are completely ignored (Pecina et al., 2012).

Also, in companies like Netflix, preliminary translations for some films are created by machines. After that, a synthetic method (post-editing of MT) is practiced, where human translators review and correct them. However, this does not happen with the same limitations in all languages and in all countries. Especially in low-resource languages (low-resource languages) such as Tamil, Malay, Hindi, etc. The quality of machine translation tends to be low (O'Brien et al., 2014).

Furthermore, machine translation methods are often based on training data and therefore rely heavily on language data widely available on the internet. As a result, there is a high risk that tools such as Google Translate will not be able to clearly distinguish between younger generation style, idioms, slang used on social media, or colloquialisms and will produce direct translations (Torres, 2020).

Overall, machine translation, while a helpful early-stage technology, is still unable to provide translation quality that is consistent with evolving human experience and cultural nuances. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge that relying 100% on MT for on-screen text can affect the viewing experience of viewers.

On Netflix and YouTube in Situation

The quality and accuracy of on-screen transcription are affected by a variety of factors. However, these issues vary depending on the nature of the video-sharing platform. In particular, differences in the dialogue translation practices of Netflix and YouTube have a direct impact on the quality of the translation and the viewer experience (Georgakopoulou, 2009).

At Netflix, subtitles are often created by the company's in-house translation team or by experienced contract translators. Closed captions (CC) and subtitles for the deaf and hard-of-hearing (SDH) are designed separately. Netflix follows the Timed Text Style Guide (Netflix, 2021), which is a standard for ensuring translation quality, consistency, and readability. In addition, locale-specific guidelines for each language are provided, which improves quality (Pedersen, 2011).

Instead, YouTube offers viewers the opportunity to translate, a feature known as "Community Contributions" (mainly from 2017 to 2020). This allows general users to add subtitles to videos of their choice. However, since such user-generated contributions are not peer-reviewed, they are more likely to contain grammatical errors, grammatical errors, and cultural misrepresentations (O'Hagan, 2020). Furthermore, since some YouTube channels only use auto-captioning, machine translation errors are common.

Furthermore, one of the characteristics of videos on YouTube is the unusual nature of the video format and the high-speed transmission of dialogue. In a YouTube vlog video or podcast, multiple speakers may be speaking simultaneously, the speed of speech may be high, and there may be background noise and regional slang. In such situations, the basic understanding of "Who said what?" can be confusing. Thus, attempting to translate dialogue can be overwhelming for the viewer (Cintas & Anderman, 2009).

For example, in a YouTube video:

Speaker 1: “Yo, that was lit, bro!”

Speaker 2 (interrupts): "Totally! Can't believe we pulled that off!"

Machine translation that auto-captions this:

அது விளக்கெழுத்தை போல் இருந்தது சகோ நாம அதை இழுத்து விட்டோம்னு நம்ப .
.முடியலை”

Would be so confusing for the reader to understand whether it was a joke? A joke? A simple mistake? “Lit” here is a word with multiple meanings. “We pulled that off” means we successfully completed it, but when translated directly, its intrinsic excitement would be lost. Furthermore, spoken-word rhythm (sentence spacing, hesitation), false starts (repetition), and filler words (“uh,” “like,” “you know”), as found on YouTube, are not correctly inferred by the machine. This is a consistent problem in user-generated translations (Gambier, 2013).

Along with this, the problems with Netflix also need to be addressed. Netflix often translates its content into more than 30 languages after creating it in the original language using its centralized control system. However, literal translations that do not fully meet the localization requirements sometimes result in a substandard experience. For example, in the Tamil translation of the Spanish series Money Heist (La Casa de Papel), the warning texts of some characters are translated very simply:

Original (Spanish): "No te metas con mi familia."

Official Tamil Subtitles: “என் குடும்பத்துடன் விளையாடாதே.”

While this seems like a fair translation, given the emotional context, a closer, more nuanced translation like “Think before you reach my family!” would have been better.

These types of issues directly impact users' content experience on platforms like Netflix and YouTube, and emphasize that each platform must have its own translation practices and quality environment.

Social Media Impacts and Reactions

Screenwriting translation has become a public cultural experience, not a solitary activity, but a shared experience on social media. Viewers, especially the younger generation, are quick to share their reactions to poor quality translations via social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and tiktok. This poses a problem not only for the translation process, but also for the institutions that produce it (Baker, 2018).

For example, in the Tamil translation of the Netflix series The Big Bang Theory, the line “Sheldon is being sarcastic” was translated as “ஷெல்டன் சட்னியா பேசுறான்”. After this, users spread it on social media in the form of memes and sarcastic posts. It went viral, and the word “சட்னி” itself spread on social media as a symbol of a translation error. Such direct translation errors, rather than showing the artificiality of the language, create humour among the audience and make the event culturally critical (Dwyer, 2017).

Furthermore, users directly record and disseminate translation errors on YouTube under the name of reaction videos or subtitle fails. In this, they take them as a centre of humour and discuss them, and it is also considered a sociolinguistic phenomenon. Baker (2018) in his study, describing the social effects of translation, argues that translation is a socially constructed phenomenon based on narrative theory and is an activity in which viewers construct their identity through that language.

In addition, the criticisms that circulate on social media create a collective viewer agency. Viewers are no longer passive recipients of momentary experiences, but rather become a social force that speaks out against designers through their reactions. This leads companies like Netflix to pay more attention to areas that require “localization feedback” (Jim é nez-Crespo, 2013).

Moreover, it also creates a kind of linguistic awareness. People, especially Tamil speakers, are more attentive to the beauty, uniqueness, and proper usage of their language. At this time, a translation in Tamil that lacks strength, elegance, and cultural coherence loses the respect of the audience (Venuti, 2012).

Thus, the criticisms given by viewers on social media are not just humorous; they are seen as sociolinguistic influences that protect the status of the language, provide feedback to translators, and emphasize language usage norms.

Recommendations

There are several key recommendations for improving translation quality. First, translators should have knowledge of literature and local linguistics. This will help them produce translations that respect the emotional and cultural nuances of the language. Second, while machine translation will continue to be used, it can only be ensured by combining it with human post-editing. Translators can provide clarity to the viewer by providing a “translator’s note” for phrases that lack cultural nuances, especially in the context of the text. Since this is a time-bound process, screen characters should be set with precise timing. Finally, instead of directly translating idiomatic expressions or words, translating them with an understanding of their underlying meanings and appropriate context will increase the viewer’s emotional connection. Such approaches open up avenues for improving translation quality on platforms such as Netflix and YouTube.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the translation of screen dialogue on global digital platforms such as Netflix and YouTube is a complex process that extends far beyond direct word-for-word substitution. Through the analysis of selected English–Tamil subtitles, it is evident that translators face a range of interconnected linguistic, cultural, and technical challenges. Idiomatic expressions, slang, humour, and culturally-bound references frequently resist literal translation, resulting in semantic loss, misinterpretation, or unnatural expressions in the target language. These problems are further intensified by the strict time and space constraints inherent in audiovisual subtitling. The findings also highlight a clear difference in translation quality between professionally produced Netflix subtitles and the auto- or user-generated captions commonly found on YouTube. While Netflix subtitles demonstrate higher consistency and contextual accuracy, YouTube translations are more vulnerable to errors caused by limitation in machine translation technologies. This underscores the inadequacy of relying

solely on automated systems for linguistically and culturally sensitive tasks such as dialogue translation. This research contributes to the field of audiovisual translation by reinforcing the importance of cultural literacy, contextual awareness, and human intervention in the translation process. It suggests that effective subtitle translation requires an integrated approach that combines technological advancement with human linguistic competence. Future research may expand this study by involving additional language pairs, larger datasets, or audience reception studies to further explore the impact of subtitle quality on viewer comprehension and engagement. Ultimately, accurate and culturally appropriate screen translation is not merely a technical necessity but a crucial element in preserving meaning and authenticity in an increasingly globalised media landscape.

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