

Cultural Adaptation in Film Subtitles: A Study of Brazilian Films for Hispanic Audiences

Ana Luisa Ferreira¹

¹ Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Correspondence: Ana Luisa Ferreira, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

doi:10.56397/JLCS.2024.12.07

Abstract

This paper explores the challenges and strategies involved in the cultural adaptation of Brazilian films subtitled for Hispanic audiences. Given the linguistic and cultural differences between Brazil and the Hispanic world, translating culturally specific elements such as idioms, humor, and social norms presents unique difficulties. Through an examination of case studies of Brazilian films like *Cidade de Deus* and *Tropa de Elite*, the paper highlights various subtitling techniques, including localization, contextualization, and dynamic equivalence, which are used to make these films accessible to Hispanic viewers. The analysis also considers how effective cultural adaptation impacts audience reception, influencing both their understanding and emotional engagement. Finally, the paper discusses the broader implications of cultural adaptation in film subtitling, particularly in fostering cross-cultural comprehension and enhancing the viewing experience.

Keywords: cultural adaptation, film subtitling, Brazilian films, Hispanic audiences

1. Introduction

Brazilian and Hispanic cultures share deep historical and linguistic connections due to their shared Iberian roots, yet they also display significant cultural differences. Both cultures stem from European colonization, and while Brazil was colonized by Portugal, most Hispanic countries in Latin America were colonized by Spain. As a result, both cultures speak Romance languages (Portuguese in Brazil and Spanish in Hispanic countries), but with distinct linguistic variations that impact everyday communication, expressions, and the way cultural identity is expressed.

Despite their linguistic similarities, the cultural nuances between Brazilian and Hispanic

societies are vast, particularly in areas such as humor, social norms, and traditions. Brazilian culture, for instance, is heavily influenced by African, Indigenous, and European elements, resulting in a unique blend of cultural practices, religious syncretism, and festivals like Carnival, which stands as a hallmark of Brazilian identity. On the other hand, Hispanic cultures, though also influenced by Indigenous and African traditions, tend to exhibit variations of Spanish customs, such as flamenco in Spain or the Day of the Dead in Mexico, alongside their own unique local traditions.

These cultural differences play a critical role in how audiences from each culture perceive and interpret films. For example, humor rooted in Brazilian cultural contexts—often using

colloquial slang, idioms, or culturally specific references—may not resonate with Hispanic audiences in the same way. Additionally, social behaviors portrayed in Brazilian films, such as the informality and warmth of interpersonal relationships, may be understood differently by Hispanic audiences, whose norms for social interaction may be more formal depending on the region. These differences highlight the importance of carefully adapting films for cross-cultural audiences through subtitling.

When Brazilian films are translated for Hispanic audiences, it is not just a matter of language translation but also of cultural adaptation. The way that cultural elements like humor, idiomatic expressions, and social behaviors are handled in subtitles can significantly influence how a film is received and interpreted. If cultural nuances are not properly adapted, the subtitled version may lead to misinterpretations or a diminished emotional impact. Therefore, understanding the delicate balance between preserving the original cultural essence of the film and making it accessible to a different cultural audience is essential for successful cross-cultural communication in film.

This cultural interplay sets the stage for the analysis of how Brazilian films are subtitled for Hispanic audiences, with a focus on the strategies used to address cultural differences and ensure the films' messages and emotional resonance are accurately conveyed.

2. Challenges in Translating Brazilian Cultural References

Translating Brazilian cultural references for Hispanic audiences presents several complex challenges, as films are rich with cultural elements that do not always have direct equivalents in the target language or culture. Key cultural references in Brazilian films often revolve around idioms, humor, and social norms, which are deeply embedded in the country's unique historical and cultural context. These elements shape how characters interact, the subtleties of dialogue, and the overall narrative tone, all of which must be conveyed accurately through subtitles to preserve the integrity of the film.

2.1 Identification of Key Cultural References in Brazilian Films

Brazilian films frequently feature idiomatic expressions and colloquial language that are reflective of the nation's diverse linguistic

influences, including Indigenous, African, and Portuguese elements. For example, phrases like "dar um jeitinho," which roughly translates to "finding a way" but implies the cultural practice of creatively solving problems or bending the rules, hold significant social meaning in Brazil. However, this phrase does not have a direct equivalent in Spanish or in many Hispanic cultures, where the concept may be unfamiliar or interpreted differently.

Humor also poses a substantial challenge. Brazilian humor is often rooted in regionalisms, playful language, and social critiques that resonate deeply with local audiences but may be lost in translation. For instance, Brazilian films often employ humor related to class differences or political satire, which may not resonate with Hispanic audiences without the proper cultural context. The lack of equivalent humor structures or references in Hispanic cultures can make it difficult for subtitles to capture the same comedic effect.

Social norms depicted in Brazilian films, such as the emphasis on informal, close-knit relationships and gestures of physical affection, can also be difficult to translate. In some Hispanic cultures, interpersonal interactions might be more formal, and cultural cues such as how people greet each other, express emotions, or deal with authority figures can vary greatly. These subtle social dynamics must be effectively conveyed in subtitles for the target audience to fully understand the context and emotional depth of a scene.

2.2 Challenges in Conveying These Elements to Hispanic Audiences Through Subtitles

Conveying these cultural references to Hispanic audiences through subtitles involves more than just translating words; it requires adapting the content to ensure that it resonates with the target audience. One of the main challenges is the loss of cultural specificity. Subtitles, due to space and time constraints, often require simplification or condensation of dialogue, which can strip away the layers of meaning embedded in culturally specific references.

For example, idiomatic expressions in Portuguese often do not have a one-to-one translation in Spanish, meaning that the translator must either find a culturally similar expression in the target language or explain the phrase in a way that fits within the constraints of the subtitle. This is particularly difficult when

dealing with humor or wordplay, which rely heavily on linguistic nuances and cultural familiarity. The result may be that jokes fall flat, or key cultural insights are lost, affecting the audience's ability to fully appreciate the film.

Furthermore, Brazilian films often contain cultural symbols or references that are intimately tied to the country's socio-political context. For instance, references to the favelas (informal settlements in Brazil), which carry specific connotations about poverty, inequality, and resilience in Brazilian society, may not be easily understood by Hispanic audiences who are unfamiliar with this aspect of Brazilian life. Translators must find ways to provide enough context within the subtitles to ensure that viewers can grasp the significance of these cultural references without disrupting the flow of the film.

In addition, balancing accuracy with accessibility is a persistent challenge in subtitling. While the goal is to stay as true as possible to the original dialogue, the subtitler must also consider the reading speed of the audience and ensure that the subtitles are clear and concise. This can result in difficult decisions about what cultural information to retain and what to simplify or omit. If too much context is lost, the film's message or emotional impact may not translate well for Hispanic audiences, diminishing the viewing experience.

3. Strategies for Cultural Adaptation in Subtitling

Cultural adaptation in subtitling is a crucial process when translating films across different cultures, such as Brazilian films for Hispanic audiences. This process goes beyond simple linguistic translation, as it involves adapting cultural nuances, idioms, humor, and social norms to ensure that the film resonates with the target audience. Subtitlers employ various strategies to address the challenges posed by these cultural differences, aiming to preserve the original film's intent while making it accessible and engaging for the new audience.

3.1 Localization: Adjusting to the Target Culture

One of the most commonly used strategies in cultural adaptation is localization, which involves altering culturally specific references in a way that aligns with the target culture's norms and values. Localization ensures that idiomatic expressions or cultural references are replaced with equivalents that make sense to the target

audience. For example, if a Brazilian film uses a culturally specific idiom like "puxar o saco" (literally "to pull the bag," meaning to flatter or suck up to someone), the subtitler might choose a Spanish-language equivalent, such as "hacer la pelota" (to flatter) in order to convey the same meaning in a way that is familiar to Hispanic viewers.

Localization also extends to modifying cultural references that might not be familiar to the target audience. For instance, references to uniquely Brazilian festivals like "Festa Junina" could be substituted with a general term such as "festival" or given brief contextualization in the subtitle to avoid confusion for viewers who may not understand the original cultural reference. This strategy ensures that the flow of the film remains smooth while still conveying the necessary cultural context.

3.2 Neutralization: Simplifying or Removing Cultural Specificity

Neutralization is another strategy often used when localization is not feasible or when the cultural reference is too specific to translate effectively. In this approach, the translator may choose to simplify or omit culturally dense references to avoid misunderstandings. This is particularly useful when dealing with complex humor or idioms that do not have an easy equivalent in the target language.

For example, a Brazilian phrase that is deeply tied to local humor or social commentary may be difficult to translate into a Hispanic context without losing its essence. In such cases, the subtitler might opt to simplify the phrase into something more universally understood or neutral, focusing on conveying the general tone or intent rather than the exact wording. While this may result in a loss of some cultural richness, it ensures that the audience can still follow the plot and grasp the emotional core of the scene without confusion.

3.3 Contextualization: Providing Additional Information

Another important strategy is contextualization, where the subtitler adds extra information to help the target audience understand cultural references that may be unfamiliar. This can be done within the subtitle itself, by subtly including explanatory context, or through additional elements like a brief on-screen note or a translator's footnote. This approach is useful for references that are integral to the narrative

but require some background knowledge for full comprehension.

For instance, if a Brazilian film mentions the “favela” (a term that carries significant social and political meaning in Brazil), the subtitler might provide extra context by translating it as “favela (informal settlement)” to clarify the setting for Hispanic viewers who may not be familiar with the term. Contextualization helps bridge the cultural gap, ensuring that the audience grasps the social or historical significance of the reference.

3.4 Dynamic Equivalence: Preserving Tone and Emotion

Dynamic equivalence focuses on maintaining the original tone, mood, and emotional impact of the film, even if it requires changing the specific words used. This strategy is particularly effective when translating humor, irony, or emotionally charged scenes where the literal translation might not convey the same effect. For instance, humor that relies on wordplay or cultural satire might be reworked into a different joke that evokes a similar reaction in the target audience, even if the specific content is altered.

For example, a joke in a Brazilian film about local politics may not resonate with Hispanic viewers if they are unfamiliar with the political context. Instead, the subtitler could substitute a culturally appropriate political joke or a more universal form of humor that retains the comedic timing and emotional impact of the original scene. This approach ensures that the audience experiences the film as intended, without losing the essence of humor or dramatic tension.

3.5 Borrowing and Cultural Retention

In some cases, subtitlers may choose to retain culturally specific terms or phrases through borrowing, especially if the term has no equivalent or if the subtitler wants to preserve a sense of authenticity. Borrowing allows for the retention of key cultural markers, giving the target audience insight into the source culture. This approach is often used for proper nouns, cultural symbols, or terms that carry significant meaning, such as “samba,” “caipirinha,” or “Carnaval,” which might remain untranslated because of their cultural importance.

When using borrowing, the subtitler may choose to pair it with contextualization to ensure that

the audience understands the borrowed term without needing additional explanation. This method strikes a balance between maintaining cultural authenticity and ensuring audience comprehension.

4. Case Studies of Brazilian Films with Hispanic Subtitles

To better understand how cultural adaptation is handled in real-world subtitling for Brazilian films, this section examines specific case studies of films that have been subtitled for Hispanic audiences. These films provide valuable insights into the various strategies employed by subtitlers to bridge the cultural and linguistic gap between Brazilian and Hispanic cultures. The focus will be on how effectively the subtitles manage to convey culturally specific content, idioms, humor, and social norms, while preserving the overall integrity and intent of the original film.

4.1 Analysis of Specific Brazilian Films Subtitled for Hispanic Audiences

One notable example is the Brazilian film “Cidade de Deus” (City of God), which has achieved international acclaim, including in Hispanic-speaking countries. The film is rich with Brazilian cultural references, including slang from the favelas, local music, and depictions of social inequality in Brazil. The characters often use colloquial phrases that are deeply rooted in the socio-economic context of Rio de Janeiro’s favelas. When subtitled for Hispanic audiences, the challenge was to retain the raw, gritty language of the streets while making it understandable to viewers from different cultural backgrounds.

In the case of “Tropa de Elite” (Elite Squad), another highly popular Brazilian film, the focus is on police violence, corruption, and the complex dynamics between law enforcement and criminal elements in Rio’s favelas. The subtitles for Hispanic audiences had to handle a range of culturally specific terms related to Brazilian law enforcement, gang culture, and military language, as well as the intricate social hierarchy depicted in the film. Maintaining the film’s intensity and raw dialogue was key in the subtitling process, but the subtitlers had to balance this with the need to ensure that the nuances were clear to a Hispanic audience unfamiliar with Brazilian policing structures.

A lighter example is “O Auto da Compadecida” (A Dog’s Will), a Brazilian comedy that mixes

humor, religion, and regional folklore. The film is set in the Northeast of Brazil and is filled with regional idioms, humor based on local customs, and religious references that are uniquely Brazilian. Subtitling this film for Hispanic audiences posed challenges in conveying the humor, especially since much of it is specific to the Brazilian Northeastern dialect and cultural context. The success of the subtitles in this film lies in the subtitlers' ability to adapt the humor and regional references in a way that preserved the comedic tone while making it understandable for a Hispanic audience.

4.2 Focus on How Subtitles Handled Cultural Adaptation in Real-World Examples

In the subtitling of "Cidade de Deus", the use of localization was critical. Many of the Brazilian slang terms and colloquial phrases used in the favelas had no direct equivalent in Spanish, requiring creative adaptation. For instance, the Brazilian term "moleque" (which can mean "kid" or "punk") was replaced with "chico" or "chaval" in the Spanish subtitles, both of which carry similar connotations in Hispanic cultures. Additionally, some phrases that referenced specific aspects of Brazilian culture were altered or neutralized to ensure that the meaning was accessible without needing extensive explanation, while still retaining the film's gritty and urban feel.

In "Tropa de Elite," the subtitlers utilized contextualization for certain terms that were too specific to Brazilian law enforcement or gang culture. For example, the "BOPE" (Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais) is a specialized police unit in Brazil with no direct equivalent in most Hispanic countries. Instead of directly translating this acronym, the subtitlers added a brief explanatory subtitle the first time the term appears, labeling it as "unidad especial de operaciones policiales" to help viewers understand the role of the unit without interrupting the film's flow. Similarly, the term "favelas," which is widely recognized in Brazilian culture, was occasionally contextualized as "barrios marginales" to provide further clarity for Hispanic audiences unfamiliar with Brazilian geography.

In the case of "O Auto da Compadecida," the film's regional humor posed one of the most significant challenges. The subtitlers made extensive use of dynamic equivalence to adapt the jokes, ensuring that they maintained their

humor and emotional impact even if the literal meaning had to be altered. For example, religious references that are uniquely Brazilian, such as invocations of Our Lady of Aparecida (a Brazilian Catholic figure), were either localized to include more recognizable figures in Hispanic Catholicism or maintained with minimal adjustments to ensure authenticity. The film's heavy use of wordplay and regional idioms required significant adaptation to make the humor work for a Spanish-speaking audience, without losing the cultural flavor of the Northeast.

In these examples, the subtitlers successfully navigated the cultural and linguistic differences by employing various strategies such as localization, contextualization, and dynamic equivalence. They ensured that the films' cultural richness was preserved while making the content accessible to Hispanic audiences. These case studies highlight the importance of thoughtful cultural adaptation in subtitling, particularly when translating between cultures that share some linguistic similarities but differ in terms of cultural references, humor, and social norms.

5. Audience Reception and Impact of Cultural Adaptation

The effectiveness of cultural adaptation in subtitling plays a crucial role in how a film is perceived by its target audience. In the case of Brazilian films subtitled for Hispanic audiences, the reception of these adaptations can significantly influence the audience's engagement, understanding, and overall enjoyment of the film. This section explores how Hispanic audiences react to the cultural adaptation of Brazilian films and examines the broader impact of these adaptations on audience reception and cultural comprehension.

5.1 Audience Perception of Adapted Subtitles

One of the primary factors influencing audience reception is the accuracy and accessibility of the cultural references within the subtitles. Hispanic audiences may struggle to connect with a film if the subtitling fails to bridge the cultural gap, particularly in relation to humor, social norms, and idiomatic expressions. When cultural references are not properly adapted, viewers might experience confusion, disconnection from the narrative, or even frustration, which can detract from the film's emotional impact.

For instance, in a film like "O Auto da

Compadecida”, where much of the humor is rooted in Brazilian Northeastern traditions, poorly adapted subtitles may result in jokes falling flat. Audience feedback from Hispanic viewers who watched subtitled versions of this film indicated that when the subtitling was well adapted, with localized humor or contextualized jokes, they could fully enjoy the film’s comedic elements. However, in cases where subtitlers failed to adapt region-specific humor adequately, the Hispanic audience’s reception was notably less positive. This highlights the importance of using dynamic equivalence and localization to ensure that the emotional and humorous tones of the original film are preserved.

Cultural adaptation also affects how audiences perceive the film’s characters and storylines. Brazilian films often portray social issues unique to the country, such as life in the favelas, police corruption, or class disparities. These social dynamics may not be immediately understood by Hispanic audiences without sufficient contextualization in the subtitles. For example, in “Cidade de Deus”, the portrayal of life in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas is central to the narrative. When subtitlers effectively contextualize cultural references related to the favelas, the Hispanic audience can better grasp the socio-political background and connect with the characters’ struggles and motivations. Conversely, insufficient adaptation of these references can lead to a disconnect between the audience and the film’s core themes, resulting in a diminished viewing experience.

5.2 The Impact of Effective Cultural Adaptation

When cultural adaptation is handled well, it can enhance the overall engagement and emotional resonance of the film. Hispanic audiences who experience a well-adapted subtitle version of a Brazilian film are more likely to appreciate the narrative’s depth, understand the cultural nuances, and feel more connected to the characters. This, in turn, can lead to a stronger emotional response, higher levels of enjoyment, and a greater willingness to recommend the film to others.

Effective cultural adaptation also contributes to cultural exchange and learning. By maintaining the integrity of the original Brazilian cultural references while making them accessible to a Hispanic audience, subtitlers help bridge cultural divides. Viewers can gain insights into Brazilian society, its traditions, and its unique

social challenges, fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. For instance, when Hispanic viewers watched “Tropa de Elite” with subtitles that accurately reflected the realities of Brazilian law enforcement, many expressed a deeper understanding of the social tensions in Brazil and related them to issues in their own societies. This demonstrates the power of well-executed subtitles in facilitating cultural empathy and comprehension.

Furthermore, audience reception research suggests that viewers are more likely to engage with foreign films when the subtitling feels natural and immersive, without excessive distractions or confusions caused by unadapted cultural references. Subtitles that flow smoothly and offer contextual clarity without overwhelming the viewer allow for a more immersive cinematic experience. This is particularly important for films that rely heavily on emotional or dramatic narratives, where even minor subtitling missteps can disrupt the audience’s connection to the story.

References

- Branco, S. (2014). *Tradução Intersemiótica e Representação Cultural em Filmes Brasileiros: Uma Construção Narrativa. Tradução e Comunicação.*
- Fukushima, T., & Major, D. (2002). Translation Course in Film Subtitling. *Translation Review.*
- García-Reyes, D. (2020). A espaldas de un gigante: Las traslaciones filmoliterarias brasileñas en el cine latinoamericano. *Aletria.*
- Rahma, A., Kristina, D., & Marmanto, S. (2018). Analisis Teknik Penerjemahan Adaptasi dan Variasi pada Subtitle Film Batman Versi Bahasa Jawa Mataraman. *PRASASTI.*
- Resende, A. da C. (2015). Shakespeare on the Screen: Brazilian cinema and TV. *Shakespeare.*
- Tang, J. (2014). Translating Kung Fu Panda’s Kung Fu-Related Elements: Cultural Representation in Dubbing and Subtitling. *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice.*