

Federica Capitani

## **The Job of a Subtitler**

### **Theoretical, Technical and Professional Aspects of Interlingual Subtitling**

#### *Abstract*

This contribution is the result of personal experience based on university education in the field of interlingual subtitling and later professional development, enriched by readings on the topic. Good translation skills and knowledge of the language of films are essential to becoming an interlingual subtitler. In addition, broad knowledge of a foreign language from all points of view is required, as well as compliance with technical parameters for creating qualitative subtitles.

Two steps are necessary to acquire all these abilities: attendance at a university degree course specialised in this field and taking up a career as a professional subtitler. Both stages combine together to the building of a subtitler's skills by operating at different levels. On one side, an academic course offers students the possibility to analyse theoretical aspects with regard to language and technique; on the other side, the technique can be refined by practising within a professional setting, where subtitlers can also acquire information regarding the specifications of the job.

## **1 Introduction**

Subtitling is not as easy an activity as it may seem to be. It represents a challenge for subtitlers, since it requires a sound knowledge of the source language, fluency in the mother tongue, as well as technical skills combined with high-level knowledge of the language of films. It is only with the combination of these elements that it becomes possible to give life to a high-quality subtitled product, which corresponds to subtitles written in a simple, adequate way, easily understood by the audience, displayed in synchrony with the video, and for a period of time sufficient for reading the text (Díaz Cintas/Remael 2007: 9). All these requirements can be achieved, firstly, through dedicated university courses allowing students to become familiar with the basic skills of a subtitler; secondly, after training, professional practice can offer a deeper awareness of the activity and a crucial chance to consolidate the skills acquired.

This contribution does not aim to be an exhaustive dissertation about the characteristics of the subtitling activity and of the subtitles themselves; it rather aims to point out some essential aspects characterising the two steps of a subtitler's career. Besides, it will

concentrate on interlingual subtitles, that is, subtitles that require translation between two different languages; intralingual subtitles will not be included in this contribution, since their characteristics and requirements would deserve dedicated analysis that would lead to different conclusions.

In the first part, this contribution will deal with education and training; in the second, it will focus on the professional setting. The two stages will be highlighted from three main perspectives: theoretical, technical, and professional.

## **2 Why Should a Student Attend a University Course in Subtitling?**

The starting point for a career in subtitling is supposed to be a dedicated university course specialising in the field. In the past few years, many universities have considered offering specialised courses in subtitling; in particular, Spain and the United Kingdom have been pioneer countries in Europe (Jüngst 2010: 8).

Attending an advanced course in subtitling is of fundamental importance for students, since it will help in developing two skill categories: basic theoretical knowledge of linguistics and translation, and those related to technique. Moreover, it will provide students with time for training and applying the notions learnt.

### **2.1 Theoretical Aspects**

With regard to the theoretical framework of subtitling, only academic courses in translation studies can offer a theoretical approach to the use of language in subtitling. First of all, at university students discover the differences between translation in a traditional, general sense and subtitling as one of its subdisciplines, with its own peculiar characteristic of using two codes at the same time: image and sound (Díaz Cintas/Remael 2007: 9). In fact, audiovisual translation is made up of both an auditory and a visual channel, appearing either at a verbal or a non-verbal level, which combine to give meaning to the video production (Gottlieb 2005a: 245).

As for the audiovisual text as a whole, it deserves to be remembered that a subtitler may have to face the problem of comparison between different versions of the same film; this problem must be theoretically treated by considering the double nature of an audiovisual text, but has to be practically solved according to the specific context in which the subtitler operates. For this reason, this point will be dealt with in section 3.1.

The differentiation between translation in a general sense and subtitling is not only due to the use of two codes but also to a number of technical parameters that must be known to be respected in addition to linguistic ones; in some cases, compliance with the parameters even prevails over a correct, standard translation.

If the linguistic sphere of subtitling is to be considered, a wide range of linguistic strategies need to be applied in order to adapt the source text to the subtitle and its audiovisual requirements. For instance, in order to comply with a fixed number of characters per row, it may be necessary to condense the text or remove some elements

(Díaz Cintas/Remael 2007: 144). Academic subtitling courses devote time to speculation upon subtitling strategies, thus raising awareness in aspiring subtitlers in order to allow them to become more confident with these strategies; they are indeed especially important when working as a professional, when their use becomes automatic.

Therefore, subtitling has to be regarded as a more flexible discipline, and this is particularly visible in the difficulty of choosing terminology to define it (Díaz Cintas/Remael 2007: 11). However, it is worth remembering that subtitling and translation share a basic common ground; hence, all principles which are to be complied with in translation must also be applied to subtitling. Some examples are the audience, the purpose of the film to subtitle, the style and construction of sentences. Moreover, the same resources used for translation could be helpful to the subtitler, since terms may need to be looked up in dictionaries and/or in glossaries.

The importance of a theoretical approach provided by educational institutions can be found by observing so-called “fan subs”. People who subtitle as a hobby, maybe because they know a foreign language and are aware of translation principles, in many cases do not know the parameters involved in subtitling and carry out the activity in much the same way as translation. The result is that many subtitle files contain illegible subtitles, as the number of characters per line exceeds the standard, making it impossible for the audience to complete the reading. In such a situation, it appears clear that a theoretical background in subtitling is essential to produce high-quality subtitle tracks.

## 2.2 Technical Aspects

Subtitles can be applied to audiovisual material only through specific professional software. This is why the first lessons at university are usually dedicated to the guidelines on how to use IT tools, in order to make students familiar with them. Different software types are available, each one presenting specific characteristics, so that they are suitable for different users. A possible classification can be related to their accessibility to subtitlers.

The first category is open-source software, which guarantees free and unlimited use to every subtitler; it can be downloaded from the Internet, thus giving students the possibility to train autonomously, with less preparation required and fewer parameters to set up. One of the most popular editors in the academic field is *Subtitle Workshop*<sup>1</sup>, user-friendly software that allows students to work professionally simply by following guided steps for the creation of a subtitle file, from translation to timing.

The second category is the most professional, complete and complex software, which often requires a user licence. This is the case of *EZTitles*,<sup>2</sup> a programme offering additional features compared to *Subtitle Workshop*, like the possibility to follow the audio on a wave line and to see the subtitle appear on the film. Choosing to attend a course specialising in subtitling also means gaining awareness of the potential of these resources,

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<sup>1</sup> *Subtitle Workshop* can be downloaded from <http://subtitle-workshop.it.softonic.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> Further information can be found on the official website: <http://www.eztitles.com/>.

in order to be able to select suitable software according to personal skills and job specifications once working as a professional.

A second step during academic training is learning the basic technical principles of the creation of each subtitle. Many parameters need to be considered, whose application requires knowledge of subtitling guidelines and consistent practice (Carroll/Ivarsson 1998: 1-2). Just to mention a few, it is worth remembering that a subtitle must abide by the 6-second rule and should not contain more than 37 characters per line. The rule varies according to the situation and channel the subtitles are created for; for instance, some film festivals may decide to fix the maximum number of characters up to 43 (Díaz Cintas/Remael 2007: 24), or a subtitling company may customise its guidelines following the client's requests.

In addition, subtitles need to comply with the speaker's voice in its time-in and time-out points, in order to let readers follow the speech in line with the visual elements which are part of the video (Jüngst 2010: 31-34). Some companies already provide time codes, thus simplifying and abbreviating the job times.

### **2.3 Training Aspects**

Academic training has a number of advantages. At university students have the possibility to experience and analyse a large number of text types. This way they can discover the main characteristics and challenges of every type, each one requiring application of corresponding techniques. Indeed, students may be asked to subtitle a short film or advertisement, whereas a subsequent step could be to translate TV series, documentary films or entire films.

A comparison can be made, for instance, between movies and documentary films. Documentaries include original videos with no modification, like interviews and original sounds, which may represent a further difficulty for the subtitler when the original version is not clearly audible. Subtitling a movie would be much easier, since it has a pre-prepared text, also known as dialogue list, from which to start translating the dialogues (Jüngst 2010: 22).

Time for subtitling could be another essential variable to consider, since it affects the quality of the final product. At university, time constraints are not as strict as at work; besides, the tasks assigned are rarely entire films, but usually include just a few scenes or short films. This allows the subtitler to have more time at her/his disposal to reflect either upon the product, or the process. Regarding the product, each linguistic and technical choice, e.g. the choice of a term or the timing of a subtitle, can be more accurately pondered; the decision to split a subtitle into two lines or not requires practice as well. Also, the process may benefit from longer working times, since students manage to find the subtitling system that best suits their skills and personality, so as to get ready to work in the most efficient way. For instance, it is a subtitler's individual decision whether to start from the timing of a subtitle slot and finish with the translation, or to complete subtitles one by one. All these operations become automatic after practice, thus allowing the

subtitler to concentrate on the linguistic aspects. After all, this is the main focus of university training: automatising technical processes and consolidating theoretical aspects.

Lastly, students at university are guided and supported by a lecturer, who is an expert in the field. In addition to all the concepts they can learn by attending lessons, students also have the possibility to ask the lecturer for any clarification needed to clear any doubts before starting in the profession. Moreover – and this is a fundamental aspect – the lecturer always gives feedback on the final products and, through their assessment, students can see what their weaknesses are and how to improve their skills.

This advantage is not very frequent in professional practice, since the client will comment on the subtitler's work only in exceptional cases. In addition, even if the client provides feedback to the subtitler, this will not necessarily coincide with the quality of a subtitled product for two reasons. Firstly, the assessment would be based not on quality parameters but on the client's expectations, that may vary according to the text type and to the client's requirements. Secondly, a client might not be an expert in the field and may not have technical knowledge to be able to assess the product from an objective point of view.

To sum up, academic courses could be regarded as a fundamental step to lay the foundations for solid skills in subtitling; training at university can help students in building their technical abilities and, above all, acquiring and consolidating theoretical concepts of basic importance.

### **3 The Profession of Subtitler as a Skill-building Process**

Besides attending academic courses and the related opportunity to learn basic skills, there are notions that can be acquired only after having become a subtitler at a professional level. The working conditions and requirements differ from those experienced at university, and give the subtitler the possibility to learn more, either professionally or technically. Moreover, many subtitling companies offer post-graduate students the possibility to do an internship in their offices, thus completing the training opportunities for aspiring subtitlers.

This section will present some considerations made through direct experience in the field of subtitling as a professional, after attendance at some academic courses specialised in interlingual subtitling.

#### **3.1 Technical Aspects**

Among the professional aspects characterising the job and differentiating it from subtitling during training, some other elements connected with some technical peculiarities of subtitling must be considered. These are to be discovered at university, and then can be developed autonomously in the course of professional development.

First of all, while working for different clients, subtitlers realise that each one has their own requirements and their films need to be treated accordingly. Depending on the client,

subtitlers may be required to specialise in one sector, which could be determined by a text typology or by a specific area of interest, thus involving a set of frequent terms belonging to the same semantic field on the one hand, while on the other, having to meet technical requirements, such as subtitle length, in order to produce the rhythm wanted by the client. Therefore, subtitlers are required to adapt to given circumstances in order to guarantee high-level performance and to persuade the client to assign them new jobs in the future.

One example provided by usual professional practice is subtitling for international film festivals. Different categories of film festivals exist; there are festivals whose aim is to launch films to a wider audience, while others are designed to introduce cultural environments which otherwise would remain unknown, with cultural minorities as protagonists (Martinez-Tejerina 2014: 216). In this latter case, a festival is supposed to show a series of films with a shared leitmotif during its different editions, as they want to represent the same cultural world. Therefore, not only may the settings of the films be similar, but also the language and culture characterising the whole production.

This has its advantages and disadvantages. If a subtitler is used to working for one single festival, there will be no possibility for professional differentiation and learning new things. However, an advantage may be represented by specialisation; once the terminology to deal with a topic has been acquired and the culture behind it studied, this knowledge could be used for further jobs assigned by the same client. Therefore, future jobs would be easier, since the personal cultural preparation on the topic would already have been completed.

Circumstances change if a subtitler is used to dealing with a number of clients specialised in different fields. Having to face different job types, the subtitler is forced to become an expert in each area of interest, increasing the time required for preparation before each task. It is worth remembering that this aspect is not only typical of the subtitling world, but also affects each type of translation.

The preparation time for a topic differs according to the sector involved; in many cases, vocabulary needs to be acquired first, either in the source or target language. In fact, if the language pertains to a very specialised sector, it becomes essential to read in parallel to find the terms characterising the field, to enable the writer to become part of a group of experts. In this way, the audience will then perceive the presence of experts who are dealing with their usual topic and will appreciate the subtitles.

Another aspect not to be underestimated is the importance of technical materials at a subtitlers' disposal. First of all, the software used could be different from the one preferred by a student; a high-level programme is to be selected, in order to guarantee higher performance and a high-quality product. Among technical requirements, the characteristics of the source video need to be considered as well. Generally, a film is provided via a web link from which the video can be downloaded; therefore, its quality is often poor in order to transfer the file quickly and also to avoid piracy. Moreover, poor quality also means smaller file size, which can then be easily managed by a standard software package (Martinez-Tejerina 2014: 218). In addition, as mentioned in section 2.1.,

a typical problem that may come up is that of correspondence between different versions of a film. The following sections underline all the possible types of incongruity from a technical point of view.

A first problem that may affect the video file provided is that it may not coincide with the final version of the film to be subtitled, as filmmakers might even decide to modify the final cut just before the film launch (Martinez-Tejerina 2014: 218). Similarly, the script given to the subtitler does not necessarily match the final film, but in many cases it could be a pre-production version. This requires comparison between the script and the audio. However, even if the script does not match the audio version, the subtitler should bear in mind that the written text is to be used only as a guideline to understand the whole film. Indeed, the translation should be carried out considering the film as a multi-code text, where the written part has no central role but acquires its meaning just in relation to its visual aspect (Martinez-Tejerina 2014: 220).

Another problem of comparison between different versions of a film which is typical of subtitled films for festivals is the multi-version film. This means that a film, shot in an uncommon language – often an Asian one – entails a subtitle track in a lingua franca – usually English – which is always provided to subtitlers so as to make their job easier. The presence of a double version of subtitles depends on different factors: first of all, in order to take part in a festival, a film must be presented in its original version; even the audio must be preserved, and the only way to show it to an audience is to add subtitles in the target language. Secondly, a film that is to be judged by an international commission needs to be accessible to everyone in a shared language; that is why an English subtitled version is preferable (Martinez-Tejerina 2014: 216).

In addition to the linguistic help that pivot translation<sup>3</sup> can provide to subtitlers to understand a film, there are many other factors contributing to the involvement of English subtitles in the translation of foreign films (Martinez-Tejerina 2014: 220). One of these is the fact that the working process is made easier by starting from a language shared by almost every subtitler worldwide. Moreover, it is useful to have a source text available in subtitle format, since the written text – which could be the script – does not always correspond to the actual dialogues; the subtitles, instead, are created according to the actual audio version. Lastly, such a practice is also demanded by the market, as subtitlers working with English are generally paid less than translators working with uncommon languages. At the same time, deadlines can be very strict, and a translation from English usually requires less time; furthermore, it is easier and quicker to look for a subtitler who is willing to work with English.

Having to work on a film which already contains subtitles implies a further matter (Martinez-Tejerina 2014: 219). The first question to ask the client is whether the film is going to be shown to the audience with the original subtitles needing translation. In the case of an affirmative answer, the final version will contain two series of subtitles

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<sup>3</sup> English subtitles used as a means to understand a film in another language is called “pivot translation” (Gottlieb 2005b).

appearing on the screen at the same time, thus forcing the subtitler to follow the original subtitles. This will have two consequences. Firstly, the subtitles related to the same scenes/sequences need to have the same time-codes, wherever possible, in order to avoid visual incongruence which could distract the audience, as it breaks the balance during the film. Secondly, an accurate reading by an audience that knows both languages may allow differences between the two versions to become noticeable, for example if proper names are included in just one set of subtitles, thus making the translations visibly different. This problem is also typical for subtitles in a language which is similar to the original audio – and this could be the case of Italian-Spanish films; indeed, the audience may understand some parts of the dialogues which the subtitler may have decided to omit due to the typical time and space constraints.

Below an example of a multi-version film is provided: the documentary film *7915 KM* by the Austrian director Nikolaus Geyrhalter, released in 2008. The film was shown during the *62nd Trento Film Festival* in 2014, as part of a section dedicated to the works of jury members, that included Geyrhalter. Subtitling this film is part of the experience on which this contribution has been based.

The film is set in different African countries crossed by the well-known Paris-Dakar Rally; it shows many people encountered along the course expressing their opinions on the race. The film proves to be very interesting from a linguistic point of view, as each character uses a different language, from local Arabic dialects to Creole languages, to the more common English or French. The film is also full of cultural references, since people's comments are linked to their background and cultural environment.

The film needed Italian subtitles in order to be shown at the *Trento Film Festival*, thus preserving the original audio version. Moreover, the original version is not dubbed but includes German subtitles. An English subtitled version of the film with time codes was provided, as well.

The example underlines the complexity of a multi-version translation of a foreign film. In the scene provided, three versions are shown: one with the original French audio, one with the original German subtitles, and one with English subtitles as pivot translation for the subtitler who, in the given case, translates into Italian.



Fig. 1: *7915 KM*. Nikolaus Geyrhalter, Austria, 2008. *62nd Trento Film Festival*, 2014.





Fig. 2: 7915 KM. Nikolaus Geyrhalter, Austria, 2008. 62nd Trento Film Festival, 2014.

The screenshots show two frames of the film with the corresponding German subtitles. The English subtitles provided in the pivot translation are as follows:

We wore the same T-shirts.  
They said "Route Security"/and we had whistles.

By analysing the English and German versions, and by observing the screenshots, it is clear they do not fully match; in fact, in the German version, the "whistle" element is missing. Despite the fact that it is usually impossible to state which version is the correct one, in this case there are many reasons leading us to deduce that the element is contained in the original version. The first reason could be that in the original version, the whistle had already been named in previous subtitles ("Pfeifen") and, due to time and space constraints, the subtitler may have decided not to repeat the word as it was already clear. Moreover, the image also suggests the presence of the whistle through the gestures of the girl. This proves how multiple codes acting in audiovisual texts at the same time contribute all together to the building of meaning.

Another helpful resource for subtitlers is the fact that this scene has French dialogues, so the source language is quite similar to Italian, compared with other scenes in which characters speak Arabic. Therefore, in this case it is possible to check that the whistle is mentioned in the French version too ("sifflet").

Hence, the process of subtitling a film may involve many subtitlers and many languages, with advantages such as the availability of many versions to choose from, according to the kind of audience. On the other side, it also has disadvantages, as many versions at the subtitlers' disposal do not provide the opportunity to check the original track, and so to discover if the different versions match. Therefore, a film with many versions may heavily affect the quality of the subtitles, especially if the film is shot in a language which is very different from the target language. Source and target cultures could be very different as well, leading to distortions of the interpretation of the film, and so to possible misunderstandings (Martinez-Tejerina 2014: 220).

### 3.2 The Professional Setting for Subtitlers

As previously stated, working as a subtitler implies different conditions from those offered at university. Although language might be used in a similar way in both fields, there are many other elements that subtitlers discover and learn to manage only after taking up a

career as a professional. A first emerging difference pertains to the time available to subtitle each audiovisual file. For each job assigned the subtitler must meet a deadline that does not leave any possibility for negotiation; moreover, a subtitler could be asked to work on different videos during the same period of time.

Time becomes a crucial parameter on the occasion of events such as film festivals; in some cases, the schedule of films to be shown may be changed at the last minute, and subtitlers are asked to produce a translation very quickly, even a few hours before the film presentation. Therefore, time management becomes a necessary condition to be able to do this job; the subtitler must have organisational skills to complete all the tasks and has to be ready to work overtime.

This also proves to be true in an academic environment; students indeed may require a longer time to complete a task due to the lack of background practice. However, the conditions would not be as strict as in the professional world, since the lecturer would assign the students tasks that are in line with their level. On the contrary, times in film festivals depend on the schedule of the event, without taking into account the potential and efficiency of the subtitlers involved in the projects. So, the end result is that a university adapts to the student's needs, while in the professional world it is the subtitler that has to adapt to the conditions of the job.

So, even if at the beginning of a professional career, it is usual to start a job without being aware of the actual time required to finish it, later on it becomes essential for subtitlers to be able to identify how much time they would need to complete a task; this requires practice and is already possible after taking the first steps into the profession, after having acquired all the basic principles and techniques to make the work more and more mechanical.

Another difference between subtitling during training and subtitling as a profession is the addressee of the job. In training, students deal with a lecturer, while in the profession, a final version of a film is to be delivered to a client. As previously explained, communicating with a lecturer is much easier and is also one of the main reasons why an aspiring subtitler should attend a university course, since the lecturer can represent a valuable reference for learning and improving (see 2.3.). On the other hand, professional subtitlers need to consider their situation and relations with the client before asking for too many clarifications; indeed, it is better to avoid contacting the client too often, as this profession requires a high level of autonomy and independence, which may represent one of the parameters through which the client assesses a subtitler's work.

## 4 Conclusions

To sum up, the relevance of a university career and professional practice in the field of subtitling has been explained with consideration of several different aspects. From a theoretical point of view, university training is the only tool students have to acquire essential notions that cannot be gained during practice at a fast working pace. Indeed, a

specialised course provides students with a theoretical framework from which they can put together all the principles learnt, which in many cases are linked to linguistic strategies that distinguish subtitling from translation. These strategies will also be applied during their career as subtitlers, but in a more automatic way.

As for technique, the role of university becomes concurrent with the profession. Subtitling courses can offer the chance to learn the fundamental guidelines, but only by subtitling professionally can technique be refined and the subtitlers' skills undergo a fine-tuning process. There are many other relevant points pertaining to each setting that would deserve attention. However, it is always advisable to attend a university course in subtitling, so as to clarify any doubt before starting professional practice. The help of a lecturer and longer times dedicated to reflection are essential elements from which subtitlers can benefit to start their career.

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## Website

Subtitling Software *Subtitle Workshop* – <http://subtitle-workshop.it.softonic.com/> (25/09/2016)  
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## Filmography

Geyrhalter Nikolaus (Austria 2008): *7915 KM*. From: *62nd Trento Film Festival* (Trento 2014, © 2008 NGF Nikolaus Geyrhalter Filmproduktion GmbH)

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