



# The Impact of Translation Strategies on Meaning Preservation and Cultural Context in Thai-English Subtitling: A Case Study of ‘The Undertaker’

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## Abstract

**Background and Aim:** Translation strategies are crucial for preserving the original meaning and cultural nuances while translating from Thai to English. Effective strategies guarantee that viewers understand both the material and the cultural context, maintaining authenticity and clarity. This study investigated the translation strategies used to subtitle Thai idiomatic expressions into English in *The Undertaker*, a Thai film rooted in Buddhist funeral traditions.

**Materials and Methods:** The strategies were identified and assessed for their impact on preserving meaning and cultural context by employing Baker’s (1992) taxonomy as the primary framework. The data were collected by identifying, categorizing, and analyzing processes. The total number of translated phrases found in the movie was 671 tokens. Among this number, there were only 25% of all phrases that could be counted under the idiomatic translation strategies. This study then analyzed these idioms by using a qualitative case study approach, validated by experts for accuracy and cultural relevance.

**Results:** The findings revealed that paraphrasing (15%) was the most frequently applied strategy, while 75% of translations notably fell outside Baker’s framework; it consisted of direct or literal translations that prioritized accessibility over cultural fidelity.

**Conclusion:** The study highlights the challenges of balancing cultural fidelity and audience comprehension in idiomatic translation for audiovisual media. It emphasizes the need for cultural sensitivity, innovative multimodal translation strategies, and interdisciplinary collaboration to enhance subtitling practices in cross-cultural communication.

**Keywords:** Audiovisual translation, Idiomatic translation, Subtitling strategies, Cultural adaptation, Cross-cultural communication

## Introduction

The translation of idiomatic expressions presents a significant challenge in audiovisual translation (AVT), particularly in subtitling, where linguistic, cultural, and technical constraints intersect. Subtitling serves as a vital medium for cross-cultural communication, demanding both linguistic accuracy and cultural sensitivity (Baker, 2018; Gottlieb, 2004). Idioms, deeply rooted in cultural and historical contexts, often carry figurative meanings that extend beyond their literal interpretations, requiring translation strategies that balance semantic fidelity and cultural accessibility (Newmark, 1988).

In Thai cinema, idioms play an essential role in conveying cultural nuances and traditional values. *The Undertaker*, a Thai film interwoven with Buddhist funeral rituals, spiritual beliefs, and social customs, exemplifies this complexity. The film’s subtitles must not only provide linguistic equivalents but also preserve the cultural essence of idiomatic expressions for international audiences (Chiaro, 2009). However, idiom translation poses inherent challenges, often requiring approaches such as literal translation, paraphrasing, cultural substitution, or omission (Baker, 2018). Each strategy has implications for meaning preservation, audience comprehension, and cultural transmission.

However, despite the increasing global circulation of Thai media, there remains a significant gap in research specifically addressing the translation of Thai idioms in film subtitling. Most existing studies have predominantly focused on European languages, where linguistic and cultural similarities often facilitate translation (Nida & Taber, 1982). In contrast, Thai idioms, with their unique structures and deep-rooted religious connotations, pose unique challenges that are largely underexplored. This lack of focused research has created a theoretical and practical blind spot in understanding how cultural meaning is transmitted—or lost—when Thai idioms are translated for international audiences.



This study responds to that gap by examining the English subtitles of *The Undertaker* through the lens of Baker's (1992) taxonomy of translation strategies, Nida's (1964) theory of dynamic equivalence, and Venuti's (1995) concepts of domestication and foreignization. It seeks to determine how specific translation choices influence the cultural accessibility of Thai audiovisual texts and evaluates the extent to which idiomatic and cultural depth is preserved—or diminished—through subtitling. By focusing on a film that is linguistically rich and culturally grounded, the study provides valuable insights into the broader challenges of cross-cultural communication in AVT, especially in contexts involving culturally distant language pairs such as Thai and English.

## Objectives

This study aimed to analyze how Thai idioms, particularly those embedded in Buddhist traditions, were rendered into English subtitles in *The Undertaker*. The research objectives were: 1) to identify the strategies employed in subtitling Thai idioms into English; and 2) to evaluate the extent to which these strategies preserve both the semantic and cultural integrity of the original expressions. Therefore, this research sought to contribute to a broader understanding of idiomatic translation in AVT and its role in cross-cultural communication. Uniquely, this study explored the challenges in translating culturally and linguistically complex idioms in Thai cinema, offering insights into bridging the gap between Thai and English in subtitling. The findings served as a valuable reference for translators and researchers, highlighting the impact of different strategies on meaning and cultural nuance. Ultimately, this study promoted a more inclusive and culturally aware approach to storytelling in global media. Specifically, this study sought to answer two research questions:

- (1) What translation strategies are used for Thai idioms in the English subtitles of *The Undertaker*?
- (2) How do these translation strategies affect the preservation of linguistic meaning and cultural representations in the film?

## Literature review

Idiomatic expressions present unique challenges in translation due to their culturally bound meanings, which often cannot be understood through direct word-for-word translation. The study of idiomatic translation, particularly in audiovisual contexts, involves an intricate negotiation between linguistic accuracy and cultural adaptation. The theoretical underpinnings of idiomatic translation stem from broader translation theories that guide the decision-making process in rendering meaning across languages. One of the most influential frameworks is the distinction between *dynamic equivalence* and *formal equivalence* proposed by Nida (1964). *Dynamic equivalence* focuses on preserving the intended meaning and effect of the original text by adapting cultural references to the target audience, ensuring accessibility and engagement. In contrast, *formal equivalence* aims to retain the grammatical and lexical structure of the source text, maintaining linguistic fidelity even if it requires greater interpretative effort from the reader. These two approaches provide fundamental guidance in idiom translation, where maintaining meaning while respecting cultural differences is essential.

Another critical theoretical perspective is Venuti's (1995) *domestication* and *foreignization* strategies. *Domestication* involves modifying idiomatic expressions to align with the cultural norms and linguistic expectations of the target audience, making the text feel more natural and familiar. On the other hand, *foreignization* deliberately preserves elements of the source culture, allowing target audiences to engage with foreign linguistic and cultural characteristics. When applied to idiom translation, domestication ensures clarity and relatability, whereas foreignization retains the uniqueness and authenticity of the original idiom. The balance between these two strategies influences how idioms are perceived and understood by target audiences.

These theoretical perspectives directly inform idiom translation strategies outlined by Newmark (1988) and expanded upon by Baker (1992). Newmark (1988) identifies several methods, including *the use of an idiom with similar meaning and form, similar meaning but different form, paraphrasing, literal*



*translation*, and *omission*. Baker (1992) further elaborates on these strategies and provides examples of their usage in various contexts, stressing the need for flexibility in idiomatic translation. One such strategy is *the use of an idiom of similar meaning and form*, wherein the target language provides an equivalent expression that mirrors both the figurative meaning and structural composition of the source idiom. Alternatively, translators may root for *an idiom of similar meaning but different form*, which conveys the intended message using a culturally familiar expression in the target language, even if its lexical components differ. When direct idiomatic equivalents are unavailable, *paraphrasing* becomes a practical solution, allowing the idiomatic meaning to be conveyed through non-idiomatic language—a particularly common choice in audiovisual translation, where clarity and brevity are essential (Baker, 1992; Gottlieb, 1997). *Literal translation*, though occasionally employed for stylistic effect or to preserve cultural flavor, involves rendering the idiom word-for-word and often risks confusing target audiences unfamiliar with the source culture. In cases where an idiom is deemed too complex, obscure, or deeply rooted in cultural specificity, *omission* may be used, sacrificing the idiomatic content altogether to maintain fluency and coherence. As Gottlieb (1997) notes, this strategy is frequently employed in subtitling due to technical limitations such as time and space constraints.

In terms of Audiovisual Translation (AVT), especially subtitling, these strategies must adapt to multimodal constraints. According to Díaz et. al. (2007), subtitling requires a condensed yet meaningful representation of spoken dialogue within limited space and time, making idiomatic translation even more complex. The selected strategy must balance clarity, cultural fidelity, and synchronization with visual and auditory cues.

With regards to idioms, they play a crucial role in communication, encapsulating cultural and linguistic nuances that make translation particularly challenging. According to Baker (1992), idioms often require adaptive translation strategies to maintain both their figurative intent and cultural significance. In audiovisual contexts, these challenges are heightened by multimodal constraints, as idioms must be effectively translated within time and space limitations.

The translation of idioms requires carefully selected strategies to ensure that their meaning and cultural connotations are effectively conveyed in the target language. One such strategy is using an *idiom of similar meaning and form*, where an equivalent idiom exists in the target language, allowing for a seamless and culturally appropriate translation (Newmark, 1988; Baker, 1992). For example, the English idiom “out of the frying pan into the fire” can be translated into Thai as *หนีเสือปะจระเข้* (*escaping a tiger and encountering a crocodile*), maintaining both the figurative meaning and imagery. When an exact idiomatic equivalent is unavailable, translators may opt for an *idiom of similar meaning but different form*. This approach prioritizes the intended message while adapting the expression to suit the target culture. An example would be translating “burning the midnight oil” into Thai as *ทำงานจนดึกดื่น* (*working late into the night*), which conveys the same idea without mirroring the original imagery. Another frequently used strategy is *paraphrasing*, where the idiomatic meaning is explained in non-idiomatic terms. This is particularly useful in audiovisual translation, where brevity and clarity are essential. In cases where an idiom’s literal structure contributes to its intended effect, translators may choose *literal translation*, preserving its linguistic composition while risking loss of meaning for audiences unfamiliar with its cultural significance. However, when an idiom is deemed too culturally bound or difficult to render effectively, *omission* may be employed. While this ensures fluency, it also sacrifices some of the richness and stylistic nuance inherent in the original text. The selection of these strategies is influenced by several factors, including linguistic compatibility between the source and target languages, cultural familiarity, the purpose and genre of the translation, and technical constraints in audiovisual formats.

Idiomatic translation is fraught with challenges, largely due to cultural and linguistic disparities between languages. Many idioms are deeply rooted in specific traditions, beliefs, and historical references, making them difficult to translate without losing essential meaning. For instance, the English idiom “carrying coals to Newcastle,” which denotes performing a redundant task, requires a culturally adapted equivalent in Thai, such as *ขนทรายเข้าวัด* (*bringing sand to a temple*). The lack of direct linguistic equivalence





often necessitates creative translation techniques to bridge cultural gaps (Baker, 1992). Subtitling, as a primary mode of audiovisual translation, imposes additional constraints on idiomatic translation. Spatial limitations mean that subtitles must be brief while retaining meaning, often leading to paraphrasing or omission of complex idioms. Additionally, subtitles must be synchronized with spoken dialogue and visual context, restricting the extent to which idioms can be explained or culturally adapted. Research by Gottlieb (1997) suggests that condensation and deletion are common subtitling strategies, though they risk diminishing the idiomatic richness of the original text. The loss of idiomatic nuance is another major concern, particularly in genres that rely heavily on cultural references, humor, or figurative language. Translators must carefully balance readability, accuracy, and cultural representation to maintain the effectiveness of idiomatic expressions within audiovisual constraints.

Several studies have examined idiomatic translation in subtitles and English-Thai/Thai-English translation, offering valuable insights into the strategies and challenges associated with this field. Hashemian and Arezi (2015) conducted a study on English-to-Croatian subtitle translations and found that paraphrasing was the dominant strategy, used in 72% of cases to maintain accessibility. Similarly, Sontisawang et al. (2020) analyzed the English-to-Thai subtitles of the film *Deadpool*, identifying cultural substitution as the most frequently employed strategy (31.08%) due to its effectiveness in preserving humor and audience engagement. These studies highlight the importance of balancing linguistic fidelity with audience comprehension in idiomatic translation. Research on English-Thai and Thai-English idiomatic translation further underscores the complexities of cross-linguistic adaptation. Chaiyapinyawat (2017) investigated idiomatic translations in Hillary Clinton's *Hard Choices* and found that paraphrasing (60%) and cultural substitution (20%) were the most effective strategies in maintaining meaning while ensuring cultural relevance. In contrast, Somsin (2020) examined student translations of idiomatic expressions and observed that omission and paraphrasing were commonly used due to limited linguistic proficiency. Studies by Ngampradit and Boonmoh (2012) and Painarin and Tipayasuparat (2022) also reinforce the dominance of paraphrasing in Thai subtitle translations, reflecting the necessity of adapting idioms creatively to align with audience expectations. These findings suggest that while formal taxonomies like Baker's are useful, they may not fully encompass the hybrid or adaptive strategies translators employ under AVT constraints. In conclusion, idiomatic translation in subtitles is a negotiation between theory and practice. The frameworks of Nida and Venuti provide conceptual clarity, while the strategic options offered by Baker and Newmark offer practical tools. However, real-world applications, as shown in empirical studies, reveal the complexity of aligning theoretical ideals with the demands of audiovisual media. This study was conducted on that body of work by examining the translation strategies used in *The Undertaker*, a culturally rich Thai film, and assessing their effectiveness in preserving both linguistic coherence and cultural depth. As a result, the study sought to contribute new insights to the ongoing conversation about idiomatic translation in cross-cultural AVT.

## Conceptual Framework

The present study is grounded in an integrated conceptual framework that integrates key perspectives from translation studies and cross-cultural communication. Baker's (1992) taxonomy of idiomatic translation strategies serves as the primary analytical model, providing a structured lens for categorizing the approaches used in subtitling idiomatic expressions. This taxonomy includes strategies such as using idioms of similar meaning and form, similar meaning but different form, paraphrasing, omission, and borrowing—all of which are particularly relevant in the context of audiovisual translation (AVT), where space and time constraints impose unique challenges. In parallel, Nida's (1964) concept of dynamic equivalence is employed to assess how well the intended effect and communicative function of Thai idioms are maintained in English subtitles, rather than focusing solely on literal correspondence.

To further interrogate the cultural implications of translation strategies, the study draws on Venuti's (1995) notions of domestication and foreignization. These concepts offer a critical framework for examining whether the subtitled idioms are adapted to fit the target culture's norms and expectations or





whether they retain the distinctiveness of the source culture. Given the high-context nature of the Thai language and culture, particularly in the context of *The Undertaker*, which is rich in religious symbolism and regional identity, this framework enables an in-depth exploration of how subtitling mediates cultural transmission. Collectively, these theoretical perspectives guide the analysis of idiomatic translation in AVT, allowing the study to evaluate not only the linguistic adequacy of translated expressions but also their effectiveness in conveying cultural meaning, character voice, and narrative tone to international audiences.

## Methodology

### 1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine the translation strategies used for Thai idioms in the English subtitles of *The Undertaker*, a Thai movie that integrates traditional beliefs and Buddhist funeral rituals. A qualitative design was chosen as it allows for an in-depth exploration of idiomatic expressions, which are deeply embedded in cultural and linguistic contexts. The case study method enabled a focused analysis of a single movie, facilitating a detailed examination of how idioms were adapted across languages. *The Undertaker* was purposefully selected due to its rich cultural and spiritual references, making it particularly insightful for exploring the challenges of Thai-English cross-cultural communication. Its narrative offers a representative example of how idioms rooted in high-context communication, such as religious symbolism, ancestral beliefs, and community values, are negotiated for a lower-context, international audience through subtitling. This design allowed the study to directly address the tension between meaning preservation and cultural adaptation that lies at the heart of intercultural communication. Baker's (1992) taxonomy of translation strategies was adopted as the principal analytical framework, providing structured categories including the use of idioms of similar meaning and form, similar meaning but different form, paraphrasing, omission, and borrowing. This research design was particularly suited to uncovering the complexities of idiom translation and its implications for cross-cultural communication.

### 2. Research Instruments

To systematically examine the translation strategies, multiple research instruments were employed. The primary tool was a coding sheet designed to document key information about each idiomatic expression, including the original Thai idiom, its contextual usage in the movie, the corresponding English translation, the translation strategy applied, and any observations on cultural adaptation. Each entry on the coding sheet included fields for idiomatic form, figurative meaning, literal meaning, and strategy classification based on Baker's (1992) framework. Before full implementation, the coding sheet was piloted on a small sample of idioms to ensure its clarity, usability, and alignment with the study's objectives. Based on the pilot, minor adjustments were made to refine the coding categories and clarify operational definitions.

To enhance the validity and reliability of the analysis, expert validation was integrated into the research process. Two groups of experts were consulted: Thai linguistic scholars reviewed the idioms for cultural and semantic authenticity, while professional translators specializing in audiovisual translation assessed the appropriateness and effectiveness of the English renderings. The experts were provided with clear evaluation criteria, including the accuracy of idiomatic interpretation, the cultural resonance of the translation, and the alignment with the context of the scene. Feedback from the experts was collected through structured commentary and follow-up discussions. In cases of disagreement or uncertainty, a consensus approach was adopted through joint consultation, and when necessary, a third expert was invited to mediate and finalize the decision. This systematic validation process ensured that the classification and interpretation of idiomatic translations were both rigorous and contextually grounded, thereby strengthening the credibility and consistency of the research findings. As these processes were run, these research instruments provided a structured approach to analyzing the translation strategies, minimizing subjectivity in interpretation, and ensuring consistency in data recording.

### 3. Data Collection





The data collection process involved several systematic steps to ensure a comprehensive and representative dataset. First, *The Undertaker* was selected as the source material due to its rich use of idiomatic expressions and its cultural significance, particularly its integration of traditional Thai beliefs and Buddhist funeral rituals. The film's linguistic and thematic complexity provided an ideal context for examining the cross-cultural challenges of idiom translation in subtitling.

To begin, the full Thai script of the movie was reviewed and compared with the English subtitle track to extract translated phrases. A total of 671 translated phrases were identified throughout the movie for initial analysis. Next, each phrase was carefully examined to determine whether it qualified as an idiomatic expression. Idioms were defined as fixed expressions whose meanings could not be inferred from the literal meanings of their words. In the context of Thai, this includes culturally embedded expressions tied to spiritual beliefs, local metaphors, and socio-religious references that reflect high-context communication styles. Based on this definition, only 25% of the translated phrases—approximately 168—were initially identified as potentially idiomatic. This relatively small proportion underscores the linguistic specificity and cultural depth of idioms in Thai, as well as the inherent difficulty of translating them into English, a lower-context language.

The identification of idioms was followed by a two-step expert validation process. First, the research team compiled a preliminary list of 68 idiomatic expressions judged to meet the inclusion criteria. These candidates were then reviewed by two groups of specialists: 1) Thai linguists, who confirmed the idiomaticity, cultural authenticity, and semantic clarity of each phrase, and 2) a professional translator, who assessed whether the English subtitles preserved the intended meaning, tone, and cultural nuance. 12 expressions were excluded due to either not meeting the idiomatic criteria, having unclear contextual meaning, or lacking English subtitle equivalents. The final dataset consisted of 56 validated idiomatic expressions. Each idiom was fully documented in terms of its original Thai form, literal and figurative meanings, contextual function within the film, and the corresponding English subtitle. This rigorous selection and validation process ensured that the idioms chosen for analysis were both linguistically accurate and culturally representative, thereby enhancing the reliability and relevance of the study's findings within the broader field of cross-cultural audiovisual translation.

#### 4. Data Analysis

The analysis process followed a structured approach to identify, categorize, and evaluate translation strategies. After the dataset was cleaned and organized to ensure completeness and accuracy, each idiom and its translation were then classified according to Baker's (1992) taxonomy, enabling a systematic assessment of the translation strategies employed. Therefore, the analysis procedures are discussed in detail as follows.

The first step involved pre-coding the dataset by organizing each idiomatic expression into a spreadsheet with predefined columns: (1) Thai idiom, (2) literal meaning, (3) English subtitle translation, (4) contextual scene description, and (5) preliminary translation strategy. These initial categorizations provided the groundwork for deeper analysis. Next, a two-phase coding procedure was implemented. In the first phase, two independent coders with expertise in translation studies applied Baker's strategy framework to classify each idiom. Coders referenced both the literal and figurative meanings in context, considering cultural relevance, syntactic structure, and rhetorical intent. Clear operational definitions for each strategy were developed to guide the coding process and reduce ambiguity. For example, paraphrasing was defined as the use of non-idiomatic language to convey idiomatic meaning, while borrowing referred to direct lexical transfer from Thai to English without alteration.

In the second phase, inter-coder reliability was assessed by comparing the two sets of coded results. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and, when necessary, through consultation with a third expert in audiovisual translation. This process ensured that classification decisions were not based on subjective judgment but adhered to consistent interpretive criteria. Following strategy classification, a contextual analysis was performed to examine how effectively the English translations retained the original idiomatic meaning and cultural significance. This included evaluating whether the emotional tone, humor,



religious connotation, or social values embedded in the Thai idiom were preserved, modified, or lost in the English subtitle. The impact of cultural adaptation and shifts in meaning was documented and analyzed. Additionally, statistical frequency analysis was conducted to identify patterns and trends in the translation choices. The frequency of each strategy's usage was calculated to determine dominant translation practices. Particular attention was given to recurring challenges, such as idioms with strong cultural specificity or those with no direct English equivalent. The final stage of analysis involved synthesizing both qualitative and quantitative findings to interpret the broader implications for cross-cultural communication in audiovisual translation.

While Baker's taxonomy served as the primary tool for classifying translation strategies, the interpretation of results was further enriched by integrating perspectives from cross-cultural communication theory. Specifically, the analysis considered the challenge of translating idioms from Thai, a high-context language that relies heavily on shared cultural knowledge and implicit meaning, into English, a lower-context language that favors explicit, direct communication. This linguistic disparity often necessitated the use of paraphrasing or simplified constructions in the subtitles, which helped facilitate comprehension for international audiences but sometimes diminished the original cultural richness and narrative tone of the source text.

By combining strategy categorization with a contextual and theoretically informed evaluation of cultural elements, this analytical framework provided a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics involved in subtitling Thai idioms into English. It allowed the study to move beyond surface-level equivalence and offer deeper insights into the implications of translation choices for intercultural communication, audience reception, and the preservation of culturally specific meaning in audiovisual media.

## Results

### *1. Results on Strategies Employed in Translating English Idioms from Thai in "The Undertaker" Movie*

The study analyzed the translation strategies used for English idioms in the subtitles of "The Undertaker". By using Baker's (1992) taxonomy as the primary analytical framework, the study examined a total of 671 translated phrases extracted from the film's script. Among these, only 25% were categorized under idiomatic translation strategies as defined by Baker, while the remaining 75% did not follow any of Baker's specific idiomatic translation methods and were thus labeled as direct or literal renderings.

This 25%-75% division underscores a crucial pattern; although Baker outlines idiom-specific strategies, the vast majority of translations in this case involved more straightforward approaches—either literal translations, generalized paraphrasing, or simplifications that avoided idiomatic equivalents entirely. These direct translations were often contextually appropriate but lacked the figurative or culturally embedded characteristics typically associated with idiomatic rendering. This indicates a tendency toward simplification or neutralization in subtitle translation, likely due to both linguistic distance and audiovisual constraints. Therefore, the study presents a summary of the idiomatic translation strategies found in the study, along with illustrative examples in Table 1.

Table 1: Idiomatic Translation Strategies Based on Baker's Taxonomy

No.	Translation Strategies	Percentage	Examples -> English Translation
1	Using an idiom of similar meaning and form	4	ขุดหลุมฝังตัวเอง -> Dig your own grave.
2	Using an idiom of similar meaning but a different form	0	N/A
3	Translation by paraphrasing	15	ผีตายทั้งกลมมันเฮี้ยน -> Pregnant ghosts are vengeful.

No.	Translation Strategies	Percentage	Examples -> English Translation
4	Translation by omission	4	ถูกราบดินแล้วเจ็ด ถูกขอร้องได้ไหมเพื่อน -> I'm bowing, Joed. I'm begging you.
5	Translation by borrowing	2	มีรู้จักไหมบ้านสไตล์นอร์ดิก -> Do you know a Nordic-styled house?
6	Not classified by Baker's taxonomy	75	Direct phrases like 'มีงอขั้วรีบพูด -> Don't say that just yet.'

As shown in Table 1, it is evident that paraphrasing (15%) was the most commonly applied strategy in translating idioms, as it provided the most flexibility in conveying meaning across languages with significant linguistic and cultural disparities. This strategy was often chosen because many Thai idioms in the film are closely tied to Buddhist cosmology, local superstitions, and culturally specific beliefs that lack direct English counterparts. For example, the idiom *ผีตายทั้งกลมมันเขี้ยว* refers to a vengeful ghost of a pregnant woman who died tragically—a concept grounded in Thai folklore and religious narrative. Translating it literally would confuse an international audience unfamiliar with such beliefs. Instead, paraphrasing offered a culturally adaptive alternative that preserved the core message while avoiding misinterpretation. This aligns with previous studies (Baker, 1992; Sadeghi & Fatahi, 2014), which emphasize paraphrasing as a practical approach when direct equivalents are unavailable. Additionally, direct borrowing (2%) was employed in cases where cultural specificity was essential to the translation, as seen in the translation of *มีรู้จักไหมบ้านสไตล์นอร์ดิก* into “Do you know a Nordic-styled house?” The strategy of using an idiom of similar meaning and form was rarely utilized (4%), likely due to the lack of one-to-one equivalence between Thai and English idioms. This analysis highlighted the predominant reliance on non-idiomatic translations and provided insight into the challenges of idiomatic expression translation in this cultural and linguistic context.

Table 2 further illustrates how paraphrasing was employed to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps. These examples reflect a deliberate effort to retain meaning while prioritizing clarity for viewers lacking background knowledge of Thai traditions.

Thai Idioms	English Translation	Translation Strategy
ผีตายทั้งกลมมันเขี้ยว	Pregnant ghosts are vengeful.	Paraphrasing
ลอยอังคาร	Scatter ashes over water.	Paraphrasing
ผีตายโหงให้คว่าหน้าก่อนค่อยเผา	People who died a violent death must be on their front before cremation.	Paraphrasing
ไม่รู้หรือว่าได้หรือไม่ได้ ถ้าทำแล้วสบายใจก็ปล่อยเขาทำไป	I don't know if they succeed, but if it gives them comfort, let them be.	Paraphrasing
ให้คนตายเป็นครู แล้วเอาคนอยู่เป็นนักเรียน	Take the dead as teachers, and the living as students.	Paraphrasing

According to Table 2, the study found that paraphrasing was the most commonly used strategy for translating idioms in *The Undertaker* subtitles. This approach was favored due to several factors (Chaiyapinyawat, 2017), including the lack of equivalent idioms in Thai and English, cultural differences that make direct translations challenging, and the need to ensure clarity for a diverse audience. Paraphrasing was especially important in addressing both cultural and narrative functions of idioms. Many expressions contributed to character voice, emotional tone, or thematic development. Simplifying or generalizing these expressions for subtitles could impact how characters are perceived, potentially softening their cultural distinctiveness or diluting symbolic meaning. In this way, translation choices not only affected accuracy but also influenced the film's atmosphere and audience engagement. Many Thai idioms are deeply tied to



Buddhist traditions and cultural practices, which may not have direct English counterparts, making paraphrasing an effective way to convey meaning while maintaining accessibility.

The study's findings align with existing research, confirming that paraphrasing is the most frequently employed strategy in idiomatic translation. Baker (1992) identified paraphrasing as a practical solution when no direct equivalent exists in the target language, a view supported by Molina and Albir (2002) and Sadeghi and Fatahi (2014), who highlighted its effectiveness in preserving meaning and cultural nuances. The findings also echo observations by Chaiyapinyawat (2017), who emphasized paraphrasing's role in conveying culturally embedded ideas in accessible terms. Moreover, as Pym (2010) pointed out, borrowing is more viable in language pairs with shared cultural assumptions—an option less effective between Thai and English, where paraphrasing becomes a necessity due to limited idiomatic overlap.

Finally, while Baker's taxonomy provided a useful foundation, the high percentage of direct or unclassified translations points to its limitations in accounting for all strategies used in real-world subtitling. The findings suggest that idiomatic translation in audiovisual media may require more hybrid or context-specific models, particularly when navigating high-context cultures like Thailand and translating for global, low-context audiences. Future research could explore additional frameworks that integrate both linguistic strategy and narrative impact, offering subtitlers more nuanced tools for handling cultural specificity in cross-cultural communication.

## 2. Results of the Analysis of Translation Strategies and Their Impact on Meaning and Cultural Context in "The Undertaker"

The impact of translation strategies on meaning and cultural context is central to understanding how idiomatic expressions function in subtitled media. In this study, the direction of analysis specifically focused on Thai idioms translated into English subtitles in *The Undertaker*. The translation process, particularly for idioms embedded in religious or cultural frameworks, inevitably involves meaning shifts. This was especially evident in the use of paraphrasing and omission, both of which often resulted in a loss of cultural specificity or narrative depth.

A notable example is the idiom ศีตลพิษที่กล่มมันเหี้ยน, which was translated as "Pregnant ghosts are vengeful." While the paraphrased version communicates the general idea, it lacks the full cultural and emotional resonance that the Thai expression carries. In Thai spiritual beliefs, the ghost of a pregnant woman who dies violently is considered especially powerful and dangerous—a culturally charged concept tied to fear, ritual purity, and karmic disruption. The English version omits this deeper layer of superstition and moral warning, flattening the idiom into a more generic horror reference. As a result, the translation reduces the supernatural force associated with the character and dilutes the film's intended horror atmosphere for viewers unfamiliar with Thai beliefs.

Similarly, the frequent use of omission as a strategy removed culturally meaningful dialogue, often in moments related to ritual, death practices, or social hierarchy. These omissions may help the subtitle conform to space and timing constraints, but they simultaneously risk erasing aspects of character development, spiritual worldviews, or communal values central to the film's message. The heavy reliance on literal and non-idiomatic translations—accounting for 75% of all cases—further supports this trend. Such translations prioritize clarity and accessibility but often do so at the expense of cultural fidelity. This finding aligns with previous AVT research (Nedergaard-Larsen, 1993; Pym, 2010), which highlights how subtitling tends to favor strategies that accommodate cross-cultural comprehension, especially for global audiences.

The findings of this study align with existing research on idiomatic translation while highlighting unique cultural and genre-specific influences. The study confirmed that paraphrasing, though practical, carries inherent trade-offs. It was employed in 15% of cases, consistent with Molina and Albir's (2002) argument that paraphrasing is a common solution when no direct idiomatic equivalent exists. However, this percentage is relatively low compared to studies involving linguistically closer languages (e.g., Spanish-English), where borrowing or idiom-to-idiom mapping is more viable (Sadeghi & Fatahi, 2014). This reflects the distinct challenges in Thai-English idiomatic translation, where direct equivalents are less



frequent. Cultural constraints also played a significant role, as Thai idioms—often rooted in Buddhist beliefs—frequently required paraphrasing or omission, a pattern differing from Western-language translations where cultural overlap facilitates greater retention of idiomatic expressions (Nedergaard-Larsen, 1993).

Genre and audience considerations further influenced translation choices. As Pym (2010) suggests, audience expectations shape translation strategies, and in *The Undertaker*, subtitles prioritized accessibility for a global audience over cultural authenticity. Unlike genres such as comedy or drama, which may preserve idioms for humor or emotional impact, the solemn nature of this film favored non-idiomatic renderings. While paraphrasing proved effective in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps, it often came at the expense of idiomatic richness. The study also found that many translations fell outside Baker's taxonomy, reflecting the complexities of Thai-English idiomatic translation. These findings reinforce the universal reliance on paraphrasing while calling for more nuanced approaches to balancing cultural preservation and audience comprehension in subtitling. Future research could further explore strategies to maintain cultural depth in translations while ensuring accessibility in a globalized media landscape.

These findings also directly relate to the research questions posed at the beginning of the study. In response to Research Question 1—“*What translation strategies are used for English idioms in the Thai subtitles of The Undertaker?*”—the data show that although Baker's (1992) taxonomy provides a valuable framework, it does not fully capture the range of strategies used in this case. The fact that 75% of translations fell outside of Baker's classification suggests that translators frequently employed literal or non-idiomatic renderings that do not conform to established categories. This deviation highlights the translators' need to adapt beyond existing frameworks to accommodate the cultural and linguistic constraints of subtitling in Thai-English contexts.

Regarding Research Question 2—“*How do these translation strategies affect the cultural and linguistic meaning of the idioms in the film?*”—the predominance of unclassified, literal translations reflects the tension between preserving cultural depth and ensuring audience accessibility. These translations often prioritize semantic clarity, making the content comprehensible to international audiences, but at the cost of diminishing the cultural richness embedded in Thai idioms. This finding reinforces the challenge introduced in the Introduction, where the study emphasized the difficulty of balancing cultural authenticity with cross-cultural comprehension in AVT. It also supports previous arguments (e.g., Nedergaard-Larsen, 1993; Pym, 2010) that in audiovisual translation, especially for culturally distant languages, accessibility often takes precedence over fidelity to source-culture nuances.

Thus, the study not only identifies the strategies used but also reveals their limitations and implications, offering insight into the broader dynamics of cross-cultural translation in AVT. This underscores the need to expand current translation frameworks to better account for hybrid, adaptive strategies in subtitling between typologically and culturally divergent languages.

## Discussion

### 1. Effectiveness of Translation Strategies

This section addresses Research Question 1, which explores the translation strategies employed for English idioms in the Thai subtitles of *The Undertaker*. The findings indicate that paraphrasing was the most frequently used strategy, followed by omission, borrowing, and using idioms of similar meaning and form. Notably, most of the translations fell outside Baker's (1992) taxonomy, consisting primarily of direct or literal renderings that prioritized surface-level semantic clarity. The frequent use of paraphrasing highlights its effectiveness in dealing with idioms that lack direct equivalents in English, particularly those embedded in Buddhist beliefs or Thai cultural contexts. These findings point to a prioritization of semantic clarity and viewer accessibility, a trend widely observed in AVT literature (Gottlieb, 1997; Wang & Chen, 2018).

Paraphrasing was particularly effective in facilitating cross-cultural comprehension, especially when idioms had no clear counterparts in English. This supports existing scholarship (Baker, 1992; Sadeghi &

Fatahi, 2014; Chaiyapinyawat, 2017; Shahid & Ahmad, 2019), which identifies paraphrasing as a flexible strategy that enables translators to retain core meaning while adapting idioms for a broader audience. Similarly, Ghaffari and Moini (2016) emphasized its flexibility in prioritizing audience comprehension over idiomatic fidelity. However, this approach often resulted in a loss of cultural richness. For example, the Thai idiom ศิษย์ที่กลมนันเฝ้า (Pregnant ghosts are vengeful) was paraphrased to convey its core meaning but lost its deep cultural and religious connotations, a pattern also observed by Nguyen and Le (2021) in their study on cultural dilution in translation. While paraphrasing allowed for viewer comprehension, it domesticated the expression, removing the "strangeness" of the original and smoothing over the cultural specificity that defines Thai spiritual cosmology. In Venuti's (1995) terms, this reflects a domesticating strategy, privileging fluency and familiarity in the target language over the foreignness of the source culture. Other strategies, such as borrowing or using idioms of similar meaning and form, were rarely applied due to the lack of equivalent idiomatic expressions between Thai and English. In contrast to language pairs like French-English, where shared cultural frameworks allow for more idiomatic substitution (Brown & Wilson, 2020), Thai-English translation must navigate more significant structural and conceptual differences. This aligns with Zhang et al. (2022), who found that significant cultural and linguistic distance often limits the applicability of direct idiom substitution on Chinese-English idiom translation.

Overall, the findings for Research Question 1 illustrate that translators relied on strategies that prioritized audience comprehension over idiomatic fidelity, a choice shaped by both the technical constraints of subtitling and the cultural distance between Thai and English. As a result, the effectiveness of translation strategies depended on the idiom's cultural and linguistic complexity. While paraphrasing ensured accessibility, it often came at the expense of cultural depth, underscoring the need for a more balanced approach in idiomatic translation.

## 2. Negotiating Cultural Specificity and Narrative Tone

The translation strategies employed in *The Undertaker* also reflect the complex challenges of maintaining cultural and linguistic meaning across languages (Research Question 2). Thai idioms, especially those related to death, ritual, and morality, are often metaphorically rich and tied to Buddhist teachings, spirit beliefs, and rural Isan (the northeastern region in Thailand) social values. Their direct translation into English is not only linguistically difficult but culturally risky, as many target audiences may lack the background knowledge to interpret the symbolic meaning correctly.

For instance, the idiom คนดีสี่โมงเย็น (literally, "a good man at 4 p.m.") was translated literally in the subtitles but without explanation. While seemingly neutral, the phrase carries a darkly ironic undertone in Thai, suggesting someone who appears virtuous but dies early, often used to hint at hypocrisy or hidden guilt. The literal rendering fails to communicate this social critique, thus altering the audience's interpretation of the character's intent and emotional tone.

These examples demonstrate that translation choices impact not only meaning but also narrative texture. Characters whose speech in Thai is idiomatic, culturally grounded, or emotionally expressive may come across as flat, generic, or even unintentionally ambiguous in English. This shift affects how international viewers engage with the story, reducing the film's atmospheric richness and dampening the emotional and cultural resonance that the original dialogue was designed to convey.

In this way, translation strategy is not a neutral technical choice but a narrative device that shapes the viewer's experience. Simplified or domesticated idioms may strip characters of cultural specificity and flatten the subtleties of ritual and spiritual themes that permeate the film. In a story like *The Undertaker*, where death rituals, ancestral reverence, and karmic consequences drive the plot, these losses affect more than linguistic fidelity—they reshape how the film's message is received across cultures.

## 3. Subtitling Constraints and the Medium's Influence

Subtitling, as a medium, imposes strict limitations on space, time, and processing load. Translators must condense meaning into concise textual units that synchronize with on-screen speech, all while ensuring readability and accessibility. As Wang and Chen (2018) and Gottlieb (1997) emphasize, these constraints frequently result in content reduction, particularly for complex idiomatic or culturally embedded



expressions. This study confirms that the pressures of the subtitling medium heavily influenced the strategic preference for paraphrasing and omission, with subtitlers often forced to sacrifice nuance for clarity.

Comparative studies reinforce this pattern. In Zhang et al.'s (2022) Chinese-English analysis, similar challenges led to a dominance of paraphrasing, while Brown and Wilson (2020) found that French-English subtitling allowed for more idiomatic fidelity due to cultural proximity. The *Undertaker*, by contrast, posed a uniquely difficult case due to its use of Isan dialect, spiritual vocabulary, and Buddhist philosophy, which are deeply embedded in Thai oral tradition but rarely translatable without significant adaptation.

#### 4. Contributions and Implications

The findings of this study emphasize the tension between accessibility and authenticity in subtitling idioms from culturally distant language pairs. While paraphrasing ensured comprehensibility, it often eroded the symbolic power, emotional tone, and narrative weight of the original expressions. This underscores the need for subtitling approaches that are more adaptive and culturally sensitive, possibly incorporating multimodal techniques (e.g., visual cues, contextual reinforcement) or explanatory subtitles in culturally significant cases.

Importantly, *The Undertaker* offers a distinctive case for AVT analysis. Its setting in Thailand's Isan region, its focus on Buddhist death rituals, and its integration of folklore and oral storytelling traditions present unique challenges and insights that go beyond more commonly studied AVT contexts. By examining how idioms function as cultural vehicles in this film, the study contributes not only to subtitling research but to broader conversations about intercultural narrative transfer, global media consumption, and the evolving role of translation in preserving intangible cultural heritage.

Future research could build on this by exploring hybrid strategies, such as guided viewer notes in streaming platforms or culturally contextualized subtitle tracks, which allow audiences to appreciate both linguistic clarity and cultural richness. For films like *The Undertaker*, such innovations could foster more meaningful cross-cultural engagement without compromising narrative integrity.

## Conclusion

This study examined the translation strategies used in subtitling Thai idiomatic expressions into English in *The Undertaker*, a film deeply embedded in Buddhist funeral rituals and cultural traditions. Using Baker's (1992) taxonomy as a framework, the study evaluated how effectively these strategies preserved linguistic and cultural nuances. The findings revealed that paraphrasing was the most frequently employed strategy, allowing for meaning adaptation while ensuring accessibility for an international audience. However, this often came at the cost of cultural richness, as the idiomatic and symbolic depth of the original expressions was diluted. Borrowing was used minimally for culturally specific terms with widely recognizable meanings, while omission was applied when idioms carried complex cultural connotations that could not be effectively rendered in English. Translation strategies maintaining both meaning and form accounted for a very small number, reflecting the significant linguistic and cultural distance between Thai and English. Notably, most of the translations did not fit into Baker's taxonomy, instead consisting of literal or direct translations that prioritized semantic clarity over idiomatic richness.

The findings of this study align with broader translation theories, particularly Venuti's concept of domestication, as paraphrasing emerged as the dominant strategy in subtitling Thai idioms into English. This choice reflects the practical demands of rendering culturally dense, high-context language accessible to lower-context audiences within the constraints of audiovisual translation. The tendency to prioritize fluency and clarity over cultural fidelity often led to the simplification of idiomatic expressions, which, while ensuring comprehension, diminished their emotional tone, cultural specificity, and narrative resonance. From a cinematic perspective, this impacted how characters, themes, and spiritual dimensions were conveyed to non-Thai audiences, as idioms that served narrative and cultural functions were frequently neutralized.

The study contributes both theoretical and practical insights into the challenges of cross-cultural subtitling. It underscores the limitations of existing translation taxonomies when applied to culturally





distant language pairs and calls for more flexible, hybrid frameworks suited to audiovisual media. While *The Undertaker* offers a rich case study, the findings are limited by its single-film scope and the absence of audience reception data. Future research should explore viewer responses to culturally adapted subtitles and examine subtitling practices across diverse genres and languages. Overall, this study highlights the need for subtitling approaches that maintain a balance between linguistic precision and cultural depth, reinforcing the translator's role as a cultural mediator in the global circulation of media.

## Implications

The translation of idiomatic expressions in audiovisual media requires more than linguistic substitution; it involves navigating cultural specificity, audience expectations, and the technical constraints of subtitling. This study's findings illustrate that strategies such as paraphrasing and borrowing were central to balancing intelligibility and cultural preservation in Thai-English subtitling. These approaches reflect broader cross-cultural dynamics, particularly the challenge of translating from a high-context language like Thai into a lower-context language like English. The predominance of paraphrasing aligns with dynamic equivalence (Nida, 1964), aiming to preserve intended meaning over literal form, while the occasional use of borrowing reflects attempts at cultural retention. Overall, the data suggest that domestication (Venuti, 1995) dominated the subtitling choices, favoring accessibility for global audiences.

These findings have both theoretical and practical implications. From a cross-cultural communication perspective, idioms carry rhetorical and cultural functions that may be diminished or altered through domestication. From a literary standpoint, translation strategies shape narrative tone, character voice, and the cultural atmosphere of a film. To address these complexities, subtitler training should emphasize functional analysis of idioms and cultural fluency, supported by resources such as glossaries and collaborative frameworks. Ultimately, the translator's role is that of a cultural intermediary—one who must balance clarity with cultural depth, ensuring that subtitled content remains both understandable and culturally resonant across diverse viewership.

## Recommendation

Future research on idiomatic translation in audiovisual contexts should build directly on the findings and limitations identified in this case study of *The Undertaker*. The film's extensive use of culturally embedded idioms, many of which resisted classification under Baker's (1992) taxonomy, underscores the need for more flexible and inclusive frameworks that can accommodate hybrid and multimodal strategies. Developing expanded models that account for idioms rooted in spiritual belief systems, oral storytelling, or non-verbal cues would allow subtitlers to more accurately navigate the complex dynamics observed in Thai-English translation. In particular, frameworks should address how subtitling integrates with visual and auditory elements to convey cultural meaning beyond text alone.

Audience reception studies are especially needed to assess how international viewers interpret paraphrased or omitted idioms in films like *The Undertaker*. Such empirical investigations would provide critical insight into the trade-offs between accessibility and authenticity that subtitlers must manage. Furthermore, emerging technologies such as AI and machine translation warrant inquiry. The current study revealed challenges in preserving Thai idiomatic nuance, particularly expressions tied to Buddhism and Isan folklore, which future AI models must be trained to recognize, contextualize, and adapt. Finally, research should include genre-specific analyses to explore how idiomatic translation strategies vary across narrative types and promote interdisciplinary collaboration among linguists, cultural experts, and media practitioners. These directions would contribute not only to better subtitling practice but also to a deeper understanding of cultural transmission through global media.

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