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## Translation as Cultural Mediation: Examining Linguistic Adaptation in Multi-lingual Indian Films

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### Research Article

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### Abstract

**Aims:** This study aims to investigate the role of linguistic adaptation as a process of cultural mediation in multi-lingual Indian cinema. It seeks to understand how translation, beyond mere linguistic transfer, functions in negotiating cultural meanings across diverse audiences in the context of Pan-Indian film circulation.

**Methodology and Approaches:** The study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Cultural Translation Theory and Audiovisual Translation Theory, along with Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignisation. It employs comparative textual and thematic analysis of selected Pan-Indian films—*Baahubali: The Beginning* (2015), *Pushpa: The Rise* (2021), and *Kantara* (2022).

**Outcome:** The findings indicate that translation in multi-lingual Indian cinema operates as an active process of cultural negotiation rather than a mere transfer of meaning. Translators reconstruct meaning to balance audience accessibility with cultural authenticity, employing varied strategies to make culturally embedded content comprehensible across linguistic boundaries.

**Conclusion and Suggestions:** The study concludes that effective cultural mediation through translation plays a crucial role in the wider dissemination, reception, and success of multi-lingual Indian films. The study suggests further interdisciplinary research integrating translation studies, audiovisual media, and cultural studies to better understand evolving practices in contemporary Indian cinema.

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India has always been known for its multi-lingual culture. The Constitution of India lists 22 languages as official languages, and hundreds of other languages and dialects are used throughout the country, as per the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. This multi-lingual reality is reflected in the Indian film industry, where a large number of movies are produced in various Indian languages, including Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Bengali, Marathi, and Punjabi. With Indian cinema flourishing and reaching out to audiences beyond their native language and community, translation has become essential to bridge language and cultural gaps. With the growing popularity of Indian films outside their native language and culture, translation has become an integral part of communication among people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It had always been believed that translation was the transfer of meaning between two languages. In contemporary studies of translation, however, translation is seen as more than a linguistic replacement process and as a negotiation of cultural meanings present in a text (Bassnett 23). Translators need to not only translate what is said in speech and writing but also to translate culture-specific references, social norms, humor, idiomatic expressions, and identity markers in audiovisual media. Therefore, translation acts as a system of cultural mediation, enabling audiences with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to interact with filmic narratives.

The term cultural mediation has emerged as one of the most relevant in the area of Audiovisual translation. Films are multimodal texts containing verbal language, visual images, music, gestures, and cultural symbols. Translators are intercultural communicators who connect the source and target audiences (Katan 16). Their job is to decide strategically which cultural aspects to keep, modify, or explain so that the content is understood and not corrupted by cultural elements. In a multi-lingual society like India, where audiences have varying levels of understanding of regional cultures and languages, such decisions assume significance. In the current era of the cinema, the rise of Pan-Indian cinema has only increased the importance of translation in cinema production and distribution. Some recent films like Baahubali, RRR, Pushpa, and Kantara have been hugely successful even without Hindi-language support, as they are

extensively dubbed and subtitled in numerous languages. These films show how translation enables cultural production to be relocated from one national or regional market to another and how it helps define audiences' perceptions of language, identity, and culture. As Venuti maintains, translation is a process that is not neutral but can change how one culture is represented and understood by others (15).

In the Indian context, audiovisual translation may involve translators dealing with intricate cultural aspects that do not have exact linguistic equivalents. The translator often finds it difficult to convey kinship terms, caste-related expressions, religious concepts, local expressions and regional humour. Balancing cultural authenticity and accessibility is the essence of the adaptation process for the different elements to different target groups. It is noteworthy that this linguistic adaptation reflects the mediator's own function in reconstructing the meaning of the culture, not simply that of the language.

Although multi-lingual Indian films are becoming more common, research on them has focused mainly on the technical aspects of subtitling and dubbing. There is comparatively little research on Indian film that seeks to articulate translation as a cultural mediation. This divide is especially noticeable in research projects that have explored more recent Pan-Indian films, with a particular focus on their appeal across multiple languages. Translating Indian cinema has become an opportune and essential study in the context of its growing globalisation via theatrical releases and digital streaming platforms.

This study thus focuses on the process of 'cultural mediation' in the context of the translation of multi-lingual Indian films. The study aims to examine the negotiation of cultural meaning across linguistic adaptations in dubbing and subtitling processes and how translators make these adaptations to facilitate intercultural communication. The study also joins a growing body of research on audiovisual translation by showing that translation is not just a linguistic process but a fluid cultural process that influences audience comprehension, cultural depiction, and cinematic reception in Indian cinema.

The growing circulation of multi-lingual films across linguistic and cultural boundaries has generated significant scholarly interest in the role of

translation in audiovisual media. Contemporary translation studies have moved beyond the traditional understanding of translation as mere linguistic transfer and increasingly emphasise its role as cultural mediation. In the context of Indian cinema, where linguistic diversity is both a cultural reality and an industrial characteristic, translation plays a crucial role in facilitating communication among heterogeneous audiences. This literature review examines four major themes relevant to the present study: translation as cultural mediation, audiovisual translation, multilingualism in Indian cinema, and linguistic adaptation in film translation.

The concept of translation as cultural mediation emerged from the broader “cultural turn” in translation studies during the late twentieth century. Scholars such as Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere argue that translation should be understood as a cultural practice rather than a purely linguistic activity. According to Bassnett, translation involves the transfer of meanings, values, and ideologies across cultures, making translators active participants in the production of cultural knowledge (Bassnett 23). This perspective challenges earlier linguistic approaches that focused primarily on textual equivalence. Lawrence Venuti further develops this argument by emphasising the translator’s role in shaping cultural representation. He contends that translation is never neutral because translators inevitably make choices that influence how source cultures are perceived by target audiences (Venuti 15). Such choices may involve adapting, modifying, or preserving cultural references depending on the intended audience and communicative purpose. Consequently, translators function as cultural mediators who negotiate meaning between different cultural systems. David Katan extends this perspective by conceptualising translators as intercultural communicators. He argues that successful translation requires an understanding of cultural assumptions, social norms, and contextual meanings that may not be explicitly expressed in language (Katan 16). In audiovisual media, where linguistic messages are intertwined with visual and auditory elements, this mediating role becomes even more significant. These theoretical contributions provide the foundation for examining translation in multi-lingual Indian films as a process of cultural negotiation rather than simple linguistic substitution.

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in the interpretivist paradigm. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks to examine how translation functions as a process of cultural mediation in multi-lingual Indian films. Rather than focusing on numerical measurement, the study explores how linguistic and cultural meanings are adapted, negotiated, and reconstructed through audiovisual translation practices such as dubbing and subtitling. A case study method is employed to facilitate an in-depth examination of selected multi-lingual Indian films. Case studies are particularly useful for investigating complex cultural phenomena in their real-world contexts and for analysing translation strategies in detail.

The study follows a descriptive and analytical approach. It describes the linguistic adaptation techniques used in film translation and critically analyses their role in mediating cultural meanings for diverse audiences. The research is informed by Cultural Translation Theory, Audiovisual Translation Theory, and Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignisation. The study utilises both primary and secondary sources of data to examine the role of translation as cultural mediation in multi-lingual Indian films. The use of multiple data sources enhances the credibility and comprehensiveness of the analysis by facilitating triangulation between film texts and existing scholarly literature.

**Primary Data:** The primary data consist of audiovisual materials obtained from the selected films. These include the original dialogues in the source language, official English subtitles, and officially dubbed Hindi versions. In addition, specific scenes containing culture-specific expressions, idiomatic phrases, humour, kinship terminology, honorific forms of address, religious references, and regionally embedded linguistic features are selected for detailed examination. These materials provide the core corpus for analysing how cultural meanings are adapted and negotiated through translation.

**Secondary Data:** Secondary data are collected from a range of academic and professional sources. These include scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles on translation studies, audiovisual translation, cultural mediation, and multi-lingual cinema. Additional sources include published interviews with filmmakers, translators, subtitlers, dubbing artists, and translation professionals,

as well as film reviews and critical commentaries that discuss issues of translation, localisation, and audience reception. These sources provide theoretical and contextual support for interpreting the findings.

**Data Collection Procedure:** Data collection is conducted through systematic viewing and examination of the selected films in both their original-language versions and translated versions. Each film is viewed multiple times to identify dialogues and scenes containing culturally significant linguistic and cultural elements. The identified dialogues are transcribed and recorded alongside their corresponding subtitle translations and dubbed renditions. Particular attention is paid to culture-bound expressions that present translation challenges. These include idioms and proverbs, humour and wordplay, kinship terms, honorific expressions, religious and mythological references, region-specific cultural practices, and social or political references embedded within the narrative. Once these elements are identified, the corresponding translated subtitles and dubbed dialogues are collected and organised for comparative analysis.

The collected data are then categorised according to the type of cultural element involved and the translation strategy employed. This systematic procedure enables a detailed examination of how translators mediate cultural meanings across linguistic boundaries. The primary theoretical lens of the study is cultural mediation. Drawing on contemporary translation studies, translation is viewed not merely as a linguistic transfer but as a process through which cultural meanings are interpreted, negotiated, and transmitted across linguistic boundaries. Translators act as cultural mediators, facilitating communication between source and target audiences by adapting culturally embedded concepts, values, and expressions. This perspective enables the study to investigate how translation contributes to the representation and transmission of cultural identities in multi-lingual Indian cinema.

The concept of domestication, proposed by Venuti, is employed to identify instances where translators adapt source-culture elements to align with the linguistic and cultural expectations of target audiences. In film translation, domestication may involve replacing culture-specific expressions, idioms, or

references with more familiar equivalents in the target language. Such adaptations are examined to understand how accessibility and audience comprehension influence translation choices.

The study also utilises the concept of foreignisation to analyse situations in which translators preserve source-culture elements within the translated text. Foreignisation seeks to maintain the original work's cultural distinctiveness by retaining culturally specific terminology, expressions, and references. The analysis explores how such strategies contribute to preserving cultural authenticity while simultaneously challenging target audiences to engage with unfamiliar cultural contexts. The study further considers the technical constraints associated with audiovisual translation. Factors such as subtitle length, reading speed, screen space limitations, synchronisation requirements, and lip movement compatibility in dubbing can significantly influence translation decisions. These constraints are taken into account when interpreting instances of omission, condensation, reformulation, and cultural adaptation. Understanding these technical limitations is essential for evaluating translation choices within their practical production context.

Several measures are used to enhance the study's reliability and validity. First, the analysis draws upon examples from multiple films rather than relying on a single case study, thereby increasing the breadth and credibility of the findings. Second, all translation examples are interpreted using established theoretical frameworks from translation studies, ensuring analytical consistency throughout the research process. The study's trustworthiness is further enhanced by methodological triangulation. Data are collected from multiple sources, including original film dialogues, subtitle translations, dubbed versions, and relevant scholarly literature. The convergence of evidence from these sources enables a more comprehensive understanding of translation practices and reduces the risk of subjective interpretation.

The study relies exclusively on publicly available audiovisual materials and published academic sources. All film dialogues, translated texts, and scholarly works are appropriately acknowledged and cited in accordance with academic standards. Since the research does not involve human participants,

issues related to informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality are not applicable. Nevertheless, the study adheres to principles of academic integrity by ensuring accurate representation of source materials and proper attribution of all referenced works.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. First, the analysis focuses on a selected corpus of contemporary pan-Indian films and therefore may not fully represent the diversity of translation practices across all sectors of Indian cinema. Second, the research primarily examines English subtitles and Hindi-dubbed versions, limiting the scope of analysis to other target languages. The translation is inherently interpretive, and alternative readings of particular translation choices may be possible. Finally, the study focuses on the textual and cultural dimensions of translation and does not incorporate audience-based empirical methods, such as surveys or interviews. Despite these limitations, the selected films provide a valuable corpus for investigating contemporary trends in linguistic adaptation and cultural mediation within multi-lingual Indian cinema.

### **Selection of Films**

- Purposive sampling is used to select films that meet the following criteria:
- The film was originally produced in a regional Indian language.
- The film was officially released in multiple languages through dubbing and/or subtitling.
- The film achieved significant recognition at the national or international level.
- The film contains culturally embedded linguistic expressions, idioms, humour, and regional references.

Based on these criteria, the following films are selected for analysis:

- Baahubali: The Beginning
- RRR
- Pushpa: The Rise
- Kantara
- K.G.F: Chapter 1

Comparative Textual Analysis: The study employs purposive sampling to select films that are most relevant to the research objectives. Purposive sampling is

appropriate because it enables the researcher to choose cases that provide rich information regarding the phenomenon under investigation. The selected films satisfy the following criteria: (a) they were originally produced in regional Indian languages, (b) they were released in multiple languages through dubbing and subtitling, (c) they achieved substantial national and international recognition, and (d) they contain culturally embedded linguistic features such as idioms, humor, honorific expressions, regional dialects, and socio-cultural references that require translation and adaptation.

Based on these criteria, five contemporaries Pan-Indian films were selected for analysis: *Baahubali: The Beginning* (2015), *K.G.F: Chapter 1* (2018), *Pushpa: The Rise* (2021), *RRR* (2022), and *Kantara* (2022).

*Baahubali: The Beginning* was chosen because it represents one of the earliest and most successful examples of Pan-Indian cinema. Originally produced in Telugu, the film was dubbed into several Indian languages and gained widespread popularity across linguistic regions. Its narrative incorporates mythological symbolism, royal honorifics, and culturally specific expressions, making it suitable for examining translation strategies.

*K.G.F: Chapter 1*, originally produced in Kannada, was selected due to its extensive multi-lingual release and strong regional identity. The film contains numerous culture-specific dialogues, colloquial expressions, and localised socio-cultural references that pose significant translation challenges.

*Pushpa: The Rise*, a Telugu-language film, offers valuable material for studying linguistic adaptation because of its distinctive use of regional dialects, slang, and culturally rooted expressions. The film's nationwide success was largely facilitated through dubbing and subtitling, making it an important case for analysing cultural mediation through translation. *RRR* was included because of its global popularity and multi-lingual distribution strategy. The film combines historical themes, regional cultural markers, and emotionally charged dialogues that require careful adaptation for diverse audiences. Its international reception further highlights the role of translation in cross-cultural communication.

*Kantara*, originally produced in Kannada, was selected because of its deep engagement with local folklore, indigenous traditions, religious rituals, and

regional linguistic practices. The film provides a particularly rich context for investigating how translators negotiate culturally specific concepts that may lack direct equivalents in target languages. Collectively, these films represent significant examples of contemporary multi-lingual Indian cinema. Their diverse linguistic origins and extensive use of culturally embedded content provide a suitable corpus for examining how translation functions as a process of cultural mediation and linguistic adaptation across different linguistic and cultural contexts. These films represent contemporary Pan-Indian cinema and provide rich material for investigating translation as cultural mediation.

Coding scheme immediately after the theoretical application section. For example:

Translation Unit	Cultural Element	Strategy Used	Theory Applied
Dialogue 1	Kinship term	Domestication	Venuti
Dialogue 2	Religious reference	Foreignisation	Venuti
Dialogue 3	Idiom	Cultural adaptation	Cultural Mediation
Dialogue 4	Humor	Omission/Reformulation	AVT Constraints

When analysing dialogues from films such as *Baahubali*, *Pushpa*, and *Kantara*, each translation unit can be coded under:

Analytical Dimension	Example Unit	Translation Strategy
Cultural Terms	Kinship/Honorific	Domestication / Foreignisation
Humor	Joke, Pun, Sarcasm	Substitution / Reformulation
Religious References	Ritual, Deity, Myth	Retention / Explanation
Regional Identity	Dialect, Slang	Neutralisation / Preservation
Accessibility vs Authenticity	Any culture-bound item	Adaptation / Literal Translation

While the study's findings will ultimately depend on the analysis of the selected films, it is anticipated that several significant patterns will emerge

regarding the role of translation as cultural mediation in multi-lingual Indian cinema. First, the study is expected to demonstrate that translation functions as a process of cultural negotiation rather than a mere transfer of linguistic content. Translators are likely to engage in various forms of adaptation and interpretation to convey culturally embedded meanings across linguistic boundaries. This suggests that translation plays an active role in reconstructing cultural narratives rather than simply reproducing them.

Second, the analysis may reveal notable differences between subtitling and dubbing practices. Subtitles are expected to retain a greater degree of cultural specificity because they allow the preservation of source-language terms and cultural references within the translated text. In contrast, dubbing may exhibit a greater tendency toward adaptation and localisation to ensure linguistic fluency and audience comprehension. Third, the study is likely to indicate that linguistic adaptation is essential for facilitating audience understanding of culture-specific concepts, idiomatic expressions, humour, and social practices. The translation of such elements may require strategic modifications that balance cultural authenticity with communicative effectiveness.

Fourth, the findings may suggest that translation significantly influences audience perceptions of regional cultures and identities. Through choices in terminology, dialect representation, and cultural references, translators shape how linguistic communities and cultural traditions are represented and understood by wider audiences. Finally, the study is expected to demonstrate that effective cultural mediation contributes to the broader circulation and reception of multi-lingual Indian films. By making culturally specific narratives accessible to diverse audiences, translation may play a crucial role in the commercial success and cultural impact of contemporary Pan-Indian cinema.

Translation occupies a central position in the contemporary landscape of multi-lingual Indian cinema, serving not merely as a linguistic mechanism but as a dynamic process of cultural mediation. As films increasingly transcend regional and linguistic boundaries through dubbing and subtitling, translators play a crucial role in facilitating communication between diverse cultural communities. The present study has explored how linguistic adaptation enables the transfer,

negotiation, and reconstruction of cultural meanings embedded within multi-lingual Indian films.

The analysis demonstrates that translation extends beyond the conversion of words from one language to another. Through strategies such as domestication, foreignisation, adaptation, reformulation, and cultural substitution, translators actively mediate culturally specific elements, including kinship expressions, honorifics, humour, religious references, regional dialects, and identity markers. These translation choices significantly influence how audiences perceive and interpret cultural narratives, thereby shaping the reception of films across different linguistic contexts. The study further highlights the complex relationship between audience accessibility and cultural authenticity. While translation seeks to make cinematic content comprehensible to wider audiences, it must also preserve the cultural distinctiveness that constitutes an essential part of a film's identity. The findings suggest that effective audiovisual translation requires a careful balance between these objectives. Excessive localisation may dilute cultural specificity, whereas excessive retention of source-language elements may hinder audience comprehension. Translators, therefore, function as cultural negotiators who continuously navigate this tension to ensure meaningful intercultural communication.

In contemporary Pan-Indian cinema, translation has emerged as a key factor in the national and international circulation of films. The success of multi-lingual productions demonstrates that well-executed translation can facilitate cultural exchange, broaden audience reach, and contribute to the commercial and critical success of cinematic works. By enabling viewers from diverse linguistic backgrounds to engage with culturally rooted narratives, translation strengthens the integrative and communicative potential of Indian cinema. The study contributes to existing scholarship by conceptualising translation as a process of cultural mediation rather than a purely linguistic activity. It underscores the importance of examining translation practices within their broader cultural, social, and communicative contexts. In doing so, it provides a deeper understanding of how translators participate in the construction and transmission of cultural meanings in multi-lingual audiovisual media.

Future research may extend this inquiry by examining audience reception of translated films, comparing translation strategies across different Indian languages, or investigating the influence of digital streaming platforms on audiovisual translation practices. Such studies would further enrich our understanding of the evolving relationship between translation, culture, and cinema in an increasingly interconnected world. Ultimately, the study affirms that translation is not simply a bridge between languages but a bridge between cultures. Through the mediation of linguistic and cultural differences, translation enables Indian cinema to transcend regional boundaries, foster intercultural understanding, and contribute to a more inclusive and interconnected cinematic space.

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