

**Translating Batak Toba Cultural Terms in Toba Dreams:
Domestication and Foreignization in English Subtitles**

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Abstract	
Article History: Received: 22/06/2026 Accepted: 06/07/2026 Published: 10/07/2026	As Indonesian films increasingly reach international audiences through global streaming platforms, subtitle translation plays an important role in representing local cultural identity across languages. However, limited studies have examined how subtitle translation strategies shape the representation of indigenous cultural identity in audiovisual media. This study investigates the domestication and foreignization strategies used in translating Batak Toba culturally specific items (CSIs) in the English subtitles of Toba Dreams (2015). Guided by Venuti's (1995) domestication and foreignization framework and Newmark's (1988) cultural taxonomy, this study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using the official Netflix subtitle corpus. The findings identified 26 culturally specific items distributed across five cultural categories. Domestication was the dominant strategy (77%), particularly for Social Culture items, while foreignization (23%) was mainly applied to Material Culture items supported by visual context. Although domestication improved subtitle readability, it also reduced the representation of Batak Toba social hierarchy, especially the Dalihan Na Tolu kinship system. This study contributes to audiovisual translation research by demonstrating how subtitle translation strategies influence the representation of indigenous cultural identity while balancing cultural preservation and audience accessibility.
Keywords: <i>audiovisual translation;</i> <i>subtitle translation;</i> <i>Batak Toba; culturally specific items (CSIs);</i> <i>domestication;</i> <i>foreignization .</i>	
Kata Kunci: <i>penerjemahan audiovisual;</i> <i>penerjemahan subtitle;</i> <i>Batak Toba; item spesifik budaya (CSIs);</i> <i>domestikasi;</i> <i>foreignisasi</i>	Abstrak Seiring semakin luasnya jangkauan film Indonesia kepada penonton internasional melalui platform streaming global, penerjemahan subtitle memegang peranan penting dalam merepresentasikan identitas budaya lokal lintas bahasa. Namun, kajian yang meneliti bagaimana strategi penerjemahan subtitle membentuk representasi identitas budaya masyarakat adat dalam media audiovisual masih terbatas. Penelitian ini mengkaji strategi domestikasi dan foreignisasi yang

digunakan dalam menerjemahkan culturally specific items (CSIs) Batak Toba pada subtitle bahasa Inggris film Toba Dreams (2015). Penelitian ini menggunakan kerangka domestikasi dan foreignisasi dari Venuti (1995) serta taksonomi budaya Newmark (1988), dengan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif berdasarkan korpus subtitle resmi Netflix. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi 26 culturally specific items yang tersebar dalam lima kategori budaya. Domestikasi menjadi strategi yang paling dominan (77%), terutama pada kategori Social Culture, sedangkan foreignisasi (23%) lebih banyak diterapkan pada kategori Material Culture yang didukung oleh konteks visual. Meskipun domestikasi meningkatkan keterbacaan subtitle, strategi ini juga mengurangi representasi hierarki sosial Batak Toba, khususnya sistem kekerabatan Dalihan Na Tolu. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian penerjemahan audiovisual dengan menunjukkan bagaimana strategi penerjemahan subtitle memengaruhi representasi identitas budaya Batak Toba sekaligus menyeimbangkan pelestarian budaya dan aksesibilitas bagi penonton internasional.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of digital media and global streaming platforms has significantly expanded the international circulation of audiovisual content, enabling films produced in local languages to reach audiences across different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In this context, audiovisual translation (AVT), particularly subtitling, plays a crucial role in facilitating intercultural communication by transferring not only linguistic meaning but also the cultural values embedded in the source language. Unlike other forms of translation, subtitle translation is constrained by limited screen space and viewing time, requiring translators to balance readability with the preservation of culturally significant meanings (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2020). Consequently, translating cultural elements into subtitles presents one of the greatest challenges in audiovisual translation.

One of the most challenging aspects of subtitle translation is the rendering of Culturally Specific Items (CSIs), which refer to lexical and cultural expressions closely associated with the beliefs, traditions, institutions, and social practices of a particular community (Newmark, 1988). Because these expressions often lack

direct equivalents in the target language, translators must decide whether to preserve their cultural uniqueness or adapt them to enhance audience comprehension. This dilemma is commonly explained through Venuti's (1995) concepts of foreignization and domestication. Foreignization retains source-culture elements to preserve cultural identity, whereas domestication adapts those elements into forms that are more familiar to target-language audiences. These strategies represent not only linguistic choices but also ideological decisions that influence how a culture is introduced and understood by international viewers.

This issue is particularly relevant in translating Indonesia's rich cultural diversity, where many ethnic groups possess unique linguistic expressions and sociocultural systems. Among them, the Batak Toba community of North Sumatra is distinguished by its complex kinship structure, customary traditions, and culturally embedded forms of address. Central to Batak Toba society is the *Dalihan Na Tolu* philosophy, which regulates social relationships based on kinship, clan affiliation (*marga*), age, and customary obligations. Many Batak Toba cultural expressions, including kinship terms, ritual vocabulary, and traditional concepts, carry meanings that extend beyond their lexical definitions and therefore present significant challenges when translated into English subtitles. Inadequate translation may simplify these expressions and reduce the cultural meanings they convey to international audiences.

The film *Toba Dreams* (2015), directed by Benni Setiawan, provides an appropriate corpus for investigating these challenges because it presents a wide range of Batak Toba culturally specific items within authentic social and cultural contexts. Rather than merely portraying Batak traditions, the film integrates kinship terms, customary practices, traditional objects, and ritual expressions into the daily interactions of its characters. Furthermore, the availability of professionally produced English subtitles distributed through Netflix offers a reliable corpus for examining how Batak Toba cultural identity is represented in audiovisual translation. The selection of *Toba Dreams* is therefore based on its cultural richness and its relevance to the objectives of this study rather than solely on its popularity or storyline.

Previous studies have examined the translation of culturally specific items in Indonesian audiovisual media from various perspectives. Martendi et al. (2022) investigated the translation of Indonesian cultural terms in *Battle of Surabaya* and reported that domestication was predominantly employed to improve subtitle readability for international audiences. Likewise, Halim et al. (2024) analyzed culturally specific items in the documentary *Perempuan Tana Humba* and found that domestication was frequently adopted to facilitate viewers' comprehension of local cultural expressions. Meanwhile, Indriyani (2024) examined the English subtitles of *Ngeri-Ngeri Sedap* by evaluating translation quality in terms of accuracy, acceptability, and readability. These studies have contributed valuable insights into translation strategies and subtitle quality assessment. However, they primarily focus on identifying translation strategies or evaluating translation quality without examining how those strategies influence the representation of indigenous cultural identity and culturally embedded social systems.

Despite the growing body of research on audiovisual translation, studies that specifically investigate the ideological implications of domestication and foreignization in representing Batak Toba cultural identity remain limited. In particular, little attention has been given to how subtitle translation reconstructs culturally significant concepts such as kinship hierarchy, customary relationships, and the *Dalihan Na Tolu* social system for international audiences. Addressing this gap, the present study integrates Venuti's (1995) framework of domestication and foreignization with Newmark's (1988) classification of culturally specific items to examine both the distribution of translation strategies and their implications for representing Batak Toba cultural identity in the English subtitles of *Toba Dreams*. By moving beyond the identification of translation strategies, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how subtitle translation shapes cultural representation in audiovisual media.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What domestication and foreignization strategies are employed in translating Batak Toba culturally specific items into the English subtitles of *Toba Dreams*?

2. How do these translation strategies influence the representation of Batak Toba cultural identity in the English subtitles of *Toba Dreams*?

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design grounded in Interpretive Semiotic Analysis to investigate the translation of Batak Toba culturally specific items (CSIs) in the English subtitles of *Toba Dreams* (2015). The descriptive phase identified and classified CSIs and their translation strategies, while the interpretive phase examined how these strategies influenced the representation of Batak Toba cultural identity. This approach was appropriate because the study focused on interpreting the cultural implications of translation choices rather than measuring statistical relationships.

The corpus consisted of the official English subtitles of *Toba Dreams* (2015) available on Netflix. The film was purposely selected for three reasons. First, it contains a high frequency of Batak Toba cultural expressions, including kinship terms, ritual practices, traditional objects, and customary concepts. Second, its distribution through a global streaming platform provides a professionally produced subtitle corpus that represents contemporary audiovisual translation practices. Third, the dialogue is primarily in Indonesian while retaining Batak Toba lexical items, allowing culturally specific items to be clearly identified. The unit of analysis was the subtitle segment, comprising each English subtitle, its corresponding Indonesian dialogue, and the accompanying visual context.

Data was collected through systematic document analysis. The film was initially viewed to understand its narrative and cultural context. Subsequently, the Indonesian dialogue was compared with the official English subtitles to identify Batak Toba culturally specific items. Each identified CSI was verified using anthropological references on Batak Toba society (Vergouwen, 1964) and recorded in a coding sheet containing the timestamp, scene description, Indonesian source text, English subtitle, CSI category, and translation strategy. This process identified 26 distinct CSI types, representing the complete dataset analyzed in this study.

Data analysis was conducted in two stages corresponding to the research questions. In the first stage, each CSI was classified according to Newmark's (1988) cultural taxonomy and categorized as either domestication or foreignization based on Venuti's (1995) ideological framework. To increase analytical consistency, the translation procedures were operationalized using the coding scheme presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Operational Coding Scheme for Domestication and Foreignization

Ideological Orientation	Code	Operational Definition	Example
Foreignization	F-RET	Retention: Source term kept verbatim	Welcome to Danau Toba"
Foreignization	F-CAL	Calque: Literal translation	(Not present)
Domestication	D-SUB	Substitution: Replacement with culturally neutral equivalent	"Horas" → "Hello"
Domestication	D-GEN	Generalization: Hypernym replacement	"Inang-inang" → "Women"
Domestication	D-OMI	Omission: Complete removal	"Sibual-buali" → omitted
Domestication	D-DIR	Direct Translation: Semantic translation	"Kakus" → "Toilet"

The coding scheme adapts Pedersen's (2011) taxonomy of Extralinguistic Cultural References by classifying each translation procedure according to its dominant ideological orientation based on Venuti's (1995) concepts of domestication and foreignization. Although the categories are presented as binary, translation strategies were interpreted as existing on a continuum, with classification determined by the dominant effect of each translation choice.

The second stage examined the semiotic implications of the identified strategies, focusing on the dominant pattern of domestication found in Social Culture items. Each translation was interpreted using three analytical criteria: (1) visual redundancy, assessing whether visual information supported the translated CSI; (2) hierarchy shift, examining whether kinship relations were preserved or neutralized; and (3) narrative salience, evaluating the importance of the translated CSI in conveying the *Dalihan Na Tolu* kinship system and the film's central

narrative. This stage linked individual translation choices to the broader representation of Batak Toba cultural identity.

To ensure trustworthiness, all coding decisions were cross-checked against Newmark's (1988) cultural taxonomy, Venuti's (1995) ideological framework, Vergouwen's (1964) anthropological description of Batak Toba society, and the visual context of each subtitle segment. The researcher's cultural competence as a native speaker of Batak Toba and Indonesian supported the interpretation, while the explicit coding procedures enhanced the transparency and replicability of the analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analysis of the 26 Batak Toba CSI types in the English subtitles of *Toba Dreams* and synthesizes these findings within the theoretical frameworks of Newmark (1988) and Venuti (1995). The findings are organized to directly address the two research questions, with discussion integrated throughout to explain why the observed translation patterns occur and what they mean for the representation of Batak Toba culture.

The 26 CSIs were classified according to Newmark's (1988) cultural categories and analyzed for their ideological orientation based on Venuti's (1995) binary. Table 1 presents the distribution by category.

Table 2: Distribution of Domestication and Foreignization by Newmark's Cultural Category (26 Types)

Newmark Category	Total Types	Domestications (%)	Foreignization (%)	Dominant Strategy
Material Culture	9	5 (56%)	4 (44%)	Domestication (slight)
Social Culture	13	12 (92%)	1 (8%)	Domestication (overwhelming)
Social Organization	2	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	Domestication
Ritual/Custom	1	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	Domestication
Ecology	1	0 (0%)	1(100%)	Foreignization
Total	26	20 (77%)	6 (23%)	Domestication Dominant

Across all categories, 77% (20 out of 26) of Batak Toba CSIs were domesticated. This finding confirms that the technical constraints of subtitling exert powerful pressure toward target-text fluency and accessibility. The overwhelming dominance of domestication is not a stylistic preference but a structural consequence of the subtitling medium. As Díaz Cintas and Remael (2020) note, subtitles must adhere to strict spatial and temporal constraints maximum two lines, approximately 37-42 characters per line, and display duration of no more than six seconds. This physical limitation exerts a centripetal force toward simplification, concision, and omission.

Social Culture items, including kinship terms, greetings, and terms of endearment, were almost entirely domesticated (92%). Only one CSI (*Horas* in a song lyric) retained its foreign form. This is the most significant finding, as this category directly encodes Batak social hierarchy. Venuti's domestication functions here as a coping mechanism. When faced with a term like *Inang-inang* (Data 13), the translator has approximately four seconds of screen time. Foreignization ("*Inang-inang* are told to work hard") would require the viewer to infer meaning from context, which may fail. Domestication ("Women are told to work hard") is instantly comprehensible. The translator, constrained by time and space, consistently chooses the latter.

Material Culture items showed a near-even split (56% domestication vs. 44% foreignization), closely tied to visual presence. Items visually present on screen (*Rumah Bolon*, *bentor*, *mandar*) were consistently foreignized, while items audible but not visually salient (e.g., *Sibual-buali*) were domesticated through omission or generalization. When the visual channel provides redundant information the *Rumah Bolon* is visible the translator can afford to foreignize. When the term exists only in the audio track (*mangulosi*, *lapo tuak*), domestication is the default. This confirms that pure Venutian foreignization is structurally constrained in subtitling; foreignization operates as a marked, strategic choice rather than a default mode. The sole ecological term, *Danau Toba*, was retained, aligning with AVT norms for globally recognized geographical names. The two Social Organization items were both domesticated.

The data contain multiple kinship terms that function as linguistic markers of Batak Toba social stratification. In the source dialogue, these terms index the speaker's relationship to the addressee based on clan (*marga*), age, and marital status, a system known as *partuturan*. The English subtitles systematically replace these hierarchical markers with generic familial terms or personal names, effectively flattening the vertical social structure.

Table 3: Translation of Kinship and Address Terms (Social Culture)

No.	CSI (Batak/Ind)	English Subtitle	Strategy	Impact on Hierarchy Representation
3	<i>Horas</i>	<i>Hello / (retained once in song)</i>	Substitution	Loss of the blessing/respect connotation; reduced to neutral greeting.
5	<i>Parumaenku</i>	<i>My daughter-in-law</i>	Retention (semantic)	The kinship relation is preserved, though the Batak surface form is replaced.
13	<i>Inang-inang</i>	<i>Women</i>	Generalization	Loss of marital/maternal specificity; identity reduced to biological sex.
18	<i>Hasian</i>	<i>My dear</i>	Substitution	Affection is preserved, but the specific Batak term of endearment is erased.
21	<i>Mujur... amang</i>	<i>I wish you luck... my son</i>	Generalization / Omission	The address term <i>amang</i> is translated as <i>my son</i> , reversing the hierarchical relationship.
24	<i>Inong</i>	<i>Ma'am</i>	Substitution	Respect maintained but cultural specificity of maternal address lost.
25	<i>Oppung Boru</i>	<i>Grandma</i>	Substitution	Gender-specific grandmother term (<i>boru</i>) is collapsed into generic English.

The translation of *amang* as "my son" (Data 21) represents the most profound distortion of Batak social hierarchy. The utterance occurs in a scene where Togar, a young Batak man, addresses his wife's uncle, a member of the ritually superior *hula-hula* lineage. According to Vergouwen (1964, p. 112), *amang* in this context functions as "a respectful term of address for a male member of the wife-giving lineage," encoding an upward vertical relationship. The visual framing reinforces this with gestures of respect Togar lowers his head and serves food.

The subtitle, "I wish you luck always, my son," inverts the power dynamic. "My son" imposes top-down Western paternal authority absent from the source interaction. For the international viewer, the relationship appears as parent-to-child

authority, whereas in Batak culture, *amang* signals deference to a superior clan position. This is not a loss of nuance but a semiotic inversion of the *Dalihan Na Tolu* hierarchy.

This neutralization exemplifies Venuti's (1995) "ethnocentric violence." The target language (English) lacks a grammaticalized system of respect based on clan exogamy. It does, however, possess a robust system of paternal address. The translator imposed an English kinship frame onto Batak dialogue, making the character sound like a Western patriarch rather than a Batak man showing deference. The cumulative effect is the textual erasure of *Dalihan Na Tolu* the foundational tripartite social structure of Batak society. The viewer perceives a nuclear family dynamic, not a complex clan-based web of obligations. This directly answers RQ2: Batak Toba social hierarchy is reconstructed as a Western-style, age-based family hierarchy rather than a clan-based reciprocal obligation system.

Batak Toba identity is enacted through specific rituals and social practices. The subtitles consistently replace these culture-bound verbs and nouns with generalized English equivalents, transforming culturally dense actions into semantically hollow events.

Table 4: Translation of Rituals and Customs

No.	CSI (Batak/Ind)	English Subtitle	Strategy	Impact on Identity
4	<i>Mangulosi</i>	<i>Bless the bride and groom</i>	Substitution / Generalization	The specific act of draping an <i>ulos</i> cloth is lost; reduced to abstract blessing.
12	<i>Lapo Tuak</i>	<i>Dining house</i>	Substitution / Generalization	The traditional palm wine drinking establishment becomes a generic restaurant.
16	<i>Tuak</i>	<i>Alcohol</i>	Generalization	The culturally significant palm wine is reduced to a generic substance.

The translation of *mangulosi* as "bless" (Data 4) exemplifies this flattening. The source, "Mereka akan mangulosi pengantin," refers to the central ritual of ceremonial draping of the *ulos* cloth over the couple's shoulders by the *hula-hula*. This act publicly ratifies marriage and affirms social hierarchy. While "bless" captures the spiritual dimension, it erases the material and social performativity of the ritual. The viewer learns nothing about the specific cloth or the kin group

performing the act. The Batak wedding is assimilated into a generic Christian or secular template. Items visually prominent on screen are foreignized, while those only mentioned in dialogue are domesticated.

Table 5: Translation of Material Culture by Visual Salience

No.	CSI	Visual Presence?	Strategy	Orientation
7	<i>Rumah Bolon</i>	Yes (Exterior shot)	Retention	Foreignization
8	<i>Bentor</i>	Yes (Vehicle on screen)	Retention	Foreignization
23	<i>Madar</i>	Yes (Worn by character)	Retention	Foreignization
1	<i>Sibual-buali</i> (Bus)	Partial (Bus seen)	Omission	Domestication
11	<i>Kakus</i>	No	Direct Translation	Domestication

The findings are consistent with previous studies on Indonesian audiovisual translation, which identified domestication as the dominant strategy for translating culturally specific items (Martendi et al., 2022; Halim et al., 2024). This supports the view that the spatial and temporal constraints of subtitling encourage translators to prioritize readability and audience accessibility. However, this study extends previous research by demonstrating that domestication is not applied uniformly across cultural categories. While Social Culture items were overwhelmingly domesticated (92%), Material Culture items with visual support were more likely to be foreignized (44%). These findings suggest that visual context, rather than text type alone, facilitates the retention of culture-specific terms in subtitles. Furthermore, unlike studies on Japanese and Korean honorifics (Kim, 2018; Yamada, 2016), this study shows that the Batak Toba *partuturan* system is largely neutralized in English subtitles, resulting in a substantial reduction of clan-based social hierarchy.

The findings also have important implications for the international circulation of Indonesian regional cinema. Although the English subtitles successfully communicate the storyline of *Toba Dreams*, they simplify the cultural logic underlying the narrative. By replacing kinship terms and ritual expressions with generic English equivalents, the subtitles reduce the visibility of the *Dalihan Na Tolu* kinship system, making culturally motivated actions appear as personal rather than customary decisions. This suggests that subtitle translation shapes not

only linguistic transfer but also the international audience's understanding of indigenous cultural identity. To better preserve culturally significant meanings, translators may consider selectively retaining key kinship terms and ritual expressions, supported by brief glosses or visual context where appropriate.

This study is limited to a single film and one official subtitle version; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all Indonesian audiovisual translations. Future research should compare different subtitle versions, examine audience reception, and investigate other Indonesian ethnic cinemas to determine whether the pattern of visual foreignization and social domestication identified in this study is more broadly applicable.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the English subtitles of *Toba Dreams* employ domestication as the dominant strategy (77% of CSI types), driven by the inherent spatial and temporal constraints of the medium. However, this domestication is not applied uniformly across Newmark's cultural categories. Material Culture items with visual support are selectively foreignized, while Social Culture items particularly kinship terms are systematically neutralized. The consequence, interpreted through Venuti's framework, is a reconstruction of Batak Toba identity that preserves its visual exoticism but tends to erase its core social architecture of hierarchy and clan obligation. In the English subtitles, Batak culture becomes something one can *see*, but not something whose complex social grammar one can *understand*. This finding underscores the need for greater critical awareness and more creative translation strategies in the subtitling of minority-language cinemas, so that the global streaming era may foster genuine cross-cultural understanding rather than inadvertently serving as a vehicle for cultural homogenization.

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