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An Analysis of English Idiomatic Expressions in The Indonesian Subtitles of *Elemental* (2023): Translation Strategies and Meaning Equivalence

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ABSTRACT: One of the difficulties in translating idiomatic expressions is that their meaning is not always clear from the literal meaning of the words that make them up. Because subtitles are limited in both space and time, this problem becomes considerably more difficult in audiovisual translation. The purpose of this study is to find English idiomatic terms in the Indonesian subtitles of the 2023 movie *Elemental*, evaluate the translation techniques employed, and look at how these idioms are expressed in the target language. The data used in this study, which uses a qualitative descriptive method, are idiomatic terms from the English dialog or subtitles and their translations into the Indonesian subtitles. The four idiom strategies put out by Baker are used to assess translation strategies, while Nida's concepts of formal and dynamic equivalency are used to analyze meaning equivalency. By viewing movies, recognizing colloquial terms, documenting source-language and target-language pairings, and analyzing the context of their usage, data were gathered using documentation techniques. It is anticipated that this study will show how idiomatic idioms in Indonesian subtitles are conveyed through translation techniques.

Keywords: Idiomatic Expressions, Translation Strategies, Semantic Equivalence, Subtitles, Elemental

1. Introduction

Translation extends beyond substituting words across languages: translators must communicate the source message naturally and accurately in the target language. Because linguistic structures and cultural contexts differ, both intended meaning and contextual appropriateness need consideration (Baker, 2018; Latif, 2018). A translation

must therefore account for the relationship between linguistic form and the message that a speaker intends. In subtitles, where the audience receives the written translation while following the scene, the naturalness of that message becomes particularly significant.

Idioms are especially challenging because their meanings cannot always be inferred from their constituent words. A literal rendering may sound unnatural or distort the intended message, so translators must consider linguistic and situational contexts. Previous studies discuss paraphrase and other strategies for handling such difficulties (Nuraini & Sayogie, 2024; Khasawneh & Alsharif, 2025). The challenge is not simply that idioms are figurative, but that the same wording may activate different associations across linguistic communities. Their interpretation depends on the communicative situation, which should guide the selection of a target-language expression.

Subtitling represents spoken dialogue as written text while working within space and time constraints. It must be concise, readable, and consistent with the dialogue and audiovisual context. These conditions make the transfer of idiomatic meaning particularly demanding (Antonini & Bucaria, 2025; Gaman & Darta, 2025). Unlike an independent written translation, the subtitle is viewed alongside images, character interactions, and sound. This makes contextual interpretation important: an expression that is understandable in the dialogue may become confusing if its literal wording is imposed on the target text.

Films frequently use conversational idioms whose forms cannot always be reproduced in Indonesian subtitles. Differences in structure and idiomatic usage may require an equivalent expression, paraphrase, or another context-sensitive solution. The relationship between a selected strategy and the meaning conveyed is therefore central to subtitle analysis (Putri & Wijaya, 2021; Fitria & Djauhari, 2025). The chosen solution can preserve the speaker's communicative intention even when the words and metaphorical structure are altered. For that reason, the analysis examines what is communicated as well as which lexical or grammatical form appears on the screen.

Baker (1992) distinguishes four idiom-translation strategies: using an idiom of similar meaning and form, using one of similar meaning but different form, paraphrasing, and omitting the idiom. These categories help describe decisions about source-language expressions, although a change of form does not necessarily entail a loss of meaning.

Baker's classification offers a basis for comparing the original expression with its Indonesian rendering. It has also informed research on idioms in film subtitles (Baker, 1992; Sutrisno et al., 2023).

Meaning equivalence also matters. Nida distinguishes formal equivalence, which stays relatively close to source-language form and content, from dynamic equivalence, which prioritizes a natural and comprehensible target-language message. For idioms, reproducing the wording alone may fail to preserve the intended contextual meaning (Baker, 2018; Sipayung et al., 2024). The two approaches offer related but distinct questions. Baker's categories describe how an idiom is translated, whereas Nida's distinction helps examine how the message reaches the target audience. Combining them therefore allows the analysis to attend to translation choice and communicated meaning without assuming that lexical similarity equals equivalence.

This study examines idiomatic expressions in Peter Sohn's animated film *Elemental* (2023) by comparing its English dialogue or subtitles with the corresponding Indonesian subtitles. These paired expressions allow changes in form and conveyed meaning to be examined. Mustafiroh et al. (2023) previously investigated idiom types and contextual meanings in Elemental: Forces of Nature through a descriptive qualitative approach. Rachmadini, Ana and Pratama (2025) examined idiom types and Baker's translation strategies in the same film, using McCarthy and O'Dell's classification. Their qualitative study analyzed fifteen idioms and reported five types and four translation strategies. They demonstrated that *Elemental* has already been studied in terms of idiom types and translation strategies. The present study instead emphasizes the relationship between the strategies used and meaning equivalence in the selected English–Indonesian subtitle pairs.

Accordingly, this study does not claim novelty from either the film or Baker's framework. It asks (1) which English idiomatic expressions are identified in the selected dialogue of *Elemental* (2023), (2) how they are translated using Baker's categories, and (3) how their intended meanings are conveyed in Indonesian through the lens of equivalence. The study's more modest contribution lies in reading the selected subtitle pairs through two complementary analytical perspectives. Its interpretation is confined to the identified expressions rather than a claim about every idiom in the entire film.

2. Method

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative design to identify, classify, and interpret the translation of idioms in *Elemental* (2023). The English dialogue or subtitles form the source text, the Indonesian subtitles form the target text, and the units of analysis are paired expressions considered idiomatic in context. No respondents were involved. The design is intended to account for relationships between expression, scene and translation rather than to measure viewer responses. Each English item is examined with its corresponding Indonesian rendering, allowing the description of both formal changes and the meaning retained in the subtitle.

Qualitative description permits close comparison of the source expression, target rendering, and contextual meaning. Nuraini and Sayogie (2024) used a comparable approach to study idiomatic expressions and translation accuracy in the Indonesian subtitles of *Soul*.

The primary source consists of *Elemental* (2023) and its English and Indonesian subtitles. As audiovisual translation, subtitling carries dialogue into written text under visual, temporal, and spatial constraints; these conditions inform the interpretation of each translation. The film context remains part of the evidence because a subtitle can be fully interpreted only with reference to the utterance and situation it accompanies. The paired texts were therefore treated as connected instances of film dialogue rather than as independent lexical items.

Comparison of dialogue and subtitles helps identify shifts in wording and meaning. Putri and Wijaya (2021), for example, compared idiom-translation strategies in fansub and official Indonesian subtitles of Game Night, illustrating the value of aligned subtitle pairs.

Data were collected through documentation. The film was viewed to establish its narrative context; English subtitles were screened for potential idioms; each candidate was paired with its Indonesian translation and checked against the scene before being tabulated. McCarthy and O'Dell's concept of idioms supported identification, but phrasal verbs, slang, metaphors, and fixed phrases were not automatically treated as idioms. Each expression's meaning was evaluated in context, consistent with the classification discussed by Rachmadini et al. (2025). The inclusion decision depended on the use of an expression in the specific scene; a familiar multiword construction was not sufficient on its own. Candidate phrases whose meanings could reasonably be interpreted literally were set aside so that the central dataset would focus on clearer idiomatic uses.

The documentation retained surrounding dialogue for contextual interpretation. Nuraini and Sayogie (2024) likewise identified idioms by viewing a film, reading the subtitles, and recording relevant expressions. A comparable procedure was followed here to make the source–target comparison systematic.

Each pair was classified using Baker's (1992) four strategies: similar meaning and form, similar meaning with dissimilar form, paraphrase, or omission. Meaning equivalence was then assessed using Nida's formal and dynamic equivalence distinction. Both classifications took account of the scene, not merely lexical similarities between English and Indonesian. The first classification concerns the translation procedure; the second concerns the extent to which the target phrase presents an understandable contextual message. This separation is important because a non-idiomatic paraphrase may retain a message, while a formally similar expression does not automatically guarantee the same interpretation.

Rachmadini et al. (2025) also applied Baker's framework to *Elemental*. Using the same strategy categories enables a focused comparison with previous findings, while the present analysis adds the dimension of meaning equivalence.

Analysis proceeded through contextual idiom identification, alignment of English and Indonesian expressions, classification of translation strategy, and interpretation of meaning equivalence. Each judgment was checked against the relevant scene and subtitle; items failing the idiom criteria were excluded, and the same criteria were applied across the selected dataset. The results were reported for individual expressions and subsequently summarized by category. This sequence permits the reader to check how the general distribution arises from the examples, while recognizing that a small purposively selected sample does not establish the distribution for the entire film.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Findings

3.1.1. Identification of Idiomatic Expressions

Seven English idiomatic expressions were retained after contextual checking and aligned with their Indonesian subtitles. Table 1 presents the expressions, timestamps, contextual meanings, strategies, and equivalence classifications.

Table 1. Idiomatic Expressions

No.	Time	English Idiomatic Expression	Indonesian Translation	Contextual Meaning	Baker's Strategy	Nida's Equivalence
1.	00:06:30	Keep an eye on them	*Terus awasi mereka*	To monitor or pay attention to someone	Translation by paraphrase	**Dynamic equivalence**
2.	00:08:49	On the house	*Gratis*	Something is given without requiring payment	Translation by paraphrase	**Dynamic equivalence**
3.	00:17:54	Take it easy	*Hei, tenanglah*	Asking someone to remain calm and not worry too much	Translation by paraphrase	**Dynamic equivalence**
4.	00:28:03	A sob story	*Cerita sedih*	A sad story intended to evoke sympathy or pity	Translation by paraphrase	**Dynamic equivalence**
5.	00:28:38	In such a funk	*Dia merasa sedih*	Being in a sad, gloomy, or low-spirited state	Translation by paraphrase	**Dynamic equivalence**
6.	00:43:57	Hard feelings	*Masih kesal*	Feelings of anger, hurt, or resentment that remain toward someone	Translation by paraphrase	**Dynamic equivalence**
7.	00:56:43	Out of his league	*Di luar jangkauannya*	Someone is considered too good or at a level too high for another person to attain or have	Translation by paraphrase	Dynamic equivalence

3.1.2. Analysis of Translation Strategies for Idiomatic Expressions

Each selected expression was classified using Baker's (1992) idiom strategies, while Nida's equivalence categories were used to interpret how its meaning was conveyed in Indonesian. All seven selected pairs were classified as translation by paraphrase and dynamic equivalence.

Paraphrase conveys an idiom's contextual meaning through different wording when a directly equivalent idiom is unsuitable. Putri and Wijaya (2021) identified paraphrase as the most frequent strategy in their Game Night subtitle comparison; Fitria and Djauhari (2025) also reported paraphrasing in their analysis of Up.

Data 1: "Keep an eye on them" → "*Terus awasi mereka*" (00:06:30)
The idiom means to monitor someone rather than literally keep an eye on them. The Indonesian subtitle conveys this instruction directly. Within the source utterance, the expression is understood as an instruction to pay attention to other people. The translated command retains the action that the listener is expected to perform, even though the figurative reference to an "eye" has disappeared.

Replacing "keep an eye on" with "*awasi*" removes the original idiomatic imagery, making the rendering an instance of Baker's translation by paraphrase. In Nida's terms, the natural command "*terus awasi mereka*" represents dynamic equivalence because it preserves the intended message rather than the source-language form.

Data 2: "On the house" → "*Gratis*"
At 00:08:49, "on the house" signifies that something is provided without payment. Rendering it as "*gratis*" communicates that meaning in a brief and immediately accessible way. The idiomatic form is replaced with a non-idiomatic Indonesian word, so Baker's strategy is paraphrase. The expression typically signals that a product or service is being given at no cost in the situation shown. The single-word subtitle condenses that transactional meaning while avoiding an unnatural literal reference to a "house." The target expression also shows Nida's dynamic equivalence: although its wording differs, Indonesian viewers receive the intended message that no payment is required.

Data 3: "Take it easy" → "*Hei, tenanglah*"
At 00:17:54, "take it easy" is used to ask someone to calm down or stop worrying. The subtitle "*hei, tenanglah*" retains this conversational function without translating the words literally. The expression functions pragmatically as reassurance or an instruction to remain calm. In the target subtitle, the interjection "*hei*" and the imperative "*tenanglah*" make the calming purpose explicit.

Because the English idiom becomes a direct Indonesian instruction, this pair is classified as paraphrase under Baker's framework. It also illustrates Nida's dynamic equivalence: "*tenanglah*" communicates the intended reassurance naturally to Indonesian-speaking viewers.

Data 4: "A sob story" → "*Cerita sedih*"
At 00:28:03, "a sob story" refers to a sad account presented in a way that may invite sympathy. The subtitle translates the expression as "*cerita sedih*." The distinction is relevant because "sob story" may suggest a story intended to elicit pity, while "*cerita sedih*" foregrounds the sadness itself. Thus, the main topical meaning survives, but not necessarily every pragmatic implication of the original phrase.

Baker's paraphrase strategy applies because the idiomatic connotation is expressed through straightforward Indonesian wording rather than a corresponding idiom. For Nida, the translation shows dynamic equivalence at the level of its core message, although the nuance of deliberately seeking sympathy is less explicit.

Data 5: "In such a funk" → "*Merasa sedih*"

At 00:28:38, "in such a funk" denotes a gloomy or low-spirited emotional state. The subtitle "*dia merasa sedih*" expresses this state without reproducing the original idiom. Under Baker's categories, it is translation by paraphrase. The English phrase contains an informal description of mood, whereas the Indonesian version names the emotional condition directly. In context, the choice favors a recognizable feeling over the idiom's stylistic character. In Nida's terms, the result exemplifies dynamic equivalence because the intended emotional condition remains intelligible and natural in Indonesian.

Data 6: "Hard feelings" → "*Masih kesal*"

At 00:43:57, "hard feelings" refers to lingering anger, hurt, or resentment. The Indonesian subtitle "*masih kesal*" conveys the continuing negative feeling in direct language. Since the idiom itself is not retained, Baker's paraphrase category applies. This is not simply a statement that someone feels upset at one moment; it implies that the unfavorable reaction continues. The combination "*masih kesal*" is significant because it preserves this temporal aspect in an economical subtitle.

The word "*masih*" signals that the emotion persists; "*kesal*" is familiar Indonesian usage. This supports Nida's dynamic equivalence despite the different lexical form.

Data 7: "Out of his league" → "*Di luar jangkauannya*"

At 00:56:43, "out of his league" indicates that someone is regarded as beyond another person's level or reach. The subtitle uses "di luar jangkauannya" to communicate this sense. The phrase draws on a comparison of perceived standing or suitability. The Indonesian wording removes that particular figurative association but conveys the notion that a person is regarded as beyond someone else's reach.

The English idiom is recast as a more explicit expression in Indonesian; accordingly, Baker's strategy is paraphrase. Following Nida, the expression shows dynamic equivalence because it remains comprehensible and retains the scene-relevant sense of someone being difficult to attain.

3.1.3. Distribution: Baker's Translation Strategy

No.	Baker's Translation Strategy	amount of data	Percentage
1.	Similar meaning and form	0	**0%**
2.	Similar meaning but dissimilar form	0	**0%**
3.	Translation by paraphrase	7	**100%**
4.	Translation by omission	0	**0%**
Total		**7**	**100%**

Table 2 shows that all seven selected expressions (100%) were translated by paraphrase. No instance in this dataset was classified under Baker's other three strategies: similar meaning and form, similar meaning but different form, or omission. For example, "keep an eye on them," "take it easy," and "hard feelings" become direct Indonesian expressions such as "*terus awasi mereka*," "*hei, tenanglah*," and "*masih kesal*." The translations prioritize contextual meaning over source-language idiomatic structure. The 100% figure is restricted to the seven examples selected for this analysis; it cannot establish that all idioms throughout Elemental are translated through paraphrase.

3.1.4. Distribution: Meaning Equivalence Based on Nida

No.	Types of equivalence	Amount of data	Percentage
1.	Formal Equivalence	0	**0%**
2.	Dynamic Equivalence	7	**100%**
Total		**7**	**100%**

Table 3 likewise shows dynamic equivalence in all seven pairs (100%), with no formal equivalence identified. Translations such as "on the house" → "*gratis*" and "hard feelings" → "*masih kesal*" favor comprehensible meaning over source-language wording.

These examples indicate a preference for natural Indonesian expressions that communicate the situational message despite changes in linguistic form. As with the translation-strategy results, this classification concerns only the seven analyzed expressions and cannot be generalized to all idioms in the film.

3.2. Discussion

In the seven selected subtitle pairs, Baker's (1992) paraphrase strategy coincides with Nida's dynamic equivalence. The translator replaces the original idiomatic form with wording that expresses a comparable contextual message in Indonesian. In this study, the two classifications are applied to the same translation pairs rather than to separate sets of evidence. The results are therefore best read together: the method identifies a recurrent shift in form, and the equivalence analysis interprets what that shift does to meaning.

This pattern agrees with Fitria and Djauhari (2025), who discuss the difficulty of translating English idioms literally and identify paraphrase as a useful strategy in Indonesian film subtitles. For instance, "keep an eye on them" → "*terus awasi mereka*" loses the English eye-related imagery but retains the instruction to monitor someone. "Take it easy" → "*hei, tenanglah*" similarly retains the utterance's calming function. These cases are especially clear because a literal translation of the English wording would be an awkward way to deliver the intended instruction in the target context. The subtitled expressions instead focus on what the speaker wants the interlocutor to understand or do. The rendering of "on the house" as "*gratis*" illustrates how a compact non-idiomatic expression can convey the essential message of an English idiom without reproducing its original form.

The remaining cases— "a sob story" → "*cerita sedih*," "in such a funk" → "*dia merasa sedih*," "hard feelings" → "*masih kesal*," and "out of his league" → "*di luar jangkauannya*"—follow this pattern. Some nuances, such as the appeal for sympathy in "a sob story," are less explicit. The set also illustrates that the broad label of dynamic equivalence need not imply complete preservation of every connotation. The analysis recognizes core communicative content, while leaving room for shifts in tone or emotional shading. Viewed through Nida's distinction, these renderings prioritize meaningful reception in Indonesian. Even when the vocabulary and idiomatic imagery change, the subtitles preserve the central message relevant to the scene.

Together, the two frameworks highlight a consistent relationship in the selected sample: paraphrase changes the expression's form, while dynamic equivalence describes its retention of communicative meaning. This should not be understood as a necessary or universal pairing. Baker's framework is a classification of procedures, whereas Nida's equivalence distinction evaluates the communicative orientation of their results; other datasets could produce different combinations. This relationship matters in subtitling because viewers need to process written dialogue quickly alongside the visual narrative. Concise, familiar Indonesian forms can support comprehension without preserving English idiomatic wording.

Audiovisual meaning also depends on visual and auditory context. Research on subtitling and audience reception supports interpreting each translated utterance within the scene rather than as isolated text (Antonini & Bucaria, 2025; Jia & Díaz-Cintas, 2026). A line may derive its meaning from who speaks, whom it addresses, and what is happening on screen. These features justify comparing subtitle choices against the original dialogue in context instead of assessing them only as dictionary equivalents. Nevertheless, the observed association between paraphrase and dynamic equivalence describes only these seven selected items and should not be interpreted as a film-wide generalization.

3.2.1. Data Selection for Analysis

Data selection required distinguishing established idiomatic meanings from expressions that could be literal, metaphoric, or strongly context-dependent. Candidates were assessed against their scene, subtitle translation, and the idiom-translation categories in Baker (1992). As a consequence, the dataset represents selected instances that the study judged suitable for its idiom criteria. This matters because the examples excluded from analysis can have different formal characteristics and could lead to different strategy counts if a broader inclusion rule were adopted.

The seven retained examples were "keep an eye on them," "on the house," "take it easy," "a sob story," "in such a funk," "hard feelings," and "out of his league." Their meanings were examined in context, not on linguistic form alone. Other expressions were excluded when their idiomatic status was less certain. For instance, "calm as a candle" could be treated as a metaphor or simile, while "like oil and water" had an interpretation affected by its cinematic context.

"Eyes in the back of your head" was rendered in a closely similar form ("*apa matamu di belakang kepalamu*?"), and "run for your life" could be interpreted as a direct command in its scene. These cases were not included in the primary seven-item sample. Likewise, "plead your case," "go either way," and "break my way" were considered too dependent on usage or classification, while "snuffed out" could be understood literally in the film's setting.

Thus, the final sample was determined by the study's idiom criteria rather than a target number. This selection enhances consistency within the sample but also limits the extent to which the resulting strategy distribution can be generalized.

3.2.2. Implications of the Research Findings

The classification of every selected case as paraphrase and dynamic equivalence reflects both the translation choices and the selection of the seven examples. Within this sample, direct Indonesian formulations convey the main idiomatic meanings. The 100% figures should therefore be interpreted as sample-specific, not evidence that all idioms in Elemental use paraphrase or achieve dynamic equivalence.

The individual pairs illustrate a consistent preference for clarity in Indonesian, as in "keep an eye on them" → "*terus awasi mereka*" and "hard feelings" → "*masih kesal*." Paraphrase can thus be an effective strategy when an English idiom lacks a natural Indonesian idiomatic counterpart or when subtitle clarity takes priority.

This limited contribution complements comparative subtitle research by Putri and Wijaya (2021), work on idiom accuracy by Nuraini and Sayogie (2024), and the earlier Elemental analysis by Rachmadini et al. (2025). The present study adds a direct examination of translation strategy in relation to meaning equivalence. It also makes the stated scope of analysis explicit: the research connects strategy and equivalence in seven examples rather than offering a comprehensive inventory of all idiomatic expressions in Elemental.

4. Conclusion

Seven idiomatic expressions were selected from *Elemental* (2023) and compared with their Indonesian subtitles. All seven were classified as paraphrase using Baker's strategy framework and as dynamic equivalence under Nida's approach. In this sample, direct Indonesian renderings generally convey the scene-relevant messages without retaining the source idioms' forms; however, some secondary nuances may be less explicit. Because the findings are limited to seven selected expressions, they cannot represent every idiom in the film. The study highlights the relationship between paraphrase and intelligible meaning in these subtitle pairs.

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