

Translating Meaning and Intention: Error Analysis of Indonesian Children Fairy Tale Subtitles on YouTube



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates translation errors in the English subtitles of the Indonesian fairy tale *Pohon yang Sombong* (trans. The Arrogant Tree), with the aim of examining how meaning is transferred under the constraints of audiovisual translation. Subtitling is a complex process that requires not only accuracy in meaning but also adaptation to time, space, and readability limits, which become even more demanding when the audience is children. To address these challenges, the study employed a descriptive qualitative approach and applied the ATA Framework (2021), which classifies errors into three domains: target-language mechanics, transfer of meaning, and writing. The data consisted of all subtitle utterances from the chosen video, which were analyzed through content analysis and systematically categorized. The findings indicate that transfer-of-meaning errors were the most dominant, accounting for the majority of cases, particularly in the form of faithfulness errors. These errors reveal difficulties in preserving semantic and pragmatic equivalence, resulting in distortions of meaning that risk obscuring the intended message. Other types of errors included usage, syntax, omission, addition, and grammar, though these appeared less frequently. The results highlight the challenges faced by translators in maintaining accuracy while operating within subtitling constraints. The study concludes that improving subtitle quality requires greater emphasis on pragmatic awareness, cultural sensitivity, and child-oriented readability, alongside linguistic accuracy. Pedagogically, the findings underscore the importance of translator training and the value of applying systematic error analysis frameworks to ensure the clarity and educational function of subtitled children's literature.

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INTRODUCTION

Translation is widely recognized as a communicative act that transfers meaning and intention from a source text (ST) into a target text (TT) under various linguistic, cultural, and medium-specific constraints. Central to this process is the notion of equivalence, often understood as the degree to which

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the TT conveys semantic, pragmatic, and stylistic values comparable to those in the ST (Pym, 2007; Panou, 2013). Achieving equivalence, however, is rarely straightforward, particularly in modes of translation constrained by time, space, and multimodality. Subtitling epitomizes such challenges, as it requires accuracy in meaning transfer while conforming to strict audiovisual constraints (Gottlieb, 1992; Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021).

Subtitling is defined as a constrained translation because it is bound by multimodal restrictions: synchronization with dialogue and visuals, limited character space per line, and the need for rapid readability. Translators must condense spoken language into short written forms, omit redundancies, and balance naturalness with fidelity (Pedersen, 2017; Szarkowska & Gerber-Morón, 2018). Errors in subtitling therefore differ from errors in written translation; a mistranslation, omission, or lack of synchronization can disrupt immediate comprehension. When the target audience is children, the stakes are even higher, as children's linguistic and cognitive processing capacities are less developed and more dependent on clarity and straightforwardness.

Translating children's literature presents unique challenges. Unlike adult audiences, children rely on simple syntax, familiar vocabulary, and culturally accessible references to make sense of stories (Hu, 2003). Thus, translators must adapt language without diluting meaning, preserve stylistic qualities while ensuring accessibility, and mediate cultural elements so that young audiences can understand. As Alwazna (2017) emphasizes, pragmatic adaptation in translation is vital for maintaining communicative functions. This is especially true in fairy tales, which carry moral and cultural lessons. Mistranslations can obscure not only linguistic meaning but also the pedagogical value of the narrative.

In Indonesia, fairy tales have long been a medium for transmitting cultural and moral values, and digital platforms like YouTube have expanded their accessibility. Many fairy tales are subtitled into English to reach wider audiences. However, because such subtitling is often carried out by non-professional translators or automated systems, errors are common. These include grammatical inaccuracies, unnatural phrasing, mistranslation of cultural references, and synchronization issues. Given the increasing reliance on YouTube fairy tales for informal education, assessing the quality of subtitle translation is of practical and scholarly significance.

Translation error analysis provides a systematic means of evaluating such translations. Translation errors are commonly defined as deviations from target language norms or failures to achieve equivalence between ST and TT (Cozma, 2019). Nord (1976) argues that an error occurs whenever the TT fails to fulfill its communicative purpose, while Cuc (2017) identifies grammatical and lexical deficiencies as frequent error sources in student translation. Prior studies, such as Syahrir and Hartiana (2021) and Rahmatillah (2016), have focused on errors in short stories and student translations, but less research has examined subtitling, particularly in children's literature.

Different models of translation quality assessment provide parameters for evaluating errors. Machali (2000) outlines key criteria such as acceptability, accuracy, and naturalness, while Al-Qinai (2002) expands these into seven dimensions, including pragmatic equivalence and cohesion. The American Translators Association (ATA, 2021), however, proposes a practical error-oriented framework that categorizes errors into three domains: target language mechanics (grammar, syntax, punctuation), transfer meaning (faithfulness, omission, addition, cohesion), and writing (register, style, usage). This model provides a structured and replicable way to evaluate errors, making it particularly suitable for subtitling.

Subtitling-specific errors further complicate this landscape. Scholars have identified omission, condensation, synchronization, and readability as recurrent issues in audiovisual translation (Pedersen, 2017; Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021). Omission occurs when essential meaning is lost; condensation reduces dialogue excessively; synchronization errors misalign subtitles with speech or visual cues; and readability issues occur when subtitles overwhelm processing capacity. Studies in subtitle reception have shown that viewers can handle fast subtitles but still demand clarity and coherence (Szarkowska & Gerber-Morón, 2018). For children's literature subtitling, these issues directly influence comprehension and learning outcomes, making error analysis a vital step in ensuring quality.

Recent research in audiovisual translation (AVT) highlights subtitling not only as a technical process but also as a reception-centered practice (Gambier, 2018; Orrego-Carmona, 2016). It also emphasizes that subtitling involves multimodal semiotics, where verbal language interacts with sound and visuals, requiring strategies beyond traditional written translation. For children's fairy tales, subtitling is not merely about linguistic transfer but about facilitating narrative immersion and moral learning.

Despite a growing body of research, there remains a notable gap in the study of subtitle translation errors in Indonesian children's fairy tales. Existing studies tend to focus on student translations of prose texts (e.g., Putri, 2019; Asipi & Henrika, 2023) or pragmatic equivalence in general (Mahsa & Ardeshiri, 2014), with little attention to subtitling in children's audiovisual media. This study addresses that gap by analyzing subtitle errors in *Pohon yang Sombong* (transl. The Arrogant Tree), a popular YouTube fairy tale, using the ATA Framework (2021). Unlike previous research, this study examines subtitling under real-world conditions of audiovisual constraint and child-directed communication.

By identifying the types and frequencies of subtitle errors and linking them to broader theoretical debates in translation quality assessment, this study contributes both descriptively and pedagogically. It provides evidence of how subtitling constraints intersect with children's literature translation, and it underscores the importance of professional subtitling standards in educational digital media. In doing so, it positions error analysis not only as a diagnostic tool but also as a pathway for improving translation pedagogy and audiovisual literacy in multilingual contexts.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to investigate translation errors in the subtitles of the Indonesian fairy tale *Pohon yang Sombong* (transl. The Arrogant Tree) uploaded on YouTube. Qualitative methods were deemed appropriate because the primary objective was not to quantify errors in large corpora but to describe, categorize, and interpret the nature of errors in a specific audiovisual text. As Surakhmad (1994) notes, descriptive qualitative research emphasizes careful observation and systematic description of naturally occurring phenomena. Within this framework, error analysis serves not only as a descriptive tool but also as an interpretive practice, allowing the researcher to account for how errors affect meaning transfer and reception.

Research Approach

The study was designed as a single-case study, focusing on one fairy tale video. Sutopo (2006) argues that case studies are valuable for providing in-depth insights into specific instances of linguistic behavior. In this research, the case study approach enabled detailed analysis of how subtitling practices manifest in children's audiovisual texts under the constraints of time, space, and multimodality. While the analysis of a single video does not permit broad generalizations, it reveals patterns of error that may be indicative of systemic challenges in subtitling practices on similar platforms.

Data Source and Sampling

The data source was the English subtitles accompanying the Indonesian fairy tale *Pohon yang Sombong* (transl. The Arrogant Tree). This video was selected because of its popularity as part of a series of animated fairy tales intended for child audiences and its reliance on subtitling to reach a broader viewership. The dataset consisted of all utterances in the subtitles, totaling 27 units of analysis. Each utterance was treated as a potential site of error, allowing comprehensive examination rather than selective sampling.

The choice of fairy tale data responds to the unique challenges in translating children's literature. Unlike technical or adult-oriented texts, children's stories rely heavily on simple syntax, culturally embedded metaphors, and moral didacticism (Hu, 2003). Translating these into another language requires not only semantic accuracy but also attention to cultural accessibility and

pedagogical clarity. Thus, this corpus is particularly useful for assessing how subtitling practices may succeed or fail in preserving equivalence for young audiences.

Data Collection

Data collection followed a content analysis procedure (Cozma, 2019). First, the subtitles were transcribed and aligned with the spoken dialogue. Second, each subtitle was compared to its corresponding source utterance in Indonesian. This alignment allowed for direct evaluation of equivalence, omissions, additions, or distortions of meaning. The analysis emphasized both linguistic accuracy and subtitling conventions such as brevity, synchronization, and readability. In addition, the study accounted for the constraints of subtitling (Gottlieb, 2011; Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021). Specifically, the researcher observed whether errors could be attributed to time and space limitations typical of subtitling (e.g., reduction of phrases due to character limits), or whether they reflected broader linguistic or pragmatic shortcomings. By situating the analysis within subtitling theory, the study avoided treating subtitles as merely written texts and instead recognized their multimodal nature.

Analytical Framework

Error identification and classification followed the American Translators Association (ATA) Framework 2021, which organizes errors into three categories:

1. Target Language Mechanics: grammar, syntax, word form, punctuation, spelling.
2. Transfer of Meaning: addition, omission, faithfulness, cohesion, literalness, misunderstanding.
3. Writing: style, register, idiomaticity, and usage.

The ATA framework was selected because it provides granular categories of errors that align with subtitling practices. For instance, omission and addition errors frequently occur in subtitles due to condensation or timing constraints, while style and register errors are particularly relevant in translations for children. Compared with broader models such as Machali (2000) and Al-Qinai (2002), the ATA framework offers a practical error-focused approach that can be systematically applied to audiovisual translation data.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis involved five stages, adapted from translation error analysis protocols (Rahmatillah, 2016; Syahrir & Hartiana, 2021):

1. Identification: locating errors by comparing ST and TT utterances.
2. Classification: assigning errors to one of the ATA categories.
3. Explanation: describing why the error constitutes a deviation from norms or equivalence.
4. Frequency Analysis: counting how often each type of error occurred.
5. Interpretation: discussing the significance of the errors, particularly in the context of subtitling for children's literature.

This staged analysis ensured both quantitative rigor (by documenting frequencies) and qualitative depth (by explaining the pragmatic and communicative implications of each error).

Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the analysis was conducted systematically and iteratively. Triangulation was achieved by consulting multiple frameworks of translation quality assessment (Machali, 2000; Al-Qinai, 2002; ATA, 2021) and cross-referencing the findings with prior literature on common subtitle errors (Pedersen, 2017; Szarkowska & Gerber-Morón, 2018). Dependability was addressed by maintaining a clear record of the steps of analysis, while confirmability was strengthened through transparent presentation of error examples in the Findings section. Although the study is limited by its single-case design, its focus on a representative and widely circulated text provides valuable insights for both translation practitioners and educators.

Ethical Considerations

Because the study analyzed publicly available YouTube content, no human subjects were involved, and thus no formal ethical approval was required. However, the researcher adhered to academic integrity by citing all frameworks and prior studies, acknowledging the original creators of the fairy tale video, and ensuring accurate representation of the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the YouTube subtitles for the Indonesian fairy tale *Pohon yang Sombong* identified three error domains following the ATA Framework (2021): target-language mechanics, transfer of meaning, and writing. Of the total instances examined, four were classified as target-language mechanics (grammar/syntax/punctuation), 18 as transfer-of-meaning (e.g., faithfulness, omission, addition), and 5 as writing (register, style, and idiomaticity). The predominance of transfer-of-meaning errors indicates that semantic and pragmatic equivalence is the principal challenge in this subtitling context, where time/space constraints and child-directed readability intensify the risk of distorted or reduced meanings. By contrast, mechanics and writing issues, while present, were comparatively fewer and typically secondary to mis-transfer of content. These distributions suggest that quality improvement efforts should prioritize strategies for meaning preservation under audiovisual constraints, before fine-tuning surface-level mechanics and stylistic polish.

Table 1. *Error Categories*

Error Categories	Percentage
Target Language Mechanics	14.81%
Transfer Meaning	66.67%
Writing	18.51%

Target Language Mechanics

Based on the ATA framework 2021 target language mechanics error category belongs to clearly violates one or more rules in written forms of the target language. There are 4 data classified into this error category. The details analysis can be seen in the following data.

- (1) Source Text (ST): *Karena tidak setiap pohon memiliki bayangan seindah bayangan milikku.*
Target Text (TT): Because not every tree has a shade as grand as mine!
- (2) Source Text (ST): *Pohon mangga sangat terluka kata-kata pohon ara namun dia memilih untuk tidak bereaksi malahan dia memanggil kawanan lebah dan meminta mereka membangun sarang di dahannya.*
Target Text (TT): The Mango Tree was very hurt by the Fig Tree's word. But he choose [sic] to not react. He could out to the swarm of bees and he asked them to build a hive on his branches instead.

In the example above, the subtitle translation reflects a literal rendering of the source text. In English syntax, however, the placement of “not” in Data (1) before the subject is incorrect. Negative structures in English require *not* to be paired with a verb, auxiliary, or modal, rather than directly preceding the subject. The error in Data (1) is therefore categorized as a syntactic error, as it results from a word order that violates the syntactic rules of the target language. Such errors occur when the arrangement of sentence elements does not conform to target language norms. In this case, the use of “not” produces an unnatural and ungrammatical construction. A more accurate rendering would be: *Because every tree does not have a shade as grand as mine.*

Data (2) illustrates a grammatical error. The translation “But he choose to not react” breaks the rules of English verb agreement. The verb *choose* should be inflected to *chooses* in the simple present tense or accompanied by an auxiliary (*does not choose*). In the target language system, negative

sentences with third-person singular subjects require *does not* followed by the base form of the verb. Therefore, the corrected version should be: *But he does not choose to react*. This error demonstrates how inappropriate verb forms and auxiliary use disrupt grammatical accuracy in the target language.

Transfer Meaning

The transfer-of-meaning error category arises when the translation fails to fully convey the intended meaning of the source text. Such errors directly affect the reader's comprehension of facts or ideas presented in the original. Analysis of the data reveals that this is the most dominant error category identified in the subtitles. Within this domain, three main types of errors were found: faithfulness, deletion (omission), and addition. Each of these error types illustrates how the meaning of the source text is either distorted, reduced, or expanded in ways that compromise semantic and pragmatic equivalence. The following examples provide a closer examination of these cases.

(3) Source Text (ST): *Dia adalah pohon yang murah hati.*

Target Text (TT): He was a generous tree

(4) Source Text (ST): *Ia tidak pernah membiarkan burung apapun membuat sangkar*

Target Text (TT): He never let any birds rest on him.

(5) Source Text (ST): *uh itu adalah hal yang sangat kejam untuk dikatakan, Ara!*

Target Text (TT): Hey, watch it! That's a very mean thing to say, Fig!

Data (3) falls under the category of faithfulness errors. This type of error occurs when the target text fails to adequately convey the meaning of the source text. In this case, the error is reflected in the use of the word *generous* as the translation of *murah hati*. The term *generous* is inappropriate because in the source language it is closer in meaning to *dermawan*, which specifically refers to the behavior of someone who habitually gives money or material assistance to others. By contrast, the term *murah hati* carries a broader sense of kindness or benevolence. A more equivalent rendering would therefore be *charitable* or *kindly*.

Data (4) represents an omission error, which occurs when one or more elements of meaning present in the source text (ST) are absent from the target text (TT). In this instance, the omission involves the word *him*. By excluding this element, the TT provides an incomplete transfer of meaning, which may hinder the target reader's ability to fully grasp the intended message.

Data (5) belongs to the category of addition errors. These errors arise when the translator inserts new elements of meaning into the TT that are not present in the ST. The addition is evident in the expression *watch it!*, which does not appear in the original utterance. Introducing this element alters the tone and creates a non-equivalent meaning in the TT, thereby reducing fidelity to the ST.

The three examples illustrate how subtitling errors in the category of transfer of meaning—faithfulness, omission, and addition—pose significant risks to both accuracy and reception. In faithfulness errors, such as the mistranslation of *murah hati* as *generous*, the semantic nuance of the ST is distorted, leading to a shift in moral or cultural connotations. Omission errors, such as the absence of *him*, result in incomplete information that disrupts cohesion and weakens the reader's comprehension of the narrative. By contrast, addition errors, exemplified by the insertion of *watch it!*, introduce unintended emphases or tones not present in the ST. In the context of children's fairy tales, these deviations are particularly problematic, as they can obscure moral lessons, alter character portrayal, or confuse young viewers. This pattern underscores the importance of maintaining semantic and pragmatic equivalence in subtitling, especially when translating educational or culturally embedded texts for child audiences.

Writing

According to the ATA Framework (2021), the category of writing errors refers to target-language issues that do not necessarily break explicit grammatical, syntactic, or spelling rules but

nonetheless reduce the overall quality of the translation. Such errors typically involve non-idiomatic, inappropriate, or unclear wording and phrasing, which may obscure meaning or sound unnatural to the target audience. In the subtitles of *Pohon yang Sombong*, five instances were classified under this category. These cases illustrate how stylistic or register-related choices, even when grammatically correct, can detract from readability and communicative effectiveness. A detailed analysis of one representative example is provided below.

(6) Source Text (ST): *dan berdiri tegap ketika ada angin datang,*

Target Text (TT): and stand strong when wind came to pay a visit.

In the example above, the subtitle demonstrates a usage error, which arises when the conventions of wording or phrasing in the target language are not observed. In Data (6), the expression *come to pay a visit* is used to translate the Indonesian verb *datang*. While idiomatic in English, this phrase does not carry the same straightforward meaning as *datang*, which simply means *to come* or *to arrive*. The choice of this idiom therefore creates a stylistic mismatch and results in a translation that feels unnatural and semantically inappropriate for the context. Such deviations are categorized as writing errors, specifically within the sub-type of usage errors, because they do not breach grammatical rules but nonetheless reduce clarity and communicative accuracy.

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency distribution of translation errors identified in the subtitles of *Pohon yang Sombong*. The findings confirm that different types of errors emerge across categories, with meaning transfer errors being most dominant, followed by writing errors and target-language mechanics. The use of the ATA (2021) analysis framework allowed these variations to be systematically classified and interpreted, ensuring that the analysis accounted not only for surface-level inaccuracies but also for pragmatic and stylistic shortcomings relevant to the subtitling context.

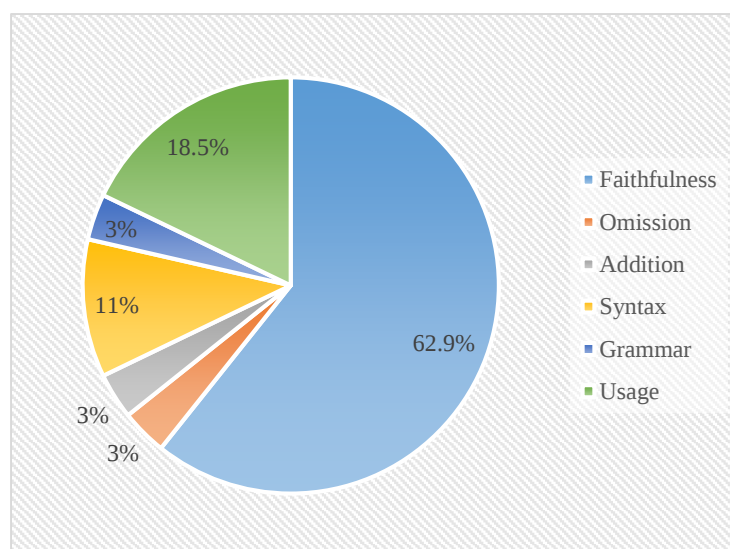


Figure 1. *The frequency of translation errors*

Figure 1 presents the frequency distribution of errors in the subtitles of the Indonesian fairy tale *Pohon yang Sombong*. The findings show that faithfulness errors are the most prevalent, accounting for 62.9% of the total data. This indicates that the majority of translation problems stem from a failure to transfer meaning accurately from the source text (ST) to the target text (TT). Such errors reveal weaknesses in capturing semantic and pragmatic equivalence, which are essential in translation for child audiences. As Putri (2019) notes, the most dominant types of translation errors often appear in the surface structure of language, including semantic, lexical, morphological, and grammatical errors. These surface-level inaccuracies, however, often interact with deeper structural

issues related to cultural differences between languages, suggesting that subtitling errors cannot be explained solely in linguistic terms.

The findings further suggest that deficiencies in the translator's mastery of the target language contribute significantly to these errors. A lack of competence in the linguistic and cultural systems of the TT results in distortions of meaning, confirming Nord's (1976) view that errors arise whenever the communicative purpose of translation is obstructed. Thus, subtitling quality depends not only on linguistic accuracy but also on the translator's ability to negotiate cultural equivalence and audience expectations.

Beyond faithfulness, other types of errors were also identified, though in smaller proportions. Syntax errors accounted for 11% of the total, while usage errors represented 18.5%. These findings resonate with Cuc (2017), who emphasizes that linguistic errors are the most frequent in translation and often reflect interlanguage or intralingual difficulties. Such issues, while less frequent than faithfulness errors, are pedagogically significant because they highlight areas where translators may require targeted training in grammatical competence and idiomatic expression.

The least frequent errors in the data set were omissions, additions, and grammar errors, each appearing only once (3%). While less prominent, these errors remain important because they lead to non-equivalent meanings in the TT. Omissions reduce the informational content of the translation, additions distort the intended message by introducing elements not present in the ST, and grammar errors undermine sentence coherence. The presence of these errors, even in low frequency, aligns with Lesmana's (2021) observation that bilingual texts often contain misformations that compromise the accuracy of meaning transfer. In subtitling, such distortions are particularly problematic because viewers rely on subtitles in real time and cannot revisit the text for clarification.

The overall distribution of errors in this study reinforces the view that translation is a communicative act (Munday, 2001) and that the quality of translation should be measured not only by grammatical correctness but also by its ability to convey equivalent communicative functions. Failure to achieve equivalence results in miscommunication, especially in pragmatic contexts where utterances carry illocutionary force (Alwazna, 2017). As highlighted by Majhad, Bnini, and Kandoussi (2020) and Panou (2013), equivalence remains a central concern in translation studies, encompassing both semantic and pragmatic dimensions. The present findings confirm that subtitling errors are often linked to the translator's inability to maintain this equivalence.

In this study, the failure to preserve pragmatic equivalence (Fakhrurrazi, 2020) and semantic equivalence (Fancellu & Webber, 2015) resulted in translations that did not reflect the intended illocutionary force of the ST. In the context of children's fairy tales, such failures are particularly detrimental because they risk obscuring moral lessons or altering character portrayals. Thus, even minor deviations can have significant pedagogical and cultural implications. The results therefore emphasize that improving subtitling quality requires not only technical linguistic accuracy but also deeper training in pragmatic and semantic awareness to ensure that meaning and communicative intent are faithfully preserved.

Overall, the findings highlight that the most critical challenge in subtitling children's fairy tales lies in preserving semantic and pragmatic equivalence, with faithfulness errors emerging as the most frequent. While less common, syntax, usage, omission, and addition errors also reveal gaps in linguistic competence and stylistic awareness. These results underline the pedagogical need to train translators not only in grammar and mechanics but also in strategies for maintaining meaning under audiovisual constraints, ensuring that children's literature in digital formats retains both its communicative clarity and cultural value.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated translation errors in the English subtitles of the Indonesian fairy tale *Pohon yang Sombong* using the ATA Framework (2021). The analysis identified three main categories of errors: target-language mechanics, transfer of meaning, and writing. Among these, transfer-of-

meaning errors were the most dominant, particularly faithfulness errors, which highlighted difficulties in achieving semantic and pragmatic equivalence. Although less frequent, usage, syntax, omission, addition, and grammar errors also played a role in reducing the accuracy and clarity of the subtitles.

The results demonstrate that subtitling children's fairy tales involves challenges that extend beyond the application of grammatical rules. Translators must simultaneously attend to linguistic fidelity, technical constraints of audiovisual media, and the communicative needs of young viewers. When equivalence is not preserved, the subtitles risk obscuring the narrative's moral dimension, altering character portrayals, and diminishing the cultural and pedagogical value of the story. This is particularly critical for child audiences, who rely on clarity and simplicity to engage with stories meaningfully.

From a broader perspective, the study highlights the pedagogical importance of equipping translators with the ability to balance accuracy and accessibility under subtitling constraints. Training should emphasize not only grammar and mechanics but also the skills required to safeguard meaning and maintain naturalness in context-sensitive translations. Practically, the application of systematic frameworks such as the ATA model can guide quality assessment and improvement. As children's literature increasingly reaches audiences through digital media, high-quality subtitling is essential for ensuring both the integrity of the narrative and its educational impact.

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