

Pivot Subtitling on Netflix: The Case of *Squid Game*

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of English as a pivot language in the Turkish subtitles of *Squid Game*. As an integral part of global media, pivot subtitling (indirect subtitle translation) should not be understood as a response to an alleged talent crunch of subtitling professionals but rather as a deliberate policy and strategy pursued by streaming services and their language service providers to streamline subtitling workflows between non-English language pairs. The present research uncovers the multilingual nature of this practice and exposes its limitations through a case study of the Turkish subtitles of *Squid Game*. The findings suggest that English as a pivot language may have limitations in conveying the full range of sociopragmatic aspects present in the Korean discourse. This has implications for the social dynamics between the characters and the thematic undertones of the series. Beyond its function as a pivot language, English also serves as a dominant cultural filter that mediates Korean culture into downstream languages through an Anglo-American lens, which may obscure the stratified facets of Korean and impose an added layer of cultural interpretation on target viewers.

Key words: pivot subtitling, pivot templates, Netflix, *Squid Game*, indirect translation, pivot audiovisual translation

Introduction

With the proliferation of video-on-demand (VoD) services, indirect translation has emerged as a prominent strategy for the global distribution of regional, non-English content. Despite the growing reliance on indirect translation in the audiovisual translation (AVT) industry, the phenomenon has received scant and relatively recent attention within Translation Studies.

Firstly, there is terminological confusion surrounding the phenomenon. Rosa et al. (2017) showcase 18 distinct terms denoting the process and product of indirect translation. Within the domain of AVT, *pivot* (Gottlieb, 1994; Pedersen, 2011) is more prevalent compared to other associated terms, including *indirect*, *relay* (Dollerup, 2000), *second hand* (Toury, 2012), or *re-translation*. *Pivot subtitling* (Gottlieb, 1994; Gambier, 2003; Oziemblewska & Szarkowska, 2020; Casas-Tost & Bustins, 2021; Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021; Dallı, 2023; Künzli, 2023; Torres-Simón et al., 2023; Valdez et al., 2023), in particular, is a well-established term to describe subtitles translated via an intermediary language. The evident hyponym of indirect translation for AVT, namely *indirect AVT*, is almost absent from the literature, except for a single instance identified in Pięta (2017). The present study adopts the term *pivot subtitling* in order to maintain terminological integrity within the field.

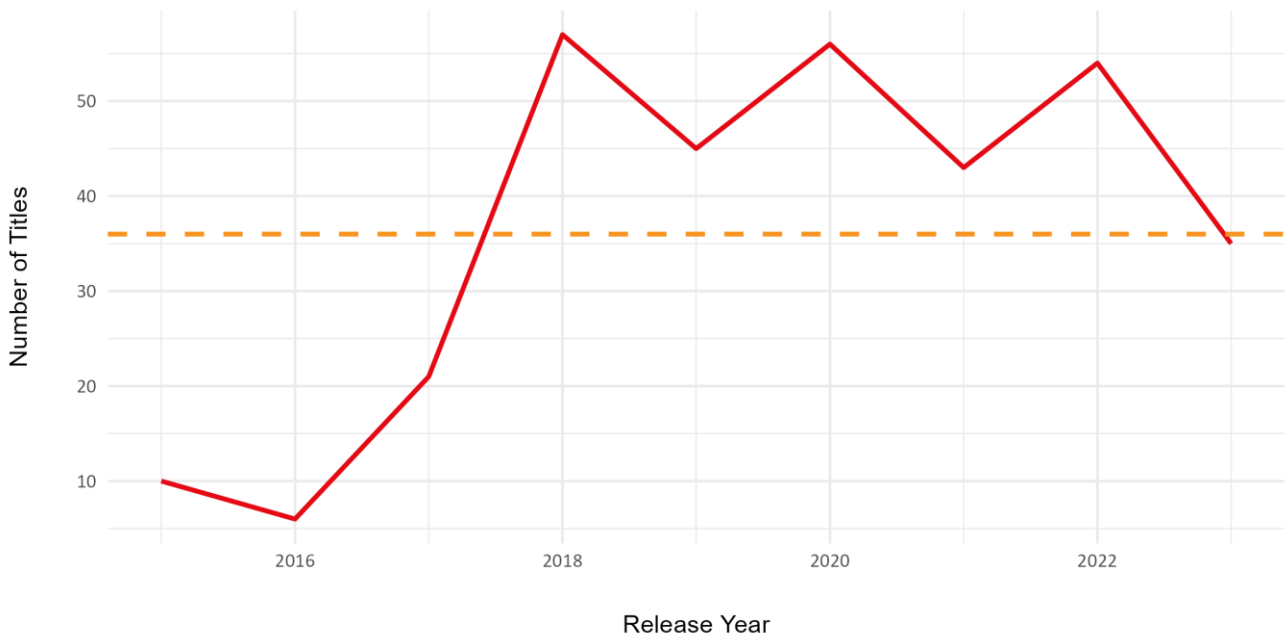
Pivot subtitling is a strategic response to the surging worldwide demand for instant access to regional and non-English content on streaming platforms. The influx of non-English content to VoD services can be attributed to a variety of factors, including cultural trends as well as governmental and industry-led initiatives that promote cultural diversity. The European Union's (2020) Audiovisual Media Services Directive, for example, requires VoD services to "secure at least 30% share of European works in their catalogues" (p. 10) in an attempt to promote the proliferation of domestic productions and safeguard media pluralism. The directive's ongoing influence might play a partial role in the growing collection of European content on Netflix Türkiye. In December 2023, the platform featured a diverse range of European titles, including 441 Spanish, 140 French, and 84 German titles (Dallı & Sung, 2024).

Similarly, *Hallyu*¹ (한류) or the Korean Wave (Shim, 2006), i.e., global interest in South Korean popular culture, is attracting a flood of Korean original content to VoD services. To capitalize on this trend, platforms have channeled notable financial resources, as evidenced by Netflix's \$500 million investment in Korean originals in 2021 (Merican, 2021), which yielded the global success of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021a) and revitalized the company's stock value. In December 2023, Netflix Türkiye featured nearly 400 Korean productions (Dallı & Sung, 2024). Figure 1 contextualizes the annual increase in the volume of Korean dramas (episodic titles) on Netflix Türkiye, underscored by the 9.3-fold surge in the number of dramas between 2016 and 2018. The dashed line represents the overall mean of Korean dramas released per year.

¹ Korean terms are Romanized according to the McCune-Reischauer system.

Figure 1

Number of Korean Dramas Released Each Year on Netflix Türkiye



Source: Author's manual data collection (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11483161>).

As such, the proliferation of regional media on streaming platforms entails dubbing and subtitling between non-English language pairs, such as Korean and Turkish.

To streamline subtitling workflows involving *emerging* language pairs (e.g., Korean and Turkish), master templates (Georgakopoulou, 2019) are typically repurposed as pivot templates (PTs) to pivot through an intermediary language (e.g., English), eliminating the source language (SL) variable and centralizing multilingual translation projects with this third language. These mediating templates contain the segmented and spotted subtitles in an intermediate third language and serve as a bridge between the original audiovisual production and the target subtitles to facilitate indirect translation. Pivot subtitling workflows are ideally coordinated through PTs created for the exclusive purpose of indirect translation. For example, in the event that English is designated as an intermediary language, there should ideally be two distinct English files: one to serve as commercial subtitles for viewership, and the other to function as a PT to facilitate indirect translation. Unlike publicly available subtitles, which are typically tailored for a specific target audience, PTs should be free from the constraints of subtitling norms of the intermediary culture. In theory, the absence of a target audience allows for a more literal rendering and minimizes the introduction of additional cultural layers between the audiovisual source and the target subtitles.

It is important to stress that pivot subtitling is not strictly a necessity but rather a deliberate policy and strategy pursued by VoD services and their vendors for cost-efficiency and operational feasibility. Although Netflix Türkiye featured approximately 400 Korean productions as of December 2023,

none of its preferred² language service providers (LSPs) onboarded Korean-to-Turkish subtitlers. A recent survey study (Dallı & Sung, 2024) of 80 Turkish subtitlers of Korean content found that a mere 4% reported some knowledge in Korean, with only 1% professed plus-intermediate proficiency. Nevertheless, SL proficiency alone does not imply direct translation, as the study also unveiled that all Turkish subtitlers, irrespective of their level of Korean proficiency, used English PTs to translate Korean content into Turkish. This is partly because Netflix's Global Rate Card³ for timed text creation exclusively lists rates for English-to-Turkish and Turkish-to-English subtitling, reinforcing the fact that all Korean content on Netflix Türkiye gets translated into Turkish using English as a pivot language. There are no established rates for Korean-to-Turkish translation in either Netflix's Global Rate Card or ÇEVBİR's⁴ tariff for subtitle translation. On the other hand, from a vendor's point of view, the recruitment of Turkish subtitlers based on English proficiency tests rationalizes the pivot towards English-centric localization. Direct subtitling would also require quality reviewers proficient in the SL, thereby requiring additional human resources and payment procedures to compensate for Korean-to-Turkish direct translation and quality assurance services.

On a parallel basis, today's mediascape is characterized by a sense of immediacy, driving VoD platforms to streamline their content delivery systems to satisfy the global appetite for instant and on-demand viewing. In turn, translating between emerging language combinations in ever-shorter deadlines is a challenge for subtitling workflows, given the multitude of language pairs and the alleged shortage of specialized translators (Stasimioti, 2022). The global distribution of media is often facilitated through simultaneously shipped (sim-ship) releases. Originally popularized in the game localization industry (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006), sim-ship envisions the simultaneous release of content across all markets and can only be executed when translation is available in all languages simultaneously. The operational impact of sim-ship is evident in the multiplicity of Turkish subtitlers per Korean drama. Figure 2 illustrates that although a Korean drama may maintain a consistent narrative progression throughout different episodes, it may still be translated by multiple subtitlers distributed across the episodes. The dashed line represents the overall mean of subtitlers per title, while the error bars represent the standard deviation.

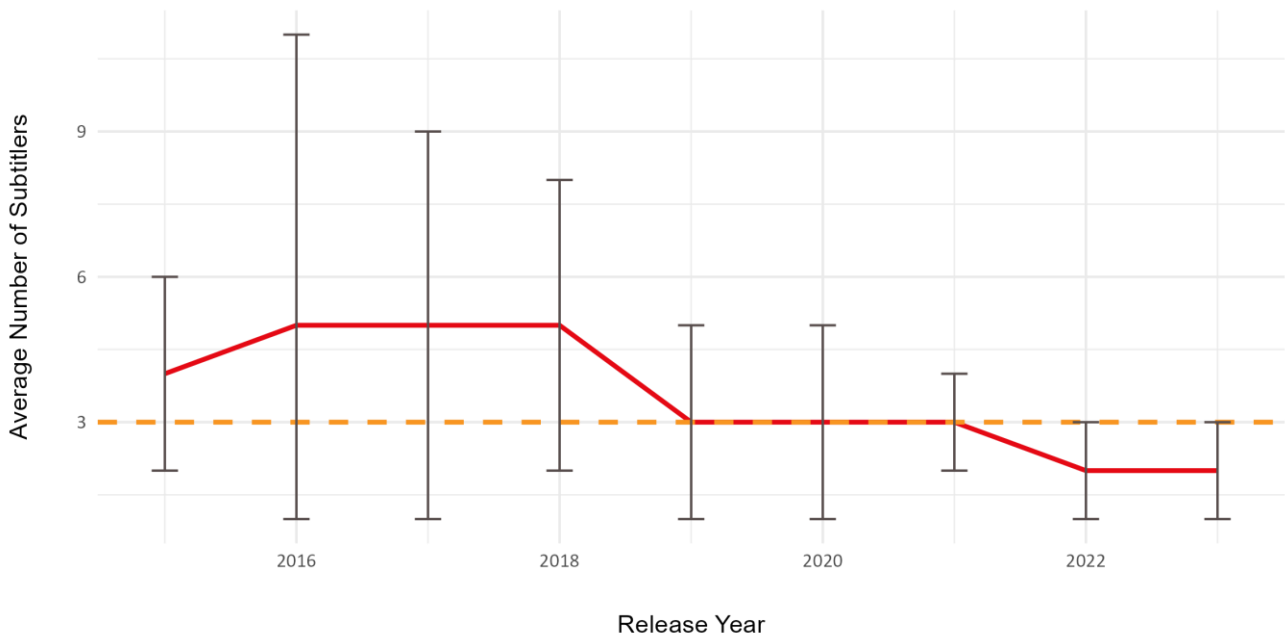
² Netflix outsources content localization to a network of preferred LSPs. These vendors are grouped under two programs: [Direct Timed Text \(DTT\)](#) and [Netflix Preferred Fulfillment Partners \(NPFPS\)](#). More info can be found on their websites.

³ Netflix's "Global Rate Card" establishes standardized pricing for content preparation and delivery, including timed text creation and origination, i.e., translation. It is specifically targeted at their Netflix Preferred Fulfillment Partners (NPFPS), a network of vetted media fulfillment companies. <https://nfp.netflixstudios.com/program-conditions#Global-Rate-Card>

⁴ ÇEVBİR stands for "Çevirmenler Meslek Birliği", which translates to "Professional Association of Translators" in English. This Türkiye-based organization is dedicated to supporting and advocating for professional translators. Their tariff is available at <https://cevbir.org.tr/avt/altyazi-cevirisi-ve-baglanti-diger-hizmetlere-iliskin-tarife>

Figure 2

Yearly Average Number of Turkish Subtitlers per Korean Drama on Netflix Türkiye



Source: Author's manual data collection (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11483161>).

In particular, the 18-episode drama *Yong-pal* (Moon, 2015) serves as a prime example of the logistics of sim-ship, as it was translated into Turkish by 18 different subtitlers, one per episode. This is followed by the 26-episode *Hello, my Twenties!* (Ham et al., 2016), which has 16 subtitlers. The per-episode allocation of subtitlers reflects sim-ship scheduling and raises concerns about the consistency and terminological uniformity of translations, especially given the reliance on English as the pivot language. While the average number of Turkish subtitlers per Korean drama has been steadily decreasing, recent releases like the 16-episode *Welcome to Samdal-ri* (Park, 2023) and the 16-episode *Doctor Slump* (Kim et al., 2024) still involve multiple translators per series. This trend suggests that achieving a single subtitler per Korean drama episode remains elusive, and further research is warranted to explore if two is indeed too many for translating episodic content. Quality concerns aside, there is a positive correlation between pivot subtitling and sim-ship, particularly in the context of Turkish subtitles of Korean content on Netflix Türkiye.

Pivot subtitling stands as the main practice that defines how Turkish viewers access Korean content on Netflix Türkiye, and this strategy is sustained through the implementation of English-centric rates and onboarding procedures, whereby vendors strategically maximize their pool of Turkish subtitlers translating from English. Given its integral role and scope in the global distribution of regional media, pivot subtitling merits further investigation from Translation Studies and its granular subfield of AVT. Focusing on the Turkish subtitles of the South Korean megahit series *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021a), this qualitative case study explores the concrete effects and translational aspects of pivot subtitling, particularly the impact of English as a pivot language in the translation of Korean media into Turkish.

The next section presents a comparative evaluation of the English, Korean, and Turkish languages to lay the groundwork for the qualitative case study of *Squid Game*'s Turkish pivot subtitles.

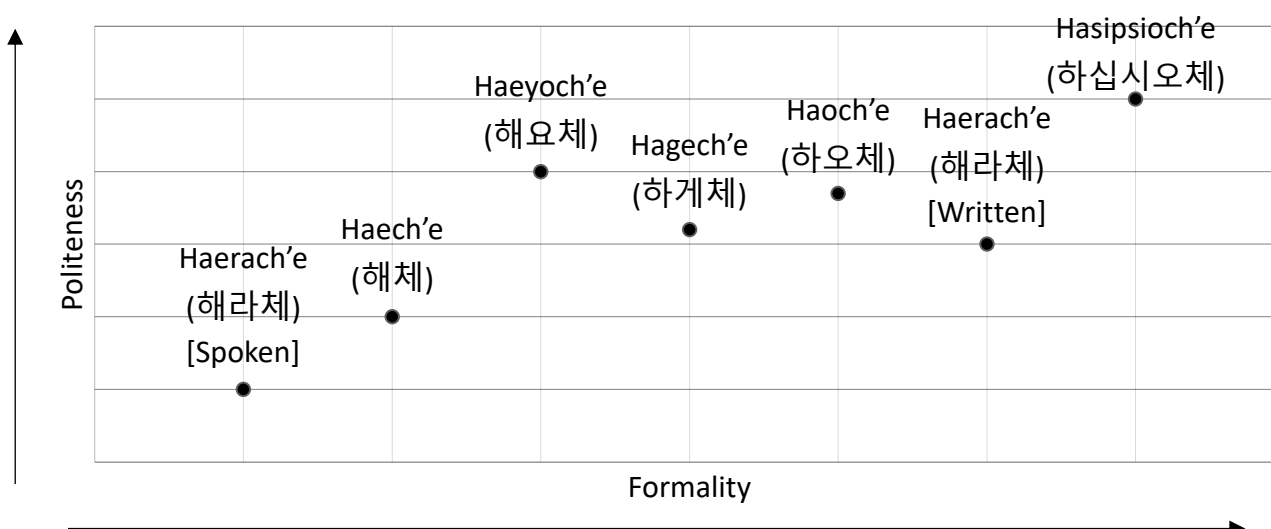
1. Comparative Overview of English, Korean, and Turkish Languages

As Korean content and indirect translation proliferate on Netflix Türkiye, the question remains: what is the impact of English as the pivot language in the Turkish subtitles of Korean content? This necessitates a grasp of the structural, syntactic, and semantic aspects of all three languages. But beyond a linguistic exercise, this comparative approach aims to unravel the multilingual nature of pivot subtitling and offer insights into both its challenges and possibilities.

Unlike English's subject-verb-object order, Korean and Turkish follow a subject-object-verb structure. Both Korean and Turkish are agglutinative languages, meaning they build words by adding affixes for grammatical concepts (tense, plurality, etc.). Each syllable can potentially alter the word's meaning. However, the true impact of English as a pivot language lies within the sociopragmatic dimension, i.e., how language functions in social contexts (Levinson, 1983). It is within this communicative realm that the Confucian roots of Korean culture, language, and society come into play (Yoon, 2004). Confucian values emphasize social order, which is reflected in Korean's elaborate honorifics system with marked distinctions in linguistic features depending on the speaker's relationship to the listener, their age, and social status. Korean honorifics are organized into hierarchical speech levels, each associated with distinct verb paradigms (i.e., inflectional patterns). Sohn (1999) proposes that contemporary Korean uses six different verb paradigms:

Figure 3

Hierarchical Distribution of Verb Paradigms in Contemporary Korean



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Sohn (1999).

These verb paradigms encompass a wide array of sentence functions, spanning from declaratives to exclamatives, interrogatives, and imperatives, each accompanied by different sentence enders (I. Lee & Ramsey, 2000). While this study cannot cover every speech level, it is essential to examine the four most prevalent ones:

Table 1

Descriptions of Common Speech Levels and Verb Paradigms in Korean

Speech level	Verb paradigm	Usage
Deferential	<i>Hasipsioch'e</i> (하십시오체)	Between strangers, to customers, work meetings, presentations, news broadcasts, etc.
Polite	<i>Haeyoch'e</i> (해요체)	Between strangers of similar age, between colleagues, social media interactions, etc.
Informal	<i>Haech'e</i> (해체)	Between close friends, to younger listeners, social inferiors, etc.
Impersonal/impolite	<i>Haerach'e</i> (해라체)	Impersonal in written Korean, third-person perspective; impolite in spoken Korean, between friends, to children.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Hasipsioch'e (하십시오체) represents the utmost formality and deference and is characterized by the suffix *-(sŭ)mnida* ([-스]ㅂ니다) in the declarative mood and *-si* (-시) in the indicative mood. This verb paradigm establishes a respectful distance between the speaker and the listener and is appropriate for formal settings. *Haeyoch'e* (해요체) embodies a blend of casualness and politeness, marked by the *-yo* (-요) ending, commonly observed in interactions among strangers of similar age. The use of the honorific suffix *-si* (-시) in this verb paradigm implies deference. On the other hand, *haech'e* (해체) denotes informality and conveys intimacy. It is often used between close friends or in addressing younger or socially inferior people. Lastly, *haerach'e* (해라체) presents different forms in written and spoken Korean. In written Korean, it reflects impersonality through a third-person style, and in spoken Korean, it is typically used between friends or to children (I. Lee & Ramsey, 2000).

As such, Korean speech levels reflect intricate social dynamics (Kiaer, 2017). Verb paradigms provide a perspective through which speakers can navigate through age, social status, and relationships. Sohn (1999) argues that the concept of honorifics is ingrained in Korean to such an extent that

it is practically impossible to form a Korean sentence without first addressing interpersonal relations. Disparities in interpersonal perspectives pose a common problem for non-equivalence in translation (Baker, 1992/2011), and the multifaceted nature of Korean speech levels exacerbates this challenge. The morphological units of Korean verb paradigms, crucial for expressing interpersonal relations, often become invisible in English subtitles due to grammatical differences. For Kiaer (2019), *invisibles* are “systems and contexts that exist in the source language but not in the target language” (p. 94). Kiaer and L. Kim (2022) add that this invisibility is multimodal; although nonverbal cues are vital in interpersonal interactions, they cannot be translated in subtitles.

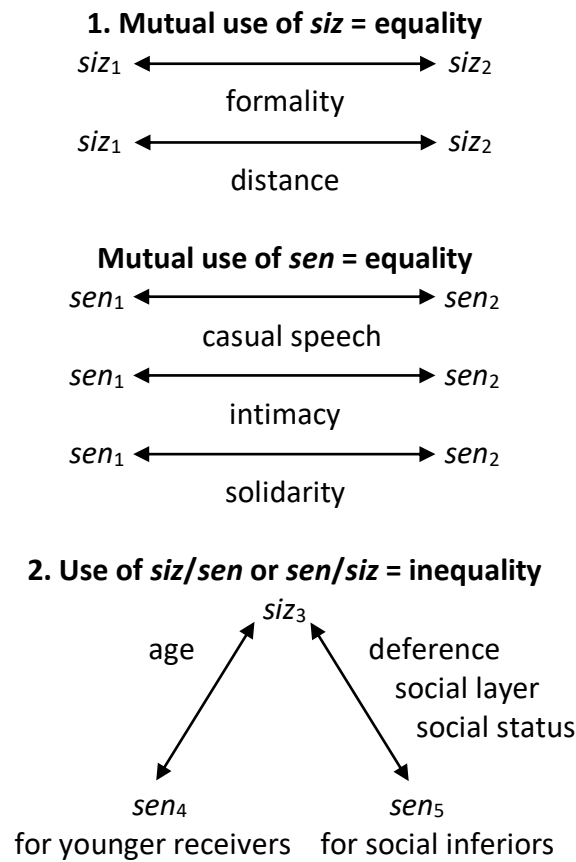
Terms of address serve as the primary conduit through which English mediates Korean social relations (Kiaer, 2017). While English offers formal options like “sir,” “mister,” and “ma’am,” these are often gender-specific, except for certain professions such as “doctor” and “professor”. On the other hand, Korean has an extensive array of address terms due to the restricted use of second-person pronouns, which are reserved for specific contexts, such as informal conversations among friends. For instance, unlike English speakers who may use the second-person pronoun “you” when addressing a teacher, Korean speakers would avoid “you” and use the respectful term *sŏnsaengnim* (선생님), i.e., teacher. Using a second-person pronoun in such a scenario would be perceived as impolite in Korean culture. This extends to kinship terms denoting age differences, such as *hyŏng* (형), “older brother,” and *nuna* (누나), “older sister”. The extensive repertoire of address terms in Korean presents a challenge for translation into English (Sung et al., 2022), particularly in light of the spatiotemporal constraints inherent to subtitling (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021).

This is not necessarily the case in Korean-to-Turkish direct translation. Turkish morphosyntax includes features similar to Korean honorific markers (Türközü, 2009), and politeness is a crucial aspect of communication in Turkish (Zeyrek, 2001). While Turkish speech levels are not as elaborate as Korean, formality and respect remain central to interpersonal interactions. Similar to Korean, Turkish uses terms of address and verb conjugations to navigate social dynamics (Bayyurt & Bayraktaroğlu, 2001). Turkish has a clear T–V distinction in the second-person pronouns *sen* (second-person singular you) and *siz* (second-person plural you), each of which entails different verbal inflection patterns. This double-edged system reflects power and solidarity dimensions within social relationships.

Turkish builds upon this T–V distinction in the imperative mood of verbs, featuring three forms: singular, plural, and double plural. The informal *sen* (singular you) uses the uninflected verb stem. The polite second-person plural *siz* is inflected with the suffixes *-in*, *-in*, *-un*, and *-ün*, depending on the final vowel of the verb stem. Finally, the highly formal *sizler* (double plural you) is distinguished by the suffixes *-iniz*, *-iniz*, *-unuz*, and *-ünüz*. This triple imperative system exhibits parallelism with the Korean verb paradigms *haech’e*, *haeyoch’e*, and *hasipsioch’e*, respectively.

Figure 4

Social Implications of sen/siz (T/V)



Source: König, 1990, pp. 183–184.

Table 2

Parallelism Between Imperative Forms in Turkish and Their Equivalent Verb Paradigms in Korean

Imperative mood	Turkish	Korean
Informal, non-polite	<i>Sen</i> (second-person singular)	해체 (<i>haech'e</i>)
Semi-formal, polite	<i>Siz</i> (second-person plural)	해요체 (<i>haeyoch'e</i>)
Formal, polite	<i>Sizler</i> (second-person double plural)	하십시오체 (<i>hasipsioch'e</i>)

Source: Author's own elaboration.

While a deeper analysis of this Korean-Turkish modal overlap falls outside this article's scope, exploring their similarities is valuable for understanding the impact of English as a pivot language.

Given the absence of politeness distinctions in English verbal inflection, a unit-for-unit translation of the forms outlined in Figure 3 and Table 2 is unattainable. Instead, it is at the broader level of *tone* that English can convey interpersonal nuances encapsulated in inflectional particles (Kiaer, 2019). Nonetheless, the spatiotemporal “constraints” (Titford, 1982) inherent in subtitling, in addition to its synchronous and “multimodal” (Pérez-González, 2014) nature, pose practical challenges to achieving broader translation strategies. The synchronous flow with the audiovisual source makes it difficult to introduce or replace information in the subtitles.

The transition between honorific and non-honorific forms plays a pivotal role in communication. Both Korean and Turkish employ dedicated terminology to denote this linguistic shift. In Korean, *mal nok'i* (말 놓기) signifies the act of “dropping speech”, i.e., marking the transition from honorific to informal language use. Similarly, *nŏnadŏri* (너나들이) literally translates to “you-and-I”, indicating the use of casual pronouns. Similarly, Turkish uses *teklifsiz konuşma* for casual speech. More nuanced is *senli benli konuşma*, which literally translates to “speaking you-and-I”. This phrase signifies a shift from polite plural pronouns and their associated verb paradigms to informal singular forms, indicating a heightened level of intimacy. Incorrect pronoun and verb usage in either language can be seen as impolite and potentially cause misunderstandings.

This section has explored the linguistic convergences between Korean and Turkish to shed light on the translational complexities arising from the use of English as a pivot language. It is hypothesized that although Turkish boasts the grammatical tools to convey Korean honorifics to some degree, English PTs may introduce a cultural and linguistic barrier. If this hypothesis is confirmed, an analysis of such discrepancies can pinpoint areas where English proves inadequate in accurately pivoting the Korean content into Turkish. In turn, a better understanding of these shortcomings can facilitate the development of targeted annotation guidelines and the provision of supplementary materials.

2. Qualitative Case Study of *Squid Game*'s Turkish Pivot Subtitles

Building upon the comparative groundwork outlined previously, this qualitative case study analyzes the translational impact of English as a pivot language in the Turkish subtitles of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021a). This South Korean survival drama series, recently embroiled in a controversy over the accuracy of its English subtitles (BBC, 2021; Cho, 2021; Groskop, 2021; Lim, 2021; Namkung, 2021; Walden, 2021), presents a compelling case study. A viral social media debate sparked by user Youngmi Mayer thrust the show's English subtitles into the spotlight, prompting discussions about quality and leading Netflix to re-evaluate the subtitles (Deck, 2023). In contrast, the Turkish subtitles have received minimal public attention, with discussions limited to isolated instances on blogs (Yalın, 2021) or social media threads. However, beyond the controversy surrounding its English subtitles, *Squid Game*, with its complex portrayal of social criticism, betrayal, and intricate power dynamics, offers a fertile ground for examining the effectiveness of English as a pivot language for conveying these subtleties in the Turkish subtitles.

As outlined in the Introduction, it is standard practice to subtitle Korean media to Turkish via English, primarily due to financial and project management considerations. This practice also holds true for the megahit series *Squid Game*. The Turkish subtitler, as observed on their ProZ profile, does not explicitly list Korean among their working language pairs. Intriguingly, the use of a pivot language remains unacknowledged in the subtitler credit, with Turkish subtitles presented in the form of pseudo-direct translation (Rosa et al., 2017) without any explicit reference to indirect translation. The scope of this case study is confined to product analysis, as the subtitler declined to grant an interview regarding their translation decisions, which can be attributed to confidentiality obligations. While there is reported use of post-editing machine translation in the Spanish version of the series (De Partearroyo, 2021), the close correspondence between the English and Turkish subtitles suggests the potential reuse of readily available English subtitles as a PT for indirect translation into Turkish. Since the PT is not publicly accessible, the study uses the commercially available English subtitles as the primary source of reference.

As detailed in Section 1, the translation of Korean Address Terms and Speech Levels into English poses practical challenges (Kiaer, 2019; Sung et al., 2022), particularly in subtitling (Kiaer & L. Kim, 2022). This case study, therefore, focuses primarily on this sociopragmatic aspect of language and analyzes the translation of these linguistic features. However, Ringmar (2007) reminds us that pivot languages often hold a dominant cultural position compared to source and target cultures. Considering this, an analysis of the translation of Cultural References complements the linguistic focus of the study. This broader approach can help us to determine whether the Anglo-American perspective arising from English might unintentionally marginalize the source and target cultural contexts.

2.1. Address Terms

As pointed out in Section 1, the Korean language has a diverse array of address terms that are indicative of social hierarchy and the level of solidarity between the speaker and the recipient (Sohn, 1999). Korean personal pronouns are used only in limited circumstances, and Korean speakers commonly use professional titles or kinship terms to address their referents. This pragmatic aspect of address terms plays a key function in shaping the narrative propulsion and thematic undercurrents of *Squid Game*.

A case in point would be the honorific address term *sajangnim* (사장님, i.e., dear [님] boss [사장]). Ali, a migrant worker, uses this term in a unique way to show respect to his friends (Example 1). This scene unfolds after the players decide to exit the games, and Ali and Sang-woo (the anti-villain) are dropped off on the street.

Example 1

Korean Original	사장님, 여기 어디예요? (Dear boss, where are we?)
English Subtitles	Sir, where are we?
Turkish Subtitles	Efendim, neredeyiz? (Sir, where are we?)

Source: *Squid Game*, Season 1, Episode 2 (Hwang, 2021c, 15:33).

As an undocumented and mistreated migrant worker, Ali grapples with an inferiority complex, perceiving himself as confined to the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. Throughout the narrative, he displays a consistent pattern of submissive behavior towards other characters. Ali's unique use of the address term *sajangnim* further accentuates his already marginalized status as an illegal worker, reflecting his vulnerability to deportation in contrast to the relative authority enjoyed by Koreans, who are literally depicted as *bosses*. Hence, the subtle use of *sajangnim* serves as a thematic device that amplifies the anti-capitalist critique woven into the narrative.

Throughout Season 1, Ali uses the term *sajangnim* a total of 23 times, always accompanied by the honorific suffix *-nim* (-님). Coupled with Ali's frequent use of formal language (*hasipsioch'e*), this repetition of *sajangnim* imparts an artificial tone to his social interactions, which is indicative of his limited proficiency in the language. However, the overuse of *sajangnim* is not mirrored in both English and Turkish subtitles. In the English rendition, *sajangnim* is substituted with "sir," presumably to achieve a smooth narrative flow without unfamiliar language, like referring to someone as "boss". This approach prioritizes linguistic fluency over thematic nuances crucial for character development. It is atypical to address strangers as *sajangnim* in Korean, akin to calling strangers "boss" in English and "patron" in Turkish. The linguistic anomaly is reconciled in the English and Turkish subtitles. Through pivot subtitling, Anglo-American subtitling norms of fluency (Venuti, 2019) infiltrated the Turkish subtitles, potentially leading Turkish viewers to perceive Ali's character as diluted by an Anglo-normative perspective.

The title *sajangnim* does not sit well with Sang-woo, and he instead suggests that Ali call him *hyöng* (형, i.e., older brother). This kinship term is used by a younger male to address an older brother, but it can also be used between males without biological affinity to express a close yet hierarchical bond. As Ali starts using *hyöng* to address Sang-woo, their friendship appears to grow stronger, with Sang-woo embracing the role of an older brother to the migrant outcast. Kiaer (2017) observes that the age-based distinction in *hyöng* is absent from English, where the age-neutral term "brother" is used instead, potentially obscuring the hierarchical implications of *hyöng* to anglophone audiences.

In contrast, the Turkish term *abi* (i.e., older brother), which is used among siblings and close friends, conveys similar hierarchical connotations as *hyǒng*, but with a gender-neutral undertone on the part of the addresser.

Example 2

Korean Original	그럼 그냥 형이라고 해. (Then just call me <i>hyǒng</i> .)
English Subtitles	Then just call me Sang-woo.
Turkish Subtitles	O zaman bana Sang-woo de. (Then call me Sang-woo.)

Source: *Squid Game*, Season 1, Episode 5 (Hwang, 2021d, 15:32).

There is no functional equivalent for *hyǒng* in English. It is more common to use a person's name than "older brother". Thus, the English subtitles replaced *hyǒng* with the proper name Sang-woo throughout the series. More specifically, *hyǒng* occurs a total of 68 times across 9 episodes, and both the English and Turkish subtitles replaced it with proper nouns altogether. However, the fact that *hyǒng* has a direct functional equivalent in Turkish (*abi*) renders this strategy completely redundant, which can be considered a shortcoming introduced by English as the pivot language.

A seemingly minor detail – replacing *hyǒng* with proper names – can have a significant impact on how viewers perceive the relationships between characters. While practically unavoidable in English, this strategy weakens Sang-woo's role as a protective older brother to Ali, a nuance that could be preserved by *abi* in Turkish. The effect becomes particularly clear in Episode 6, where players are forced to confront their allies, culminating in a poignant betrayal and breakdown of brotherhood between Ali and Sang-woo. In Example 3, Ali realizes Sang-woo's deception, yet continues to call him *hyǒng*, evoking pathos.

While the substitution of *hyǒng* for a proper name might be fairly unproblematic in English, it introduces a complexity in Turkish due to cultural nuances. Being on a first-name basis in Turkish implies equality, which contrasts with the hierarchical implications embedded in the original context, where Sang-woo, as the "older brother," holds the upper hand. From a narrative perspective, this redundancy arguably dilutes the emotional depth and thematic weight of the plot twist in Episode 6.

Overall, this subsection explored the impact of English as a pivot language in the Turkish translation of two Korean address terms, *sajangnim* and *hyǒng*. While the progression from *sajangnim* to *hyǒng* highlights the complexity of the relationship between Ali and Sang-woo, these linguistic features are among the "invisibles" outlined by Kiaer (2019). Hence, they require a dedicated translation strategy

in pivot subtitling to prevent English from introducing a redundant barrier between Korean and Turkish, as illustrated in Examples 1 to 3.

Example 3

Korean Original	형, 어디 있어? (<i>Hyöng</i> , where are you?)
English Subtitles	Sang-woo, where are you?
Turkish Subtitles	Sang-woo, neredesin? (Sang-woo, where are you?)

Source: *Squid Game*, Season 1, Episode 6 (Hwang, 2021e, 50:53).

2.2. Speech Levels

Korean verb paradigms reflect how individuals configure their interpersonal networks based on a dynamic balance of power and solidarity. It is through the broader levels of speech (Table 1) and their associated verb paradigms (Figure 3) that characters in virtually all Korean audiovisual content express respect, intimacy, authority, or even rudeness. Drawing on Section 1, this subsection explores how the pivot language, English, lacking an equivalent system, influences the Turkish translation of Korean speech levels, particularly verb paradigms.

Example 4 depicts a scene in which Gi-hun, the protagonist, visits his former spouse to ask for a loan. During the visit, he encounters his daughter Ga-yeong's stepfather, who extends the loan and respectfully asks Gi-hun to leave his family alone.

Ga-yeong's stepfather seeks to establish a discreet, formal, and polite atmosphere through his use of the deferential speech level *hasipsioch'e*, indicated by the formal verb paradigm *-(sŭ)mnida* as well as the honorific suffix *-si* attached to the verb *kap'ta* (갚다, i.e., repay) and auxiliary verb *chuda* (주다). Given that unit-for-unit translation of these features into English is unattainable (Kiaer, 2017, 2019), the only method of maintaining this formality would be to over-translate the Korean phrase by introducing additional honorific features (e.g., "Mr."), which is not practically feasible in subtitling due to spatiotemporal constraints. In the context of pivot subtitling, this linguistic problem extends to Turkish subtitles despite a remarkable correspondence between Turkish imperative conjugation and Korean verb paradigms outlined in Table 2. The absence of honorifics in the English subtitles creates a neutral tone, whereas the Turkish subtitles unintentionally portray Ga-yeong's stepfather as condescending and patronizing.

Example 4

Korean Original	안 갚으셔도 됩니다. 대신 우리 가족 앞에 다신 안 나타나 주셨으면 합니다. 가영이가 많이 힘들어합니다. (You do not have to pay me back, Mr. Seong. Instead, I hope you will never appear in front of my family again. Ga-yeong is having a hard time, as you might imagine.)
English Subtitles	You don't have to. Instead, I need you to stop coming to see my family. Ga-yeong is having a tough time.
Turkish Subtitles	Gerek yok. Onun yerine ailemle görüşmeyi bırakacaksın. Ga-yeong zor günler geçiriyor. (No need. Instead, you'll stop seeing my family. Ga-yeong is having a hard time.)

Source: *Squid Game*, Season 1, Episode 2 (Hwang, 2021c, 53:08).

Example 5 demonstrates a similar case where Gi-hun is surrounded by loan sharks after winning a substantial sum in a horse race. The loan sharks resort to violence as they confront Gi-hun about his delinquent debts.

Example 5

Korean Original	아이, 선생님 번거로우실까 봐 제가 한꺼번에 모아서 드리려고 했거든요. (Oh, I was afraid I would be a burden to you, dear sir, so I was going to collect them all together and present them to you at once.)
English Subtitles	That's because... I wanted to pay you all at once to save you the trouble.
Turkish Subtitles	Çünkü seni uğraştırmamak için hepsini bir seferde vereyim dedim. (Because I thought I'd give them all at once so as not to make you bother.)

Source: *Squid Game*, Season 1, Episode 1 (Hwang, 2021b, 09:26).

In the Korean version, Gi-hun takes a subservient stance towards the loan sharks through his use of the respectful first-person pronoun *chŏ* (저) as well as the honorific auxiliary verb *tŭrida* (드리다). Adjectives are also conjugated in Korean, and the honorific suffix *-si* is attached to *pŏn'gŏropta* (번거롭다, i.e., cumbersome). Gi-hun refers to the ringleader of the loan sharks with the title

sönsaengnim (선생님, i.e., dear [님] teacher [선생], means mister or miss, depending on the context). The omission of these honorific markers in the Turkish subtitles leads to a relatively more confrontational portrayal of Gi-hun in stark contrast to the desperate figure depicted in the original.

These examples highlight a broader concern: with every conversation in *Squid Game* subtly marked by specific speech levels, the impact of such tonal shifts introduced during pivot subtitling can significantly alter characterization for Turkish viewers, who unknowingly perceive these interpersonal dynamics through the filter of the English language.

2.3. Cultural References

Squid Game blends global concerns with a distinctly Korean setting through cultural references that reinforce thematic elements. The resonance of local elements is evident in the first round's game, called *mugunghwa kkoch'i p'ïössümnida* (무궁화 꽃이 피었습니다, i.e., Rose of Sharon bloomed), which also serves as the title for Episode 1, *mugunghwa kkoch'i p'idön nal* (무궁화 꽃이 피던 날, i.e., the day Rose of Sharon bloomed). In the traditional iteration of this Korean children's game, players freeze when the tagger moves. Here, the game is transformed into a deadly competition in which players are executed by gunfire. From a narrative standpoint, this game serves a dual purpose. First, it reinforces Korean cultural identity in the narrative and instills local elements into the series. Second, it acts as a microcosm of South Korean capitalist society, where the ruthless pursuit of wealth literally becomes a matter of life and death.

Example 6

Korean Original	무궁화 꽃이 피었습니다. (The Rose of Sharon has bloomed.)
English Subtitles	Green light, red light.
Turkish Subtitles	Yeşil Işık, Kırmızı Işık. (Green Light, Red Light.)

Source: *Squid Game*, Season 1, Episode 1 (Hwang, 2021b, 45:46).

The Korean children's game is substituted with its American counterpart *Red Light, Green Light* in both English and non-English versions of the series. This specific substitution strategy was sanctioned as an authorized term that had to remain unaltered in pivot translation chains, as reported by the Spanish subtitler of *Squid Game* (De Partearroyo, 2021). The Turkish subtitles also feature *Yeşil Işık, Kırmızı Işık* (Green Light, Red Light) following the authenticated key names and phrases.

In this way, English acts not only as a pivot language, but as a pivot cultural conduit, channeling Korean local elements into target cultural contexts. However, this use of English-centric terminology has complex implications in the Turkish version. *Kırmızı Işık, Yeşil Işık* is a contrived foreign element, originating not from the Korean source but from the English language and culture as an intermediary. While anglophone viewers may derive certain meaning from *Red Light, Green Light*, Turkish viewers encounter an additional layer of cultural reference that is not inherent to the Korean original content, as the game's Turkish equivalent would be *Davul, Zurna, Bir, İki, Üç* (davul, zurna, one, two, three). This comprehension delay for Turkish viewers underscores the decisive role of English not only as a pivot language but also as a dominant cultural force shaping downstream translation chains, ultimately imposing a greater cognitive distance between Turkish viewers and the Korean series.

Beyond authorized key names and phrases such as *Red Light and Green Light*, pivot subtitles may deviate from the PT. In essence, indirect translation is a multifaceted process characterized by a bidirectional flow of information originating from both the source text and the mediating text. Translators may opt to deviate from this intermediary text based on inferences of original meaning. Example 7 features one such scene where the Turkish subtitles diverge from the English translation. Before the fourth game, Gi-hun and Il-nam, the hidden antagonist, forge a pact to prove their loyalty. Il-nam offers Gi-hun to become his *gganbu* (간부), a culturally specific friendship term that might be obscure to global viewers. Recognizing this, the show's creators elucidate this opaque reference within the content itself to extend the show's international reach. Il-nam clarifies *gganbu*, saying, "The neighborhood friend with whom you share marbles and ddakji. There is no yours or mine." (Hwang, 2021e, 15:51).

Example 7

Korean Original	그러면은 우리 간부부터 맺어야지. (Then let's start with becoming gganbus.)
English Subtitles	In that case, we need to make a pact. And become gganbu.
Turkish Subtitles	Öyleyse bir anlaşma yapıp kanka olmalıyız. (Then we need to make a deal and become kanka.)

Source: *Squid Game*, Season 1, Episode 6 (Hwang, 2021e, 15:39).

While the English subtitles transliterate *gganbu*, the Turkish subtitles substitute it with *kanka* – a familiar and colloquial expression for close friendship. On the one hand, this substitution strategy enhances audience familiarity and subtitle fluency. On the other hand, it introduces an inconsistency: Il-nam's explanation of *gganbu* as "a neighborhood friend with whom you share marbles and ddakji" (Hwang, 2021e, 15:51) does not align with the broader definition of *kanka* in Turkish. This dissonance is further amplified by the visual elements of the series. Image 1 depicts a specific gesture exchanged

between Gi-hun and Il-nam upon becoming *gganbus*. This gesture is absent in the concept of *kanka*. In contrast, Il-nam's hand gesture visually aligns with the Turkish game *lades tutuşmak*, where players perform a specific hand gesture while making a bet.

Image 1

Gi-hun and Il-nam Become Gganbus



Source: *Squid Game*, Season 1, Episode 6 (Hwang, 2021e, 16:10).

The first part of this subsection established that in pivot subtitling, English is not just a pivot language, but a dominant cultural filter that appropriates local elements and imposes Anglo-American values. The second part focused on a counterexample in which the indirect Turkish translation deviated from the English mediating text, demonstrating the sheer fragility of pivot subtitling in terms of preserving cultural authenticity. This instance highlights the potential for cultural nuances to be lost or altered within the multilayered and multilingual processes of pivot subtitling.

3. Discussion and Conclusions

This study has provided quantitative and qualitative insights into the understudied yet ubiquitous practice of pivot subtitling, focusing on the Turkish subtitles of Korean audiovisual content on Netflix. Pivot subtitling has been contextualized as a deliberate policy and systematic strategy to facilitate the Turkish translation of Korean content on Netflix. The argument that pivot subtitling is the product of a purported shortage in the industry remains contested with the absence of official initiatives to promote direct translation between non-English language pairs. Rather, pivot subtitling stands as a strategy perpetuated by English-centric onboarding policies and payment schemes that incentivize indirect translation while marginalizing direct translation between non-English language pairs.

The study also established a correlation between pivot subtitling and sim-ship, evidenced by the consistent involvement of multiple Turkish subtitlers per Korean drama.

Section 1 provided a comparative overview of English, Korean, and Turkish in order to understand the translational impact of English as a pivot language in the Turkish subtitling of Korean content. Beyond serving as a comparative framework, this section uncovered the intricate multilingual nature of pivot subtitling. The sociopragmatic aspects of address terms and speech levels in Korean are rendered “invisible” (Kiaer, 2019) in the morphosyntax of English. These linguistic features require broader translation strategies to convey the social dynamics embedded within Korean discourse. However, the time constraints and multimodality inherent to subtitling present a practical challenge in achieving document-level translation strategies, as subtitles flow in sync with the original content. Although the Turkish T–V distinction can to some extent reflect the layered Korean verb paradigms, particularly in the imperative form, this potential can be undermined in pivot subtitling in the absence of supplementary resources such as annotations and formality tables. This conclusion demonstrates that the practice of pivot subtitling requires language-specific translation guidelines to bridge the linguistic gap created by the limitations of English as a pivot language. The content of these resources should also extend to cultural elements. Beyond a mere pivot language, English also serves as a dominant cultural conduit that might, whether intentionally or not, infuse an Anglo-American bias in indirect translation.

Section 2 unfolded a qualitative case study on the translational impact of English as a pivot language in the Turkish subtitles of *Squid Game*. Drawing on the comparative framework outlined in Section 2, the analysis of Address Terms (Section 2.1) and Speech Levels (Section 2.2) revealed how interpersonal dynamics and subtleties of social hierarchy can be unintentionally diluted or distorted in the Turkish subtitles due to the influence of the English grammar or translation norms of fluency. Furthermore, the examination of Cultural References (Section 2.3) underscored the role of English as a dominant cultural filter, potentially imposing an Anglo-American perspective on Turkish viewers. This case study demonstrated that the linguistic limitations of English are not acknowledged in the practice of pivot subtitling Korean content into Turkish. Coupled with the reliance on pivot languages, the involvement of multiple Turkish subtitlers per Korean drama raises further questions about the overall translation quality.

Prior research has documented the industry’s predominant use of English as the pivot language for Turkish translations of Korean media content (Dallı & Sung, 2024). As an extension of this research, the current case study highlights the qualitative nature of this phenomenon. There is an urgent need to foster a greater diversity of language pairs in the subtitling industry considering the proliferation of non-English media. It is reasonable to assume that similar quality concerns are observable in other pivot translation combinations, underscoring the urgency for Netflix and other VoD platforms to acknowledge and accommodate a wider spectrum of language pairs within their payment schemes. By establishing financial incentives for direct translation, LSPs can promote diversity within their subtitler pools and allocate resources more equitably across underrepresented language pairs. Such measures are essential not only for enhancing the translation quality of non-English media,

but also for cultivating a more inclusive and representative AVT landscape. Hopefully, this study will stimulate further scholarly contributions in this field.

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