

Relay Translation as Collaboration

A case study of how multilingual subtitling for global streaming services showcases a new mode of collaborative translation¹

Cheong Ho-Jeong

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Korea

angelhjchg@gmail.com

Lim Hyun-Kyung

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Korea

lunaires@hufs.ac.kr

ABSTRACT: The present study aims to establish relay translation as a new representative mode of collaborative translation. The conventional stigmatic labeling of “indirect”/“less authentic” translation and the prevalent myth of single translatorship have hindered research on the topic. Intriguingly, interest in the issue did not come from academia. The extension of the global network made possible by the advent of advanced technologies and the expansion of media access by worldwide viewers have given rise to an exploding need for subtitling audiovisual (AV) content being created around the globe. Global streaming service (GSS) providers immediately recognized the need to maximize the distribution of what they offer. Thus, the significance of the relay-based, centralized subtitling of AV content into multiple languages proliferated, with or without the sanctions of TS researchers.

Admittedly, “relay translation” is not a new coinage, but recently, albeit belatedly, there has been a surge in the number of international conferences, special journal issues, and independent publications. However, their focus

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is mainly on its relational nature vis-à-vis the original text, terminology differentiation, and remote case discussions centering around literary translation. The present study is a theoretical endeavor to place the issue in the appropriate research context by proposing a dual definition of relay translation: the broad, conventional definition of translating source texts indirectly and a narrower, audiovisual translation (AVT)-focused definition as an industrialized form of process-centered, collaborative work. The role of pivot translators, i.e., specialists responsible for the creation of pivot templates, stand out in the latter as “translators for subsequent translators” and cultural mediators. As a qualitative approach, the study introduces a case study of an in-depth semi-structured interview with a seasoned practitioner. In doing so, the collection of field-resonant data, the collaboration among agents, the process of creating and annotating pivot templates, and implications and challenges of relay translation as collaboration will be reported, leading to the salience of the topic as an emerging form of collaborative translation.

The study is an early endeavor to revisit and establish relay translation as a significant mode of collaborative translation. Enriching the findings by furthering research on multilingual subtitling and other forms of relay translation from a wider array of angles will be instrumental in understanding the complexity and significance of relay translation.

KEYWORDS: relay translation, collaborative translation, multilingual subtitling, global streaming services, pivot template, cultural annotation

논문초록: 본 연구는 협업 번역의 새로운 대표적 형태로 릴레이 번역을 확립하는 것을 목표로 한다. '간접번역/중역' 또는 '진본(眞本)으로서의 성격이 떨어지는 번역'이란 낙인을 수반하는 전통적인 릴레이 번역 관(觀)과 텍스트 별 단일 번역사 신화의 만연은 관련 연구를 가로막는 요소로 작용해 왔다. 그러나 릴레이 번역에 대한 관심이 학계에서 먼저 나타난 것이 아니라는 사실은 흥미롭다. 새로운 기술의 발전으로 가능해진 세계적 네트워크의 확충과 전세계 청중들의 미디어 접근 확대에 따라 전세계에서 생산되는 시청각 콘텐츠에 대한 자막번역 수요는 폭발적으로 늘어났다. 글로벌 OTT 업체들은 자사 콘텐츠의 국제적 보급을 극대화할 필요성을 즉각 인식하였다. 이에 따라 시청각 콘텐츠의 자막번역을 릴레이 기반의 중앙집중적 방식을 통해 다수의 언어로 제공하는 작업의 중요성은 번역학자들의 인정 여부와 상관없이 빠른 속도로 커졌다.

물론 릴레이 번역은 새로운 개념은 아니며, 다소 늦은 감은 있지만 이 주제에 대한 국제 학술대회, 학술논문집 특별호 발행 및 기타 간행물의 수가 최근 크게 늘어나는 추세이다. 그러

나 이들 연구는 주로 원전(原典)과의 관계, 용어 구분, 문학번역의 일부 사례 논의에 집중되어 있다. 본 연구는 이러한 주제를 적절한 학술적 맥락에서 다루고자 하는 이론적 시도로, 릴레이 번역에 대한 이중적 정의를 제안한다. 전통적인 광의의 정의는 ‘출발 텍스트의 간접적 번역’인 반면, 멀티미디어번역(AVT)에 초점을 맞춘 협의의 정의는 ‘산업화된 형태의 프로세스 중심적 협업’이다. 후자에서는 ‘후속 번역사를 위한 번역사’이자 문화 중개자로 기능하는 피벗 템플릿 제작자(즉, 피벗 템플릿의 작성을 담당하는 전문가)의 역할이 두드러진다.

정성적 접근법을 취하는 본 연구는 오랜 경력을 갖춘 실무자와의 심층 반구조화 면담에 바탕을 둔 사례연구를 제시한다. 본 연구는 현장의 목소리를 담아낸 데이터의 수집, 다양한 주체간의 협업, 피벗 템플릿의 작성 및 주석 과정, 협업으로서의 릴레이 번역이 가지는 시사점과 도전과제를 보고함으로써 새롭게 부상하는 협업번역의 형태로서 이 주제가 가지는 특징을 보여주고자 한다.

본 연구는 릴레이 번역을 ‘협업적’ 관행으로 재조명하고 확립하려는 초기 연구이다. 다양한 언어의 자막번역, 그리고 릴레이 번역의 여타 형태에 대한 다양한 관점의 연구를 통해 본 연구의 성과를 확충하게 된다면 릴레이 번역의 복잡성과 함의에 대한 이해를 한층 제고할 수 있을 것이다.

핵심어: 릴레이 번역, 협업으로서의 번역, 다국어 자막번역, 글로벌 OTT, 피벗 템플릿, 문화 소주석

1. K-culture Everywhere?

Over the last quarter-century, the popularity of K-Content has soared exponentially, gaining recognition far beyond its national and local market boundaries. Widely known as the “Korean Wave” or *Hallyu*, the phenomenon encompasses the entire scope of the entertainment industry, including K-pop, films, TV dramas, web-based content, and K-literature,² attracting audiences from around the globe. While the initial stream of the Korean Wave was forged largely through regional broadcasting and ever-expanding internet-based fan communities, the global enthusiasm of late owes much to digital distribution platforms, i.e., Netflix and other major global streaming service (GSS) providers. Pivotal in extending the access of global viewers to K-Content in new markets with diverse linguistic backgrounds, these providers allow for the latest K-Content of a broad scope

2 The latest addition to the scope, with Han Kang’s winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2024.

to remain a click away.

From the industrial viewpoint, the global proliferation of K-Content³ poses significant linguistic and cultural challenges to the translation industry. The need to make that content intelligible to worldwide viewers with different linguistic and cultural experiences is a complex yet crucial task. Skilled translators in the required language pairs are scarce and translation costs even more for language pairs involving minor or “exotic” languages. This challenge has led those in global audiovisual (AV) subtitling to adopt “relay-based” subtitling, a process in which translating the source text into a pivot text to be followed by rendering it into different target texts to cater to the needs of the linguistic-cultural communities where the respective languages serve as the major medium of communication. Typically, English is the pivot language used to facilitate the subsequent translation into other target texts.⁴

1.1 New Environment Necessitating a New Mode of Translation

Concurrently with the emerging practical commercial needs discussed above, “relay translation” in general and “relay subtitling” in particular have drawn academic interest. Admittedly, relay translation and subtitling itself is not an entirely new phenomenon. Emulating the well-established convention of relay interpreting⁵ at international conferences, including at the UN, the term has been used to refer to the type of translation where pivot templates have been used to produce multilingual translations for international film festival entries and DVDs. Contrary to relay interpreting, where the interpreting into a pivot language constitutes a “pivot interpreting,” with a real-world audience who listens to it as an end product, relay translation uses a novel concept of “pivot template,” which contrasts in that it does not have real-world viewers other than the subsequent translators. However, these relay translations are

3 Translating, as relay translation, the AV content created from countries other than Korea has also been prevalent worldwide. Translating K-Content is noteworthy, however, as translated K-Content ranks at the top of the global list of relay translated languages.

4 Contrary to English as the *lingua franca* for most of the globe, other languages also serve as pivot languages in some parts of the world, e.g., Arabic for Arab nations and Russian for states that used to belong to the former Soviet Union.

5 In the present study, a “relay translation” is chosen over “indirect translation” as a written-language counterpart of “relay interpreting” since “indirect interpreting” is hardly in use (Pöchhacker, 2022, pp. 2-3). At the same time, the definition of “relay translation” encompasses both the practices where the intermediate version has a genuine audience and those not.

basically remote instances, typically small-scale and for one-time distribution of translated individual titles. The exponential surge of the practical need to almost instantaneously provide subtitling into multiple languages posed a new challenge to GSS providers wanting to distribute and circulate what they have to offer. This in turn has forced those who offer translation services to adopt a new model of translating: quick provision of subtitling in all of the languages spoken in their distribution network, and at the same time, management of the subtitling of the same content in different languages to meet unified style guides and policies to ensure the sameness of the content and maintain consistency across languages.

Born out of this practical need, the relay-based model adopted by GSS providers represents a significant shift from traditional subtitling practices since translating into different target languages to produce end-translation almost at the same time became a priority. Such an approach reflects a more systematic and coordinated way of translation: offering reliable subtitling in many a different language where different viewer groups with different cultural backgrounds and experiences of unfamiliar cultures can find the subtitling accessible and relatable. On the increase in this respect is the significance of pivot templates, which comprise not only literal renditions of the source text but annotations of cultural elements for later use by subsequent translators who will work into different target texts (Agulló Garcia et al., 2024, p. 863; Oziemblewska & Szarkowska, 2020, pp. 432-433). As will be addressed later, the significance of cultural annotations cannot be exaggerated for the completion of target text translation with successful communicative effectiveness and efficiency. The pivot templates with cultural annotations attached serve as a framework of reference for translators working in various target languages, ensuring that viewers can understand and appreciate what is unique to Korean culture even when they are not very familiar with Korean cultural traditions.

Obviously, this process requires a high degree of collaboration engaging all those involved, including pivot templators, or specialists responsible for the creation of pivot templates, translators, revisionists, as well as those in quality control (QC), among others. The key figure in the context of the collaboration is the pivot templator. Pivot templators make this multi-staged communication possible by serving as ‘translators for subsequent translators’ and cultural mediators for other translators. Translators responsible for the final subtitling in target languages depend on pivot templators for

the communicability of cultural elements involved as well as the accurate equivalent informativity of target texts. In this sense, relay-based multilingual subtitling for GSS providers should be recognized as a new form of “translation as collaboration” where pivot templates play an indispensable integral role.

Historically, relay translation was deeply rooted and relatively widespread in Korea until a few decades back, especially in the realm of literary translation and self-help books (Cho, 2020; Esther Torres-Simón, 2008) as a majority of relay translations used to be made inbound via Chinese, Japanese, or English at the dawn of the 20th century and in the latter half of the same century. Adding a new function of annotating to translating for subsequent translation into final target languages, however, is a newfound contemporary role for Korean translators. The changes of Korean culture from a cultural importer to one of the primary contributors to global cultural proliferation has transformed the industrial landscape involving translating K-Content as it now stands at the forefront of this emerging mode of translation.

“Translations are not made in a vacuum” (Lefevere, 2002, p. 14), and by extension, Translation Studies does not operate in a vacuum, either; it is closely related to the burning questions of practitioners, leading researchers to take them seriously and endeavor to answer them. It interacts with and inspires those in the practicing field. Whereas relay translation has thus far been approached mainly from academic perspectives, the process of new workflows being formed and actually implemented has yet to be thoroughly examined. It thus is important to theorize this new mode of collaborative translation by basing the argument on the genuine voices of those who are actually involved in these emergent workflows.

Structured around an in-depth interview with an experienced industry professional, the present study will serve as a meaningful starting point in this respect. In the present study, efforts will be made to highlight how “relay translation as collaboration” is emerging as a new form of collaborative translation—as illustrated in the multilingual subtitling practices of GSS providers—and why it deserves theoretical attention. The main discussions will include interaction and collaboration among key actors involved, the role of pivot templates in creating and annotating pivot templates, and the implications and challenges ahead for the global distribution of K-Content. In tandem with the in-depth interview, the authors of the present study made the most of the information they obtained on the subtitling policies and procedures of major GSS providers from GSS websites (including Netflix) as

well as those working for these providers, as they were able to complement and support the interview results.

1.2 Structure of the Study

Against this backdrop, the present study will address “relay translation” based on data collected from the practicing field of translation. In Section 2, literature will be reviewed first to point to the limitations of the discussions thus far on the issue. As an alternate view, new definitions will be given both on the broad and narrower sense levels, the latter of which focuses more on the industrialized nature of collaborative workflow of translating AV content for the GSS providers. The literature review will then focus on translation as collaboration and multilingual subtitling in particular for GSS provision. Section 3 will introduce research questions and methods employed. A case study using an in-depth semi-structured interview will illustrate relay-based multilingual subtitling practices for GSS provision. Section 4 will present findings and discussions, and by way of conclusion, Section 5 will summarize the outcomes of the present study and its implications and limitations.

2. Relay translation: Something Old and Nothing New?

2.1 Relay Translation in Literature

Relay translation is generally understood as an indirect form of translation where a translated text is translated into a third language (André, 2019, p. 470). Its conventional views have focused on the inevitable indirectness of its end-products, often dubbed “a translation of a translation” (Gambier, 1994, p. 413). Some scholars opt for very broad definitions of relay translation that can work with a wider array of interlinguistic and intermodal processes (Pięta, 2021), such as “a translation based on a text (or texts) other than (only) the ultimate source text (ST)” (Ivaska, 2020, p. 19). The most widely adopted definition, however, would be that of Kittel and Frank (1991, p. 3), who define it as the translation of “a source (or sources) which is itself a translation into a language other than the language of the original, or the target language.” While Pym (2011, p. 80) notices the process side of relay translation by defining it as a “historical process of translation from an intermediary version,” conventional

understandings of the phenomenon have largely been product-oriented and structured around isolated instances, i.e., how individual books or movies are translated not directly but via a mediating language.

Despite its long tradition and widespread use, relay translation has not been free from stigma and prejudice. Just as the translation has long been perceived as inferior to the original (Dizdar, 2009, p. 95), the product of relay translation has naturally been seen as a poorer copy of the already poor copy (Pięta, 2019, p. 28), leading the practice to be “often hidden or camouflaged” (Assis Rosa et al., 2017, p. 113).

Admittedly, a growing number of scholars are paying renewed attention to relay translation, revisiting historical examples and current developments across various subfields. Many international conferences have ensued to explore this topic, together with multiple special issues on relay/indirect translation by multiple international journals as well as books exploring the theme (e.g., Atwood, 2024; Hadley, 2023; Pięta et al., 2022; Rosa et al., 2019).⁶ Altogether, these demonstrate the growing scholarly interest in the topic, the research direction of which can be summarized as:

- (a) **Terminological and conceptual discussions:** A multitude of competing terms with varying definitions have been introduced to indicate the indirectness of translation. While “indirect translation” is increasingly preferred among translation scholars exploring the topic, “relay translation” (Dollerup, 2000; St. André, 2010) remains a popular term when discussing both oral and written translation. Other options like “mediated translation” (Linder, 2014), “pivot translation” (Vermeulen,

6 The number of academic papers on relay translation has risen exponentially from just one in the 1960s and 1970s to 48 in the 2010s (Pięta, 2019, p. 27); a structured literature review also suggests a significant rise in the number of relevant publications between 2017 and 2022 (Pięta, Ivaska, et al., 2023).

In 2017, the University of Lisbon held a conference titled “Decentering Translation Studies in Portugal: Translating East Asia: Practices and Dialogues of Indirect Translation.” Another conference dedicated to the issue was arranged in Rome, Italy in 2020. The IndirecTrans network brings together scholars and research results on relay/indirect translation (<https://www.indirecttrans.com/about-us/about-this-website.html>).

Special issues on this topic have also been published by *Translation Studies* (Vol. 10, Issue 2; “Indirect Translation: Theoretical, Methodological and Terminological Issues”), *Target* (Vol. 34, Issue 3; “What Can Research on Indirect Translation Do for Translation Studies?”), *Translation Spaces* (Vol. 12, Issue 2; “Indirect Translation and Sustainable Development”), and *Perspectives* (Vol. 32, Issue 5; “Indirect (Pivot) Audiovisual Translation: A Burning Issue for Research and Training”).

2011), and “second-hand translation” (Toury, 1995) are also used in different geographies or contexts. Also, conceptual assumptions about the notion have often differed, including the number of languages involved, the type of mediating languages, and the intended receiver of the mediating text (Assis Rosa et al., 2017, pp. 115-120).

- (b) **Justification and identification:** Scholars interested in relay translation have also focused on exploring the reasons behind—or the advantages of—the practice, including the availability of translators working directly, cost-effectiveness and time-efficiency, power relations between languages, the lack of the original text, and censorial or copyright control (Pięta, 2019, pp. 27-28; Washbourne, 2013, pp. 611-612). The identification of relay translations has also been a key issue, since a historical stigma has led them to be hidden or disguised as the output of direct translation.
- (c) **Focus on literary translation and historical research:** Endeavors to elucidate the practice of relay translation have been centered around literary translation in book form, mainly from a product-oriented perspective (Davier et al., 2023; Pięta, Ivaska, et al., 2023). Most studies have employed a historical approach, with a focus on quality issues and other negative consequences of relay translation (Pięta et al., 2022, p. 13).

As clearly shown in the summary above, the research on relay translation has been rather confined in scope to discussing its relational nature vis-à-vis the original text, terminology-focused, exploring its specific cases centering on literary translation.

2.2 Defining Relay Translation in Relation to the Translation Field

What is significant at this juncture is to recognize the collaborative nature of relay translation anchored to the concrete practice of the field. It is a mode of translation in which multiple players collaborate to produce different target texts to meet different needs of viewers with different linguistic and cultural experiences. It is a process of translation in which the pivot templator first provides not only the literal rendition of the source text but cultural annotations as the raw material/food for thoughts/inspiration for the subsequent translator. It is a procedure of ensuring that the source content

be rendered with the same informativity and communicative effect to end viewers no matter what their linguistic and cultural experiences. It is a reality in which all the above players work together closely and in succession to produce the required end translations. What researchers have failed to do thus far is to duly recognize and provide accounts of it. All the components above should be incorporated in the research, and, thus allowing both the theory and the experience-based insights of practitioners in the field to complement each other.

The present study is an endeavor to address the above questions. It attempts to define “relay translation” in a narrower novel sense and explore it as a new mode of collaborative translation. Here, it will be conceptualized in relation to the practical industrial field of GSS provision as a collaborative workflow of simultaneous or near-simultaneous multilingual translation where the source text is translated via a pivot language into multiple target languages. While analogous to relay interpreting as a “chain-like process” (Interpreter.io, 2024) of interpreting through a pivot language, this practice differs from its interpreting counterpart. Unlike the rendering in the pivot language in interpreting, the pivot text, or the “pivot template,” in relay translation often looks different from any target translations due largely to the enrichment⁷ by cultural annotations and other additional information for subsequent translators as its intended audience. All in all, relay translation differs from relay interpreting not only because of the absence of the real-world viewers of the pivot template but also because of the presence and use of cultural annotations as the means of “translation for translators to follow” and “cultural mediation” for target text translations.

Our conceptualization of relay translation stands out from conventional perspectives, since it represents an approach from the process/workflow-based practical viewpoint. It does not refer to isolated instances but to an emerging mode of translation to meet the growing need of an ever-extending industry. Instead of highlighting indirectness or lack of authenticity, the new focus is on how a pivot text with cultural annotations serves as a reference point for subsequent target texts that will cater to different viewers.

In this vein, relay translation should be defined on two dimensions. First, its broad or generic definition, in line with the conventional usage of

7 See Footnote 5 of the present study, which denotes its difference from relay interpreting in terms of having no real-world viewers.

the term, would be a mode of translation where the source text is translated via a mediating text (i.e., pivot text) into a target language. The pivot text functions as the source text for the subsequent translation and a source of cultural annotations offered to the translator of a subsequent version to allow for cultural mediation for target viewers. Instances of relay translation in this sense include often isolated, one-off projects for particular books/titles and language pairs.

The narrower definition of relay translation, on the other hand, represents an audiovisual translation (AVT) perspective, referring to an industrialized form of collaborative workflow of translating AV content for GSS provision. It features communication, coordination, and collaboration among various agents. The key difference of this new workflow is the centralized, synchronous management of all titles (or texts) on the streaming platforms under uniform guidelines and policies, as opposed to individual works being handled independently by different publishers, broadcasters or studios for each language pair. Similarly, pivot templates and cultural annotations included therein are created by pivot templators, and shared with subsequent translators who will work on different target translations. These pivot templators and translators work together and communicate actively with quality controllers, language managers, and other agents to ensure successful linguistic and cultural mediation across all languages.

2.3 Translation as Collaboration

Translation as collaboration, or collaborative translation, refers to a situation where “two or more agents cooperate *in some way* to produce a translation” (O’Brien, 2011, p. 17; italics original). While it has been a longstanding practice throughout the world’s history,⁸ scholarly attention to this matter is a relatively recent phenomenon, due partially to the widespread image and perception of the translator as a solitary agent working in isolation.

Indeed, the “powerful Romantic mythologizing of solitary genius” (Cordingley & Frigau Manning, 2016, pp. 9-10) contradicts the collaborative

8 Historical examples include the Septuagint and its 72 translators (Isserlin, 1973), Chinese classics translated jointly by bilinguals James Legge and Wang Tao and their Chinese assistants who understood English (St. André, 2017, pp. 285-286), and Korean children’s songs edited/illustrated by Korean-Australian pastor Esmond W. New and translated by his wife Anne New (Kang, 2022, p. 413).

nature of authorial and translation practices throughout history. Echoing Stillinger's notion of "multiple authorship," which demonstrates how "texts considered to be the work of a single authorship turn out to be the product of several hands" (Stillinger, 1991, p. v; as cited in Cordingley & Frigau Manning, 2016, p. 10), Jansen and Wegener (2013) propose "multiple translatorship" to stress "how agents interact, negotiate and struggle for influence in the various phases leading up to the translated text" (Jansen & Wegener, 2013, p. 5). This "process-oriented, 'horizontal' perspective" (Jansen & Wegener, 2013, p. 5) resonates in the sociological turn in Translation Studies, which has given rise to a new interest in the translation process and the involvement of collaborators as traditionally invisible agents.

The advancement of new technologies has spawned new forms and arenas of collaboration for translators. Now multiple translators can "work simultaneously on the same target-text draft on different web-enabled devices" (Huss, 2018, p. 398), and crowdsourcing "makes active producers out of formerly passive consumers or users" of translation (Zwischenberger, 2020, p. 184).

Still, the question remains whether the term "translation" here should be defined narrowly as a set of strictly linguistic processes (e.g., translation, revision, review) or as a wider array of activities including pre- and post-production processes (St. André, 2017, pp. 286-287), since this will dictate the range of agents to be called "translators." The present study will adopt the narrower scope to shed light on those involved directly in the very process of relay translation.

Collaborative translation can be done by multiple translators (i.e., co-translation), between the translator and other agents, including the author, editor, revisionist, and reader (Huss, 2018, pp. 389-399), or among multiple translators working into different languages, with the help or guidance of the author or other agents. Many of these collaborative translation practices are professional, but the number of non-professional ones is constantly rising. Collaboration between humans and technology, including the nature of such collaboration, is also drawing attention (O'Brien, 2012).

Another way of approaching collaborative translation is to look at its temporal sequences or successive nature in which different agents engage with the text. A strong example in this light can be relay translation as the focus of the present study, especially in the context of industrialized workflows for GSS provision that will be discussed in detail in the next section.

2.4 Multilingual Subtitling for GSS Provision

AVT in general is inherently collaborative, and subtitling as its key component is no exception. Its multimodal nature requires the involvement of various agents in addition to the translators in a strict sense, including the commissioner/client, translation agency, adapter, reviewer, spotter, and editor to name just a few (Vermeulen, 2011, p. 121).

In the early days, subtitling projects were commissioned by film studios or broadcasters on national levels and for individual titles. With the arrival of advanced media technologies, however, Netflix and other GSS providers have emerged as distinct major commissioners. Their subtitling practices are particularly interesting, as they are rather analogous with the localization of software, websites, and games: They go beyond the translation of individual titles to develop and implement uniform guidelines and policies governing the production and global distribution of multilingual subtitles and dubs—often through relay translation when the source language is not English—for titles that they stream (especially their original series).⁹

Research on relay translation in subtitling has grown significantly over recent years. Many case studies have explored individual instances of relay translation from one language to another through a pivot language (Dore & De Nicola, 2023; Jin et al., 2022; Vermeulen, 2011; Zilberdik, 2004), and the reasons for relay translation in AV content and the need for cultural mediation have also been examined (Chaume, 2018; Jankowska, 2023). With the rise of GSS, however, research on simultaneous relay translation into multiple languages is emerging as a novel field of interest. In particular, the relay translation of Korean AV content, which has gained popularity on platforms like Netflix, has attracted significant attention (Dalli, 2024; Sung et al., 2022).

Pięta et al. (2024) duly point out in their overview of relevant research trends that the creation and cultural annotation of pivot templates, the development of technology and tools for collaboration, and the rights and ethics of pivot translators are among key research factors in the future. Understanding the roles and dynamics of various stakeholders involved in the collaboration process would be the first step in theorizing the actual workflow

9 One difference, though, is that they do not necessarily produce the source content but deal with what is created by another agent (i.e., studios), while the source texts for conventional localization projects are generally produced in-house.

and eventually producing qualified resources for relay-based multilingual subtitling tailored to industry needs. As a response to the research need as such, the present study reports on an interview with a well-seasoned practitioner, the workflow of relay-based multilingual subtitling for global streaming services where K-Content is translated into different languages via English. The collaboration among key stakeholders and the creation and annotation of pivot templates will be closely examined. In doing so, emphases will be on how relay-based multilingual subtitling showcases as a new mode of collaborative translation and how translation researchers and practitioners should work together to navigate through this newly emerging reality.

3. Research Questions and Methods

To address the above-raised issue, the research questions for the present study are fourfold:

RQ1: Is “relay translation as collaboration” a new form of translation? Why does the collaborative nature of this new mode of translation practice deserve theoretical attention?

RQ2: How do key agents work with each other in this new collaborative translation, and in what procedures?

RQ3: How does the pivot templator create and annotate pivot templates?

RQ4: What implications and challenges are posed by the ever-expanding relay translation of international AV content, including K-Content?

To answer these questions, a case study was designed and conducted of relay-based multilingual subtitling practices for GSS providers. The interview method was chosen as a quick and efficient way of gathering factual data. The fact that direct observation or other research methods are difficult or impossible to employ also support the decision process (Lamont & Swidler, 2014, p. 158).

The interviewee is an experienced professional at an AVT vendor that works with GSS providers. Her/his extensive knowledge and experience

throughout the entire process of collaboration made her/him the ideal subject for the present study. A semi-structured interview was implemented with the interviewee strictly under the condition of anonymity, and, because of the requirement for anonymity, any description of the subject is intentionally absent from the present study.

Once the agreement was reached with the subject, a questionnaire was first emailed to her/him and the background and main purposes of the present study was explained. Key topics covered in the questionnaire were: (a) the collaboration process for and agents involved in direct and relay-based multilingual subtitling for GSS providers; (b) guidelines and policies; (c) the production and use of pivot templates; and (d) the annotation of cultural references. The final list of questions answered during the interview can be found in the table below.

Table 1: List of questions asked during the interview

Category	#	Question
Collaboration process and agents	1	Which GSS provider(s) are you working with for multilingual subtitling?
	2	What are the structure and steps of the collaborative subtitling process for each of these services?
	3	Who are the main agents in this process? What are their roles and responsibilities?
	4	How different is the collaboration process for relay-based multilingual subtitling from that for direct multilingual subtitling? What steps are added, and who are the extra agents involved?
	5	In each step of the collaboration process for relay subtitling, how do key agents communicate? (e.g., documented instruction/reporting, interactive feedback)
	6	During relay-based multilingual subtitling using pivot templates, do translators rely solely on annotations (either documented or available online), or do they ask questions and receive feedback? Who provides the feedback?
	7	In addition to pivot templates, are the machine translation output of the original text and translations into other languages used as references during the translation process?
	8	Do relay translators who use pivot templates revise timing?

Category	#	Question
Guidelines and policies	9	GSS providers, except Netflix, have not made public their guidelines on pivot templating and annotation. If you have experience with the relay subtitling of K-Content for these services, can you explain how pivot templates are created and cultural references annotated for them?
	10	Are there guidelines for the annotation of cultural references?
Pivot templates	11	Is the pivot language always English, or are other languages also in use?
	12	How different are relay subtitling practices using pivot templates from those not? How much are the respective shares of these practices, and what are the criteria for determining whether to adopt pivot templates?
	13	Who produces pivot templates for the relay subtitling of Korean AV content?
	14	Are the pivot templates later used as finished products? Or are these literal templates used as the basis for creating final English subtitles?
	15	After the delivery of pivot templates, are there requests being made for additional adjustments? If yes, what are these adjustments about?
	16	Can you share examples of titles for which you or your team created pivot templates?
Annotation of cultural references	17	Does the terminology list for GSS providers consist of proper nouns and characteristic phrases, not cultural references in general?
	18	How are cultural references other than these terms marked and annotated?
	19	Does the pivot templator provide annotations? Or are there separate resources responsible for the task?
	20	Can you name some examples of cultural references that were tricky to annotate or whose annotations brought about unintended misunderstandings?

The email communication was followed by a one-and-a-half-hour, face-to-face interview in November 2023. At the interviewee's request, her/his answers were not recorded but summarized in writing. The same set of questions in the mailed questionnaire was used, but the original order of questions was not strictly followed to ensure the subject could freely address what she/he has observed and experienced. Some of the questions

were skipped if the subject found them relevant to the disclosure of her/his identify, and a few questions were added on the spot for the clarification of the subject's responses. The written summary was finalized after a double check with the interviewee to make sure if any of the phrasing is inaccurate or misleading.

Prior to the interview, efforts were made to obtain the subtitling policies and procedures of major GSS providers, including Netflix, by exploring their websites and securing other written materials from those working for these GSS providers, especially ones relating to relay-based subtitling and pivot templating. Illustrating the apparent practice of AVT vendors, these data were used to complement and support the interview process and compared with the interview findings.

4. Findings and Discussions

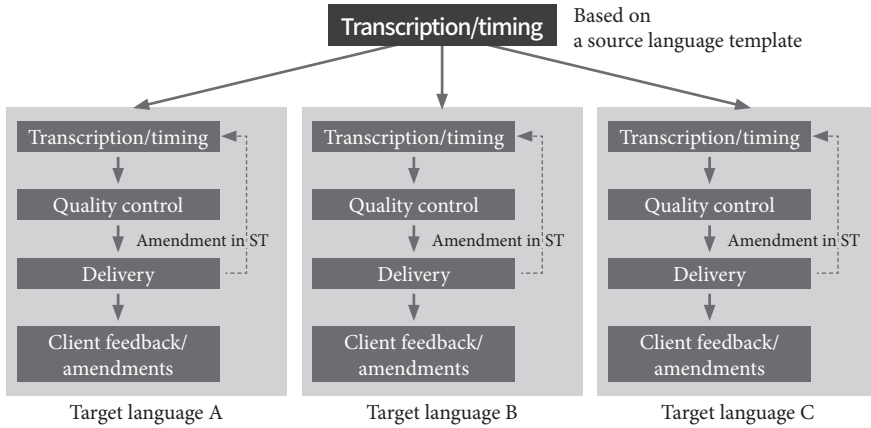
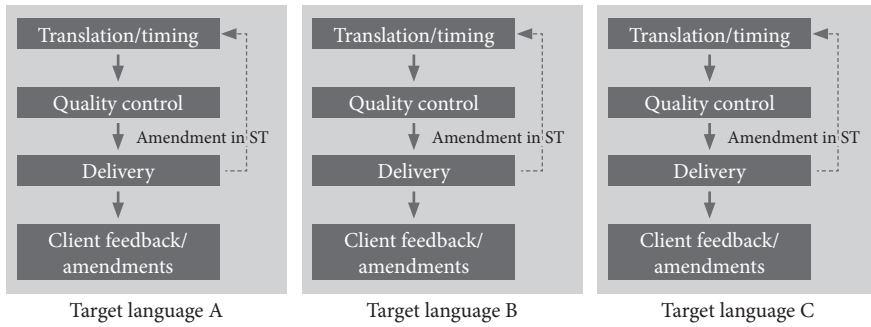
In the section below, the findings from the interview are presented and discussed. First, the collaboration process of and agents in multilingual subtitling for GSS providers services are reported, with a focus on differences found in relay-based practices. Then the use of pivot templates¹⁰ and the annotation of cultural references are examined, followed by a review of relevant guidelines and policies.

4.1 Collaboration Process and Agents

The subject confirmed that she/he had experience working with at least three of the major GSS providers. While the specifics of the work experience with each of the clients differ by client, the general workflow for multilingual subtitling in AVT vendors¹¹ can be visualized in the following two models:

10 Examples of actual pivot templates, if any, were not provided in the present study, because of the interviewee's rejection.

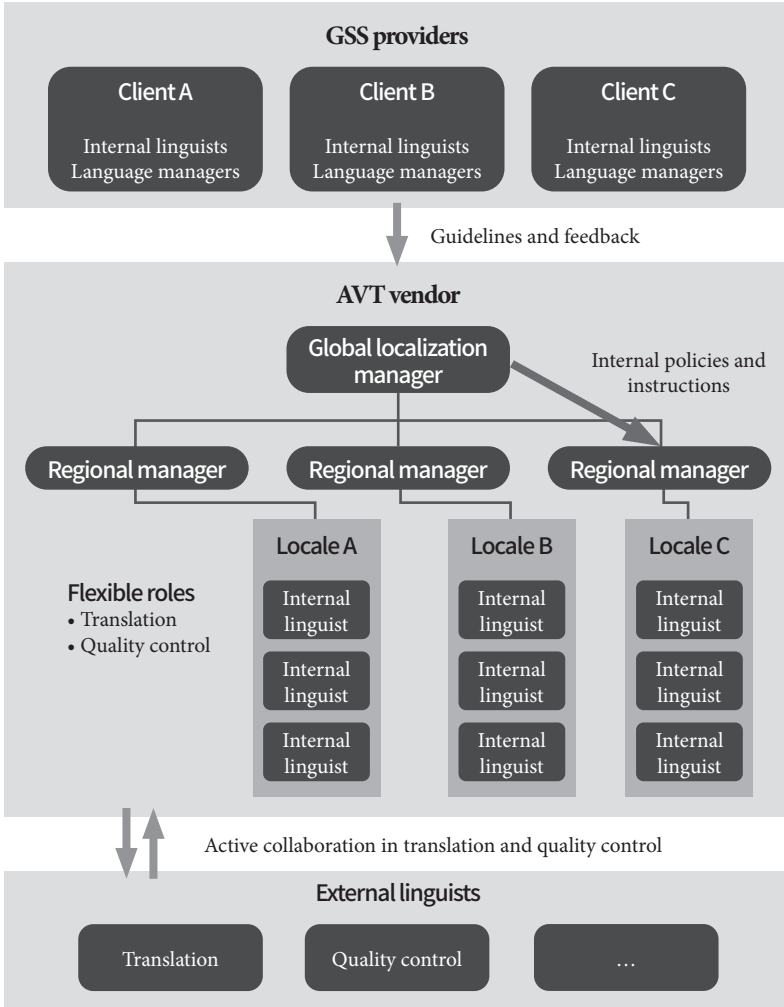
11 AVT vendors offering a full range of media and localization services are called end-to-end (E2E) vendors.

Figure 1: Workflow for multilingual subtitling #1 (source-language template in use)¹²**Figure 2: Workflow for multilingual subtitling #2 (no source-language template used)**

The main difference between Figure 1 and Figure 2 is the use of a source-language template, which is a list of source-language dialogues transcribed and timed in advance to spare the translators the time-consuming technical work, allowing for the concentration on translation per se. Transcription and timing may be done by in-house or external translators. Some translators, however, prefer translating and timing the subtitles directly, in which case the source-language dialogues are not transcribed at all and the subtitles for each language are created from scratch.

¹² The number of target texts in the models has been set to three to highlight the multilingual nature of subtitling practices that they represent while ensuring the visibility of information in the relevant figures by not adding too many languages. These workflows within an AVT vendor are largely standardized across locales.

Figure 3: Key agents involved in multilingual subtitling



The translation of subtitles is handled predominantly by external translators, but some locales tend to have one or two internal translators engage directly in some of the translation projects. The translated subtitles undergo quality control. In the interviewee’s case, approximately 90% of all quality control jobs are conducted in-house, but occasionally, trusted external translators may be assigned as quality controllers.

During or after translation and during quality control, the client may request translation adjustments when the source content was a “work in

progress” and a new, final version has arrived. After the delivery of the translation, some of the clients may provide feedback but the situation depends largely on titles.

Figure 3 shows key agents involved in the linguistic aspects of multilingual subtitling for GSS providers. As clients, GSS providers outsource subtitling projects to AVT vendors. They offer overall guidelines for the subtitling process, and their internal linguists or language managers¹³ may give feedback on translation products. AVT vendors engaged in multilingual subtitling (usually E2E vendors) have a global localization manager who sets out internal policies and provides instructions for regional offices and locale teams. Each locale team may have internal linguists with different roles, who work together actively with external translators (some of whom may occasionally serve as quality controllers) to translate and deliver subtitles. The client acknowledges that not the entire pool of translators can be filled with internal resources and tolerates the combination of internal and external translators, on the condition that the AVT vendor’s internal team guarantees the quality of final products.

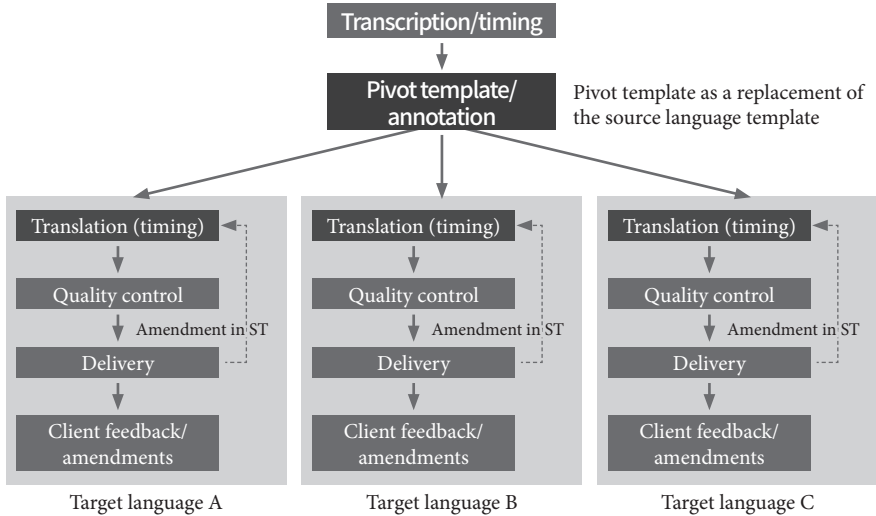
Then how does the collaboration process for relay-based multilingual subtitling differ from the aforesaid practices? And when do vendors go for relay translation? The interviewee indicated that such decisions are made on a case-by-case basis depending on the availability of direct pairs and the client’s preferences. Even when no direct pair is available, the client may insist on having the subtitles translated directly. In most cases, relay translation is needed when a very large number of languages (e.g., 30) are involved, and this is where a new step kicks in: creating pivot templates¹⁴ and providing annotations.

Figure 4 shows a revised version of the workflow in Figure 1. Here the creation and annotation of a pivot template, which replaces a source-language template described in Figure 1, take place after transcription and timing. The

13 Linguists are responsible for dealing with translation, quality control, and pivot template creation/annotation hands-on, while their roles may not necessarily be fixed. Language managers coordinate translation projects, monitor the output, and facilitate collaboration among various stakeholders.

14 Vendors using English as the only pivot language may refer to the pivot template as the “English template” instead. Netflix, for example, uses the term “pivot (language) template” in its relevant guidelines (Netflix, 2023d, Section 33), while “English (language) template” is also found elsewhere on the Partner Help Center website (Netflix, 2023b). Further discussion on the pivot template will be made in the next section.

Figure 4: Workflow for relay-based multilingual subtitling



interviewee pointed out that some of the translators may choose to adjust timing in the pivot template to better fit the target language, hinting that timing may remain part of the process even when pivot templates are put in use.

A pivot template is created jointly by the external translator and the internal team, with the former preparing a draft and the latter adding more details during quality control. Likewise, annotations are first provided by external translators, and the internal team later reviews them and add more annotations as necessary. The number of annotations from external translators, however, is extremely small, and it is hard to say that cultural references and other issues worth annotating are systematically managed in the process. The interviewee specifically raised the need for future training as to why cultural references need to be annotated and how.

The addition of pivot template/annotation as a new step to Figure 2, on the other hand, makes the workflow somewhat contradictory, since the original model involves no source-language template to be replaced with a pivot template in the first place. If the translation is made first into English and the subsequent translators refer to this English translation individually and translate/time their subtitles from scratch, this might be more of the sum of isolated relay translation instances than of the centralized workflow that we are looking at. For the purpose of the present study, we thus focus our attention on the workflow for relay-based multilingual subtitling presented in

Figure 4.

The key difference in the revised diagram of agents involved is the addition of a new role: the internal pivot templator. While pivot templates are generally drafted by external translators, the internal team finalizes these templates and responds to questions from translators. Figure 5 shows that the internal pivot templator plays a central role as she/he interacts with other locale teams¹⁵ as well as external translators/quality controllers spanning different locales.

The communication between the GSS client and the AVT vendor is mostly done in the form of email or other written correspondences, including documents, instead of directly on the translation management system or other interface systems. Whether reference materials are made available for translators varies by client and by project.

Recently, the AVT industry is paying keen attention to the possibility of leveraging machine translation outputs or other instruments to enhance productivity. At the moment, some vendors do not allow translators to use the ST's machine translation output ST's translations in different languages as references, while others leave the choice at the liberty of the translators. The use of such references depends largely on each vendor's rules and systems as well as the preferences of translators.

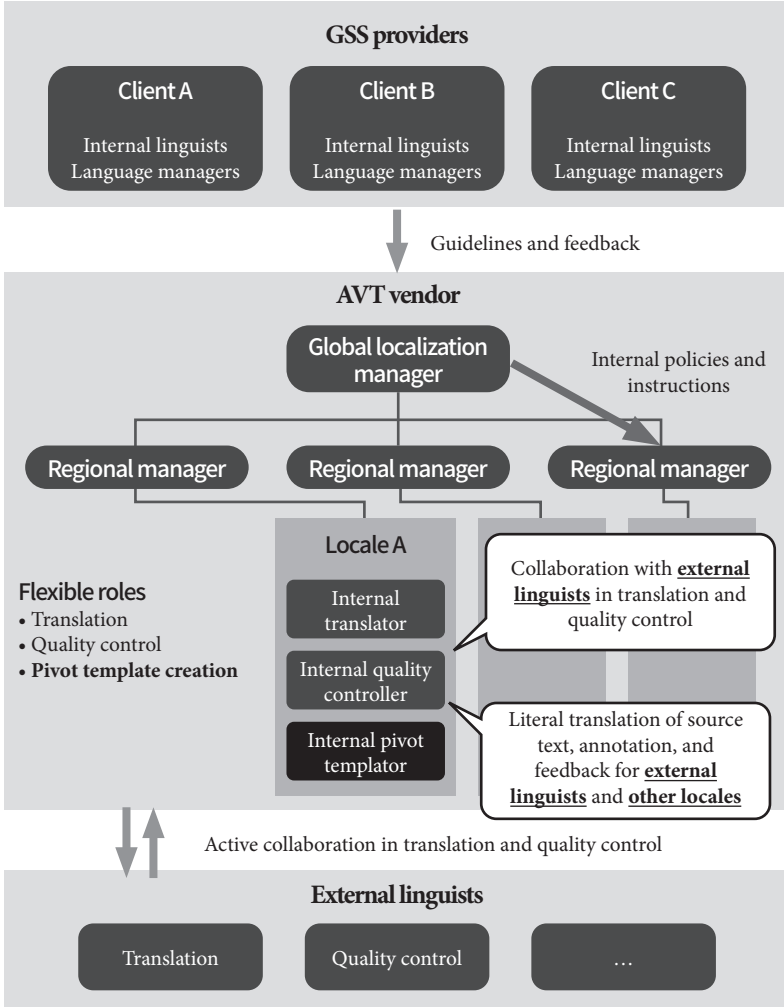
4.2 Guidelines and Policies

Most GSS providers do not disclose their guidelines and policies for AVT, but they do share their guidelines with translators working on their titles. While there are no separate guidelines on pivot template creation, all these services have guidelines as to how translations into English should be handled, which may technically serve as pivot template guidelines.

Netflix, on the other hand, is the only global streaming service whose subtitling/dubbing policies and guidelines are available online. Its guidelines named "Timed Text Style Guide: Subtitle Templates" (Netflix, 2023d) describe what should be covered in source-language and pivot templates for multilingual subtitling and when to add annotations. Cultural references are mentioned

15 The creation and cultural annotation of a pivot template by the internal pivot templator for Locale A will be followed by subsequent translation into different locales, necessitating the interaction and collaboration across locales and among various agents involved.

Figure 5: Key agents involved in relay-based multilingual subtitling



as one of the items to be annotated, but it is unclear what exactly constitutes cultural references and how they should be annotated.

AVT vendors may ask their translators to add notes on cultural references and any cultural contexts that may be useful. Not all of them have separate guidelines on how to provide cultural annotations, and they often rely on their highly experienced translators who are familiar with how to deal with culture-specific expressions.

The specifics of pivot template creation and annotation will be discussed in the next sections, with Netflix (2023d) and other publicly available guidelines as key references.

4.3 Pivot Templates

A pivot template is a type of subtitle template,¹⁶ which Netflix (2023d) defines as follows:

A subtitle template serves as the basis for subtitling in other languages. A subtitle template is an edited, positioned, researched, annotated and checked subtitle file, timed to shot and audio, matching the source language of the associated content (unless it is a pivot file) which is intended to serve as a basis for downstream interlingual subtitling.

A pivot template, on the other hand, is “in a language other than the source language, intended to act as a bridge between the source language and target languages when unusual language pairs are in play” (Netflix, 2023d). For efficient and accurate relay translation, a pivot template should “resemble a linguistically correct and fluent back translation which is not overly transcreated or localized” (Netflix, 2023d), meaning cultural references and other culture-bound elements should be preserved and explained in detail to avoid linguistic inferences from the pivot language and enhance the understanding of translators into their respective target languages.

The availability of resources is the most important factor when choosing relay translation. Therefore, the pivot language used in relay-based multilingual subtitling for GSS providers is almost always English (Ester Torres-Simón et al., 2023, p. 222), since the pool of linguists working from/into it is the largest in any country worldwide. The subject explained that none of the relay translation projects that she/he has engaged in had a pivot language other than English.

The vast majority of multilingual subtitling projects that the interviewee has worked on are relay-based, and most of these relay-based projects have adopted pivot templates. The decision to use a pivot template, however, is made on a case-by-case basis, since the number of languages involved varies

16 To avoid confusion, the present study refers to this type of template a “source-language template.”

considerably by project. As indicated earlier, pivot templates are produced jointly by the internal team and external translators, and the client or its resources are not involved in the process.

One important issue to be examined here is whether the dialogues in pivot templates become finished products as they are (minus annotations and other extra information), or whether new subtitles in the pivot language are produced based on the templates. At least to the subject's knowledge,¹⁷ dialogues in a pivot template are usually final, but they are checked against dubs after deleting information that is unnecessary in subtitles, such as annotations and internal notes, together with overlaps between subtitles and on-screen texts (i.e., forced narrative). Proofreading and other linguistic checks (e.g., ambiguous/redundant expressions) may also be made, as part of the quality control step for pivot templates. These reviews are mostly done by the internal team but may occasionally be outsourced.

If the content of an end product in the pivot language differs from the corresponding pivot template, this may be because: (a) the pivot template did not go through quality control due to a tight schedule; or (b) the initial template had to be revised as the video itself was later updated on the client's side. Also, the client may request amendments to the pivot template when it has checked final products in target languages and discovered misunderstandings as a result of inadequate translations or annotations. Once the template is updated, translators across different locales are informed to implement the changes.

The examples of titles for which the subject or her/his team created pivot templates cannot be shared due to confidentiality concerns.

4.4 Annotating Cultural References

Annotations are crucial for translators working with pivot templates for multilingual subtitling, as many of the proper names, terms, and especially cultural references from the source culture may be unfamiliar to translators with different national/cultural backgrounds. Things get more complicated when relay translation takes place via pivot templates, as these elements may

17 The subject did not rule out the possibility that other vendors may be creating whole new subtitles in the pivot language on the basis of pivot templates. This issue will need to be explored further in our future research.

be misinterpreted or even lost without proper annotations.

In the case of Netflix, its guidelines on source-language templates state that annotations should be made on both linguistic and cultural levels. The language of annotation is English, which is not only the company's working language but also the source language of the templates that translators work with. Key examples of the former are complex grammar, puns and plays on words, formality and class, sarcasm and irony, and register; the latter includes cultural references; cultural nuance relating to race, religion, geo-political and political points, ethnicity, and LGBT+; and levels of offensiveness of the source language. Information on the characters and locations are also important, such as relationships between characters, age, and spatial location and distance (Netflix, 2023d).

For pivot templates, Netflix (2023d) stresses that annotations should be provided in all templates (also in English, which predominantly serves as the pivot language, too) and are necessary for context provision. The localization of cultural references, names, locations and other culture-bound elements should be avoided; jokes, word play, puns and other expressions lost during the back translation need explanations and a literal translation in the annotations to avoid linguistic interferences from the pivot language. In particular, the need for "extensive" linguistic and cultural annotations is highlighted for pivot templates,¹⁸ but again, the guidelines do not define exactly what should be considered cultural references and how annotations should be structured.

Netflix has a separate tool for managing key terms called the Terminology Tool (Netflix, 2023c), but it deals mainly with proper nouns (e.g., character, location, organization) and unique phrases found in each title (Netflix, 2023a, pp. 53-54; Sung et al., 2022) and does not cover cultural references in a general sense such as names of clothing and food from a certain culture, which naturally are left to AVT vendors to handle.

Key vendors in the industry have partnered with GSS providers for a long time, so they are fairly familiar with how to create templates and add annotations. Some vendors create and use Microsoft Word/Excel files or live

18 In addition to the list of items to be annotated in source-language templates, other types of information are also mentioned, including grammatical details like definite/indefinite article, mood, and case that may need to be considered in the target language, as well as legal terms that may be unknown in other cultures.

documents, while others use their own tools for annotation. Clients may check these annotations and provide comments as to what needs to be added or may leave the job entirely to the vendors.

External translators draft annotations, and internal pivot templators add a finishing touch with further details. The examples of cultural references whose annotations were tricky to make or led to unintended misunderstandings could not be shared.

5. Conclusion

As a theoretical endeavor to place relay translation in the appropriate research context in TS, the present study has proposed a dual definition of relay translation: the broad definition based on the conventional view of translating source texts indirectly and a new, narrower definition as an industrialized form of collaborative workflow of AV content for the GSS providers, or their AVT vendors. While relay translation in a conventional sense has often been associated with isolated instances where individual books or titles are translated via a mediating language, the centralized and often-simultaneous management of relay-based multilingual subtitling for all titles involved as the new focus of the present paper deserves to be recognized and re-introduced through its precise conceptualization. The emphasis placed on pivot templators as “translators for subsequent translators” and cultural mediators and on the significance of their consultation and communication with internal/external translators and other agents involved throughout the collaborative process seem to make the present study stand out from the conventional dichotomy involving relay translation.

One of the merits of the present paper is its endeavor to relay field-resonant voices and data to TS researchers. Basically adopting a qualitative approach to the research topic by using the findings of a case study based on an in-depth semi-structured interview, the present study exploited other data obtained directly from the field to complement and support the interview results, including the subtitling policies and procedures of major GSS providers, including Netflix. These were obtained from the GSS providers' websites and from those who had experience of working for these providers.

The present paper underscore the salience of relay-based multilingual subtitling as a burgeoning form of collaborative translation. As the global

distribution of Korean AV content via GSS providers continues to expand, the demand for multilingual subtitling and, consequently, relay translation, will only surge. This necessitates a strategic approach to handle a multitude of languages within a tight time frame for nearly simultaneous global distribution.

This form of relay translation is also intrinsically collaborative. The AVT vendor's internal team for one locale works with the client and external translators to translate original dialogues and produce pivot templates with annotations, and then the team actively communicates with internal linguists and external translators for other locales to systematically prevent any misinterpretations and resulting errors in subtitles in target languages. Despite the significant function of pivot templates who serve as the essential link that dictates the accessibility and reliability of relay translation, their role as linguistic/cultural mediators has yet secured due attention until very recently (Oziemblewska & Szarkowska, 2020; Pięta, Valdez, et al., 2023).

Although GSS providers share their guidelines for multilingual subtitling with their vendors, these instructions only indicate “when” to annotate, not exactly “how.” The definition of “cultural references” does not exist in specific terms, and only general directions are given to show preference toward over-explanations. While some clients tend to provide feedback on vendor annotations, the decisions on the issue are left to AVT vendors, who often rely on the distinctive yet idiosyncratic experiences and knowhow of the translators in their employment, instead of proactively offering systematic guidelines and manuals of their own.

Another significant gap exists in the landscape of collaboration in point: the chasm between translation researchers and industry professionals. Providing specific training on how to create pivot templates and add linguistic/cultural annotations, coupled with developing systematic guidelines and manuals to tackle specific cases, will be instrumental in fostering pivot template specialists that the industry needs. TS scholars should provide industry professionals with theory-based foundations to this end. This potential for collaboration between TS scholars and industry professionals should be fully exploited.

Widening in-the-process communications by adopting interactive communication tools—as opposed to “fixed” means like documents and email instructions—will be helpful in facilitating collaboration among agents involved in relay translation. The instances of active cooperation between

novelists and their translators and online-based collaboration can be taken as a valuable frame of reference. Possibilities include integrating the annotation feature into translation tools, maximizing online communication between pivot translators and translators, and using discussion forms/knowledge bases to be shared by all agents. These tools can significantly improve the efficiency and accuracy of relay translation.

The present study has highlighted the need to go beyond the historical stigma of and prejudice towards relay translation and look at it as an inevitable reality in the fast-evolving translation industry. It holds significance as one of the early endeavors to revisit relay translation as a “collaborative” practice and explore its roles and implications in the simultaneous distribution of international AV content, including the K-Content, on GSS platforms. The current rift identified concerning the job of pivot template creation and annotations and the lack of securing reliable pivot template specialists also hints at the pressing need for active collaboration among translation researchers/educators and industry professionals.

The present study, however, is not without limitations, since it neither illustrates the specifics of communication and collaboration among key agents involved nor indicates the components of pivot templates and other tools employed by AVT vendors and GSS providers. While this limitation is unlikely to be overcome immediately due to strict confidentiality needs, efforts should be exercised to further the scope of exploration in our future research into new dimensions, including: (a) understanding the common challenges facing pivot translators and developing actionable solutions; (b) setting out criteria for measuring the quality of pivot templates; and (c) defining the key skills and expertise required for pivot translators and building a framework for training and producing qualified professionals. Follow-up interviews with pivot translators, GSS providers, and external translators for other locales, as well as simulated experiments with practitioners, will be instrumental in this regard.

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Professional Profiles

Cheong Ho-Jeong is Professor at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS), Korea. She received her PhD in Translation Studies in 2004, the first such degree conferred in Korea. She has coordinated large-scale government-funded translation projects and organized multiple translation policy fora with the National Assembly of Korea. Her research interests include research methodologies and cognitive and sociological approaches to translation studies. Her latest publications include “Theoretical Constituents of Interpreting Research in Korea” (Routledge, 2024).

Hyun-Kyung Lim is Lecturer at HUFS, Korea. She has practiced translation, transcreation, and localization and worked on terminology management at the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). She co-authored *A Model for the Standardization of Public Translation*

(2013) and “Netflix’s Multilingual Subtitling Through English Pivot Translation” (2022) and is the author of “Italicization of Translated Korean Literature and Korean Diasporic Literature” (2023).