Skopos Theory and Cultural Preservation in the Short Film Tilik (2018)

Niken Paramita[1], Riza Adi Sampurna[2]
[1]Universitas Widya Gama Malang
[2]Universitas Brawijaya
Email: niken.paramita@gmail.com[1], rizaadys@gmail.com[2]

Abstract

This study explores how Javanese cultural values are translated into English subtitles in the short film Tilik (2018). Javanese communication relies on speech levels that mark hierarchy and on politeness strategies that avoid conflict, both of which are challenging to render in English. Using a qualitative case study of 427 subtitle lines, the data were transcribed, annotated, and analyzed to identify translation strategies. The findings show that clarity and accessibility were prioritized for global viewers: speech levels were simplified into polite forms, and indirect expressions were made more direct. At the same time, some culture-specific terms were preserved, and pauses or hesitations were represented with punctuation to mimic interactional style. These results suggest that subtitling is not merely linguistic transfer but cultural negotiation, balancing fidelity to local identity with international readability. The study highlights the importance of socio-cultural awareness in subtitler training and contributes to research on subtitling in marginalized languages.

INTRODUCTION

Audiovisual Translation (AVT) has increasingly gained scholarly and professional attention in the era of media globalization. Among its main forms, subtitling plays a critical role not only in transferring linguistic elements from the source language into the target language but also in mediating cultural values, norms, and identities across communities. Unlike conventional text translation, subtitling must work under spatial and temporal constraints, which compels translators to balance readability, accuracy, and cultural nuance in dialogue (MotaWord, 2020). Consequently, subtitling is more than a lexical operation; it is essentially a practice of cultural negotiation.

Despite this significance, research in AVT still demonstrates notable limitations. Most existing studies privilege dominant language pairs, such as English–Spanish or English–Arabic, leaving marginalized languages such as Javanese largely underrepresented (Yahiaoui & Fattah, 2020). At the same time, the literature has often focused on technical aspects such as synchronization, timing, and readability (Chaume, 2012), while socio-cultural dimensions that critically shape meaning remain less explored. As Venuti (1995) points out, translation is never neutral but rather involves ideological choices between domestication and foreignization. These limitations underscore the need for studies that foreground how local cultural values are transferred and negotiated through subtitling.

Javanese, as one of Indonesia's major local languages, presents a particularly rich case for such an inquiry. Its communicative system embodies cultural complexity through unggah-ungguh (speech levels) and the ethic of ewuh-pekewuh (reluctance to cause conflict). Speech levels in Javanese are central in regulating social interaction by age, hierarchy, and relationship, while ewuh-pekewuh reflects indirectness and the avoidance of face-threatening acts. Both features encode politeness and collectivist values in ways that are difficult to render into English, which is structurally more egalitarian and individualistic (Nord, 1997). As a result, translating Javanese into English involves not only linguistic equivalence but also delicate socio-pragmatic negotiation.

The short film Tilik (2018) provides a highly relevant case study for investigating these challenges. Beyond its popularity as a cultural phenomenon in Indonesia, the film is linguistically dense with speech levels, pragmatic markers, and community-based norms that characterize Javanese social interaction. The subtitling of Tilik thus represents an ideal site for examining how translators manage the competing demands of linguistic accuracy, audience readability, and cultural preservation. By analyzing its English subtitles, the present study aims to show how subtitlers employ specific strategies to balance functional adequacy with cultural authenticity.

Recent AVT scholarship has increasingly engaged with broader debates such as the global expansion of streaming services, the rise of AI-assisted subtitling, and the growing recognition of multimodality in translation (Georgakopoulou, 2019; Jiménez-Crespo, 2021; Huber, 2021). These debates have advanced our understanding of accessibility, user experience, and technological change, yet they remain largely focused on dominant language contexts. For marginalized languages, however, the stakes are different: subtitling is not only about access but also about safeguarding cultural identity within global circulation. As Saad (2023) emphasizes, translation strategies can either dilute or foreground cultural distinctiveness, shaping how local works are received abroad. This is especially relevant for Javanese, which, despite being spoken by more than 80 million people, has received little scholarly attention in AVT research.

This study contributes to filling that gap by analyzing the subtitling strategies in Tilik through the theoretical lens of Functionalism (Nord, 2001) and Skopos Theory (Vermeer, 1989). Functionalist approaches highlight that translation decisions should always be evaluated in light of their communicative purpose, namely, how effectively the translated text functions for its intended audience. Skopos Theory, in particular, emphasizes that the subtitler's primary goal is not to replicate linguistic form but to achieve coherence and comprehensibility in the target culture. These frameworks are highly relevant for examining the subtitling of culture-specific elements such as unggah-ungguh and ewuh-pekewuh, where strict linguistic fidelity may obstruct communication.

The contributions of this study are twofold. Theoretically, it extends discussions of AVT beyond dominant language pairs by showing how functionalist and skopos-based principles operate in a marginalized language context. Practically, it offers insights for subtitler training by stressing the importance of socio-cultural sensitivity in handling hierarchical speech levels, indirectness, and collectivist values. More broadly, the findings are significant in the context of global media flows, as subtitling serves not only to facilitate comprehension but also to preserve cultural diversity. In analyzing how Tilik's subtitles negotiate between readability and authenticity, this study highlights subtitling as a site where local culture can be safeguarded even as it becomes globally accessible.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to analyze subtitling strategies in the short film Tilik (2018), which was chosen because it contains rich Javanese linguistic and cultural expressions that reflect social norms, speech levels, and collectivist values, making it an ideal object for audiovisual translation analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary data consisted of a parallel corpus of 427

Javanese utterances from the script and their corresponding translations in the official English subtitles, supported by the director's notes, group discussions with native Javanese speakers, and cross-checking with other Javanese films of similar cultural context.

The research process unfolded through several interconnected stages. It began with transcription, where all spoken utterances in Javanese were documented in written form. This was followed by annotation using ELAN software to capture timing, intonation, and conversational breaks, ensuring alignment between the spoken dialogue and the subtitles. The next stage involved the identification of socio-cultural markers, focusing particularly on elements such as *unggah-ungguh* (speech levels: *ngoko, krama, krama inggil*) and *ewuh-pekewuh* (expressions of reluctance or deference). After this, a coding process was carried out, guided by Skopos Theory, which examined each translation in terms of Skopos (the intended purpose of the translation), coherence (its accessibility to the target audience), and fidelity (its consistency with the source text). Finally, a stage of comparison and verification was conducted, in which subtitling choices were cross-checked with other Javanese films and further validated through discussions with native speakers to ensure cultural accuracy and nuance. Together, these steps provided a systematic and rigorous basis for data collection and analysis in line with established qualitative research practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To enhance the credibility of the findings, triangulation was applied through multiple theoretical frameworks, including functionalism, Skopos Theory, and Nord's distinction between documentary and instrumental translation. The study also adhered to qualitative research standards of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017). Nevertheless, its scope was limited by focusing on a single audiovisual text, which constrains the generalizability of the results, and by the absence of quantitative measurement of international audience reception. Consequently, the findings emphasize a qualitative understanding of subtitling strategies rather than statistical generalization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Results
The analysis of the parallel corpus consisting of 427 utterances in the short film Tilik (2018) reveals that the translation from Javanese into English involves a set of strategies consistently guided by the skopos—ensuring comprehensibility for global audiences. The findings are presented in the following categories, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Translation Strategy of Javanese Culture in Tilik (2018)

No	Source text (javanese)	Target text (english)	Translation strategy	Social Hierarchy		Skopos Theory		Paralinguistic Features Showing *sungkan*
				unggah-ungguh	*ewuh pekewuh*	Fr*	Dm*	
1	*Bu Lurah*	1. Mrs. Mayoress 2. Mayoress (Bu Lurah)	Adaptation & explication			✓	✓	
2	*Soko WhatsApp iki lo neng grup-e awake dewe*	through our WhatsApp group	Reduction				✓	
3	*Jare tau ono sing ngomong yen gaweane Dian ki ra bener ngono lho.*	I heard that she does inappropriate job.	Modulation					✓
4	*Ora opo-opo, Dik.*	Nothing.	Literal & Reduction	✓				✓
5	*Deloken wae komen-komene.*	Just look at those comments.	Literal				✓	
6	*Lagi mampir mushola ki, dho nguyuh.*	We are at a mosque. Some people are taking a pee.	Adaptation				✓	
7	*Yu Sam karo Yu Tri mau jarene Luhuran sik.*	They are praying Zuhr.	Compensation & Adaptation			✓		
8	*Opo iki Bu? Mau yo wis diwenehi karo ibu-ibu.*	What is it? It's already taken care by the others.	Modulation	✓				
9	*Lha wong bojoku wis ora iso attahiyat (pointing index finger)*	Because he can't even get it on.	Idiomatic Adaptation	✓				✓
10	*Alhamdulillah.*	Thank God.	Cultural Adaptation	✓			✓	

No	Source text (javanese)	Target text (english)	Translation strategy	Social Hierarchy		Skopos Theory		Paralinguistic Features Showing *sungkan*
				unggah-ungguh	*ewuh pekewuh*	Fr*	Dm*	
11	*Sakjane ibu-ibu niki mboten sah niki riyin.*	Actually, you don't need to come here.	Explication	✓	✓			
12	*Bu Lurah niku taksih dateng ICU, dados dereng saged dituweni Bu.*	Bu Lurah is still in ICU, she's not allowed to get visitors.	Explication & Adaptation	✓			✓	
13	*Njenengan kulo kontak mawon angel banget.*	I couldn't reach you at all.	Modulation	✓			✓	
14	*Nuwun sewu ibu-ibu, waduh ibu-ibu malah sampun dugi mriki, matur suwun.*	Excuse me. You all are here already. Thank you.	Reduction & Adaptation	✓	✓		✓	
15	*Ngapunten, ibu-ibu, sejatosipun... ibu kulo meniko taksih dereng saged dipun tuweni e, ibu-ibu.*	I apologize, Mam. Actually my mom can't get visited yet.	Explication	✓	✓			✓
16	*Inggih, nyuwun ngapunten, Bu.*	Yes, I apologize, Mam.		✓	✓			✓
17	*Aduh, malah ngrepoti.*	You don't need to.	Modulation		✓		✓	✓
18	*Nderekaken nggih, Bu, matur nuwun, ngapunten niki.*	Thank you so much for coming. We apologize once more.	Amplification	✓	✓	✓		✓

*Note: * Foreignization (Fr); Domestication (Dm)*

The analysis of the parallel corpus reveals that subtitling from Javanese into English was consistently guided by the skopos of ensuring comprehensibility for global audiences. The strategies identified are summarized below.

1. Translation of Speech Levels (*Unggah-ungguh*)

Javanese uses a stratified speech system (*ngoko, krama, krama inggil*) to signal hierarchy. Since English lacks equivalent layers, the subtitler relied on pragmatic compensation, such as honorifics (*ma'am*) or neutral forms (*you*). Certain kinship terms, such as *Dik*, were left untranslated, preserving some cultural texture but flattening the complex social stratification unique to Javanese. This shows that subtitling often prioritizes functional clarity while accepting a degree of cultural loss.

2. Representation of *Ewuh-pekewuh*

Ten examples of *ewuh-pekewuh*—expressing reluctance or avoidance of conflict—were translated into more direct English forms, for example, *Ngapunten, mboten kepenak* becoming *I hate to bother you*. This domestication improved clarity but erased the indirect politeness embedded in Javanese interaction. In some cases, reduction simplified expressions further (*Nothing*), highlighting the trade-off between readability and subtle socio-cultural meaning. The fact that *ewuh-pekewuh* rarely survived in subtitling suggests that indirectness is one of the most vulnerable cultural features when translated into a more straightforward communicative system.

3. Foreignization and Domestication

Culture-specific references such as *Bu Lurah* were handled in two ways: adapted as *Mrs. Mayoress* to aid understanding, or rendered as *Mayoress (Bu Lurah)* to retain cultural specificity. This dual approach illustrates a hybrid strategy: domestication when clarity is paramount, foreignization when cultural identity needs to be signalled. The coexistence of these approaches suggests that subtitling is best understood not as a binary, but as a spectrum where translators move between strategies depending on narrative salience.

4. Paralinguistic Compensation

Javanese conversation often relies on gestures, intonation, and pauses, elements that cannot be fully conveyed in subtitles. The subtitler compensated by using textual devices such as ellipses (…) to mark hesitation and line breaks to indicate interruptions. While imperfect, these devices offered viewers cues about the social and emotional dynamics underlying the dialogue. Importantly, these paralinguistic markers also gave the subtitles a rhythm that mirrored the interactional flow of Javanese speech, even if not all cultural depth could be preserved.

5. General Patterns of Strategy

Across the corpus, functionalist strategies predominated. The subtitler prioritized readability and comprehension for international viewers, often simplifying hierarchical markers and indirect speech into more straightforward English. At the same time, selective foreignization and paralinguistic compensation show attempts to preserve cultural authenticity where possible. This combination reflects an adaptive approach rather than a strict adherence to one translation ideology.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that subtitling Javanese into English involves systematic negotiation between cultural fidelity and global accessibility. The flattening of speech levels illustrates the structural gap between a hierarchical language like Javanese and the egalitarian norms of English. While functionalist strategies ensured comprehension, they also led to cultural reduction. This supports Nord's (1997, 2001) argument that functionalist translation prioritizes communicative purpose over form, yet it highlights the difficulty of retaining multi-layered respect systems when translating into a language without registers of deference (Vermeer, 1989; Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2020). Recent research on culturally specific items (CSIs) also emphasizes that hierarchical nuance is especially fragile in subtitling, raising the question of whether paratextual explanations, glossaries, or alternative subtitling conventions might better preserve these features (Rahmani, 2024; Huber, 2021).

The treatment of *ewuh-pekewuh* shows how subtitling often sacrifices indirectness for clarity. This aligns with audience processing needs but diminishes the subtle politeness strategies central to Javanese communication. Such findings resonate with Venuti's (1995) notion of the "translator's invisibility" and contemporary analyses showing that domestication increases comprehensibility at the expense of cultural alterity (El-Farahaty, 2024; Saad, 2023; An, 2024). Moreover, empirical studies confirm that politeness encoded in indirectness is among the first cultural features to be lost under temporal and spatial subtitle constraints (Prompan, 2024).

The rendering of *Bu Lurah* illustrates that subtitling is not a binary choice between domestication and foreignization but rather operates on a spectrum. The decision to sometimes retain the Javanese title while at other times adapt it into English demonstrates how subtitlers dynamically balance audience accessibility with cultural signaling. This aligns with the concept of hybridity, increasingly discussed in audiovisual translation as a systematic strategy rather than an occasional compromise (Saad, 2023; El-Farahaty, 2024; An, 2024). In Nord's (2001)

terms, selective retention of cultural markers also represents loyalty to the source culture while maintaining coherence for the target audience.

Paralinguistic compensation shows how subtitlers creatively use textual markers such as ellipses, line breaks, and spacing to approximate non-verbal meaning. While these cannot fully replicate gesture or prosody, studies show that such devices provide essential cues for audiences, especially under cognitive load (Mendis, 2022; "Visible Nuances" project, 2023). In AVT scholarship, this aligns with multimodal approaches that view subtitling as integrating linguistic, visual, and paralinguistic resources to ensure coherence for target viewers (Huber, 2021; Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2020).

Taken together, these results underscore subtitling as a practice of cultural negotiation. In the case of *Tilik*, the subtitler's decisions reflect a balance between simplifying hierarchy and indirectness for global readability and selectively preserving cultural markers through foreignization and paralinguistic cues. This finding extends functionalist and Skopos applications to a marginalized language pair, echoing recent CSI scholarship advocating context-sensitive, purpose-driven solutions for culturally dense material (Rahmani, 2024; Prompan, 2024). More broadly, the results suggest that subtitler training should address not only linguistic accuracy but also the creative and ethical dimensions of cultural mediation, as recommended in contemporary AVT guidelines (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2020; An, 2024). By doing so, subtitling can serve not only as a tool of accessibility but also as a safeguard for cultural identity in global circulation.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights subtitling as a site of cultural negotiation rather than a purely linguistic transfer. By examining how Javanese social values and communicative norms were rendered into English in *Tilik* (2018), it demonstrates that translating a marginalized language into a global lingua franca involves constant balancing acts between cultural fidelity and audience accessibility.

The significance of these findings lies in three broader areas. First, for subtitling practice, they show that translators working with culturally dense languages need flexible strategies that go beyond rigid binaries of domestication and foreignization. Subtitling is most effective when it adapts to narrative salience—simplifying where clarity is essential, but signaling cultural specificity where identity must be preserved.

Second, for cultural preservation, this study underlines the vulnerability of hierarchical and indirect communicative systems when mediated through subtitles. Yet it also illustrates that careful use of hybrid strategies and creative compensation can retain at least traces of these systems. In this way, subtitling is

not merely a tool of accessibility but also a vehicle for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in the global media sphere.

Third, for translator training, the results emphasize the importance of socio-cultural sensitivity and creativity alongside technical skills. Training programs should prepare subtitlers to diagnose culturally specific items, to weigh functional adequacy against cultural fidelity, and to experiment with multimodal strategies under the constraints of time and space.

Future research could extend these insights by investigating how international audiences perceive subtitled Javanese films, comparing strategies across other local language pairs, or examining how multimodal elements interact with subtitles in shaping cultural meaning. Such inquiries would deepen our understanding of subtitling not only as an act of translation but as a cultural intervention that shapes how communities are represented globally.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

REFERENCES

An, G. (2024). Domestication and foreignisation in translation studies: A review. *Journal of Intercultural Communication, 24*(3), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.36923/an-2024-4

Chaume, F. (2012). *Audiovisual translation: Dubbing*. Manchester, UK: St. Jerome Publishing.

Chalas, K., Charalabopoulou, A., Christodoulides, P., & Baltazani, M. (2024). Perceived pauses and prosodic boundaries in Modern Greek. In *Proceedings of Speech Prosody 2024* (pp. 144–148).

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Cresti, E., Moneglia, M., & González, M. (2023). Prosody–illocution interface: Evidence from the C-ORAL-BRASIL corpus. *Journal of Pragmatics, 203,* 43–59. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2022.12.013

Díaz Cintas, J., & Remael, A. (2020). *Subtitling: Concepts and practices*. London, UK: Routledge.

El-Farahaty, H. (2024). Translating cultural references and sensitive elements in English–Arabic subtitles. *SAGE Open, 14*(2), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241258293

Forero, R., Nahidi, S., De Costa, J., Mohsin, M., Fitzgerald, G., Gibson, N., & Aboagye-Sarfo, P. (2018). Application of four-dimension criteria to assess

rigour of qualitative research in emergency medicine. *BMC Health Services Research, 18*(1), 120. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-018-2915-2

Gambier, Y., & Gottlieb, H. (Eds.). (2001). *Multi-media translation: Concepts, practices, and research*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins.

Georgakopoulou, P. (2019). AVT in the age of streaming: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation, 2*(2), 25–43. https://doi.org/10.47476/jat.v2i2.64

Huber, L. U. (2021). Audiovisual communication and subtitling from the perspective of semiotic cohesion. *Respectus Philologicus, 39*(44), 121–137. https://doi.org/10.15388/RESPECTUS.2021.39.44.09

Jiménez-Crespo, M. A. (2021). Crowdsourcing and AI in translation: Ethical and cultural implications. *Translation Studies, 14*(3), 345–361. https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2021.1915212

Korstjens, I., & Moser, A. (2017). Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and publishing. *European Journal of General Practice, 23*(1), 36–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375092

Mendis, J. (2022). *Caption UI/UX: Display emotive and paralinguistic information* (Master's thesis, California State University).

MotaWord. (2020, July 22). Audiovisual translation: Overcoming linguistic barriers while preserving cultural specificity. *MotaWord Blog.* https://www.motaword.com/blog/audiovisual-translation

Noble, H., & Heale, R. (2019). Triangulation in research, with examples. *Evidence-Based Nursing, 22*(3), 67–68. https://doi.org/10.1136/ebnurs-2019-103145

Nord, C. (1997). *Translating as a purposeful activity: Functionalist approaches explained*. Manchester, UK: St. Jerome Publishing.

Nord, C. (2001). *Loyalty and fidelity in functional translation theory*. Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Peter Lang.

Nordhoff, S. (2020). Language documentation with ELAN and FLEX. *Language Documentation & Conservation, 14*, 1–15.

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 16*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Pérez-González, L. (2020). Audiovisual translation. In L. Pérez-González (Ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (pp. 32–40). London, UK: Routledge.

Prompan, J. (2024). Culture-specific items and translation strategies in *The Blind Earthworm in the Labyrinth*. *Rajabhat Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 21*(1), 33–47.

Rahmani, K. (2024). The transfer of culture-specific items in subtitling. *Journal of Translation and Language Studies, 5*(2), 55–72. https://doi.org/10.47476/jtls.v5i2.412

Saad, C. (2023). Between domestication and foreignization: A study of translation strategies. *Languages, 8*(4), 273. https://doi.org/10.3390/languages8040273

The Language Archive. (2023). *ELAN: Linguistic annotator* (Version 7.0) [Computer software]. Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan

"Visible Nuances" Project. (2023). A caption system to visualize paralinguistic speech cues. *Proceedings/Preprint*. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2304.05678

Varpio, L., Ajjawi, R., Monrouxe, L. V., O'Brien, B. C., & Rees, C. E. (2017). Shedding the cobra effect: Problematising thematic emergence, triangulation, saturation and member checking. *Medical Education, 51*(1), 40–50. https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.13124

Venuti, L. (1995). *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. London, UK: Routledge.

Vermeer, H. J. (1989). Skopos and commission in translational action. In A. Chesterman (Ed.), *Readings in translation theory* (pp. 173–187). Helsinki, Finland: Oy Finn Lectura Ab.

Yahiaoui, R., & Fattah, A. (2020). Shifts in transadapting Western socio-cultural references for dubbing into Arabic: A case study of *The Simpsons* and *Al-Shamshoon*. *inTRAlinea, 22*. https://www.intralinea.org/specials/article/2521

Zheng, Y., & Liang, J. (2022). ELAN: A powerful multimodal annotation tool for linguistic research. *Journal of Language Technology and Research, 6*(2), 88–96.