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# Comparing Audience Perceptions of Characters in Subtitled Film: Validating a Strategy for Assessing Equivalence of Character Voice

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**Abstract**

Understanding of key character attributes in foreign film may be reduced when perception is dependent on subtitles. This research aimed to validate a reception-based method for empirically measuring functional equivalence of character voice in subtitled film. Participants watched a Japanese film excerpt, with or without English subtitles, and rated their impressions of the central character (Takuji) on 16 character descriptors (8 antonym pairs), identified by the author as important for understanding Takuji. Perceptions of Takuji's personality were compared between Japanese and English speakers in two studies (Study 1, N = 49, 28 Japanese, 21 English; Study 2, N = 53, 23 Japanese, 30 English). Both studies involved assessment of Takuji by Japanese speakers (no subtitles) and English speakers (English subtitles). Study 2 attempted to improve inter-item reliability and equivalence between languages by using more direct antonyms and longer descriptors than Study 1. Results from both studies established significant differences in character perceptions between Japanese and English viewers and confirmed the reliability of Japanese intracultural perceptions. Consistency in the loss of character voice between language groups in both studies confirmed that this approach to measuring character voice has strong potential for assessing subtitling approaches that aim to address functional equivalence in character perception.

**Key words**: audiovisual translation (AVT), character voice, functional equivalence, reception study, subtitles.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, subtitling has come into favour as the primary approach to audio-visual translation for English speaking audiences. This is largely due to the relatively short time required for production and lower cost of subtitling in comparison to dubbing (Anderman & Díaz-Cintas, 2009), and also potentially because of the fact that subtitles preserve the original spoken performances of the actors within a film (Díaz-Cintas, 2013; Koolstra, Peeters, & Spinhof, 2002). Subtitling foreign-language film dialogue into written English is rendered difficult by practical and socio-linguistic constraints. Consequently, subtitles often omit parts of the original dialogue that are judged by the translator to be unnecessary to understanding the overarching plot of a given film, instead aiming to maximise their readability. However, these eliminated elements of speech often contain nuances that are core to the formation of character voice (i.e., elements of speech that inform the audience about a character's motivations, beliefs, social status, background and personality). Understanding the personality of the main characters in a film is undoubtedly key to full appreciation of the director's and actors' intent.

Uniformity in cross-cultural understanding of a film's content is reliant on equivalence between the source and translated materials, even though the definition of equivalence has been frequently debated by translation scholars (Pym, 2014). Nida (1993) coined the term *functional equivalence*, which he defined as "a comparison of the way in which the original receptors understood and appreciated [a] text and the way in which receptors of the translated text understand and appreciate the translated text" (p. 116). In contrast, *formal equivalence* refers to the extent to which the form and content of a message is preserved in the target language (Nida, 1964). In subtitled media, functional equivalence is typically prioritized over formal equivalence because, due to the spatial and temporal limitations of subtitling as an approach, it is difficult to maintain formal equivalence while still creating a translation that is readable by the viewers of a film.

Nornes (1999) described the effect that subtitles have on viewers, stating that "every turn of phrase, every punctuation mark, every decision the translator makes holds implications for the viewing experience of foreign spectators" (p. 17). He famously asserted that strict adherence to conventional subtitling norms (discussed in Section 1.2) can be detrimental to the quality of a translation and suggested that subtitle translators could instead use innovative subtitling methods to improve functional equivalence between the source dialogue and the subtitles (Nornes, 1999, 2017). However, as of yet, academic research that empirically tests Nornes's proposal is limited.

In order to test whether character voice is lost in subtitles and if so, whether its rendition can be improved, it is first necessary to establish a method for empirically establishing any loss. This paper aims to investigate the assertion that character voice may be lost in subtitled film by validating a measure of audience perceptions of character traits. A reception-based method for measuring

equivalence of character voice in subtitles is developed and tested. Finally, potential directions for future research into the preservation of character voice in film translation are discussed.

### 1.1. What is Character Voice?

Kozloff (2000) described the dual-layered role of film dialogue. On one level, dialogue is used to address other characters within a film, but on a meta-level, aspects of the spoken words also inform the audience about aspects of a character's personality, background and possible motivations. She suggested that the nature of the words spoken can help viewers distinguish between characters in a film, and add substance to the characters themselves.

> Each time a character opens his mouth, filmgoers learn more about him — is his accent "upper class" or "hillbilly"? Is he or she polite? Brusque? Thoughtful? Quick? Lazy? Does the voice carry calm resonant authority (Alec Guinness as Obi Wan Kenobi) or a brittle nervousness (Anthony Daniels as C-3PO)? (Kozloff, 2000, p.43)

Additionally, Dyer and McDonald (1998) highlighted that "a character is a construct [derived] from the very *many different signs* deployed by a film" (italics added, p. 106). In other words, characterization in film is achieved through a number of means, some of which may be culturally bound. These include non-verbal indicators such as demeanour (facial expression, body language, costume, etc.), aural indicators (pitch, tone, accent, etc.) and verbal indicators (explicit descriptions by other characters, content of dialogue, word choice, etc.) (Pfister & Halliday, 2000).

These speech characteristics are important when trying to understand the characters within a film and are a critical aspect in achieving the story-telling goals of the script writer and the director. However, such characteristics can be difficult to capture in subtitles. This paper is primarily focused on exploring audience perceptions of a character based on the dialogue spoken by the character in question. This is because character dialogue is the core aspect of a film that foreign viewers cannot comprehend without translation, and the primary aspect available for manipulation by translators.

The term *character voice* has appeared previously in the literature, referring to characterization in film dialogue (Howell, 2007), but has not been defined in a manner that aids assessment. For the purpose of this paper, character voice is defined as any and all verbal elements of spoken dialogue by a character that provide information regarding that character's personality, background or beliefs. Vocabulary and grammar choices are the two most important elements that comprise text-based representation of character voice in film dialogue.

Examples of omissions of the speech elements that influence perceptions of character voice can be found in Nornes's (2017, p. 6) analysis of the subtitled dialogue in the Japanese translation of Terrence Malik's 1998 war film, *The Thin Red Line*. Nornes noted several instances where the original

meaning has been lost in translation. Three examples of utterances by a young soldier named Doll are shown below in Table 1. Back translations have been added to show the literal meaning of the Japanese subtitles.

Table 1.

*Examples of Loss of Character Voice in The Thin Red Line*

| Reference Number | Original English dialogue | Japanese subtitle | Back translated subtitle |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | "Queen! You see those Japs leavin' that left ridge?" | 「敵が峰づたいに逃げてった」 | "The enemy was fleeing along the ridge" |
| 2 | "I killed a man. Nobody can touch me for it" | 「おれは人を殺した」 | "I killed a man" |
| 3 | "I can't see much of nothin'" | 「見えない」 | "I can't see" |

Note: Original English dialogue and Japanese subtitles have been copied from Nornes's analysis (2017). Back translated subtitles have been provided by the author of this paper.

The original English dialogue portrays Doll as harbouring racism and contempt towards the Japanese (Line 1). This nuance is omitted from the Japanese translation, possibly as an effort to avoid offending Japanese audiences watching the film. Doll is boastful and arrogant (Line 2), with vocabulary and grammar characteristic of someone poorly educated or from a disadvantaged socio-economic background (Line 3). These aspects of his personality have been omitted in the Japanese subtitles, likely in an attempt to conform to industry norms regarding use of potentially offensive language, subtitle length and grammar usage. Based on these changes to the dialogue, it is easy to conceive that Japanese viewers would form a different impression of Doll than would native English speakers.

### 1.2. Why Might Character Voice Be Lost?

Character voice may be lost in subtitles because temporal and spatial limitations force translators to render utterances in as few words as possible. Film subtitles can obscure images on screen and are therefore optimised to convey meaning succinctly, sometimes sacrificing up to 50% of spoken dialogue (Gottlieb, 2001). Readability is generally viewed to be a higher priority than providing a direct translation of the source, with translators employing many strategies to trim dialogue considered irrelevant to the core plot (Georgakopoulou, 2009). When writing English subtitles, it is

traditionally recommended that a maximum of 70 alphanumeric characters should be displayed on screen at any given time across one or two lines (maximum of 35 characters per line) (Hajmohammadi, 2004; Gottlieb, 2004), and that subtitles should be shown at a pace that does not exceed 12 characters per second (CPS) (Gottlieb, 2004). Additionally, it is recommended that subtitles should be displayed for a minimum of one second, and a maximum of six seconds, with longer utterances being broken up into separate subtitles (Díaz-Cintas, 2013). As a result of these constraints, subtitle writers typically avoid a literal approach to translation and instead aim to provide an abbreviated version of the dialogue.

Traditionally, subtitling has almost always involved correction of grammatical errors for the purpose of enhancing readability (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007). The European Association for Studies in Screen Translation's *Code for Good Subtitling Practice* (Carroll & Ivarsson, 1998) states that "the language used [in subtitles] should be grammatically correct" and that "simple syntactic units should be used". When grammatical errors are considered necessary to the narrative, they are typically conveyed through lexical choice (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007). Use of incorrect or unusual grammatical constructions is often judged to be too distracting and is thought to impede viewers' ability to read the subtitles within the time provided. Richie (1991) argued that, in the context of film subtitling, "translation should be invisible. […] Any oddity, any term too heightened, as well as any mistake, calls attention to [the] written dialogue" (p. 16).

Nornes (1999, 2017) lamented the practice of a "one-size-fits-all" approach to film translation, suggesting that priorities should differ depending on the film in question and arguing in favour of *abusive subtitling*, which he defined as subtitling that prioritized experimentation rather than abiding by established audio-visual translation norms. According to Nornes (1999), abusive subtitles "experiment with language and its grammatical, morphological and visual qualities" (p. 18). He provided several examples of abusive approaches to translation, including retainment of expletives and coarse language, manipulation of font size and placement, and variation of subtitle length. Recently, reception studies have explored the effects of these kinds of innovative subtitling strategies on subtitle readability and audience comprehension. For example, Secară (2017) investigated the use of "txt lingo" as a strategy for reducing subtitle length and allowing for longer utterances and Zárate and Eliahoo (2014) tested the use of larger font sizes to highlight difficult or important words in subtitles for children who are hard of hearing. Künzli and Ehrensberger-Dow (2011) investigated audience response and retention of subtitled films that included metalinguistic explanations for cultural references, implemented using both additional subtitle text and supplementary surtitles. Fox (2016) investigated audience reception of non-standard subtitle placement, implemented to increase the amount of time that audiences spend looking at the image in a film.

In recent years, innovative subtitling strategies similar to those that Nornes proposed have become relatively common in online fan subtitling circles (i.e., "fansubs"). Fansubs often preserve linguistic idiosyncrasies of the source text and ignore conventions relating to the number of characters

displayed on the screen and CPS (Jimenez-Crespo, 2017). Innovative fan subtitling practices emerged from fan discontent with existing subtitling norms and have moved subtitles away from an excessive domesticating approach towards a more literal and source-oriented approach. Consumers of fan subtitles demand higher accuracy in culture and language transfer and accept a higher degree of foreignization in translation than general audiences (Jimenez-Crespo, 2017). It can be assumed that one of the main goals of the fan subtitling community when employing innovative strategies is to improve retention of character voice. However, as of yet, there is no existing research that specifically investigates the effect these strategies have on audience perceptions of character voice. This is an important topic for future research to explore; it requires the development and validation of a method for comparing audience perceptions of characters between the original film and its subtitled version in order to establish any loss of character voice.

### 1.3. Measuring Equivalence of Character Voice

Empirical research investigating equivalence of character voice in subtitles is scarce. Darder (2014) demonstrated that audience perceptions of characters could be measured using rating scales. She compared native audience perceptions of characters portrayed by actors who speak non-standard language varieties of English, Catalan and Spanish in dubbed animated films. Audience members were asked to rate characters for 10 antonym pairs (e.g., Extrovert and Introvert). This approach suggests the possibility of measuring perceptions of film characters experienced by different language-based groups. The current study utilised a similar strategy. The aim was to measure and compare native and non-native audience perceptions of characters within a film. Japanese native speakers' perceptions of a character in a Japanese film excerpt were measured for 16 items using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). These ratings were then compared to the responses of native English speakers who watched the same excerpt with the English subtitle track provided in the commercial DVD release of the film.

## 2. Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested:

H1: There are statistically significant differences in ratings of descriptors for Takuji's character in the film *The Light Shines Only There* between native Japanese speakers watching the film in Japanese and native English speakers watching the same film with the commercially available subtitles. This difference confirms the loss of character voice in the English translation of the Japanese film.

H2: Audience perceptions of Takuji's character in Study 1 and Study 2 demonstrate high reliability within language groups.

## 3. Method

Two between-group comparison studies were conducted. Study 1 was a pilot, designed to test the adequacy of the proposed method for establishing the loss of character voice, and Study 2 was designed to improve on the limitations identified in Study 1. Study 2 closely repeated Study 1 but used age-matched samples and, as detailed in Table 3, below, it also modified the adjectives used to describe the same aspects of the investigated character in order to improve inter-item reliability and validity.

### 3.1. Participants

Participants in both studies were recruited by the author from among acquaintances, with snowball sampling utilised to boost sample size. Participants who volunteered to participate were linked to the survey via email or social media. Participants were briefed as to the general nature of the study before participating, and provided informed consent. They were not aware of the hypotheses.

Study 1:

Group 1 comprised 28 native (first language) Japanese speakers living in Japan (11 male, 17 female). Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 66 years (mean age = 25.54, *SD* = 8.17). No limits were placed on participant age in Study 1. Only one participant in Group 1 was over 30 years of age. Adjusting for this outlier, the mean age of the group was 24.04 years (*SD* = 2.61).

Group 2 comprised 21 native (first language) English speakers living in Australia (10 male, 11 female). Participant ages ranged between 18 and 78 years (mean age = 42.67, *SD* = 19.45). Of the 21 participants, only one reported having studied Japanese before. This participant reported that s/he would have understood "none" of the spoken Japanese in the scene without English subtitles. Self-reported frequency of consuming subtitled media was collected using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never watch*, 5 = *watch very often* – at least once every two months), with a mean score of 3.05 (*SD* = 1.13).

Study 2:

None of the participants in Study 2 overlapped with Study 1. An upper age limit of 35 was implemented to avoid the significant difference in mean age of participants observed in Study 1. Group 1 comprised 23 native (first language) Japanese speakers living in Japan (9 male, 13 female). Ages ranged from 19 to 31 years (mean age = 23.73, *SD* = 6.85).

Group 2 comprised 30 native (first language) English speakers (10 male, 20 female). Of these, 19 reported their nationality as "Australian", with the others reporting a range of nationalities, "English", "Irish", "American (USA)", "Macedonian", and "Singaporean". Participants' ages ranged between 20

and 34 years (mean age = 26.48, *SD* = 4.71). Seven participants reported having studied Japanese before, but none reported having sat any level of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test. These seven participants were asked to estimate how much of the spoken Japanese in the scene they believe that they would have understood without subtitles. The average score was 1.83 out of 5 (*SD* = 0.37), with 1 being "none" and 2 being "a little". No participants reported a score above 2.

## 3.2. Materials

### 3.2.1. Film Segment

The 2014 Japanese film *The Light Shines Only There* was selected, and the English subtitles used for analysis were taken from the official Japanese DVD release of the film. This film was selected because the genre is drama, and it contains a large focus on character dialogue. Films with high verbal content are more likely to contain cultural references (Pedersen, 2011, p. 61) and films that focus on character relationships over narrative are more likely to rely on distinct character voice. Additionally, the film contains *marked speech* – i.e., "speech that is characterized by non-standard language features or features that are not 'neutral', even though they do belong to the standard language and may therefore have more or less specific connotations." (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007, p. 187).

An excerpt from the first scene was chosen (runtime: 3 minutes 2 seconds). This scene was selected because it contains a lot of spoken dialogue, especially by Takuji. The Japanese captions for the deaf and hard of hearing for the scene contain 59 subtitles, displayed between the time signatures 00:03:22,035 and 00:06:09,452. Of the 59 subtitles in the scene, 52 included dialogue spoken by Takuji.

In the scene, the protagonist of the film (Tatsuo) first meets one of the other major characters (Takuji). Both men are spending the afternoon at a *pachinko* parlour, and Tatsuo gives Takuji his cigarette lighter. Takuji invites Tatsuo back to his house for lunch. Takuji is a garrulous man, and talks a lot on the way home but Tatsuo does not say much. Takuji comes from a disadvantaged economic background. This scene is both Tatsuo's and the audience's introduction to Takuji as a character.

In the scene in question, Takuji does not use polite language (*teineigo*) when speaking to Tatsuo, despite the fact that he is meeting him for the first time. His speech style heavily employs elements of multiple Japanese sociolects that are difficult to translate into English, given the limitations of traditional subtitling norms. His lexical choices and accent incorporate aspects of a regional dialect (Hakodate, Hokkaido), he slurs his speech and uses casual or impolite language when speaking to the other characters in the film. The latter two aspects are reflective of Japanese "delinquent" role language. Examples of Takuji's speech style are provided in Table 2.

Table 2.

*Examples of Takuji's Casual Speech Style*

| Standard Japanese | Takuji's Speech | Explanation |
|---|---|---|
| 「悪(わる)い」 | 「わりい」 | Example of slurring causing phonetic shift in vowels. /ɯ/ is devoiced and /i/ is lengthened. [ɰarɯi] -> [ɰari:] |
| 「お前(まえ)」 | 「おめえ」 | Examples of phonetic shift towards [e:] sounds. In casual Japanese speech, sequences of two vowels such as /ae/ are often realized as [e:]. This can be characterized as a masculine speech pattern signalling toughness (Tsujimura, 2014, p. 74). [omae] -> [ome:] |
| 「と(ゆ);言っていた」 | 「っつってた」 | This is an example of a common Japanese euphonic shift, in the form of a colloquial contraction whereby /i/ is devoiced when a conjugated verb and auxiliary verb are contracted. It is also an example of [tojɯtte] becoming [t͡sɯtte], a common occurrence in slurred and colloquial speech. [tojɯtteita] -> [t͡sɯtteta] |

### 3.2.2. Questionnaire

The survey was provided to Japanese participants in Japanese and to English speakers in English. In the English version of the survey, participants were also asked to provide information about their history studying Japanese. Besides this, the content of the two surveys was the same. All participants were asked to provide their age and gender. They then assessed Takuji by rating him on 16 items using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). These 16 items formed eight pairs of antonyms, with each pair providing two items intended to measure the same broad attribute (e.g., "Polite" and "Rude" were chosen as extremes for measuring audience perceptions of Takuji's manners, "Educated" and "Uneducated" were selected to represent the degree of perceived education, etc.). These broader attributes were selected for inclusion by the author based on the

aspects of Takuji's character evident within the film clip. Particular attention was payed to selection of broader attributes that may be interpreted differently across cultures. A purposeful attempt was made to avoid broader attributes that are entirely subjective (e.g., likability) or irrelevant to the film clip. Antonym pairs were included as a measure for consistency in attribute assessment and permitted subsequent analysis of between-item reliability (i.e., if Takuji was judged to be high for the item "Rude", one would expect a low outcome for the item "Polite").

Study 2 measured the same aspects of character voice as Study 1, but, as detailed in Table 3 (below), altered the way these characteristics were described in an attempt to improve intercultural shared understanding and between-item reliability within the paired items. Specifically, antonym pairs were made more directly oppositional, and descriptors were lengthened where required. For example, "Polite" and "Rude" were replaced with "Polite (Correct manners)" and "Rude (Poor manners)". These changes were intended to improve inter-item reliability and equivalence in meaning across languages. For Study 2, the equivalent descriptors between Japanese and English were selected with help from a professional interpreter in an attempt to improve the validity of the measure. A full list of the equivalent descriptor pairs in both studies is included in Table 3 below.

Table 3.

*Attribute Descriptor Pairs in Study 1 and Study 2*

| Study 1 | | Study 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|
| English language attributes | Japanese language attributes | English language attributes | Japanese language attributes |
| “Polite” and “Rude” | “礼儀正しい” and ”無礼” | “Polite (Correct manners)” and “Rude (Poor manners)” | “礼儀正しい” and “失礼／マナーが悪い” |
| “Calm” and “Angry” | “冷静” and “短気” | “Calm/Laid back” and “Short tempered” | “落ち着いている／リラックスしている” and “攻撃的／気が短い” |
| “Eloquent” and “Inarticulate” | “雄弁” and ”語彙力がない” | “Articulate (Possesses a large vocabulary/strong command of language)” and “Inarticulate (Limited vocabulary)” | “語彙力が高い／表現力がある人” and “語彙力がない／表現力がない人” |
| “Clever" and “Unintelligent” | “賢い” and “浅はか” | “Intelligent” and “Unintelligent” | “賢い／頭がいい” and “頭が悪い” |
| “Wealthy” and “Poor” | “裕福” and “貧乏” | “Wealthy/Rich” and “Poor (Financially disadvantaged)” | “お金持ち／豊か” and “貧乏／貧しい” |
| “Energetic” and “Lethargic” | “活発” and “無気力” | “Energetic/Lively” and “Lethargic/Sluggish” | “元気／活発” and “けだるい／のろのろした” |
| “Conformist” and “Rebellious” | “従順” and “反抗的” | “Conforming to societal norms” and “Rebellious/Nonconformist” | “従順な人／社会のルールや規範に従う人” and “まわりに合わせない人” |
| “Educated” and “Uneducated” | “高学歴” and “無教養” | “Educated” and “Uneducated” | “高学歴 ／教養がある人” and “低学歴／教養がない人” |

Note: Each broad attribute is measured with two items that are antonyms (e.g., "Polite" and "Rude"). Each item is rated on a 5-point scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5).

### 3.3. Procedure

Participants in both studies watched the selected segment from the Japanese film *The Light Shines Only There* and then completed the online questionnaire hosted on SurveyMonkey[1]. Responses were anonymous and were screened to confirm that they represented genuine attempts. All responses were accepted as genuine and the survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete, on average. Participants' ratings of character traits formed the dependent variable and group membership (Japanese native speakers vs. English native speakers) was the independent variable.

## 4. Results

Differences in ratings of Takuji's character between groups were compared to test Hypothesis 1 (loss of character voice between Japanese and English) and the correlation between ratings within language groups provided a test for the intracultural stability of character assessment (Hypothesis 2).

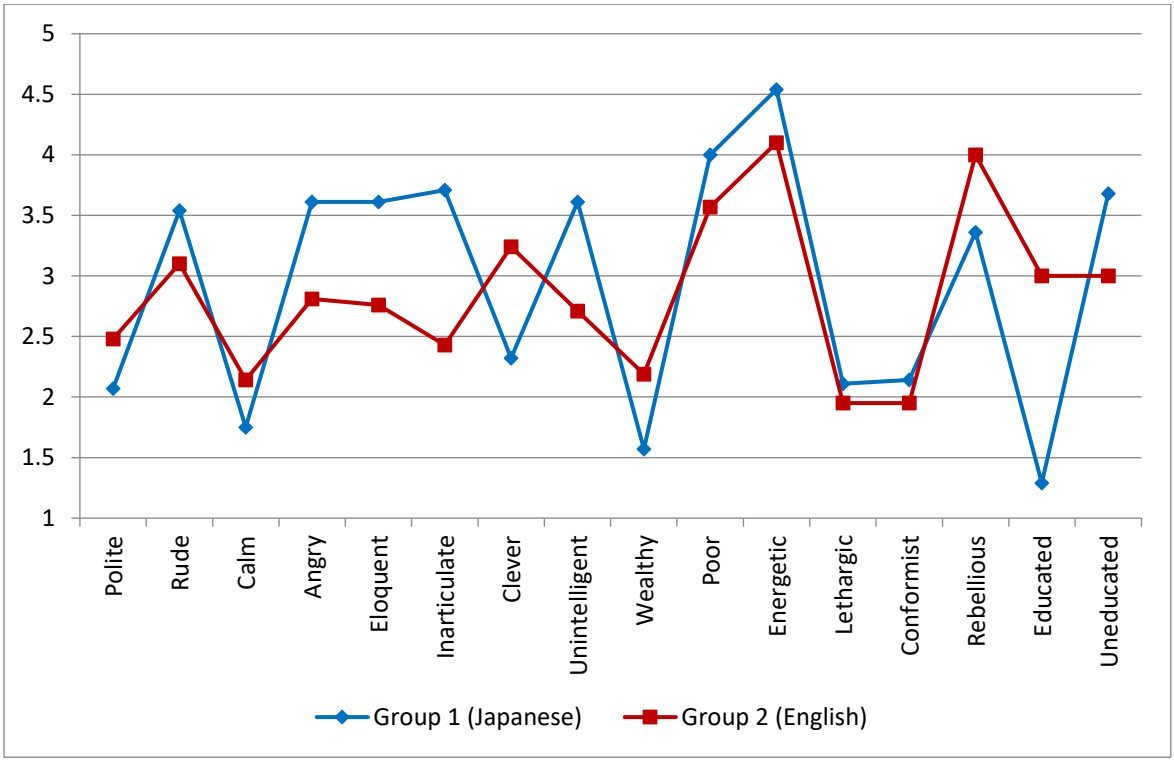
### 4.1. Comparison of Mean Ratings on Each Adjective Between Groups

Mean ratings of Takuji on each descriptor for the two groups in Study 1 are summarised in Figure 1 (below). The figure suggests considerable differences in perceptions between the groups. Unrelated samples t-tests (two-tailed) compared mean ratings of Takuji on the 16 descriptors between the Japanese monolingual condition (Group 1) and the English subtitle condition (Group 2). These confirmed the loss of character voice, with statistically significant differences ($p$<0.05 found for ratings of 10 of the 16 descriptors: "Educated", "Uneducated", "Clever", "Unintelligent", "Eloquent", "Inarticulate", "Angry", "Rebellious", "Wealthy" and "Energetic" (t values ($df$ = 48) ranged from 1.58 to 8.74). The largest differences between language groups were for "Educated", "Inarticulate", "Clever", and "Unintelligent". These results therefore provide strong support for Hypothesis 1, demonstrating that some aspects of character voice have been lost in commercial DVD subtitles.

[1] https://www.surveymonkey.com/

Figure 1.

*Comparison of Mean Ratings of Takuji Between Group 1 (Japanese Speakers) and Group 2 (English Speakers) in Study 1*

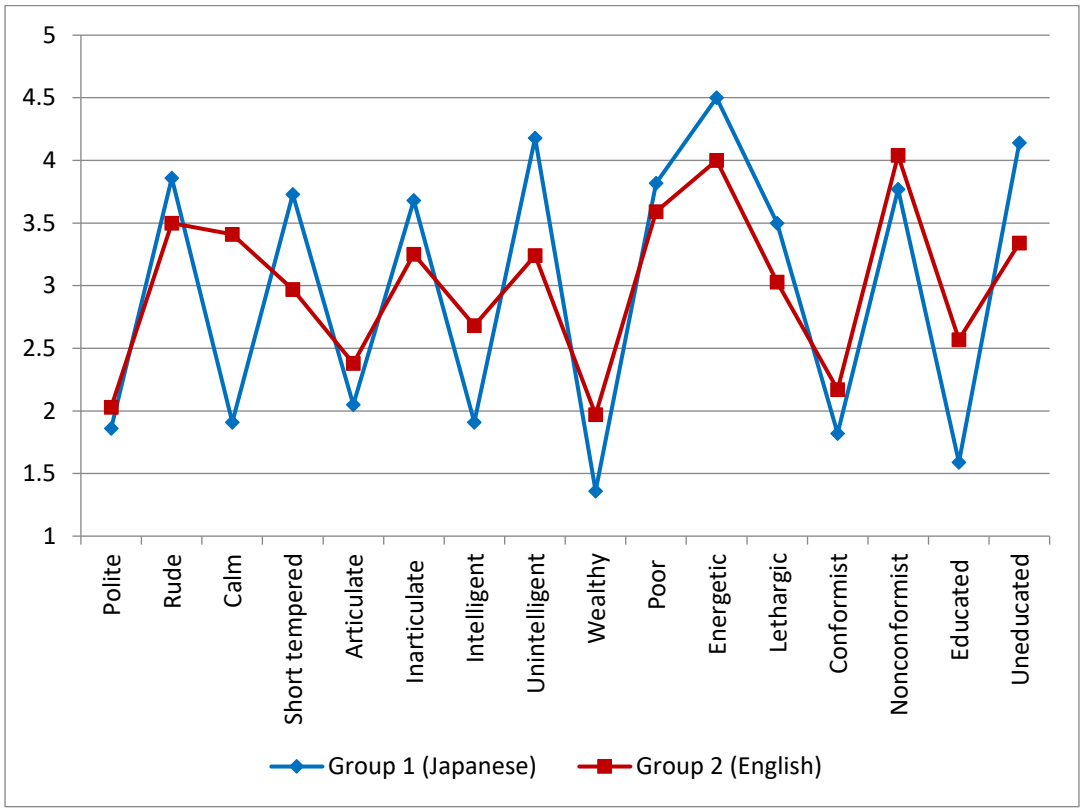



Note: To improve readability, several of the descriptor items have been shortened in the above figure. The full length descriptors are provided in Table 3 (above).

Mean ratings for assessments of Takuji between the Japanese and English speaking groups for Study 2 can be seen in Figure 2 (below). Unrelated samples t-tests (two-tailed) compared mean scores of Takuji between Group 1 (Japanese monolingual viewers) and Group 2 (DVD Subtitle viewers) for the 16 descriptors. Statistically significant differences ($p$<0.05) between the two groups were found for eight of the 16 descriptors: “Calm/Laid back”, “Short tempered”, “Intelligent”, “Unintelligent”, “Wealthy/Rich”, “Energetic/Lively”, “Educated” and “Uneducated”(t values ($df$ = 52) ranged from 2.53 to 9.88). The largest differences were found for “Wealthy/Rich”, “Educated”, “Calm /Laid back”, “Unintelligent”, “Intelligent” and “Short tempered”.

Figure 2.

*Comparison of Mean Ratings of Takuji Between Group 1 (Japanese Speakers) and Group 2 (English Speakers) in Study 2*




Note: To improve readability, several of the descriptor items have been shortened in the above figure. The full-length descriptors are provided in Table 3.

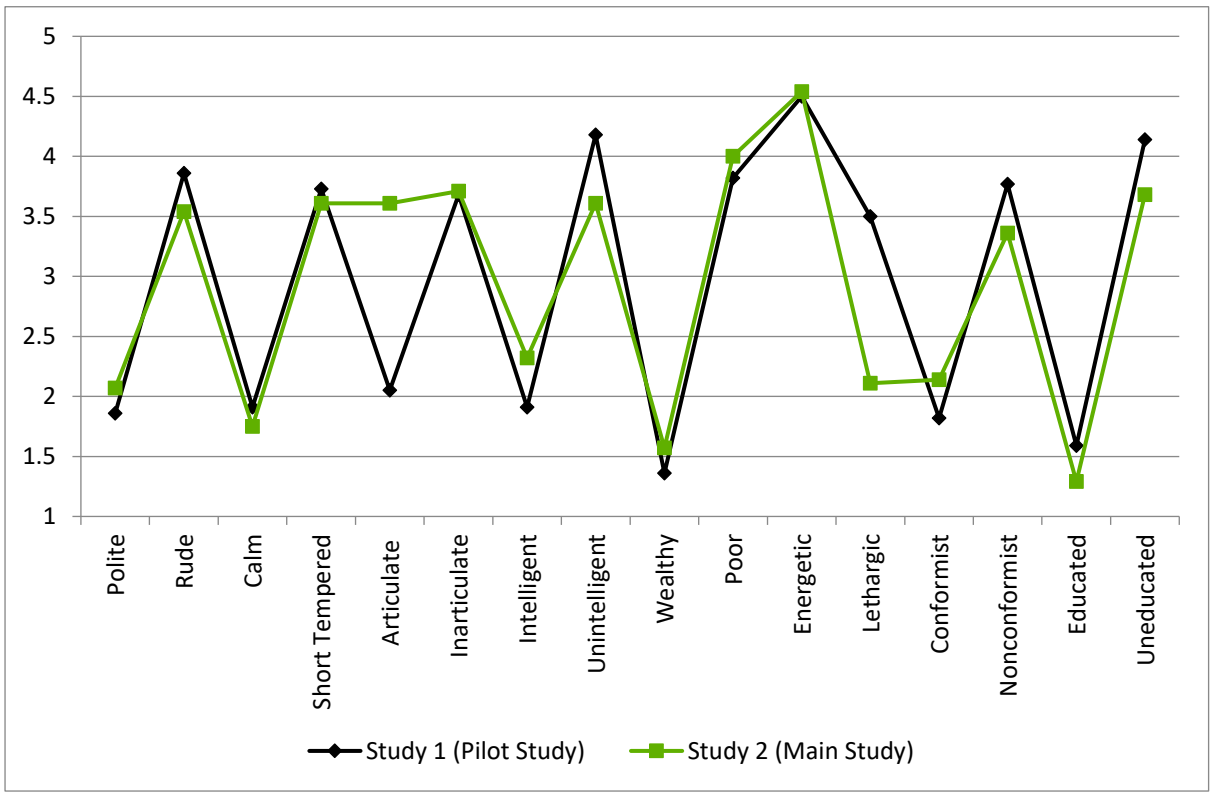
### 4.2. Assessment of Inter-Rater Reliability of Character Assessment Within the Language Groups

A Pearson Correlation between the mean scores provided by Group 1 (Japanese native speakers) for equivalent descriptors in Study 1 and Study 2 returned a coefficient of 0.83, despite the fact that the actual wording of the descriptors used in the survey was changed between the two studies. The coefficient increases to 0.92 if the descriptor "*yuuben*" ("雄弁" – "Eloquent") and its equivalent descriptor in Study 2 are removed. This Japanese descriptor was judged, following Study 1, to be inadequate for measuring the desired trait and was replaced in Study 2 with the descriptor "*goiryoku ga takai/hyōgenryoku ga aru hito*" ("語彙力が高い／表現力がある人" – "Articulate (Possesses a large vocabulary/strong command of language)").

Similarly, mean assessments of Takuji's character made by participants in the English-speaking condition were compared between Study 1 and Study 2. Assessments of Takuji made by the English-speaking audiences differed somewhat for many of the character traits between studies. Nonetheless, the Pearson Correlation between the mean scores for equivalent descriptors within the English samples of the two studies was 0.65, which is lower than the correlation in the Japanese samples, but still indicating statistically significant within-language-group consistency in perceptions of Takuji. Figure 3 (below) summarises average ratings of the Japanese participants in Study 1 and 2 and Figure 4 (below) provides the same data for the English speakers.

Figure 3.

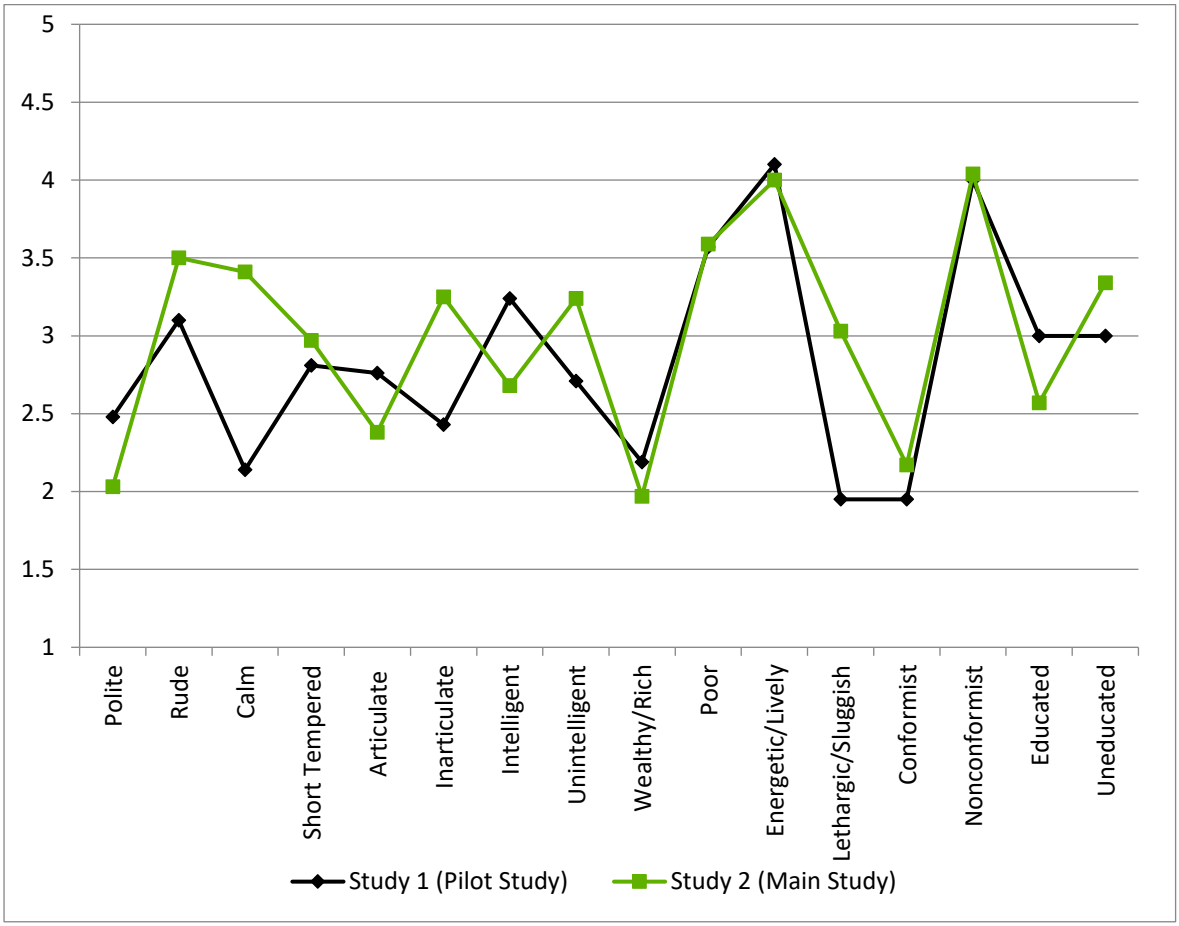
*Comparison of Mean Scores for Takuji Between Japanese Participants in Studies 1 and 2*




Note: The labels used in the figure derive from the descriptors used in Study 2. To improve readability, several of the descriptor items have been shortened in the above figure. The full-length descriptors are provided in Table 3.

Figure 4

*Comparison of Mean Scores for Takuji Between Viewers of the English Subtitles in Studies 1 and 2*




Note: The labels used in the figure derive from the descriptors used in Study 2. To improve readability, several of the descriptor items have been shortened in the above figure. The full length descriptors are provided in Table 3.

### 4.3. Inter-item Reliability

Poor inter-item reliability was found between opposite descriptor pairs for the native Japanese speaking condition in both studies. In Study 1, only one of the eight descriptor pairs ("Wealthy" and "Poor") had a negative correlation greater than -0.6. Three of the pairs correlated below -0.3 ("Eloquent" and "Inarticulate", "Clever" and "Unintelligent", and "Energetic" and "Lethargic"). In Study 2 only "Educated" and "Uneducated" correlated above -0.6, and five of the pairs correlated below -0.3: "Polite (Correct manners)" and "Rude (Poor manners)", "Articulate (Possesses a large vocabulary/strong command of language)" and "Inarticulate (Limited vocabulary)", "Intelligent" and

"Unintelligent", "Wealthy/Rich" and "Poor (Financially disadvantaged)", "Energetic/Lively" and "Lethargic/Sluggish".

Poor inter-item reliability was also found between antonym pairs in the English condition. In Study 1 three of the pairs correlated above -0.6 ("Eloquent" and "Inarticulate", "Clever" and "Unintelligent", "Educated" and "Uneducated") and three pairs correlated below -0.3 ("Polite" and Rude", "Energetic" and "Lethargic", "Conformist" and "Rebellious"). In Study 2, two of the pairs correlated higher than -0.6 ("Articulate (Possesses a large vocabulary/strong command of language)" and "Inarticulate (Limited vocabulary)", and "Intelligent" and "Unintelligent"). Four of the pairs correlated below -0.3: "Polite (Correct manners)" and "Rude (Poor manners)", "Calm/Laid back" and "Short Tempered", "Energetic/Lively" and "Lethargic/Sluggish", and "Conforming to societal norms" and "Rebellious/Nonconformist".

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Loss of Character Voice

The hypothesis that character voice is lost in the subtitled version of *The Light only Shines There* (H1) was strongly supported. In Study 1, statistically significant differences were found between Groups 1 and 2 for 10 of the 16 descriptors, indicating that audience perceptions of Takuji's personality among Japanese monolingual viewers differed from the perceptions of English native speakers viewing the film segment with the commercially available English subtitle track.

Similar results were found in Study 2; statistically significant differences between the English and Japanese speaking groups were observed for eight of the 16 descriptors. Despite the change in wording used for descriptors between studies, the number of differences did not increase, and seven of the eight traits identified as examples of the loss of character voice in Study 2 were consistent with those found in Study 1. The results of Study 1 included three examples of the loss of character voice that were not found to be significantly different in Study 2 ("Eloquent", "Inarticulate" and "Rebellious"). The results of Study 2 contained one example of the loss of character voice that was not identified in Study 1 ("Calm/Laid back"). These differences suggest some issues with instability in the assessment of character between the two groups of English speakers watching the same subtitled Japanese film excerpt and confirm that the appraisal of character attributes was less stable when viewed by the English-speaking audience members.

## 5.2. Within-Culture Reliability of the Character Voice Assessment Measure

Correlation of the mean ratings of Takuji on the 16 descriptors between the Japanese participants in Study 1 and Study 2 indicated that the Japanese perceptions of the character were highly stable. Very high inter-rater reliability was found ($r$ = 0.83 or $r$ = 0.92 after excluding the descriptor "Eloquent" and its equivalent in Study 2). This strongly supports the suggestion that source-culture audiences view the personalities of characters within a film consistently, and validates this instrument for use in assessment of source-culture audience perceptions. Utilisation of character assessment in this way could provide the basis from which translators could produce subtitles that stimulate similar responses in target-culture audiences.

Correlation of the mean ratings between the English-speaking participants in Study 1 and Study 2 suggested lower levels of stability in character assessment when compared to the Japanese participants. This is consistent with the idea that judging a character in a foreign film that utilises subtitles produces more varied assessment of the character. Nonetheless, a reasonable level of consistency was evidenced ($r$=0.65), confirming the utility of the character measurement strategy. The poorer within-culture consistency of ratings among the English language viewers confirms that interpretation of the nature of a character is potentially influenced by variables separate from the words used within the film (e.g., visuals or non-verbal audio elements). The lower inter-rater reliability among the English subtitle condition is consistent with the view that the English subtitles provided a less clear image of Takuji's personality than the original Japanese dialogue, and that Takuji's personality is therefore more open to interpretation by English viewers.

This possibility is supported by the finding that the English speaking viewers chose polar options on the Likert scale less often when assessing Takuji's personality, instead gravitating towards the middle of the scale (see Figures 1 and 2). It is worth noting that this result contrasts with published literature investigating response styles, which has highlighted that East Asians are more likely to use the midpoint on the scales, and are less likely to choose the extreme values than Americans (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1995; Hanamura, Heine, & Paulhaus, 2008). This further supports the contention that the differences between cultures in character rating styles in the current study are the result of the more obscure characterization provided by the English subtitles when compared to the original Japanese dialogue.

## 5.3. Limitations of the Study

### 5.3.1. Poor Inter-Item Reliability and Potential for Future Changes to the Measure

The antonym pairs used to measure Takuji's character traits in Study 1 were found to correlate poorly. This may result from a poor choice of adjectives, and Study 2 attempted to circumvent this

problem by providing more detailed descriptors; this, however, did not improve the result. The poor inter-item correlation in both studies could be a result of the small sample sizes of the studies. Alternatively, the problem could stem from the possibility that people do not perceive the antonyms used as opposite ends of a bipolar construct. For example, participants may agree with the statement that a character is "energetic" but could also agree that the character is "lethargic" if they do not consider these two descriptors to be mutually exclusive. It is possible that a character's personality could reflect elements of both sides of a descriptor pair under different social contexts. Based on these results, future studies that avoid using this antonym-pair approach to investigating inter-item reliability are recommended. One possible solution could be to use synonym pairs instead, given the higher reliability that was found within language groups between studies, despite the use of different wording for the descriptors.

The measure may also be improved by having native language viewers identify the character traits that stand out to them after watching a given film clip in order to select the traits for assessment. The traits used in the studies described herein were chosen by the author based upon evaluation of the attributes evident in the film clip.

### 5.3.2. Differences in the Samples

One possible confounding factor that could have affected the inter-rater reliability in the English subtitle condition is the large difference in mean ages between Study 1 and Study 2. In Study 1, no limit was placed on age when recruiting participants and, as a result, the mean age of the participants was 42.67 years, which was significantly higher than the mean age of the Japanese participants in that study (24.04 years of age when adjusted for outliers), and also significantly higher than the mean age for the English speaking participants in Study 2 (26.48 years of age). Additionally, the English sample in Study 2 included 11 native English speaking participants who identified their nationality as being from countries other than Australia, whereas the participants in Study 1 were all identified as Australian. These differences in the demographics between the two studies could provide an additional explanation for the difference in assessments provided by English participants between the two studies. However, it should be noted that, regardless of age group and nationality, the English condition was found to have statistically different perceptions of Takuji than the Japanese group in both studies. Furthermore, in both studies the Japanese group chose more polar options than the English-speaking group, indicating a higher degree of certainty in the assessments of the Japanese viewers.

### 5.3.3. Loss of Character Voice as a Result of Translation versus Cultural Differences

Another limitation of the study is that it was not possible to determine the extent to which the differences in character perception were caused by the content of the subtitles, as opposed to other variables, such as visual aspects of the film and cultural differences between the Japanese and the Australian participants. Research suggests that both intentional and subconscious impression formations differ across cultures, with East Asians being more likely than Westerners to make inferences about a person based on contextual information such as social role, whereas Westerners are more likely to pay attention to the central person and make intentional judgements based on that person's individual traits (Shimizu, Lee, & Uleman, 2017). Additionally, the frequency with which these spontaneous trait inferences are made differs across cultures. Shimizu, Lee, and Uleman (2017) found that Japanese university students make fewer spontaneous trait inferences than Americans do. Future research might measure character voice assessment in the absence of any dialogue in order to assess how the visual and non-verbal audio components of a film influence intercultural perceptions.

Additionally, audiences make judgements about a speaker's background and personality based on a range of vocal features, including rate of speaking, pitch and intonation (Bradac, 1990; Imhof, 2010; Pfister & Haliday, 2000; Scherer & Giles, 1979). For example, in a study with German university students, Imhof (2010) found that speakers with higher pitch levels were perceived to be high in extraversion and openness, and low in conscientiousness and emotional stability. These perception standards may be culturally bound and thus may differ between areas and age demographics.

In accordance with the above, future studies in this area should aim to develop a method for determining the extent to which differences in viewer perceptions are determined by the content of the subtitles. One potential solution could be to create an alternative set of subtitles written in a different register, or using innovative subtitling strategies such as those proposed by Nornes (1999, 2017), and then to compare audience assessments between viewers of the official subtitles and the alternative subtitles. Differences in character assessments between the two subtitle conditions could be judged to be indicative of changes in perceived character voice created by the subtitle tracks.

## 6. Conclusion

The two studies described have established a valid measure for determining the loss of character voice in subtitled film. This could form the basis for future development of a measure for comparing the functional equivalence of character voice across a variety of subtitling strategies.

Source culture viewers were found to make highly consistent judgements relating to Takuji's character traits, and viewers of the English subtitles consistently made significantly different evaluations than those made by the Japanese audience. The extent to which these differences in the

perception of character voice are determined by translation decisions versus differences in cultural perceptions is currently unclear and should be investigated further. Future studies could explore the extent to which innovative subtitling strategies such as those proposed by Nornes (1999, 2017) improve the preservation of character voice.

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