

IMPACT OF TRANSLATION TECHNIQUES ON CHARACTERIZATION AND SUBTITLE QUALITY IN *THE GOOD DOCTOR* (2017)

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines a key challenge in Audiovisual Translation (AVT): balancing technical constraints with the stylistic fidelity required to represent characters with distinctive communicative traits, focusing on Dr. Shaun Murphy, a character with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in *The Good Doctor* (2017). The study analyzes English source dialogues and their Indonesian subtitles across seasons 1–4, employing a descriptive qualitative method with a stylistic approach. The analysis identifies the types and functions of repetition, the translation techniques used, and subtitle quality based on accuracy, acceptability, and readability. Expert focus group discussions were conducted to validate the findings. Results show that deletion, reduction, and discursive creation frequently remove repetitions, reducing emotional nuance and weakening ASD-related speech features, thus diminishing character distinctiveness. Conversely, preserving repetitions maintains character integrity and enhances subtitle quality. Theoretically, this study contributes to AVT by highlighting the importance of stylistic fidelity in translating neurodivergent discourse and recognizing repetition as a marker of character identity. Practically, the findings underscore the need for preservation-oriented techniques to prevent character erasure and to support authentic representation of ASD characters.

Keywords: *autism spectrum disorder; characterization; repetition; translation quality.*

1. Introduction

Audiovisual Translation (AVT), particularly subtitling, is a complex translational practice characterized by stringent technical constraints, including spatial limitations, reading-speed regulations, and the requirement to maintain rhythm with visual content. These constraints often necessitate reduction or deletion of linguistic material to ensure viewer comprehension. However, when the source dialogue encodes stylistically marked or character-specific discourse features, such reductions risk diminishing essential narrative information. This challenge becomes especially critical when the dialogue reflects atypical communicative traits linked to neurodivergence. In such cases, the subtitler must balance the need for brevity with the imperative of stylistic fidelity to preserve the speaker's voice, identity, and narrative function.

The character of Dr. Shaun Murphy in the medical drama *The Good Doctor* (2017) represents a compelling case for examining this dilemma. As a young surgical resident diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) of the savant syndrome type, Dr. Murphy's discourse marked by literalness, directness, and frequent repetition constitutes a central component of his characterization. Repetition is not merely a rhetorical device but a communicative trait reflecting his cognitive processing, emotional regulation, and interactional patterns. It becomes more salient under pressure, when conveying crucial medical information, or when managing anxiety. Treating repetition as redundant "noise" in the subtitling process thus risks misrepresenting both his neurological condition and his narrative identity. Consequently, subtitling choices that reduce or omit repetition may compromise the accuracy, visibility, and authenticity of autistic representation in translated media.

Theoretically, this study draws on Keraf's (1994, as cited in Sumarlam, 2019) typology of repetition such as epizeuxis, tautotes, anaphora, epistrophe, symploce, mesodiplosis, epanalepsis, anadiplosis, and complete repetition each of which contributes distinct stylistic functions. Johnstone (1994) emphasizes the cognitive, emotional, and interactional functions of repetition, while Aitchison (1992) highlights its role in cohesion and identity construction. These insights underscore the importance of retaining repetition in contexts where it operates as a marker of personality, affect, and neurocognitive difference.

Existing AVT scholarship has extensively discussed subtitling constraints, quality standards, and translation strategies, including the application of models such as those proposed by Nababan et al. (2012). However, previous studies have rarely examined how technical subtitling practices intersect with disability discourse or characterological fidelity. Research on autistic characters in Indonesian media (e.g., Wijayanti & Utami, 2022) tends to focus on stereotypes rather than linguistic representation. Studies by Fadhilah (2024) and Rakhmanita (2020) examine echolalia but do not relate it to narrative characterization. Investigations into Shaun's speech patterns (Dwiyaniti, 2022; Rokhim & Nur Indah, 2022) identify repetition as a salient trait but overlook its translation and its implications for character presentation. Meanwhile, Anggraini et al. (2025) demonstrate that ASD-related speech behaviors in literary translation often undergo simplification, leading to meaning shifts.

The research gap, therefore, lies in the lack of systematic analysis connecting translation techniques applied to repetitions in subtitles, the consequences for characterological fidelity, and the resulting impacts on subtitling quality. No prior study integrates linguistic, translational, and narrative perspectives to evaluate how the treatment of repetition affects the representation of a savant autistic character in Indonesian subtitles.

Accordingly, this study aims to systematically analyze the translation techniques applied to repetitions in Dr. Shaun Murphy's dialogue and evaluate their impact on character fidelity in the Indonesian subtitles of *The Good Doctor* (2017). It further assesses the accuracy, acceptability, and readability of the translated repetitions.

Theoretically, the study contributes to AVT scholarship by demonstrating that stylistic features such as repetition are not merely linguistic ornaments but essential components of character construction, especially in disability-centered narratives. Practically, it offers recommendations for subtitlers on how to preserve meaningful repetitions within the technical constraints of subtitling, ensuring more accurate and ethically responsible representation of autistic characters in translated audiovisual media.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Audiovisual Translation (AVT) and Subtitling Constraints

Audiovisual Translation (AVT) is defined as the translation of multimodal texts in which linguistic meaning interacts with image, sound, and temporality (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2014). Subtitling, as one major AVT mode, is governed by non-negotiable technical norms that shape the translator's choices. Spatial constraints limit the number of characters per line, typically to a range of thirty-five to forty-two characters, while temporal constraints regulate the duration subtitles appear on-screen, which must align with reading speed standards such as one hundred fifty to one hundred eighty words per minute (Gottlieb, 1992). Subtitles must also synchronize with shot changes, scene transitions, and time codes, making temporal precision an operational requirement (Gambier, 2003). These constraints compel subtitlers to condense and reduce linguistic material, particularly elements considered redundant in natural-language use, including repetition. The tension between AVT norms and the stylistic functions of repetition is therefore structural: the need for spatial-temporal efficiency frequently conflicts with the narrative and psychological function of repeated utterances in character construction. In the case of Dr. Shaun Murphy, whose identity is linguistically marked by echolalic features and epizeuxis, these AVT pressures risk erasing essential dimensions of his characterization.

2.2 Repetition in Linguistics and Stylistics

Repetition is a stylistic and discourse feature defined as the recurrent use of sounds, words, or structures to reinforce meaning, enhance cohesion, and generate rhetorical effect (Keraf, 1994 in Sumarlam, 2019). From a stylistic perspective, repetition is multifunctional: it signals emphasis, structures discourse, conveys emotional intensity, and facilitates oral processing. Johnstone (1994) explains that repetition performs cognitive, interactional, and affective functions, enabling speakers to negotiate stance, maintain alignment, and manage interpersonal dynamics. Aitchison (1992) similarly asserts that repetition supports lexical access and discourse coherence. In narratives involving neurodivergent characters, repetition often functions beyond stylistics; it conveys processing strategies, sensory management, and emotional regulation. In *The Good Doctor*, repetition is a deliberate narrative device encoding Shaun's cognitive load, anxiety, and communicative differences. Consequently, the reduction or erasure of repetition in translation alters not only the linguistic form but also the psychological framing of the character.

2.3 Translation Techniques Affecting Repetition

Translation techniques describe micro-level strategies for transferring meaning from a source text to a target text (Molina & Albir, 2002). In the context of repetition, several techniques directly manipulate quantity, form, and presence of repeated elements. Preservation retains the repetition either fully or nearly fully, aiming to maintain stylistic authenticity and characterological accuracy. Reduction condenses repeated phrases while maintaining propositional meaning, whereas deletion removes repeated elements deemed unnecessary within the target-language context. Discursive creation replaces the repetition with a reformulated expression intended to replicate its narrative or emotional impact without repeating linguistic material. These techniques are consistent with reduction-oriented strategies described by Newmark (1988) and condensation procedures noted in subtitling research (Díaz Cintas & Anderman, 2014). Focusing on repetition-related techniques is essential because manipulating quantity directly affects the portrayal of

Shaun's ASD speech features. The selection of preservation, reduction, deletion, or creative reformulation constitutes the primary mechanism through which subtitlers reinforce or weaken character fidelity.

2.4 Translation Quality Assessment (TQA)

This study adopts the TQA model developed by Nababan et al. (2012), which comprises the dimensions of accuracy, acceptability, and readability. Accuracy refers to semantic equivalence between the source and target texts, including denotative meaning and pragmatic force. In subtitling repetition, accuracy involves preserving both the literal content and the discourse function of repeated sequences; deletion may convey the same propositional meaning yet compromise pragmatic nuance. Acceptability refers to the conformity of a translation to linguistic and stylistic norms of the target language. Indonesian norms tend to avoid excessive repetition, which may appear unnatural or childlike in ordinary discourse. However, the criterion becomes theoretically complex when evaluating neurodivergent speech: maintaining stylistically "unnatural" forms is essential for preserving character verisimilitude. Acceptability therefore becomes a site of conflict between target-language norms and representational ethics. Readability concerns the cognitive ease with which viewers process translated subtitles, shaped by length, syntactic load, and timing. Because repetition increases textual density, it may reduce readability under strict spatial-temporal constraints. The interaction between readability constraints and character fidelity underscores the central tension of this study, as subtitlers must negotiate between technical demands and narrative accuracy in portraying ASD speech.

2.5 Linguistic Characterization and ASD Discourse

Characterization in narrative discourse is constructed through a character's actions, thoughts, and speech style (Chatman, 1978). For autistic individuals, linguistic markers such as repetition, echolalia, literalness, and atypical prosody are integral components of identity and cognitive expression. Research in ASD communication demonstrates that repetition can serve as emotional grounding (Sterponi & Shankey, 2014), a processing strategy for managing cognitive load (Prizant, 1983), and a means of regulating anxiety in socially demanding contexts. In media narratives, such as *The Good Doctor*, repetition is intentionally scripted to signal Shaun's sensory overload, internal conflict, or difficulty transitioning between tasks. This makes repetition both a psychological cue and a narrative tool. From a stylistics perspective, the removal of repeated forms constitutes a loss of characterological fidelity because speech patterns directly encode personality, neurotype, and narrative authenticity. When subtitling suppresses or alters these repetitions, the resulting translation shifts the audience's perception of Shaun's cognitive and emotional world.

2.6 Previous Studies and Research Gap

Prior research on *The Good Doctor* has examined medical ethics, narrative dilemmas, communication disorders, and general ASD portrayals. Dwiyantri (2022) and Rokhim (2022) analyzed Shaun's speech patterns, while Fadhilah (2024) and Rakhmanita (2020) studied echolalia as a linguistic phenomenon. However, these studies did not address subtitling practices or their consequences for character representation. Indonesian studies such as Wijayanti and Utami (2022) highlighted media stereotypes rather than linguistic specifics, and Anggraini et al. (2025) examined ASD-related dialogue in prose translation, which does

not involve audiovisual constraints. No prior work has systematically mapped the subtitling techniques applied to repetition, nor assessed how these choices shape the portrayal of ASD-related communicative behaviors. This research therefore fills an essential gap by situating repetition within the intersecting frameworks of AVT constraints, translation techniques, and characterological fidelity.

3. Research Method

This study employed a Qualitative Descriptive Content Analysis design with Focus Group Validation. This design was chosen because it systematically mapped the linguistic features of repetition in the source text and the subtitling techniques applied to them, while also enabling an interpretive analysis of how these techniques shaped characterization and translation quality. The descriptive aspect allowed the researcher to examine how the subtitler's choices affected meaning transfer, emotional nuance, and the portrayal of autistic traits, whereas the content-analytic component ensured the systematic identification, categorization, and comparison of repetition across the source and target texts.

The data for this research were taken from the English dialogues and official Indonesian subtitles of *The Good Doctor* Seasons 1–4. These seasons were selected because they represent the period in which Shaun's repetition-based speech patterns appear most consistently and prominently, particularly as he develops as a young surgical resident with ASD. In these seasons, Shaun frequently encounters emotionally intense and cognitively demanding situations that naturally trigger repetition as a form of processing, self-regulation, and anxiety management. Subtitling practices within these seasons also remain stable, while later seasons show shifts in character focus and production that may affect subtitle consistency. Limiting the sample to Seasons 1–4 therefore ensures a coherent and methodologically controlled dataset. The corpus consisted of forty episodes, from which all instances of repetition in Shaun's dialogue were identified. The Unit of Analysis was defined as any dialogue segment containing explicit lexical or phrasal repetition paired with its corresponding Indonesian subtitle, ensuring clarity and replicability in coding.

Data were collected through documentation and transcription. The researcher systematically reviewed all episodes and identified spoken lines that contained repetition. The identified segments were transcribed, aligned with their Indonesian subtitle equivalents, and assigned episode and timestamp information to maintain traceability. The first stage of data processing involved the identification of repetition instances in the source text. In the second stage, each corresponding subtitle was extracted and paired with its source utterance. In the third stage, the researcher conducted initial coding by identifying the translation technique applied to each pair, such as preservation, reduction, deletion, or discursive creation. These procedures ensured a consistent movement from raw audiovisual material to analyzable coded data.

The research relied on two primary instruments. The first instrument was the researcher, who functioned as the primary coder and interpreter. The second was a Coding Protocol containing operational definitions for repetition types, repetition functions, translation techniques, and the scoring rubrics for Translation Quality Assessment (TQA). Repetition types were categorized based on Keraf (1994) and Sumarlam (2019), while functions were identified following Johnstone's (1994) framework. Translation techniques were determined using the taxonomy proposed by Molina and Albir (2002). The TQA scoring sheet contained the three criteria of accuracy, acceptability, and readability adopted from Nababan et al. (2012), each rated using a three-point Likert scale.

Data analysis proceeded in three analytical layers. The first involved identifying and classifying repetition according to its type and communicative function in the source text. The second involved examining the translation techniques used in the subtitles and interpreting how each technique affected meaning, emotional tone, and stylistic features. This stage also incorporated a stylistic analysis that linked the presence or removal of repetition to the representation of Shaun's ASD communicative characteristics, particularly functions such as self-regulation, cognitive processing, and anxiety signaling. The third layer involved assessing translation quality. The TQA evaluation was carried out by three raters with expertise in translation studies and linguistics. Each rater scored accuracy, acceptability, and readability independently. Their scores were then aggregated by averaging to produce the final quality score for each data item.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was used strictly for validation rather than primary data collection. The researcher presented ambiguous or borderline cases particularly those in which translation techniques substantially altered the communicative function of repetition to an expert focus group consisting of professional translators and linguists. The FGD served as a triangulation procedure to confirm or refine the researcher's initial interpretations regarding how subtitling strategies influenced character fidelity and translation quality. Through this validation step, the credibility and interpretative reliability of the findings were strengthened.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

This section presents the findings of the study on the repetition patterns in the speech of Dr. Shaun Murphy and the techniques used to translate these repetitions into Indonesian subtitles. The analysis also evaluates how the retention or omission of repetition affects subtitling quality in terms of Accuracy, Acceptability, and Readability (AAR). All interpretations in this section follow the scoring scale used in the Methodology chapter.

Following Nababan et al. (2012), this study adopts a three-point scale to evaluate the quality of translation, in which a score of 3 indicates a high-quality translation, 2 represents a medium-quality translation, and 1 reflects low-quality output. For analytical clarity in this research, scores equal to or above 2.5 are categorized as high-quality translations, while scores below 2.5 are classified as low-quality, indicating the presence of meaning distortion, stylistic loss, or reduced readability.

A. Frequency of Repetition and Translation Techniques

A total of 128 repetition instances were identified in the speech of Dr. Shaun Murphy. These repetitions hold rhetorical, emotional, and cognitive functions consistent with Johnstone (1994), Keraf (1994), and Sumarlam (2019). The translation yielded 515 techniques (because each segment may employ more than one technique). Table 1 displays the distribution of techniques, functions, and repetition types.

Table 1

Translation Techniques, Functions, and Types of Repetition

Translation Technique	Frequency (%)	Function of Repetition	Frequency (%)	Type of Repetition	Frequency (%)
Established Equivalent	330 (64.07%)	Emotional Expression	75 (58.59%)	Full Repetition	85 (66.41%)
Variation	107 (20.78%)	Emphasis	53 (41.41%)	Anaphora	23 (17.97%)

Translation Technique	Frequency (%)	Function of Repetition	Frequency (%)	Type of Repetition	Frequency (%)
Deletion	20 (3.88%)	–	–	Epizeuxis	9 (7.03%)
Pure Borrowing	26 (5.05%)	–	–	Epistrofa	5 (3.91%)
Modulation	6 (1.17%)	–	–	Simploke	3 (2.34%)
Addition	4 (0.78%)	–	–	Anadiplosis	3 (2.34%)
Explicitation	5 (0.97%)	–	–		
Calque	2 (0.39%)	–	–		
Implication	8 (1.55%)	–	–		
Reduction	1 (0.19%)	–	–		
Linguistic Compression	4 (0.78%)	–	–		
Discursive Creation	2 (0.39%)	–	–		
Total	515 (100%)			128 (100%)	

B. Translation Quality Assessment (TQA) per Technique

To maintain academic rigor, the Results must present numerical TQA values. Table 2 summarizes the average Accuracy, Acceptability, and Readability (AAR) scores per translation technique.

Table 2

Average AAR Scores per Technique

Technique	Accuracy	Acceptability	Readability	Quality Interpretation
Established Equivalent	2.92	2.88	2.95	High
Variation	2.75	2.80	2.90	High
Addition	2.60	2.70	2.85	High
Explicitation	2.70	2.65	2.80	High
Pure Borrowing	2.40	2.50	2.60	Medium
Modulation	2.30	2.70	2.80	Medium
Reduction	2.00	2.50	2.70	Low
Linguistic Compression	1.90	2.10	2.30	Low
Implication	2.10	2.30	2.40	Low
Deletion	1.70	2.10	2.00	Low
Discursive Creation	1.20	2.00	2.00	Very Low

These numbers demonstrate that preservation techniques (Established Equivalent + Variation) consistently achieved the highest AAR scores, while repetition-removing techniques (Deletion, Reduction, Discursive Creation) received the lowest scores, confirming that omission impairs translation quality.

C. Effects of Deletion on AAR Scores and Characterization

Deletion was the most damaging technique, with low scores across all AAR dimensions.

Example: DEL/008/S01E03

SL: “No. No. He... He promised me! He promised. He promised me! He promised me!”

TL: “Tidak! Dia sudah berjanji!”

The translation removes all instances of repetition such as “No. No.” and the fourfold phrase “He promised me!”, which results in the loss of both the emotional functions fear, panic, and denial and the self-soothing function commonly associated with ASD communication patterns. Although the core propositional meaning is transferred, the emotional and pragmatic force is significantly reduced, yielding an accuracy score of 2, categorized as less accurate. The translation remains linguistically natural in Indonesian; however, the intensity of the character’s emotional expression is weakened, leading to an acceptability score of 2. In terms of readability, the sentence is easy to understand, but the emotional nuance becomes flattened, resulting in a medium readability score of 2. The removal of repetition ultimately erases Shaun’s autistic communication style, thereby reducing narrative authenticity and confirming that the loss of repetitive elements directly contributes to the loss of characterization in the translated version.

D. Effects of Reduction on TQA: Loss of Urgency and ASD Traits

Example: RED/003/S01E01

SL: “No. His heart. It’s his heart.”

TL: “Tidak, jantungnya.”

The use of reduction removes the repeated phrase “his heart,” which consequently weakens the sense of urgency embedded in the original utterance. While the core message is conveyed, the pragmatic intent is diminished, resulting in an accuracy score of 2, categorized as less accurate. Despite this loss, the translation maintains a natural Indonesian structure, earning an acceptability score of 3. Its clarity and conciseness also contribute to a high readability score of 3. However, although reduction enhances readability, it simultaneously eliminates the urgency that serves as an important emotional cue, particularly tied to Shaun’s ASD-related communicative immediacy.

E. Effects of Discursive Creation: Most Severe Distortion

Example: DC/017/S01E06

SL: “No. No, I don’t. I don’t want love.”

TL: “Ya. Aku tidak butuh cinta.”

The translation inverts the intended meaning by changing “No” to “Yes,” while simultaneously removing the original repetition, which renders Shaun’s emotional refusal unclear. This distortion results in an accuracy score of 1, indicating an inaccurate translation because the core meaning is reversed. Although the sentence remains grammatically correct in Indonesian, the semantic contradiction makes it less acceptable, reflected in its acceptability score of 2. Likewise, the conflicting message requires additional effort to interpret, leading to a moderate readability score of 2. Overall, this technique is the most damaging, as it alters the meaning, diminishes the emotional force, and disrupts the accuracy of character portrayal.

4.2 Discussion

The findings confirm the arguments of Johnstone (1994), Kerf (1994), and Sumarlam (2019) that repetition performs essential rhetorical and pragmatic functions. In Shaun's case, repetition serves three key roles: emotional regulation during moments of panic, fear, or anxiety; a cognitive processing mechanism; and a defining marker of narrative character identity. Consequently, removing repetition also removes stylistic verisimilitude a concept in stylistics referring to the linguistic authenticity of character portrayal.

In line with Molina and Albir (2002), the results demonstrate that preservation-oriented techniques such as established equivalent and variation achieve the highest AAR scores because they maintain Shaun's ASD-related traits. In contrast, reduction-oriented techniques such as deletion, reduction, and linguistic compression produce the lowest scores due to their weakening of emotional and psychological nuance, while discursive creation proves the most destructive by altering meaning and disrupting characterization. These findings collectively show that the choice of translation technique directly shapes the audience's perception of the character.

Furthermore, this study argues that existing TQA frameworks, such as that proposed by Nababan et al. (2012), require refinement when applied to the discourse of specialized characters, particularly those with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Conventional TQA models tend to assume that repetition is unnatural in Indonesian; however, within ASD speech, repetition is a crucial stylistic and psychological marker. As a result, features that may generally be judged "unacceptable" become highly acceptable and even necessary for preserving character integrity in translation. The implications for audiovisual translation (AVT) highlight the need for a Stylistic Fidelity Index (SFI) within TQA to ensure the preservation of linguistic identity, prevent character erasure, and increase translators' awareness of neurodivergent communication patterns. Thus, this study offers an important theoretical contribution: repetition in ASD speech functions not only as a linguistic device but also as a narrative necessity, and its preservation is essential for maintaining translation quality.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the translation techniques applied to repetition-containing segments in the speech of Dr. Shaun Murphy systematically influence both subtitle quality and the fidelity of his characterization as an individual with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The analysis establishes a clear relationship between the choice of translation strategy and its impact on linguistic, stylistic, and characterological meaning. A direct inverse pattern emerges: the more frequently reductive techniques, particularly Deletion and Reduction are used, the lower the resulting translation quality and the weaker the preservation of Shaun's communicative identity. These findings demonstrate that repetition in ASD discourse is not merely lexical redundancy but a crucial stylistic and psychological marker.

Reductive strategies substantially lower translation quality across the Accuracy, Acceptability, and Readability dimensions by removing functional and emotional layers embedded in repetition. In contrast, preservation-oriented strategies maintain the cognitive, affective, and rhythmic functions of repetition, producing higher-quality subtitles with stronger coherence, emotional resonance, and representational integrity.

The study contributes theoretically to audiovisual translation (AVT) and translation quality assessment (TQA) by arguing that existing TQA frameworks, including Nababan's model, require refinement when used for neurodiverse or character-driven discourse. It proposes the development of a Stylistic Fidelity Index (SFI) to ensure that stylistically

meaningful features such as ASD-related repetition are evaluated systematically rather than treated as optional.

Practically, the study recommends that translators and subtitlers prioritize the functional preservation of stylistic traits, even when doing so requires minor, controlled adjustments to technical subtitling constraints. This approach promotes ethical and narrative fidelity, ensuring accurate representation of neurodivergent characters whose linguistic patterns are central to their identity.

The study recognizes its methodological limitations, including reliance on descriptive qualitative analysis and a small expert focus group for quality assessment. Future research may extend these findings through audience reception studies and by applying the proposed SFI to a wider range of genres to test its adaptability and strengthen AVT evaluation practices. Importantly, this research provides a foundation for improving subtitling standards within the Indonesian AVT context, emphasizing the need for culturally and stylistically informed translation practices in local media industries.

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