

Subtitling, Semiotics and *Spirited Away*

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Abstract

When translating a film according to typical subtitling models, the focus is usually solely on the dialogue of the film. Furthermore, the resulting translations are often impoverished to a large extent due to the constraints of the medium. The combined effects of this result in a significant loss of equivalence between the subtitles and the original linguistic and extralinguistic information. A potential method of preventing this loss is the application of a semiotic model for translation during the subtitling process. To this end, an existing model for the semiotranslation of film was enhanced and applied to the subtitling of the wildly popular Japanese animated film *Spirited Away* (2001). The resulting subtitles were evaluated for equivalence with the source text (ST) against the existing subtitle track that was distributed on a DVD release of the film. It was found that much more information, both from dialogue and on-screen extralinguistic content, could be conveyed by the semiotic subtitles than those created following more traditional subtitling norms.

Key words: audiovisual translation, subtitling, semiotics, semiotranslation, anime, Japanese film, translation of Japanese.

1. Introduction

Especially in the face of “fansubbing” practices, in which subtitlers—who are typically not formally trained in audiovisual translation (AVT)—create their own rules that still work, it is becoming evident that the current standards for subtitling within more formalised AVT arenas are lacking in certain crucial areas. One of the significant shortcomings is the reduction of subtitles that the field seems to impose. This may result in many important aspects of the source text (ST) being lost in the effort to reduce the length and complexity of the subtitles.

Kruger (2001) proposed a semiotic model for subtitling that would circumvent these reductions, resulting in subtitles that retain a higher level of equivalence with the ST without significantly lengthening the subtitles or the amount of time they remain on screen. By expanding on this model with the inclusion of some of the standard features of fansubbing and even current trends in major film studios, a potentially-improved method of subtitling could be introduced, incorporating more of the meaning that is typically lost due to reduction. This theory was tested for this study by adapting Kruger’s model with a specific film in mind—the hugely successful Studio Ghibli animation *Spirited Away* (2001)—and subtitling the film according to the enhanced semiotic model.

Before introducing this model and its application, a few aspects are discussed, namely, the existing standards for subtitling, semiotics and semiotranslation and the specifics of the film that was selected.

1.1. Traditional Subtitling vs Fansubbing

The subtitling methods that are generally accepted within the field of AVT, for this study, will be referred to as “traditional subtitling”. While there is no one definitive text outlining the standards for subtitling (despite efforts by well-versed authors such as Karamitroglou (1998) and Díaz-Cintas & Remael (2007)), some rules seem to be universally adhered to across the field. There are various texts from several authors outlining some of the commonly agreed-upon rules regarding placement and other stylistic choices, line segmentation, timing, and length, as well as the actual translation of the ST dialogue to the target text (TT) subtitle (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007; Karamitroglou, 1998; *inter alia*). Most of these prescriptive texts on interlingual subtitling emphasise the reduction of the TT to meet the constraints of subtitling. They strongly encourage the omission of certain words and phrases, often sacrificing meaning for shorter, more legible subtitles (Kruger, 2001).

In fansubbing, several features are mostly unique to the medium (Nornes, 1999): “supertitles” at the top of the screen containing translation notes (which can be rather lengthy), decorative typefaces, creative use of colour and font characteristics such as bolding and italicisation, and the translation of on-screen text (often omitted in traditional subtitling norms). Many features are in line with those prescribed by AVT academics, such as the number of characters per line or the timing of the subtitles.

However, this may be due more to the fact that subtitling software is pre-built with these parameters already set.

1.2. Semiotics, Semiotranslation and Subtitling

Semiotics, the study of signs (something that communicates a meaning) and their interpretation, is particularly relevant in AVT. Films present multiple semiotic channels that convey meaning, such as the dialogue and soundtrack in the audio channel, and on-screen text and aspects like gestures, clothing, and the setting in the visual channel. Optimally, all of these aspects should be taken into consideration when translating and creating subtitles.

In her 1994 book *Semiotics and the problem of translation*, Gorfée outlined what she termed “semiotranslation,” a model for translating texts that retain more equivalence with the ST through the use of Peirce’s approach to semiotics. Semiotranslation entails examining the sign – something that communicates meaning to the interpreter – that is conveyed through the ST, and “translating” the sign rather than the signifier (in this case, the word or phrase in the ST), resulting in what is essentially a new sign along with the target language signifier. This process is cyclical and essentially can never end, as no “perfect” translation is possible. This is because *semiosis*, which can be defined as “any form of activity, conduct, or process that involves signs, including the production of meaning” (Peirce, 1906, p. 546), can never end due to the continually evolving nature of meaning (Gorfée, 1994, p. 188).

This model was later adapted by Kruger specifically for subtitling (2001). Outlining the nature of semiotranslation, Kruger states that the translator can deviate from “...the semantic meaning of the ST by creating a “new” TT which is nevertheless significationally equivalent to the original” (2001, p. 185). Equivalence here refers to the interpretation of the sign being equivalent to that of the ST, rather than merely equivalence between the two signifiers, i.e. the words used. This then allows for more creative ways to translate the ST without sacrificing equivalence and still results in subtitles that align with the length, time, and other restrictions that the medium requires (Kruger, 2001).

For this study, after re-examining the translational model as outlined initially by Gorfée (1994) and adapting the subtitling model proposed by Kruger (2001), an enhanced model was devised by applying additional semiotic theory to the framework. The primary work selected for this was Barthes’s *Empire of Signs* (1970/1982). Another seminal author in the field of semiotics (or, in his case, semiology), this particular work of Barthes was relevant especially in light of its subject matter – the shift in focus regarding meaning towards the “empty centre” that Barthes uncovered in Japan. According to him, where in the west there is always something of great import at the heart of everything, in Japan, just like the forbidden void that is the imperial palace at the centre of Tokyo, there is no singular sign in Japanese semiosis—signs are merely whatever the interpreter interprets them as being (Barthes, 1970/1982; Ikegami, 1991a). A related work also incorporated into the theoretical component of the model was a compilation of essays on semiotics edited by Ikegami, also

entitled *The Empire of Signs* (1991a). These essays by Japanese authors focus on semiotics related explicitly to Japan. Two of these, in particular, were used: Kawai's essay (1991, p. 157) on Japanese folk tales and Ikegami's own essay (1991b, p. 285) on the differences in the Japanese language when compared with English. Both essays highlight the "empty centre" in a way that is particularly relevant to the study.

1.3. Spirited Away

The famous Studio Ghibli released *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (translatable as "The Spiriting Away of Sen and Chihiro") by famed director, Hayao Miyazaki, produced by Toshio Suzuki, in 2001. It was adapted by Disney/Pixar's John Lasseter (Denison, 2007; Osmond, 2008) for the North American audience and distributed by Disney and won an Academy Award at the 75th Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Academy Awards ceremony in 2003 (Academy Awards, 2003).

The film follows Chihiro, a young girl who, together with her parents, is moving to a new city. Along the way to their new house, their father takes a wrong turn, and they land up in what Chihiro's father believes to be an abandoned amusement park but in reality, is a gateway to the spirit world. Through their greed, Chihiro's parents are turned into pigs, and Chihiro is urged to seek employment at the bathhouse (where the witch in charge of the realm resides) to stay in the spirit world and figure out how to save her parents and return to her world.

Spirited Away is rich in cultural references, many specific to Japanese culture but also many references which were invented by Miyazaki himself (Denison, 2007; Napier, 2006; Osmond, 2008). Many of these were ignored in both the dubbed and subtitled Disney releases, particularly when the cultural references were in the visual channel and not the audio. This was the primary reason for the selection of this film for translation, along with the already challenging task of maintaining equivalence when translating Japanese into English.

To translate the film according to a semiotic model, Kruger's model had to be adapted to include Japanese perspectives on semiotics and semiosis, referring to the empty centre discussed by the abovementioned authors, Barthes, Ikegami and Kawai. The following section will outline how the model was adapted as well as how it was applied. The resulting subtitles will then be discussed.

2. Method

Since the purpose of this study was to investigate whether or not the application of a semiotic model to the translation process can result in improved subtitles for a specific Japanese film, this study was conducted as a case study. Therefore, the focus is quite limited, and the methods involved were uniquely adapted for the translation of *Spirited Away*.

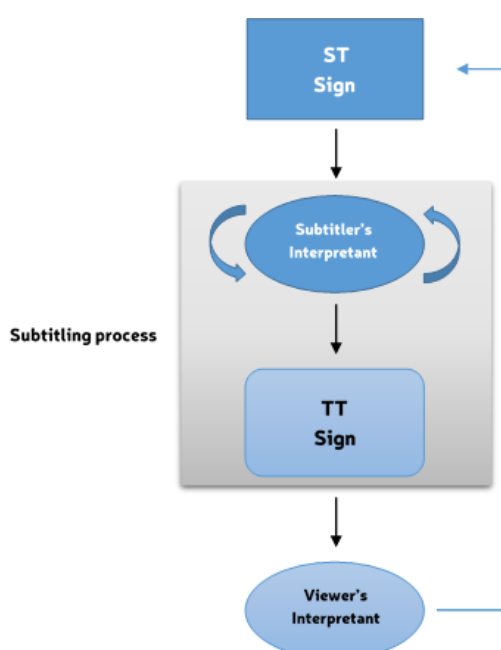
The model and the theory behind it are discussed below, followed by outlines of the means for data collection, and finally, the limitations of the method.

2.1. A Semiotic Model for Subtitling *Spirited Away*

In her 2001 article, Kruger introduces a model for subtitling based primarily on Gorlée's model for semiotranslation (1994). The model can be illustrated as in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Kruger's model for semiotic subtitling



Source: Kruger, 2001, p. 191.

In essence, the process of semiotic subtitling as per Kruger (2001) can be explained as follows: the ST sign (the film's dialogue or on-screen text, etc.) is interpreted by the subtitler as the first step of their translation process. As indicated in the diagram by the arrows, this action of interpreting and re-interpreting the sign is cyclical, as an equivalent translation in the TT has to be reached, and the subtitler has, perhaps, several choices for an appropriate translation. At this step, the process of deriving equivalence should focus on the meaning of the *sign* rather than the superficial dialogue or language. This results in a new sign—especially because the translation has now (in most cases with regards to subtitling) crossed from one semiotic channel (audio or dialogue) to another (writing). The viewer will then interpret this new resulting sign (or *interpretant*, the sign as interpreted and re-conveyed by the subtitler). Suppose the process was carried out with sufficient emphasis on the semiotic or significant equivalence. In that case, the viewer's interpretation will seamlessly refer back to the ST sign, and the viewer will have no difficulty in understanding the film.

As mentioned above, Kruger's model (2001) was created based on Goriée's 1994 work which mainly focused on Peirce's semiotics (1906). To apply the model to a Japanese film, the theoretical component for the model had to be adjusted and was done so using Barthes' *Empire of Signs* and its derivative works.

Given that the film selected for translation is of Japanese origin, it was necessary to use a semiotic model that considers this "empty centre" that Barthes found to be vital to Japanese semiosis and understanding. Therefore, the semiotic theory behind the model was adapted to include the viewpoints of Barthes (1970/1982) and Ikegami's *The Empire of Signs*, especially the concept of the "empty centre," while retaining many elements of Peirce's semiotics (1906)—such as the entire process of semiosis.

Numerous examples of the "empty centre" Barthes introduced can be given from *Spirited Away*, but it is perhaps most noticeable in the protagonist, Chihiro. Many people have criticised her blandness and others have highlighted that although there is development in her character, she remains a blank slate, something of a placeholder for the viewer to experience the story for themselves (Denison, 2007; Osmond, 2008). She is a sign that takes on whatever meaning one attributes to her.

As mentioned above, two essays in Ikegami's *The Empire of Signs* (1991a) are particularly useful for this study. These are Kawai's essay on the "forbidden chamber" motif in Japanese fairy tales and Ikegami's essay on the differences from a semantic (that is, the more surface-level linguistic meaning of words) and semiotic (the actual meaning the words refer to) point of view between Japanese and a language such as English. The former deals with a common core theme in Japanese fairy tales: nothing essentially happens. There is no "happily ever after" in these fairy tales—the protagonist finds himself in a given situation, someone (typically a beautiful woman) appears and issues a rule or prohibition which the protagonist inevitably breaks, causing the woman to disappear and the "hero" to find himself in the same place he started (Kawai, 1991). Fortunately, the author offers some solace for the Western reader who may be somewhat disheartened by this pattern:

What has happened, then, in The Bush Warblers' Home? Has nothing happened really? Let us start by changing our attitude completely, and put positive value on the fact that nothing has happened instead of searching for that something which might have happened. In other words, nothing has happened can be interpreted as The Nothingness has happened. In this way, the story may be assumed to be simply about The Nothingness. Lüthi's "the situation of nothing" has a negative connotation, but one can interpret it positively. Fundamentally, The Nothingness is beyond negative and positive values. (Kawai, 1991, p. 174)

Spirited Away follows the pattern outlined above, but with the gender roles typical of the traditional Japanese fairy tale reversed. The female Chihiro trespasses into the forbidden realm of the spirit world, where she encounters the "beautiful prince" in the form of the male Haku (who even disappears at the end of the film). When she leaves the spirit world, it is as if nothing happened. The bulk of the film's plot is thus relegated to the "empty centre" category; Kawai's "nothingness," which must be taken into account when translating the film.

Ikegami's essay on what he terms "do" languages *versus* "become" languages is also pivotal to the translation of Japanese into English, especially with regards to this study. According to Ikegami (1991b), English is a "do" language with a clear agent (the one who carries out the action denoted by the verb in a sentence), while Japanese is a "become" language, which can completely omit the agent:

In *Yukiguni* ("Snow Country"), one of the most celebrated novels by Yasunari Kawabata, the 1968 Nobel Prize winner for literature, the first sentence of the work reads as follows [...]:

Kunizakai no nagai tonneru o nukeru to,
border of long tunnel [OBJ] pass when

yukiguni de atta.
snow-country was

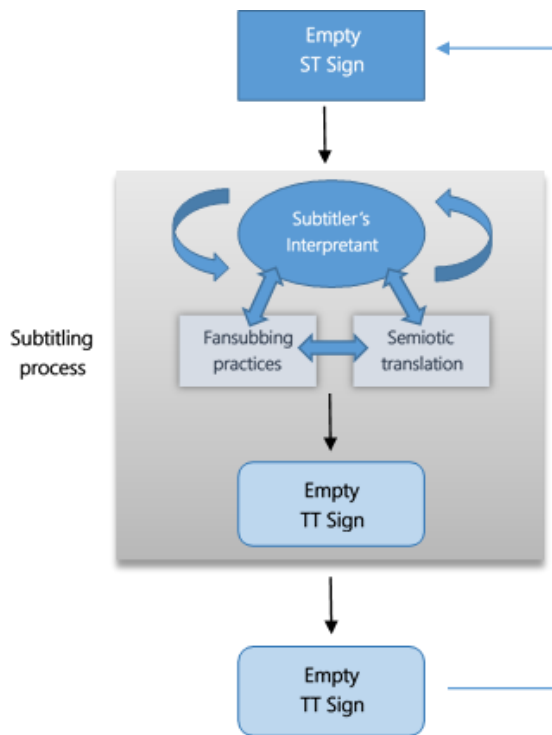
An approximately literal translation of the sentence would be something like "On passing the long tunnel at the border, (it) was a snow country." [...] [The] reaction of a western reader who knows some Japanese is typically that of bewilderment. He asks himself, "In the first half of the sentence, there is a verb *nukeru* ("pass"). But what is it that passed (the tunnel)?" The sentence makes no mention of it. Also, in the second half, we are told "(it) was a snow country." But what exactly is characterised as a "snow country" is not made explicit at all. (Ikegami, 1991b, p. 288)

This erasure of the agent of the action of passing the tunnel echoes the "empty centre" in Barthes' literature: the agent is "nothing;" it is not merely left out or even implied. Because it is left up to the interpreter, even if it is made more explicit later, any number of interpretations of who or what is "passing the long tunnel" can be made from that brief sentence. This adds another layer to the complexity of translating Japanese semiotically, even outside of AVT: How is a translator supposed to reach a significant equivalent to *nothing*? Creating new, but still empty signs is the ultimate goal for a TT that is as equivalent as possible under these conditions, although there will undoubtedly be differences when translating between Japanese and English, especially in light of these highlighted issues.

The almost intuitive fansubbing practices which include the use of several semiotic modes (e.g. the colours and placement of the subtitles themselves, as well as what the fansubbers choose to translate such as background text or song lyrics (Pérez-González, 2013)) are also beneficial to consider when subtitling semiotically.

These concepts are thus applied to Kruger's theoretical model (2001) to create an adapted model illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Proposed semiotic subtitling model

Instead of attempting merely to re-interpret the sign as intended in the ST and creating a new sign in the TT that can be interpreted the same way, according to this proposed model, the subtitler should choose one appropriate interpretation of the “empty” ST sign and translate it semiotically (incorporating some of the fansubbing practices) to create a sign in the TT that is as equivalent as possible. In addition to this, where it is appropriate, the subtitler should try to retain the “emptiness,” allowing the viewer to interpret it again independently.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

In order to select scenes to translate according to the model, a close viewing of the film was undertaken with five key scenes being chosen for (re)translation and comparison to the existing subtitles. The criteria for the selection were quite broad, consisting of the scene’s overall impact on the plot, and whether it contained non-verbal information such as accents or dialects or “[v]isually transmitted verbal signs (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007, p. 47), with text appearing on-screen, as well as Pedersen's extra cultural references (ECRs), which he defines as “references to places, people, institutions, customs, food, etc. that you may not know even if you know the language in question” (2011, p. 44). Special attention was given to scenes with potential translation challenges and to those that had clear opportunities to apply the proposed semiotic model when translating.

The five scenes that were selected were given arbitrary titles, and are presented with the time codes at which they appear in the film *Spirited Away*:

1. The bathhouse (00:07:24–00:14:36)
2. Lin appears (00:28:36–00:33:28)
3. Chihiro meets Yubaba (00:34:00–00:41:08)
4. Kamaji helps Chihiro (01:25:40–01:31:18)
5. Chihiro meets Zeniba (01:45:18–01:50:25)

These scenes were translated and subtitled according to the semiotic model created, following the subtitling guidelines described by Díaz-Cintas & Remael (2007), with some deviation from these prescriptions using what Nornes describes in his 1999 essay, *For an Abusive Subtitling*. These deviations, which focus primarily on fansubbing and its creation by amateur subtitlers who work almost “instinctively,” suggests overturning the conventions of subtitling practice for a favourable result. As McClarty states, “by adopting an abusive approach and creating “thick” translations that are loaded with multiple layers of signification, we might commit violence upon the target language and culture, thus levelling the metaphorical “playing field” between the translated and the translation.” (2014, p. 599). The resulting subtitles were compiled into a corpus and compared with the subtitles included on the DVD version of the film (Miyazaki, 2015) and analysed for their equivalence with the ST (on multiple semiotic channels). This analysis was done mostly in reference to Pedersen's strategies for translating ECRs (Pedersen, 2011). His list of proposed strategies includes retention, specification, direct translation, generalisation, substitution, omission, and the use of an “official translation” (Pedersen, 2011, p. 76). Specific instances of subtitles that highlight the use of these strategies will be discussed in-depth and compared to the DVD subtitles.

Of course, while the method may now be fleshed out, its limitations cannot be ignored. There are limitations to any study, but perhaps especially a study as narrowly-focused as this. These limitations are addressed below.

2.3. Limitations

The main limitations of this study are a) the subjectivity of the translations within the subtitles versus their accuracy, and b) the narrow focus of the study, since it is being carried out as a case study.

As is typical of translation studies, the entire process of creating these subtitles is subjective and bound to be coloured by the translator’s experience and bias; however, translations can differ widely depending on the translator yet still be accurate. Further to this, as Gorrée states, “a translation...is never finished and can always, however minimally, be improved upon” (1994, p. 231). Thus, should another researcher attempt to improve on the subtitles that are created for this study, the product will certainly differ yet again, and will most likely be open to further improvement.

Another factor that limits this study is the fact that the data is being gathered from a single source. There are many arguments for and against the use of a single case upon which to base research, but as Saldanha and O'Brien (2013, p. 211) point out, it is quite common in translation studies to conduct research based on a single text. However, it may be beneficial if a more general model can be developed and other films translated following the same model to test its efficacy further.

The choice of *Spirited Away* itself could also be seen as a limitation of the current study, given that the film is not entirely Japanese in nature, with elements being borrowed from other cultures or outright fabrications, such as the pseudo-Western style of the iconic bathhouse in the film (Osmond, 2008, p. 70) or the made-up monsters that Miyazaki inserted, such as No-Face (Denison, 2007; Osmond 2008). The film, however, was created by a Japanese studio for a primarily Japanese audience, and rather than see this as an insurmountable obstacle, this was regarded as part of the challenge of translating the film. The foreign and fictitious elements were intended to create a sense of mystery for the Japanese audience (Denison, 2007; Osmond, 2008), and conveying this "layer" of enigma further pushes the bounds of the semiotic model being tested.

Despite the limitations, the data collected and new translations made provided a wealth of insight into the semiotic process of translating film. Rather than discuss the results and their analysis separately, it seems more reasonable to examine these facets simultaneously due to the explorative, comparative nature of the study and the results it yielded.

3. Results and Analysis

To collect and record data and draw comparisons between the DVD subtitles and those created according to the semiotic model, they were tabulated alongside transcriptions (in Romanised Japanese) of the dialogue, more literal translations which merely convey the semantic aspect, and the subtitles found on the DVD version. These were then analysed and discussed with reference to three potential translation problems that were identified after a "close viewing" of the film, namely: dialect variation, "untranslatable" cultural references, and on-screen text.

3.1. Dialect Variation

In anime, the dialects or accents that characters use are often important stylistic devices crucial to the way a given character is defined and perceived (Howell, 2007). In most subtitling guidelines, however, it is recommended to neutralise any dialectal differences by translating into a standard form of the TT (Díaz-Cintas and Remael, 2007; Howell, 2007; Karamitroglou, 1998; et al.). This leads to an inevitable loss of what Howell (2007) terms "colour", a particular layer of semiotic data.

In *Spirited Away*, the various characters' dialects and speech patterns were invented by Miyazaki (Denison, 2007; Osmond, 2008), and are as much a part of their ethereal nature as other clues pertaining to their characterisation. Thus, in the new TT, rather than neutralising the dialects, they

were reflected in the subtitles to a certain extent by using non-standard English and slightly adjusting the speech patterns.

The character, Lin, is one of the first clear examples of this. Lin speaks in a coarse, rough manner in the original Japanese dialogue. This was somewhat lost in the DVD subtitles, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Lin's Dialect

Char.	Transcription	Literal translation	DVD subtitle	New subtitle
Lin	<i>Ningen ga icha! Yabai yo, sakki ue de oo sawagi shitetanda yo!</i>	A human is here! This is bad; they were just making a big commotion upstairs!	A human! You're in trouble! // They're having a fit about it upstairs	A human's in here! Crap, they were just freakin' out about it upstairs!

Given the more casual way Lin speaks throughout the film, the cruder interjection “crap” was chosen to translate “*yabai yo*,” a phrase that has multiple interpretations across dialects and social strata of Japanese, ranging from positive (“cool!”) to a strong negative, as in this case, where in English an expletive would be the most accurate interpretation. To a lesser extent, this was applied as well to add the more colloquial “freaking out” (with a with *-ing* pronounced colloquially with [n] instead of standard [ŋ], common in some dialects or some informal forms of English) to the TT instead of “making a commotion.” This projects the abrupt manner in which Lin speaks more clearly than the subtitles would were they translated into more neutral English, as in the DVD subtitles.

The antagonist Yubaba’s speech in the original dialogue also includes non-standard word endings, particles, pronunciations, etc. However, in the DVD subtitles, her speech was neutralised to a greater degree than Lin’s. The new subtitles attempt to convey her condescending tone. As such, her subtitles are a combination of colloquial and more proper English, along with more polite (albeit sarcastically so) phrasing. This is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Yubaba's Dialect

Char.	Transcription	Literal translation	DVD subtitle	New subtitle
Yubaba	<i>Urusai ne, shizuka ni shite o-kure.</i>	Noisy, isn't (it), be quiet	You're making a racket Keep it down	Noisy, aren't you? Be quiet for me.

The “for me” in “be quiet for me,” comes from the way the line “*shizuka ni shite o-kure*” is phrased in Japanese. It can be loosely glossed as follows—**be quiet** (*conjunctive*) (honorific prefix) **give to me** (*imperative*): “Do “being quiet” for me.” This was regarded as more nuanced than simply saying “be quiet” or “keep it down.” Thus it was translated in a somewhat gentler way, although her tone of voice in the clip conveys no warmth whatsoever.

Of the three prominent speech patterns audible in the selected clips, Kamaji's was neutralised the most in the DVD subtitles. His speech is marked by the same old-fashioned way of speaking as Yubaba's, with the addition of more masculine ways of speaking, such as the syllable ぞ (*zo*) audible at the ends of his sentences. Translating these elements of gendered speech into English is difficult, if not an insurmountable challenge (Nornes, 1999) Therefore, in both the DVD subtitles and the new subtitles, his speech was rendered mostly in the simpler, more neutral language typical of subtitling (Díaz-Cintas and Remael, 2007; Howell, 2007), as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Kamaji's Dialect

Char.	Transcription	Literal translation	DVD subtitle	New subtitle
Kamaji	<i>Mahōtsukai ni naritai to ii otta.</i>	(He) said he wanted to become a magic-user.	Said he wanted to learn magic	He said he wanted to learn how to use magic.
Kamaji	<i>Washi ha hantai shitanda.</i>	I was opposed (to it).	I didn't approve...	I was against it.
Kamaji	<i>Majou no deshi nanzo rokuna koto ga nai-tte na.</i>	(I) said there are no good things from being a sorcerer's apprentice.	becoming a sorcerer's apprentice... // a: I warned him,	Nothing good comes of being a witch's apprentice.

Kamaji	<i>Kikanainda yo.</i>	(He) didn't listen.	but he wouldn't listen	He didn't listen.
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These dialect and speech differences warranted independent examination, but they also constitute part of the next point to be examined.

3.2. “Untranslatable” Cultural References

A cultural reference supposedly becomes “untranslatable” when there is no target culture (TC) equivalent to the reference in the source culture (SC) – yet methods abound to circumvent these challenges, such as Pedersen’s abovementioned strategies for translating ECRs (2011, p. 76). Adding semiotranslation methods to models such as this could potentially allow the ECRs to be translated in a more effective manner that is readily accepted by the audience.

Within *Spirited Away*, three main issues considered to be untranslatable ECRs were identified: problematic monocultural references, and specific subsets of these, namely honorifics and orthography. These will be discussed in that order.

3.2.1. Problematic Monocultural References

This challenge can best be described as a cultural reference that is so specific to the SC that translation into the TT is almost impossible, as no near equivalent occurs in the TC. One of the best examples of this challenge is found in the fourth selected clip, “Kamaji helps Chihiro.” The ill Haku spits up a *hanko* (seal stamp) which is in the clutches of what appears to be a black slug. The slug attempts to escape. Chihiro pursues and stomps on it, causing it to explode in a spectacular splatter of black goo. Kamaji immediately calls out “*engacho!*” and a shivering Chihiro creates a circle with her thumbs and index fingers of both hands. Kamaji breaks the circle with a motion similar to a karate chop, shouting “*Kitta!*” (“It's cut!”), as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

“Engacho”

Source: Miyazaki, 2015

Engacho is a somewhat outdated ritual that was once commonplace among Japanese children, performed when one child stepped in something unsavoury or did something else that could be considered to make the child dirty. If they immediately performed *Engacho*, the dirt or bad luck would be nullified, and the child would become “clean” again; if they failed, they would be disallowed to touch the other children (Asakura, 2017, p. 23). Despite an insightful article by a writer by the moniker of “SomeGuy” (2008) which indicates that the gesture “holds about as much spiritual cleansing strength as a North American child “passing cooties” by tagging another”, in the context of the scene with its implications of magic and the fantastical nature of the spirit world as a whole, the best translation was decided to be “Break the curse!”. Chihiro and, by extension the audience, later finds out the slug was indeed the manifestation of a protective spell, which had to be broken or it would have negatively affected Chihiro since she’d touched the *hanko*.

The DVD subtitles entirely omitted this information, and, considering the on-screen actions, the translations rendered are no more understandable to the viewer than the ST dialogue. The subtitles are again compared in Table 4.

Table 4

“Engacho” Vocabulary

Char.	Transcription	Literal translation	DVD subtitle	New subtitle
Kamaji	<i>Engacho, Sei!</i>	<i>Engacho, Sen!</i>	Gross, gross, Sen!	Break the curse!
	<i>Engacho!</i>	Engacho!	Totally gross	Sen! Break it!
Kamaji	<i>Kitta!</i>	(It's) cut!	Clean	It's broken!

Hopefully, by considering the on-screen visuals as well as the actual meaning of the *engacho* ritual, the new subtitles are more faithful than those on the DVD, despite the monocultural reference.

3.2.2. Honorifics

Japanese sociolinguistic norms require the use of an extensive system of politeness and formality markers, including honorific terms that are used to indicate both the speaker and the hearer's relative status. Translating into a language such as English, where the expression of politeness is not grammaticalized, can be a difficult task. Two clear instances of the two distinct aspects appear in the translated clips, one in “Lin appears,” and one in “Chihiro meets Yubaba”.

In the former, Chihiro and the usually rough-spoken Lin run into one of the visiting kami (gods), the silent and enigmatic “Radish Spirit.” Lin switches to honorific speech (*keigo*), as shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Keigo

Char.	Transcription	Literal translation	DVD subtitle	New subtitle
Lin	<i>O-kyaku-sama, kono erebeeta ha ue ni mairimasen. Hoka wo o-sagashi kudasai.</i>	Guest, this elevator doesn't go up. Please look for another.	This elevator is not in service, sir Please use another	Sir, this elevator doesn't go up. Please find another one.

This is often used when speaking to customers, to show respect to them as one's guest. Typical of *keigo*, Lin adds an honorific prefix and suffix to the word *kyaku* (“guest,” “customer”) and uses both *kenjogo* (humble speech) and *sonkeigo* (respectful speech) in these lines: the verb *mairu* is *kenjogo* for 'go' (its dictionary form is *iku*), and her phrasing of *o-sagashi kudasai* is *sonkeigo*, with an honorific

before the continuous form of the verb followed by *kudasai*, which indicates an honorific request. Unless one adds “humbly” and “respectfully” into the TT, which is unwieldy, it is difficult to convey the distinct *us/them* patterns, and the coded politeness of the ST reflected in the shift in diction. Ultimately it was deemed best to change the register as much as possible to reflect formality as well as using English’s best equivalents of the honorifics: “Sir” and “Madam.”

While “*O-kyaku-sama*” is by now a somewhat generic phrase referring to a customer, a marked instance of the usage of the honorific “*-sama*” occurs in “Chihiro meets Yubaba,” when Chihiro (now called Sen) is talking to Haku. This is shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Honorifics

Char.	Transcription	Literal translation	DVD subtitle	New subtitle
Haku	<i>Mudaguchi wo kikuna. Watashi no koto ha, Haku-sama to yobe.</i>	Don’t prattle. About me, call (me) Haku-sama.	No idle chatter // Call me Master Haku	Don’t chatter. And you will call me Master Haku.

While throughout the clips other honorifics such as the prefix *o-* were either omitted due to difficulties translating them without adding unnecessary length to the subtitles, or, as in the case of most instances of *-san* and *-sama*, simply transliterated on the assumption that the intended audience is familiar with them, Haku’s case is exceptional. In an interesting analysis of *Spirited Away* and its translation, Asakura explains this quite effectively:

“Haku-sama” is always translated as “Master Haku” (Direct translation of honorific + Retention) in the English TTs. The connotation of “sama” is highly relevant because Haku is special and occupies a highly important position in the hierarchy of the bathhouse. [...] The use of the word “master” shows his importance and, at the same time, distinguishes him from other bathhouse staff. (2017, p. 59–60)

3.2.3. Orthography

For some unknown reason, the on-screen text was never translated in the DVD version, despite there being many instances of signs and other writing appearing that could add to the plot.

One of the pivotal scenes to the plot of the movie is in “Chihiro meets Yubaba,” when Yubaba literally takes Chihiro’s name from her, off the page of a contract, and replaces it with the name Sen. This is how Yubaba controls Sen and keeps her from the real world, effectively enslaving her in the spirit realm. More to the point, this scene was also one of the deciding factors to retranslate the film, as

there is little explanation for what is happening on screen in most translations. This leaves viewers who are not able to read Japanese confused as to how the name “Chihiro” can become “Sen” by merely deleting some of the writing.

Figure 4

Chihiro Loses Her Name



Source: Miyazaki, 2015; Sanders, 2018

As can be seen in Figure 4, Chihiro’s name is written on the screen as 千尋 (Chihiro, “a thousand fathoms”). The character 千 (meaning “thousand”) can be read as “chi,” as in Chihiro, or as “sen.” The latter pronunciation is used more commonly when the character is not part of a compound. The *meaning* of the character which is left behind is not altered, but the pronunciation is. Unfortunately, explaining this via subtitles is virtually impossible, unless resorting to fansub-style supertitles containing translation notes. It has also been noted that Chihiro misspelt her family name, Ogino, with the wrong *kanji* (Asakura, 2017, p. 23; Osmond, 2008) Chihiro wrote “Ogino” with *kanji* resembling 荻野, when it should, in fact, read 荻野. This has spawned several theories that Chihiro deliberately did not give up her real name and thus was able to retain some memory of her former life and a level of freedom from Yubaba. Haku does warn Chihiro earlier on in the film not to let Yubaba steal her name, after all. This has not been commented on by Studio Ghibli or Miyazaki himself, however, and so these theories are still mere speculation. Nevertheless, this “mistake” was reflected in the newly-created subtitle by turning the letter *g* in “Ogino” back to front.

3.2.4. On-Screen Text

To continue with the final theme of the previous subsection, the translation of on-screen text was the next major issue identified in the subtitling of the film. Some, such as Osmond (2008) argue that the signs that appear in *Spirited Away* are “easter eggs” for those that can read Japanese but add nothing to the plot and therefore do not need to be translated; however, an argument against this

would be that they help towards the world-building of the spirit realm, adding to what the same author describes as the disconcerting feeling about the town (Osmond, 2008, p. 60) due to signs reading things like “three thousand eyeballs,” “grilled demon skins,” “funeral clothing” and “worms”. Throughout the DVD, none of the on-screen text is translated, save for the English dubbed version which helpfully explains what the bathhouse is because of a mere single written character: the way a viewer who can read Japanese can tell what the strange building is, is not by the kanji 油 (abura, “oil, fat”) on the flag billowing in the wind, but by the single hiragana 湯 (yu) on the blue curtain over the door. This character implies “hot water,” and marks the building as a bathhouse. In the dub, Chihiro states “it’s a bathhouse” as the camera pans up the building. The viewer watching the subtitled version, however, is left with no explanation, although they may be familiar with the appearance of an onsen (a public bath or hot spring) given the assumed audience.

In contrast to the DVD subtitles, in the new subtitles, the text on-screen was translated throughout, including all of the abovementioned kanji “abura,” which served as decoration in many places, given that it is representative of the bathhouse itself: the bathhouse is called Aburaya (油屋).

Several interesting challenges arose while translating the signage, including the fact that some of the writing was not only written from right to left (that is, according to a now outdated mode of writing in the opposite direction to that of modern Japanese) but was sometimes mirrored as well, as is illustrated in Figure 5, where the latter third of the sign in the centre of the screen appears backwards.

Figure 5

?rehtegoT teG



Source: Miyazaki, 2015; Sanders, 2018

Besides a theory posited by Ewens (2016) that this was done deliberately to reflect Chihiro’s uneasiness walking through the town, there is no definite explanation to be found for the meaning

behind this mirroring, but this was nevertheless reflected in the subtitle, as there is plausibly some semiotic significance to the changes in the writing.

Regrettably, due to the limitations of either the subtitling software used or perhaps even the subtitler herself, some of the signs were also left untranslated in the new subtitles due to their movement as part of the panning of a scene; the subtitles could not be made to stay fixed to their location relative to the on-screen text.

The decision to subtitle the on-screen text was made based on the need for consistency as well as on the intended audience; those who have an active interest in Japanese culture and language would likely want to know what the writing means. The fact that in the DVD subtitles certain essential information that adds to the overall understanding of the film is withheld from a vast majority of the audience is unfortunate, and a more complete translation would not have neglected these aspects.

4. Conclusion

This study explored whether a semiotic model for translation could potentially yield more complete, more significantly equivalent subtitles for the film *Spirited Away*. By being provided with subtitles that somewhat more holistically capture the relevant information and semiotic signs in both the dialogue and on-screen events, viewers can have a more equivalent translation to draw on when watching films like *Spirited Away*. The subtitles created for this study endeavour specifically to bridge cultural gaps and provide a more relatable translation than the DVD version.

More information is made available to help the viewer interpret the film, such as the translation of background text. However, many of these additions are directed at a particular type of audience, especially those familiar with the techniques employed in fansubbing. These subtitles break many of the tacit rules of subtitling and thus may not be suitable for a more general audience and are not intended to be accessible to those who are deaf or hard of hearing. There is potential for this to be corrected, however, given enough leeway on the prescriptions for subtitling and captioning for a broader range of audiences.

It would be still more useful for this study to ask viewers to watch the clips as subtitled in the DVD version as well as the new subtitles created according to the semiotic model. A survey could then be undertaken to ascertain the level to which their understanding of the scenes is improved, if at all.

Due to the narrow focus of the study, there is little room to apply the model used or the findings of this study to other films. However, it may be worth noting that the semiotic model, due to its very nature, might be adapted on a case-by-case basis.

By further studying and applying the understanding of semiotics from a Japanese perspective such as that of Ikegami (1991a) when creating a model for the semiotranslation of a Japanese film, an even more accurate representation of the signs in the ST could be formed; likewise, a better understanding

of Japanese culture and worldviews in general than available to this author may improve the semiotranslation of this film and other Japanese animations that much more.

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