

## THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES OF SUBTITLING TRANSLATION

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The widespread use of audiovisual media has been made possible by their ability to share information quickly and to reach large audiences anywhere in the world, traditionally mainly through television and film, and today increasingly through the Internet and mobile devices. This basic need to communicate obviously includes the production, distribution and consumption of information among people who may speak different languages in the same or in different parts of the world. Translation and interpretation, which have been practiced for centuries as means of promoting communication and dialogue between different linguistic and cultural communities, are essential to overcome language barriers. Regarding translation, the traditional approach focused almost exclusively on written texts. However, the development of mass communication in new multimedia formats has led to the appearance of new types of translation, usually grouped under the common term *audiovisual translation* (AVT), which main forms are subtitling, dubbing and voiceover. Thus, the availability of free software for captioning and video editing on the Internet has also contributed significantly to its growing popularity [1].

**Spatial considerations.** Although there is no absolute uniformity in the timing and placement of subtitles on the screen, some trends in the profession gain a fair amount of popularity and validity. Because of their intrusive nature, with subtitles appearing and disappearing from the screen at regular intervals, the idea that subtitles should attract as little attention as possible is deeply ingrained in the industry. In practice, this means that subtitles are usually located at the bottom of the screen, displayed horizontally - although in some countries, such as Japan, they can also be vertical - and do not contain more than two lines. Of course, subtitles can be moved to other parts of the screen, if necessary, for example, when the main action takes place at the bottom of the screen, when the background is so light that subtitles risk becoming illegible, or when the bottom of the original programme is occupied by written inserts or logos. In some film festivals the subtitles are shown on a separate display underneath the screen to avoid picture contamination.

**Temporal considerations.** In order for the viewer to be able to identify who is speaking and what is being said, subtitles need to be timed to coincide with the spoken words. Perhaps this can be a major factor influencing the viewer's assessment of the quality of a captioned programme. Sloppy timing, with subtitles appearing too early or too late, or leaving the screen without following the audio track, is confusing and can spoil the enjoyment of the programme. If possible, subtitles should appear on the screen exactly when the person starts speaking and leave the screen when they

stop speaking. This synchronisation process is known in the profession as spotting, cueing, timing or originating, and can be done by interpreters themselves or by technicians familiar with subtitling software.

**Linguistic considerations.** Like any other type of translation, subtitles are expected to be a semantically adequate presentation of the original dialogue, but with an additional complication: they must at the same time respect the spatial and temporal specifications discussed above. One of the immediate and most visible results of these limitations is that written subtitles are almost always an abridged form of spoken language. In any case, the abbreviation must take into account the rhythm and pitch of the original, as the excessive abbreviation typical of beginner subtitles can lead to a negative reception from viewers who have direct access to the original soundtrack. Long-worded dialogue translated by short subtitles is bound to arouse suspicion, as if the concise dialogue had been turned into extended subtitles [2].

**Different types of subtitles.** Pre-recorded programmes usually use *pop-up* subtitles, which can appear anywhere on the screen as a block and remain visible for a certain amount of time, after which they disappear to give way to a new subtitle. Live events, on the other hand, use *roll-up* or *scroll* subtitling, a method in which words appear from left to right and when a line is full, it scrolls upwards to make room for a new line, and the top line is erased to make way for a new bottom line. This continuous scrolling increases the speed at which the information is presented, but has the disadvantage that it makes it difficult to read.

From a technical standpoint, subtitles are *open* when they are an integral part of the audiovisual programme, usually burned onto the images, and cannot be turned off, as in the cinema. The opposite is called *closed* subtitles, which are not an integral part of the programme and can be added to the programme at the viewer's will, as on most DVDs.

*Pre-prepared* or *offline* subtitles are prepared ahead of the programme release whereas subtitles produced at the very same time as the programme is being broadcast are called (*semi*)*live*, *real-time* or *online*.

From a linguistic perspective, *intralingual* subtitles, also known as captions in American English, are done in the same language as the dialogue of the audiovisual programme. *Interlingual* subtitles, on the other hand, require the translation of the spoken/written message of the original programme into a different language. *Bilingual* subtitles are part of the latter category and are normally produced in geographical areas where two or more languages are spoken [3].

To sum up, it should be mentioned that the potential offered by digital technology is enormous for both the production and consumption of AVT. New

formats such as DVD, Blu-ray and the Internet have also changed the way we perceive audiovisual products, giving viewers an unusual degree of control over the language combinations in which they want to watch a programme. We are now dealing with an interactive rather than a passive viewer, who is increasingly immersed in the world of images and more familiar with new technologies [4]. Nevertheless, there are conceptual and methodological gaps in the research conducted, and it is clear that academics need to continue research in this area to try to fill these gaps.

### References

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