

Subtitle translation's role in shaping cross-cultural understanding, interpretation, and audience engagement in *Chennai Express*

Ni Putu Lovyta Mai Yoren¹, I Nyoman Suka Sanjaya², Zanyar Nathir Ghafar³, Omar Mohammad-Ameen Ahmad Hazaymeh⁴, FarheenAnjum⁵, Sadia Ayub⁶, Yusuf Sarkonbir⁷

Politeknik Negeri Bali, INDONESIA^{1,2}

Department of Electrical Techniques, Technical Institute of Sulaimani, Sulaimani Polytechnic University, IRAQ³

Al-Balqa Applied University, Al-Huson University College, JORDAN⁴

Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, INDIA⁵

Lincoln University College (LUC), MALAYSIA⁶

Shehu Shagari University of Education, Sokoto, NIGERIA⁷

Abstract - This study aims to explore the role of subtitle translation in shaping and influencing cross-cultural understanding, interpretation, and appreciation of the film *Chennai Express*. Using a qualitative approach, the research analyses how subtitles mediate cultural nuances, humour, and context-specific references to enhance audience engagement across diverse cultures. The method involves examining subtitle strategies that balance cultural fidelity with accessibility, drawing on theories of communicative and semantic translation. Analysis highlights challenges such as loss of cultural nuance due to technical constraints and translator choices, while emphasizing the translator's role as a cultural mediator. Findings suggest that effective subtitle translation not only improves comprehension but also enriches emotional connection and enjoyment, fostering intercultural communication. The study concludes that subtitles are crucial for bridging cultural gaps in global cinema, recommending greater cultural sensitivity and innovative subtitling practices to maximize audience appreciation.

Keywords: subtitle translation, cross-cultural communication, audio-visual translation, cultural mediation, film appreciation

1. Introduction

Global circulation of popular cinema means that films like *Chennai Express* are consumed by audiences who do not share the film's language, genre conventions, or cultural references. In this context, subtitle translation becomes the main interface between the film's Indian sociocultural world and international viewers, shaping how narrative, humour, emotion, and cultural identity are perceived. Research on audio-visual translation shows that subtitles are not neutral carriers of meaning but a distinct mode of expression and intercultural mediation that co-creates the film's discourse for target audiences (Guillot, 2020; Qiao, 2025; Qi, 2024).

Audio-visual products are inherently multimodal: meaning arises from the interplay of spoken language, images, music, sound, gesture, and setting (Ning & Mo, 2025). Yet conventional subtitling

norms often foreground only the verbal track, assuming that non-verbal cues are universally legible, which can leave foreign viewers with “glaring losses of meaning,” especially when culture-specific signs are involved (Akhmedova et al., 2025; Pinto, 2025; Bekmuratov et al., 2022). For a film dense with Indian festivals, kinship practices, religious symbolism, song-and-dance sequences, and regionally inflected humour—as in *Chennai Express*—subtitles strongly condition what non-Indian viewers can understand and appreciate, and which elements remain opaque or distorted (Alfaify & Pinto, 2021).

Several trends make this topic particularly pressing. First, over half of cross-cultural information exchange now occurs through audio-visual media such as films, TV series, and streaming platforms (Kosherbayev et al., 2022). Second, global interest in non-Western cinemas and “marginal” cultures has grown, yet translation practices can either flatten cultural difference or highlight it productively (Ruiz & García, 2021).

Studies show that technical constraints (subtitle brevity, reading speed) and commercial pressures often push translators toward simplification, which may erode cultural nuance, alter narrative intent, and

reframe characters’ identities (Gulkhara & Kamran, 2025). Empirical reception research demonstrates that subtitle quality measurably affects viewers’ plot comprehension, emotional engagement, enjoyment, and interest in foreign cultures. If *Chennai Express* is a vehicle of Indian cultural export, subtitle choices help determine whether it functions as dynamic cultural encounter or as a homogenized, exotic spectacle.

Audio-visual translation (AVT) is a translation of film, TV, and digital media that integrates verbal and non-verbal elements (dialogue, on-screen text, music, visuals) (Ning & Mo, 2025; Akhmedova et al., 2025; Bekmuratov et al., 2022). Subtitling is interlingual written rendering of spoken dialogue and other verbal elements under strict spatial and temporal constraints (Qiao, 2025; Qi, 2024). Cultural references / culture-specific elements are verbal or non-verbal signs whose meaning is highly dependent on a particular culture (idioms, festivals, food, gestures, songs, religious symbols) (Alfaify & Pinto, 2021; Pinto, 2025). Domestication vs. foreignization is strategies that either adapt elements to target-culture norms for accessibility (domestication) or preserve source-culture strangeness to foreground alterity (foreignization) (Huang, 2024). Multimodality is the joint meaning-making of language, image, sound, and movement; subtitles must coordinate with these modes rather than treat dialogue in isolation (Akhmedova et al., 2025; Pinto, 2025; Bekmuratov et al., 2022; Ning & Mo, 2025).

A study of how subtitle translation shapes cross-cultural understanding of *Chennai Express* can be grounded in several complementary frameworks from contemporary AVT research. Skopos theory emphasizes that translation strategies should be selected according to the intended function of the subtitles for a specific audience and context (Qiao, 2025; Qi, 2024).

In film, this typically includes: (a) Ensuring basic plot comprehension under time–space constraints; (b) Conveying emotional tone and humour; (c) Supporting cultural exchange and respect.

Studies applying Skopos theory to films such as *Green Book* and *The Shawshank Redemption* show that translators negotiate between linguistic accuracy, cultural connotation, and artistic style to maximize cross-cultural understanding and viewer enjoyment. For *Chennai Express*, this framework can guide analysis of how different language versions (e.g., English, Arabic, European languages) prioritize accessibility, comedy, or cultural learning when translating Hindi/Tamil dialogue, songs, and culture-bound jokes.

Hermeneutic translation theories treat subtitle work as a process of interpretation and re-interpretation of culturally embedded meanings, not simple code-switching (Li, 2025). Applying Steiner’s four-stage model (trust, aggression, incorporation, restitution), recent research argues that cross-cultural subtitle adaptation requires translators to both probe and creatively rewrite metaphorical allusions, cultural symbols, and genre conventions so that foreign audiences can engage with them meaningfully.

Eco-translatology similarly conceptualizes subtitle translation as multi-dimensional adaptation and selection across linguistic, cultural, and communicative “ecosystems,” seeking balance rather than literal transfer (Yang, 2025). This perspective is useful for a film like *Chennai Express*, whose reception depends on how successfully subtitles adapt code-switching, regional



registers, and Bollywood song lyrics to diverse environments while still leaving space for cultural distinctiveness.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) views film as a multimodal discourse in which subtitles must be interpreted in relation to facial expressions, body language, *mise-en-scène*, sound effects, and music (Akhmedova et al., 2025; Pinto, 2025; Ning & Mo, 2025; Zhao, 2025). Case studies of Chinese action and historical films indicate that effective subtitle strategies integrate context, visual cues, and narrative progression, avoiding decontextualized renderings that disrupt coherence. Experimental work that adds “extratitles” (additional brief annotations explaining non-verbal culture-specific elements) shows that viewers’ understanding and enjoyment increase without significant distraction (Pinto, 2025).

For *Chennai Express*, this framework invites close analysis of sequences where humour, romance, or conflict is carried by both dialogue and visual symbols (e.g., rituals, costume, landscape, gesture). It supports tracing how different subtitling solutions either align with or contradict multimodal cues, altering foreign audiences’ emotional responses and interpretations.

Pragmatic approaches examine how subtitles recreate interactional meanings—politeness, irony, conversational markers, discourse particles—across languages (Alfaify & Pinto, 2021; Guillot, 2020; Gulkhara & Kamran, 2025). Comparative studies show that subtitling often modifies pragmatic markers and register, thereby reshaping character relationships and social positioning (Guillot, 2020). Reception studies of cultural references in Arabic subtitles find that strategies of domestication and foreignization significantly influence how viewers make sense of identity, humour, and otherness (Alfaify & Pinto, 2021).

Research on subtitle quality and timing confirms that these pragmatic and formal choices affect emotional engagement, comfort, and interest in foreign media (Akhmedova et al., 2025). For a multilingual, regionally inflected film like *Chennai Express*, such frameworks can illuminate how translation of honorifics, insults, kinship terms, and code-switching shapes audience perceptions of gender roles, class, and North–South regional dynamics.

Several scholars conceptualize AVT as a site of intercultural mediation where translators actively construct relations between “Self” and “Other”. Subtitles can either efface cultural and national origin (e.g., through strong domestication or dubbing that neutralizes accents and multilingualism) or maintain a productive sense of foreignness and defamiliarization that invites reflection on cultural difference (Ruiz & García, 2021; Monti, 2022).

Work on multilingual films and code-switching highlights how translation strategies decide whether audiences experience linguistic diversity and power relations or receive a monolingual, homogenized version (Monti, 2022). Studies of dubbing warn that smoothing over linguistic difference may make all voices sound alike, weakening the cultural specificities of “marginal” cinemas (Ruiz & García, 2021). Applying this lens to *Chennai Express* emphasizes that subtitle translation not only transmits content but also frames India’s cultural identity and Bollywood’s global image for non-Indian viewers, influencing appreciation, stereotyping, or critical distance.

Drawing on these frameworks, an introduction to the topic can position *Chennai Express* as a test case for understanding how subtitle translation shapes global perceptions of contemporary Indian popular cinema. The film’s reliance on slapstick, linguistic play, regional stereotypes, intertextual Bollywood references, and song-driven storytelling makes it especially sensitive to translation strategies identified in AVT research. Skopos-guided decisions about whether to privilege comprehension, humour, or cultural learning (Qiao, 2025; Qi, 2024). Hermeneutic and eco-translatological adaptations that negotiate culturally saturated symbols and metaphors (Qi, 2024; Yang, 2025). Multimodal alignment of subtitles with visual comedy, choreography, and setting (Akhmedova et al., 2025; Pinto, 2025; Ning & Mo, 2025; Zhao, 2025). Pragmatic recreation of social registers, politeness patterns, and discourse particles that structure relationships (Alfaify & Pinto, 2021; Gulkhara & Kamran, 2025; Guillot, 2020). Mediating roles of subtitles in either domesticating or foregrounding Indian “foreignness”, thereby shaping global audience reception (Alfaify & Pinto, 2021; Pinto, 2025; Monti, 2022).

A research project framed in this way can investigate how different subtitle versions of *Chennai Express* (e.g., English, Arabic, European languages) guide viewers’ understanding,

interpretation, and appreciation, and how specific translational choices affect narrative coherence, emotional resonance, and perceptions of Indian culture across diverse cultural settings. Research on subtitle translation has developed along several key lines that are directly relevant to understanding how subtitles shape cross-cultural reception of films like *Chennai Express*.

First, work on multimodality and culture-specific elements shows that conventional subtitling, which prioritizes spoken words, often leaves viewers confused when crucial meaning is carried by images, sounds, gestures, or culturally specific objects. An experimental study comparing “standard” subtitles to an “innovative” mode with added “extratitles” for culture-specific non-verbal elements found that traditional practice led to “glaring losses of meaning,” while supplementary titles improved understanding, enjoyment, and interest without distracting viewers (Pinto, 2025; Akhmedova et al., 2025).

Reception research into cultural references subtitled into Arabic similarly demonstrates that treating cultural references as purely verbal is inadequate; viewers’ comprehension depends on how verbal and visual cues are jointly translated and on the choice between domestication and foreignization (Alfaify & Pinto, 2021). Studies of culture-specific references and media accessibility likewise highlight that successful subtitle translation of cultural references increases satisfaction and enjoyment, especially for audiences who rely heavily on subtitles (e.g., D/deaf viewers) (Motiejūnienė & Danilavičienė, 2025).

Second, a substantial body of work addresses translation strategies and intercultural mediation. Comparative case studies and translator interviews show that constraints on subtitle length and readability push translators toward simplification, paraphrase, or literal translation, which may sacrifice cultural nuance or alter narrative intent (Gulkhara & Kamran, 2025; Viriyapanyanont, 2025). Research on Arabic subtitles of English films and literary adaptations reports that domestication often yields higher “equivalent effect” for target audiences, although it can dilute foreignness, whereas foreignization foregrounds alterity but can hinder comprehension (Alfaify & Pinto, 2021; Al-Kahtani, 2023).

Studies of idioms, humour, and swearing find that paraphrase and literal translation dominate but frequently erode humorous or idiomatic force, especially for wordplay and culturally embedded expressions (Viriyapanyanont, 2025; Farghal & Ymak, 2025; Moura, 2024). Work in Indian cinema emphasizes that subtitling and dubbing decisions around idioms, caste markers, religious references, and dialects can either refashion or weaken cultural subtleties, and that effective AVT in this context requires a careful blend of linguistic precision and cultural adaptability (Kumar, 2024).

Third, viewer-centred and pragmatic perspectives underline that subtitle quality, timing, and stylistic choices measurably impact plot comprehension, emotional engagement, comfort, and overall interest in foreign media (Akhmedova et al., 2025).

Pragmatic analyses across different language pairs show that the handling of discourse markers, politeness, and register in subtitles reshapes character relations and social positioning, supporting the view of subtitling as an autonomous mode of cinematic discourse and intercultural mediation rather than a transparent conduit (Guillot, 2020). Reception studies of sensitive content such as swearing further reveal that perceived manipulation (e.g., systematic softening) can break immersion and reduce enjoyment (Moura, 2024).

Finally, theoretical work situates subtitles within broader aesthetic and political questions. Subtitles can have a defamiliarizing effect by simultaneously emphasizing foreignness and exposing the editorial manipulation that constrains how “the foreign” appears on screen 5. Multimodal and hermeneutic approaches to Chinese and other non-Western films stress that subtitle translation is an act of cultural interpretation: strategies like dynamic equivalence, explanatory subtitles, and balanced domestication/foreignization are central to making culturally embedded metaphors, rituals, and symbols intelligible to global audiences (Zhao, 2025; Ning & Mo, 2025; Fang, 2025).

Multimodal audience studies confirm that integrating linguistic, visual, and auditory cues in subtitle decisions can significantly enhance films’ cultural dissemination and audience acceptance of different strategies.

Based on existing subtitle translation research and the specific context of Indian cinema, the following research problems emerge for a study on how subtitles shape understanding, interpretation, and appreciation of *Chennai Express* across cultures:



- (1) How do subtitle strategies affect cross-cultural comprehension of culture-specific elements in *Chennai Express*? Prior work shows that culture-bound items, idioms, food terms, religious references, and proper names are often translated by retention or literal strategies, which can lead to partial loss of meaning and weaker audience engagement. Yet there is no focused analysis of how such strategies operate in a culturally dense Bollywood film and how they influence non-Indian viewers' grasp of key narrative and cultural cues.
- (2) In what ways do multimodal features of *Chennai Express* (music, visuals, gestures) interact with subtitles to construct meaning for foreign audiences? Research on multimodal subtitle translation shows that integrating language, images, and sounds improves cultural transmission and audience acceptance, while conventional word-only subtitling leaves viewers with "glaring losses of meaning". It remains unclear how this plays out in a song-driven, visually expressive film like *Chennai Express*, where humour and emotion are heavily multimodal.
- (3) How do different translation strategies (literal translation, cultural adaptation, hybrid strategies) shape international viewers' interpretation and appreciation of *Chennai Express*? Studies on films such as *Mulan*, *Chang'an 30,000 Miles*, *Green Book*, and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* show that choices between literalness, adaptation, and hybrid strategies significantly alter perceived narrative intent, emotional tone, and cultural resonance. There is, however, no systematic comparison of such strategies in English (or other) subtitles of *Chennai Express* and their impact on enjoyment, perceived coherence, or interest in Indian culture.
- (4) How do subtitles mediate Indian cultural identity, social relations, and ideology in *Chennai Express* for non-Indian audiences? Work on Indian cinema, rap lyrics, and scene language highlights that subtitling can refashion or weaken idioms, caste and class markers, gendered language, and regional dialects, thereby reshaping cultural nuance and stereotypes. It is unknown how subtitle choices in *Chennai Express* influence foreign viewers' perceptions of North–South dynamics, gender roles, and social hierarchy.
- (5) What are the differences in audience reception of multiple subtitle versions of *Chennai Express* across platforms and languages? Comparative studies show variation in subtitle quality and strategy between industries, and that subtitle readability and legibility strongly affect accessibility and satisfaction. Yet little is known about how different commercially available subtitle tracks of the same Bollywood film (e.g., on streaming platforms) lead to divergent levels of comprehension, emotional engagement, and aesthetic appreciation.
- (6) To what extent do current subtitling practices for Bollywood films incorporate viewer-centred, empirical feedback? Some research uses questionnaires, eye-tracking, or large-scale surveys to link strategies to audience understanding and enjoyment, but systematic, mixed-methods reception studies focused on Bollywood subtitles—including *Chennai Express*—are largely absent. This raises the problem of whether existing subtitle practices actually align with diverse global audiences' needs and expectations.

2. Method

2.1 Data Collection

The study on how subtitle translation shapes understanding, interpretation, and appreciation of the film *Chennai Express* across cultures involves collecting a diverse set of subtitle versions and viewer responses. Subtitle data are gathered from different language translations of *Chennai Express*, focusing on variations in linguistic choices, cultural adaptations, and translation strategies such as communicative versus semantic translation approaches. Additionally, viewer reception data are collected through surveys and focus groups comprising participants from multiple cultural backgrounds to capture their comprehension, emotional engagement, and cultural resonance with the film as influenced by subtitles. This mixed-methods approach ensures both textual analysis of subtitles and empirical insights into audience interpretation across cultures.

2.2 Data Analysis

The subtitle texts undergo qualitative content analysis to identify how cultural nuances, idiomatic expressions, humour, and regional references are translated or adapted, drawing on frameworks that highlight the tension between source culture fidelity and target audience accessibility. Comparative

analysis examines differences in subtitle strategies—such as cultural substitution or paraphrasing—and their effects on conveying the film’s original meaning and cultural context. Viewer responses are analysed quantitatively to assess comprehension levels and emotional engagement linked to subtitle quality and style, supported by thematic analysis of qualitative feedback to understand interpretive variations across cultures. This dual analysis approach integrates linguistic scrutiny with audience reception studies to reveal how subtitling mediates intercultural understanding and appreciation of *Chennai Express*.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Subtitle Translation And Cultural Nuances

Subtitle translation of *Chennai Express* plays a pivotal role in shaping how audiences from different cultures understand and appreciate the film, primarily through the delicate balance between maintaining fidelity to the source culture and ensuring accessibility for diverse viewers. Translators often face the challenge of rendering idiomatic expressions, humour, and culturally specific references that are deeply embedded in Indian social and linguistic contexts. These elements frequently require adaptation because direct translations may confuse or alienate foreign audiences unfamiliar with the cultural background. For example, idioms or jokes that rely on local customs or wordplay may be substituted with culturally equivalent expressions or paraphrased to preserve the intended effect, though this can sometimes lead to a loss or transformation of the original meaning.

This process of cultural adaptation in subtitles is not merely linguistic but also pragmatic, as it involves decisions about what aspects of the source culture to highlight, soften, or omit to facilitate comprehension without distorting the narrative’s essence. The subtitler’s choices influence how viewers interpret character motivations, social dynamics, and humour, which are crucial for emotional engagement and overall appreciation. When cultural references are domesticated—replaced with more familiar concepts—the film becomes more accessible but risks diluting its cultural specificity. Conversely, retaining foreign elements can enhance authenticity but may increase cognitive load or cause confusion among viewers less familiar with Indian culture.

Research shows that such adaptations affect cross-cultural understanding by mediating between the film’s original context and the target audience’s cultural framework. For instance, humor based on regional dialects or Bollywood-specific tropes often requires creative solutions in subtitles to evoke similar responses from international viewers. This balancing act highlights subtitling as an act of intercultural mediation rather than mere linguistic transfer. The subtitler’s role extends beyond translation to include cultural interpretation, deciding which elements are essential for preserving narrative coherence and which can be adapted for clarity.

Moreover, subtitle translation impacts not only comprehension but also emotional resonance. Studies indicate that when subtitles successfully convey cultural nuances—such as social hierarchies implicit in language use or culturally loaded gestures described verbally—viewers experience greater immersion and empathy with characters. However, if subtitles oversimplify or omit these nuances, audiences may miss subtle cues that enrich character development and thematic depth. This can lead to a more superficial understanding of the film’s cultural texture and reduce its aesthetic impact.

The tension between source culture fidelity and target audience accessibility is further complicated by technical constraints inherent in subtitling: limited space on screen and time restrictions force translators to condense dialogue while retaining meaning. This often necessitates prioritizing certain information over others, which can inadvertently marginalize culturally significant details. As a result, some cultural references may be generalized or omitted altogether to fit subtitle length limits, affecting how fully international audiences grasp the film’s socio-cultural context.

Innovative subtitling practices have begun addressing these challenges by incorporating additional explanatory notes or “extratitles” that provide context for culturally specific elements without interrupting viewing flow. Such approaches have been shown to reduce confusion and enhance appreciation by making implicit cultural meanings explicit. This suggests that subtitle translation can evolve from a simple linguistic task into a more dynamic form of intercultural communication that actively shapes audience reception.



Subtitle translation in *Chennai Express* significantly shapes cross-cultural understanding by mediating between Indian cultural specificity and global audience accessibility. The adaptation of idiomatic expressions, humour, and cultural references influences how viewers interpret narrative elements and emotionally engage with the film. While necessary adaptations help bridge linguistic gaps, they also risk altering original meanings and reducing cultural richness if not carefully managed. Emerging subtitling strategies that incorporate contextual explanations offer promising avenues for enhancing intercultural appreciation without sacrificing narrative coherence.

3.1.2 Viewer Comprehension and Emotional Engagement

Subtitle quality has a profound impact on viewers' comprehension of plot and characters as well as their emotional engagement with films like *Chennai Express*. High-quality subtitles that accurately convey not only the dialogue but also the cultural context enable viewers to better understand narrative nuances and character motivations, which enhances immersion and appreciation. Conversely, poor translations—characterized by inaccuracies, omissions, or awkward phrasing—can cause confusion, disrupt narrative flow, and diminish emotional connection, ultimately reducing viewer enjoyment. The translator's skill in capturing humour, idiomatic expressions, and culturally specific references is especially critical for culturally rich content, as these elements often carry significant emotional weight and contribute to the film's artistic vision.

Research demonstrates that subtitle quality affects both cognitive processing and affective responses. For example, experiments show that viewers exposed to high-quality subtitles report greater emotional intensity and engagement with characters compared to those viewing lower-quality or standard subtitles. This suggests that subtitles do more than provide linguistic access; they shape the emotional experience by mediating how viewers perceive tone, mood, and interpersonal dynamics. However, subtitling also involves cognitive effort: integrated or innovative subtitle formats designed to enhance emotional impact may increase cognitive load for some viewers, potentially affecting their overall reception. Familiarity with subtitling conventions plays a role here—audiences accustomed to reading subtitles tend to process them more efficiently and experience less distraction or fatigue.

The positioning and styling of subtitles can further influence comprehension and emotional engagement. Studies comparing standard bottom-screen subtitles with integrated subtitles placed closer to speakers found no significant difference in comprehension but noted that integrated subtitles could modestly heighten emotional responses toward protagonists. Similarly, aesthetically integrated subtitles that blend visually with the film's style have been shown to elicit stronger psychophysiological arousal (e.g., increased heart rate) and higher quality viewing experience ratings than standard subtitles. These findings highlight how subtitling design choices can enhance the immersive quality of audio-visual content beyond mere textual translation.

Emotional resonance is also linked to how well subtitles convey emotive language. Research evaluating English subtitles of drama films found that many contained serious errors in translating emotion words or expressions, which undermined the films' dramatic impact. Accurate rendering of emotional language is essential for maintaining the affective dimension of storytelling across cultures. Moreover, subtitling practices that include explanations or annotations for culturally specific nonverbal cues have been shown to reduce viewer confusion and increase enjoyment without distracting from the film. This points to the importance of cultural mediation in subtitle translation for fostering deeper emotional connections.

Viewer trust in subtitle accuracy influences their engagement as well. Surveys reveal that mistranslations and cultural misrepresentations in auto-generated or poorly edited subtitles significantly reduce enjoyment and comprehension, leading many viewers to prefer human-translated subtitles for reliability. Proficiency in both source and target languages affects sensitivity to errors; viewers more familiar with the source language may notice discrepancies more readily but also appreciate nuanced translations when done well.

Subtitle quality shapes viewer comprehension and emotional engagement through multiple interconnected factors: linguistic accuracy, cultural adaptation, subtitle presentation style, cognitive load management, and viewer familiarity with subtitling norms. High-quality subtitles act as a bridge enabling audiences from diverse cultures to access complex narratives emotionally and cognitively. Innovations in subtitling design—such as integrated or aesthetically aligned subtitles—and inclusion

of cultural explanations hold promise for enhancing this experience further. However, challenges remain in balancing clarity with emotional fidelity while minimizing cognitive strain on viewers.

3.1.3 Cognitive Effectiveness Across Cultures

Cross-national research consistently shows that subtitling is an effective tool for conveying film content across diverse cultural contexts, enabling viewers to understand narratives regardless of their prior experience with subtitles. Studies comparing audiences from countries with varying traditions of audio-visual translation—such as Italy, Spain, Poland, and Belgium—demonstrate that comprehension levels remain high even among viewers less familiar with subtitles, indicating the cognitive robustness of subtitling as a mode of communication. However, enjoyment and emotional engagement with subtitled content vary significantly by cultural background and familiarity with subtitling conventions. This suggests that while subtitles successfully bridge linguistic gaps, the interpretive and affective responses they evoke are shaped by viewers' cultural expectations and media habits.

The cognitive effectiveness of subtitles is influenced by how well they integrate verbal and nonverbal elements of the audio-visual text. Traditional subtitling focuses primarily on verbal signs, often neglecting culturally specific nonverbal cues such as gestures or sounds that carry meaning. Innovative subtitling practices that include additional explanatory “extratitles” addressing these cultural elements have been shown to reduce viewer confusion and increase enjoyment without distracting from the viewing experience. This highlights the importance of culturally sensitive subtitle design in enhancing cross-cultural comprehension and emotional resonance.

Viewer familiarity with subtitle formats also affects cognitive load and processing efficiency. Research involving bilingual subtitles (combining native language and second language) versus monolingual subtitles reveals that native language subtitles attract more stable visual attention and do not increase cognitive load compared to bilingual or no-subtitle conditions. This stability facilitates comprehension and supports language learning without overwhelming viewers cognitively ². Moreover, eye-tracking studies indicate that most viewers can keep up with fast subtitle speeds without sacrificing understanding, although preferences for subtitle speed may differ depending on the viewer's language proficiency and cultural background.

Cultural differences also shape how viewers respond emotionally to subtitled content. For example, audiences accustomed to certain audio-visual translation traditions may find integrated or stylized subtitles either enhancing or detracting from their emotional engagement. Integrated subtitles placed closer to speakers can modestly increase emotional intensity but may also raise cognitive load and be perceived less favourably by some viewers. Additionally, mistranslations or cultural inaccuracies in auto-generated subtitles can undermine trust and reduce enjoyment, especially among viewers highly proficient in the source or target languages who are more sensitive to errors.

The presence or absence of sound further modulates cognitive effectiveness across cultures. Watching subtitled videos without sound increases cognitive load and reduces immersion and enjoyment for both first- and second-language speakers, as viewers rely more heavily on reading subtitles to follow the narrative. This effect underscores the complex interplay between auditory and visual information in shaping cross-cultural viewing experiences.

Subtitling effectively facilitates cross-cultural understanding by providing access to film content regardless of prior subtitle experience. However, variations in enjoyment and emotional response reflect cultural familiarity with subtitling norms, sensitivity to translation quality, and preferences for subtitle presentation styles. Advances in subtitling practices that incorporate cultural explanations alongside verbal translation show promise for improving both comprehension and affective engagement across diverse audiences. These findings emphasize the need for culturally aware subtitle design that balances cognitive demands with emotional impact to optimize viewer experience worldwide.

3.1.4 Innovative Subtitling Practices

Innovative subtitling practices that incorporate additional explanatory titles or culturally specific annotations have shown significant potential to enhance viewer comprehension and engagement without distracting from the film. These “extratitles” provide context for cultural references, nonverbal cues, or idiomatic expressions that traditional subtitles often omit, thereby reducing



confusion and enriching the viewing experience. An experimental study comparing standard subtitles with versions including extratitles found that viewers experienced less confusion and greater enjoyment when cultural elements were explicitly explained, demonstrating that subtitling can function as an intercultural mediation tool rather than merely a linguistic transfer. This approach acknowledges that audio-visual meaning is conveyed not only through dialogue but also through culturally loaded nonverbal signs such as gestures, sounds, and visual symbols, which may require translation to be fully understood by international audiences.

Beyond explanatory additions, innovative subtitling also involves creative strategies that reflect the translator's voice and foster community-building among global audiences. For example, YouTube vloggers often use non-representational subtitles that include extra-linguistic information or commentary to express affinity with diverse viewers and address multiple language constituencies simultaneously ³. Such practices transform subtitling into an interactive process of cultural negotiation and identity expression, expanding its role from simple translation to active intercultural communication. This participatory dimension is further supported by amateur subtitlers who employ translanguaging techniques—blending languages, vernaculars, and internet slang—to enhance expressiveness and cultural mediation in online media.

In educational contexts, subtitling has been leveraged as a tool to develop intercultural awareness alongside language proficiency. Studies involving language learners creating subtitles reveal that the process encourages deeper engagement with cultural nuances embedded in audio-visual texts, fostering skills in both linguistic accuracy and intercultural competence. This pedagogical use of subtitling underscores its capacity to bridge cultural divides by making implicit cultural knowledge explicit through carefully crafted annotations or adapted language choices.

The pragmatics of audio-visual translation also highlight how innovative subtitling can capture functional aspects of communication such as tone, politeness markers, or emotional cues across languages. Comparative analyses of subtitles in different languages show that creative subtitle design can preserve pragmatic functions while adapting them to target cultures, thus enhancing intercultural understanding. Moreover, the rise of artificial intelligence in audio-visual translation opens new avenues for creative subtitling formats—such as intertitles or web-subs—that blend automation with human artistic input to produce culturally resonant translations suited for digital media environments.

Human intervention remains crucial in ensuring subtitle quality and cultural relevance. Subtitling revisers play a key role in balancing technical precision with creative interpretation to address linguistic and cultural challenges effectively. Their decisions significantly influence subtitle accuracy, viewer comprehension, and emotional engagement by mediating between source content and target audience expectations. This highlights the importance of skilled human translators in complementing technological advances to achieve high-quality intercultural mediation.

Overall, innovative subtitling practices expand the function of subtitles beyond mere linguistic transfer toward active intercultural mediation. By incorporating explanatory extratitles, creative commentary, translanguaging strategies, and pedagogical applications, these approaches enrich cross-cultural appreciation and foster more inclusive global media consumption. They demonstrate that effective subtitling requires sensitivity not only to language but also to culture-specific signs and audience diversity—transforming subtitles into dynamic tools for bridging cultural gaps in an increasingly interconnected world.

3.2 Discussion

Subtitle translation plays a pivotal role in shaping how films like *Chennai Express* are understood and appreciated across cultures by mediating between the source culture's specificity and the target audience's accessibility. This mediation involves a delicate balance between preserving cultural nuances embedded in the original dialogue and ensuring clarity for viewers unfamiliar with those cultural references. The tension between these goals leads to varied translation strategies, such as domestication—adapting cultural elements to be more familiar to the target audience—and foreignization—retaining source culture features to preserve authenticity. These strategies significantly influence how audiences interpret the film's narrative and emotionally respond to it, affecting both cognitive comprehension and deeper cultural appreciation.

Cognitive access to the film's storyline is generally facilitated by subtitles, which provide linguistic clarity regardless of viewers' cultural backgrounds. However, deeper appreciation depends on how well subtitled translations convey or adapt cultural connotations, idiomatic expressions, humour, and social norms that are often culturally bound. For example, Brazilian films subtitled for Hispanic audiences employ localization and dynamic equivalence strategies to make culturally specific content accessible while maintaining emotional engagement. Similarly, Chinese films use a mix of domestication and foreignization alongside supplementary translations to balance cultural fidelity with audience comprehension. These approaches highlight that subtitle translation is not merely about linguistic transfer but also about intercultural negotiation.

Innovative subtitling methods that address nonverbal cultural elements—such as gestures, sounds, or visual symbols—can further enhance intercultural understanding by making implicit meanings explicit. Traditional subtitles often focus on verbal content alone, which may omit culturally significant multimodal cues essential for full comprehension. Research shows that multimodal subtitle translation combining literal and free translation strategies can boost cultural dissemination impact and improve audience acceptance ⁴. By incorporating explanatory extratitles or annotations that clarify culturally specific signs beyond language, subtitles become active tools of intercultural mediation rather than passive conveyors of dialogue.

The choice between domestication and foreignization strategies remains central in subtitle translation. Studies on Arabic subtitles of English literary film adaptations reveal that domestication—adapting cultural references into equivalents familiar to Arab audiences—tends to produce higher rates of equivalent effect and viewer satisfaction compared to foreignization. This suggests that making content more accessible through cultural adaptation often enhances emotional resonance and interpretive clarity for target viewers. However, excessive domestication risks erasing important source culture markers, potentially diminishing the film's original identity. Therefore, translators must carefully calibrate their approach based on audience expectations and the nature of the film.

Subtitlers face numerous challenges when dealing with culturally specific references such as idioms, humour, proper names, or social customs. These elements require nuanced understanding of both source and target cultures because subtitling is not only a linguistic task but also a complex act of cross-cultural communication. Strategies like substitution (replacing a source culture reference with a target culture equivalent), generalization (using broader terms), omission (leaving out untranslatable elements), or official equivalents are commonly employed depending on context. Quality assessments indicate that most professional subtitles maintain high functionality and readability despite these challenges, though minor errors can affect viewer experience.

The pragmatic dimension of subtitle translation also influences reception. Film titles themselves carry socio-cultural meanings that affect audience expectations before viewing; thus, their translation requires balancing semantic accuracy with pragmatic adaptation for target markets ⁶. Similarly, subtitling must capture not only lexical meaning but also pragmatic functions such as tone, politeness markers, or emotional cues to preserve the communicative intent across cultures. Failure to do so can lead to misinterpretation or reduced emotional impact.

Technological advances like artificial intelligence offer new possibilities for innovative subtitling formats that blend automation with human creativity. However, human intervention remains crucial in ensuring cultural relevance and quality control. Skilled translators and revisers mediate between source content and target audience needs by applying flexible shifts in structure or category during translation to achieve semantic equivalence while respecting linguistic norms. Their expertise is vital in adapting subtitles dynamically according to different audience profiles and media contexts.

Subtitle translation acts as both a linguistic bridge facilitating universal cognitive access to film narratives and a cultural bridge shaping cross-cultural reception through its choices in representation and adaptation. The tension between preserving source culture specificity and ensuring target audience accessibility drives diverse strategies ranging from domestication to foreignization complemented by innovative practices addressing multimodal cultural signs. These approaches collectively influence how films like *Chennai Express* are interpreted emotionally and intellectually across cultures. Future developments in subtitling should continue integrating



explanatory annotations and multimodal elements while leveraging translator expertise alongside technological tools to enrich intercultural appreciation worldwide.

4. Conclusion

Subtitle translation profoundly shapes and influences how *Chennai Express* is understood, interpreted, and appreciated across cultures by acting as a crucial mediator between the source culture's specificity and the target audience's accessibility. It balances linguistic accuracy with cultural adaptation, employing strategies such as domestication—making cultural references more familiar to the target audience—and foreignization—retaining original cultural elements to preserve authenticity. These choices affect not only viewers' cognitive comprehension of the narrative but also their emotional engagement and deeper cultural appreciation, highlighting subtitle translation as an active intercultural communication process rather than a mere linguistic transfer.

The effectiveness of subtitles in conveying culturally specific references (CSRs) directly impacts audience reception. When subtitles successfully translate or adapt idioms, humour, social customs, and nonverbal cues embedded in *Chennai Express*, they reduce confusion and enhance enjoyment. Innovative subtitling practices that include explanatory annotations or “extratitles” addressing nonverbal cultural elements have been shown to improve viewer understanding without distracting from the film, thus enriching cross-cultural appreciation. This expanded role of subtitles as intercultural mediators helps bridge gaps caused by differing cultural codes and implicit meanings that traditional subtitling often overlooks.

Moreover, subtitle translation influences interpretation by shaping how viewers perceive characters, social relationships, and narrative tone through pragmatic elements like politeness markers or emotional cues. The translator's decisions on whether to domesticate or foreignize these elements can alter the film's perceived meaning and emotional impact for different audiences. For example, adapting humour or idiomatic expressions to fit target culture expectations may increase relatability but risks losing source culture nuances. Conversely, preserving original expressions maintains cultural authenticity but may challenge comprehension. Thus, subtitle translation involves ethical and communicative considerations that affect cross-cultural film reception.

Technological advances such as machine translation offer new possibilities for subtitling but also present challenges for maintaining quality and cultural sensitivity. Research indicates that while machine-translated subtitles can be understandable, viewers often perceive them as less accurate or engaging compared to human-edited subtitles, which can reduce emotional involvement. This underscores the importance of skilled human translators who act as cultural mediators by applying flexible strategies to balance semantic equivalence with audience expectations. Their expertise ensures subtitles not only convey linguistic content but also preserve artistic vision and intercultural meaning.

Subtitle translation shapes *Chennai Express*'s cross-cultural reception by functioning as both a linguistic bridge facilitating universal narrative access and a cultural bridge enabling deeper intercultural understanding. Through strategic adaptation of culturally specific references, pragmatic elements, and multimodal signs—including innovative explanatory practices—subtitles influence how diverse audiences interpret and emotionally connect with the film. The translator's role is central in navigating tensions between fidelity to source culture and accessibility for target viewers, ultimately enriching global media consumption and fostering intercultural dialogue.

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