

A Semantic-Pragmatic Analysis of the English Translation of an Urdu Play *Kuch Ankahi*

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ABSTRACT: The subtitling of idioms, metaphors, and humor presents significant translation challenges, often requiring compromises between semantic clarity and cultural authenticity. This study examines the transfer of semantic and pragmatic meanings employed in the English subtitles of the culturally rich Urdu television play *Kuch Ankahi*, written by Syed Mohammad Ahmed, focusing on the accuracy of meaning and cultural features during translation. Using a qualitative approach, this study analyzes selected dialogue pairs to explore how meanings are generalized or specified deliberately. These choices are evaluated not only for their effectiveness in maintaining the core meaning of the source text (ST) but also on how they influence the tone, emotional impact, and cultural expressiveness of the dialogues when translated into the target text (TT). By using Baker's (1992) proposed strategies for translating culture-specific items and Sperber and Wilson's (1986) relevance theory, the study aims to determine whether the applied strategies enhance or limit the precision of the subtitles. The results indicate that most of the meanings are generalized, which enhances clarity and semantic transparency but often diminishes the aesthetic tone, humor, cultural richness, and emotional subtlety of the original text.

KEYWORDS: Translation, Pragmatic Meanings, Subtitling, Semantic Meanings, Cultural Specific Expressions

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Introduction

Translation is not only the process of transferring linguistic meaning from one language to another, but also a transmission of cultures. Thus, translation may encounter linguistic and cultural barriers. In theory, due to the universality of language and the convergence of cultures, equivalence can be achieved to a certain extent. However, different cultures often convey the identical meaning in quite different ways, making it difficult to find completely synonymous equivalents. Bridging the gap caused by linguistic and cultural differences requires adjustments (Larson, 1998; Nida, 1984). Translation, like other textual practices, also negotiates subjectivities and ideological binaries in cultural contexts (Safdar & Yasmin, 2021a).

Discussing the link between language and culture is a significant aspect of the study of translation (Irshad & Yasmin, 2022; Irshad & Yasmin, 2023) as it helps determine the extent to which a situation in one language is effectively conveyed in another language (Akram & Yasmin, 2023; Safdar & Yasmin, 2021b; Sukarini et al., 2022). This study investigates the translator's choice to transfer semantic and pragmatic meanings from one

language and culture to another, exploring the reasons behind this transfer and its overall impact on semantic and pragmatic precision in the English translation of the Urdu play *Kuch Ankahi*. This is a social-romantic comic Urdu play that revolves around a middle-class family of three sisters and their parents. The Urdu language is rich in culture, containing its unique cultural expressions and intensive terms. However, culturally embedded expressions are not translated easily, and a single expression may carry a different meaning in the source and target cultures. According to Baker (2018) and Newmark (1981), every word can be translated in one way or another. Different strategies such as generalization, substitution, paraphrasing and specification etc. are typically employed when a concept from the source culture does not exist in the target culture, requiring an explanation to help readers understand the ST message. Translators usually try to maintain both semantic and pragmatic meanings when transferring culturally embedded texts; however, sometimes they cannot achieve their goal, and the meanings become distorted. High translation precision is crucial for conveying information clearly, as the purpose of translation is to communicate meaning accurately. This study investigates the way meanings are transferred in English subtitles of the Urdu play *Kuch Ankahi*.

Research Questions

The present research answers the following research questions:

- 1) How do English subtitles of *Kuch Ankahi* affect the semantic and pragmatic meanings of culturally specific expressions?
- 2) What is the overall impact of translation on the emotional and cultural tone of the source text when presented to the target audience?

Literature Review

Translation not only transfers text, but also transmits the cultural meanings attached to the words. Catford (1965, p.20) defines translation as "an operation on language: the process of replacing a text in one language with a text in another language". Nida and Taber (1974) focus on the message. Similarly, Larson (1998) states that translation refers to the transfer of ideas from one language to another, taking into account the target audience's linguistic and cultural contexts. Thus, it not only involves linguistic transfer but also the transfer of culture.

Considering translation as a cultural transfer, Newmark (1988) proposes an organized list of cultural references (ecological, material, and social cultures). According to this division, political, religious, artistic, gestural, and habitual terms are all part of cultural expressions. In addition, these include proverbs, phrasal verbs, metaphors, and idioms. He states that every culture has its own references, which are often untranslatable and therefore require translation strategies. The paper analyzes English subtitles, which are a restricted translation influenced by factors such as time, space, and position. Subtitling is defined as a textual, synchronous, and multimedia transcription of film or television (Wu, 2021). It is a cross-translation in which translators prefer to maintain a balance between the textual material, visual context, and the audience's understanding (Gottlieb, 1992). In this context, Baker (1992) introduces some strategies such as substituting general words, paraphrasing, and using loan words, etc. Some strategies used by the translators have a positive effect on translation readability. Like, paraphrasing helps translators to clear the meanings. Gottlieb (1992) asserts that translators use different techniques to fulfil the needs of fast-paced dialogues, limited time

and space, and diverse audiences in the case of subtitles. Bassnett (2002, as cited in Arhire, 2020) maintains that one of the strategies is generalization that improves comprehension; however, it usually affects the tone and emotional intensity of the original text. Specification may enhance the emotionality of meaning, but another strategy, neutralization, reduces the emotional and rhetorical features of literary texts during the process of subtitles translations, and an issue arises more often in humorous and idiomatic content (Moe, 2010).

In this regard, Sperber and Wilson's (1986) relevance theory offers a pragmatic perspective. It assumes that communication follows the principle of optimal relevance, the expectation that communicators convey the most meaningful information with the least cognitive effort. When relevance theory is applied to subtitle translation, the translator assumes the role of a strategic mediator, simplifying or substituting complex expressions to preserve the communicative intent, even if this means sacrificing stylistic fidelity. This theoretical approach supports the analysis of the strategies employed in the translation not only as a technique but also as a pragmatic decision optimizing audience comprehension.

Various studies have been conducted about translating cultural references, specifically subtitling. For instance, Sukarini et al. (2022) researched English-Indonesian translation, analysing deculturization of culturally bound elements in short stories. They found that most of the terms are deculturized by producing a universal and literal translation.

Similarly, Sun (2022) describes the method and the motivation for using neutralising tendency in English subtitling of Chinese films, conducting textual analysis. The findings reveal that the frequent use of explicitation, substitution, transposition, compensation, and omission neutralizes the culture-specific references. The reason behind this is the lack of cultural equivalence. Most research focuses on identifying the frequent strategies used in translating culture-specific items in subtitling without emphasizing semantic and pragmatic fidelity. This research focuses on investigating the transfer of cultural expressions in Urdu-to-English subtitles and their impact on semantic-pragmatic appropriateness.

Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive, qualitative approach. The descriptive approach means making comparisons between the source text and the target text to identify the issues. The data used in this research are the English subtitles of the Urdu play *Kuch Ankahi*. The dialogues from the play are extracted using purposive sampling. The analysis draws on Baker's (1992) proposed strategies for translating culture-specific items and Sperber and Wilson's (1986) relevance theory to assess semantic and pragmatic appropriateness from the viewer's perspective.

Data Analysis

The current section of the paper comprises the analysis of the selected data. It focuses on how semantic and pragmatic meanings are employed in the English subtitling of the Urdu play *Kuch Ankahi* and investigates the accuracy of these meanings and the comprehension of the message by the target readers through relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986).

Table 1

Example 1

ST	TT
جی ایک وہی تو ہے اس دنیا میں شرافت کا چیمپین۔ Ge aik wohi tou hai iss dunia ma sharafat ka champion	Fine! He is the only innocent left in this cruel world.

The selected dialogue *Ge aik wohi tou hai iss dunia ma sharafat ka champion*, is an exaggerated and sarcastic expression which comprises the Urdu word *sharafat* 'decency' and the English borrowed word 'champion'. The phrase consisting of these two linguistic expressions from two different languages is a humorous metaphor. This hybrid form conveys the speaker's irony, evoking a sense of exaggerated, ironic praise implying hypocrisy or self-righteousness among the audience. In the target text, "Fine! He is the only innocent left in this cruel world.", the translator uses a generalized term, replacing "champion of decency" with "only innocent." While this maintains the core meaning, it depicts the character as morally upright. It narrows the semantic scope, as "innocent" overlooks the broader sociocultural connotations of *sharafat* and omits the performative exaggeration implied by "hero." The ironic tone of the translation is thus weakened and rendered more literal, reducing the humor and rhetorical effect of the original.

The translator's choice seems to lessen the cognitive load for the target audience. The subtitle is translated in a way that viewers don't need to interpret the culturally loaded term. Though this disturbs the stylistic duality and the irony inherent in the original, it simplifies its emotional and cultural richness.

Table 2

Example 2

ST	TT
اٹن کارنگ چڑھ رہا ہے اور کیا ہے۔ Ubtan ka rang charh raha hy aur kya hai	It's because of the facial mask! What else?

This example also illustrates the employment of the generalized substitution technique. Here, in this example, a culturally specific reference is substituted with a very general and broad term in the target text. The dialogue uttered in the original text, *ubtan ka rang charhna*, is replaced with the term facial mask. The phrase *ubtan ka rang charhna* means the visible positive change in the complexion after using *ubtan* (a local South Asian herbal paste usually used in pre-wedding rituals). For related religious and socio-cultural inscription of wedding practices in Pakistani texts, see Yasmin et al. (2019). The cultural expression *ubtan* in Urdu and Punjabi culture represents the imagery of beauty and traditions connected to heritage, women's beauty, and celebrations; it is not simply a facial mask or a skin-care product. The subtitles replace the term with a modern, general, and internationally familiar term, removing the cultural association attached to the source term. The ST term is completely generalized for the ease of the English audience, although affecting the pragmatic precision.

A generalized term is selected due to the comprehension issue faced by the target readers. Non-South Asian readers could understand the meaning with the assistance of explanatory material. They would not recognize the cultural association, so the translator uses general and simplified expressions. Semantic fidelity is given preference over pragmatic meanings.

Table 3

Example 3

ST	TT
مجھے تمہارے کمرے میں اس طرح نہیں آنا چاہیے تھا لیکن کیا کروں شرافت کا زمانہ نہیں ہے۔ mujhy tumhary kamry ma iss trah nahi aana chahiye tha lekin kya krun sharafat ka zamana nahi hai	I shouldn't entered your room like this what do I do? No one understands easily.

In this example, the subtitles show the omission of cultural idiom and semantic-pragmatic destruction. The ST dialogue contains a culturally loaded expression, *sharafat ka zamana nahi hai*, which can literally be translated as “it is no longer the age of decency.” It is quite a common South Asian expression of grief about moral decline in society. Shifts in such evaluative idioms also intersect with politeness and face work across cultures and genders (Saleem et al., 2021). It is usually used ironically to explain or justify cautious or intrusive behavior in situations where trust and propriety are perceived as diminished. In this context, a character named Salman utters it to excuse entering his neighbor Aliya’s room in a way that might otherwise be considered inappropriate, implying that in the current age, people are no longer as respectful as they were in the past. On the other hand, in the subtitle, the expression is replaced with “no one understands easily,” which not only removes the moral and social association but also changes the meaning completely. This change erases the cultural meaning embedded in *sharafat ka zamana nahi hai* and hence results in a weaker justification for the character’s action. The translator has omitted a part and chosen a general expression that requires no background knowledge. While this increases accessibility and reduces cognitive efforts, it does so at the expense of both semantic accuracy and cultural richness.

Table 4

Example 4

ST	TT
اللہ نہ کرے ترے منہ میں خاک۔ جو منہ میں آتا ہے بکے چلی جاتی ہے۔ Allah na kry terey munh ma khaak. Jo munh mein aata hai baky chali jati hai	Shut up! You keep on blabbing non-sense.

In this dialogue, two different cultural expressions are employed: *Allah na kare* “God forbid”, a traditional South Asian curse used to condemn inauspicious words, and *tere munh mein khaak* “dust in your mouth”. These are followed by the expression *jo munh mein aata hai baky chali jaati hai* “you go on saying whatever comes to your mouth”. It indicates frustration at the speaker’s inappropriate remarks. Both culturally embedded phrases are replaced with a simple rebuke, “Shut up!” in the target language, which again shows generalization. In Urdu and Punjabi culture, such expressions are used in emotional situations and state more than just surface meaning. The target language expression totally removes the metaphorical curse, the intensity of the situation, and uses a brief imperative. The subtitle choice highlighted the need to lessen cognitive effort for the target audience by avoiding unclear religious and cultural references. The TT is easily understandable to an English or any international viewer, maintaining the pragmatic intent of silencing the addressee and criticizing their speech. However, the shift eliminates the culturally specific performativity and rhetorical richness that intensify the ST’s tone.

Table 5

Example 5

ST	TT
سارے کھلا دیئے کیا ان چٹوریوں کو؟ saare khila diye kya in chatoriyon ko?	Did you feed all of them to those gluttonous wretches?

This example demonstrates substitution. The ST uses *chatoriyān*, a bouncy and somewhat affectionate term in Urdu that refers to individuals who have a fondness for eating. Tone is a core part of literary text, and *chatoriyān* can carry a humorous, teasing, or lightly mocking tone. In this context, the phrase *saare khila diye kya in chatoriyon ko?* is a casual remark with teasing embedded in the words used by the ST author.

In the target text, the phrase “gluttonous wretches” is used as a replacement for *chatoriyān*, which intensifies the judgmental tone. This shifts the expression from light-hearted teasing to a sharper, more insulting remark. The cultural politeness and comedic softness of *chatoriyān* are lost, replaced with a harsher moral judgment; however, the semantic accuracy is maintained to some extent. “Gluttonous” is an accessible equivalent for international audiences, minimizing processing effort while retaining semantic clarity. However, the addition of “wretches” increases the emotional negativity and changes the register of the utterance, making it sound confrontational than playful.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the translator’s consistent use of generalization and substitution highlights an underlying emphasis on audience accessibility, often prioritizing semantic clarity over pragmatic fidelity (Pedersen, 2011). This confirms the assumption of relevance theory that the translator aims to achieve optimal relevance, maximizing communicative effect while minimizing cognitive effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). The study concludes that generalization which is frequently used in the translation of the selected dialogues, is a valuable strategy for subtitling culturally rich audiovisual content such as *Kuch Ankahi*. While it enables the translator to translate idiomatic and culturally embedded expressions into comprehensible English, it reduces the pragmatic effect, such as intensity and humor of the original dialogue.

These findings suggest that although such strategies can serve as a practical solution for cross-cultural transfer, especially under subtitling constraints (time, space, and readability), they should be applied carefully. In contexts where emotional tone, humor, or cultural identity is central to the narrative, a more creative or adaptive strategies, such as cultural substitution or metaphorical approximation, may better preserve the richness of the source text (Newmark, 1988).

Future research could further explore the reception of such subtitles by different audience groups, compare translator strategies across genres, or investigate hybrid approaches that combine multiple strategies such as generalization with compensation or explicitation.

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