

Elena Di Giovanni

Reception Studies in Audiovisual Translation Research

The Case of Subtitling at Film Festivals

Abstract

This article aims first and foremost to promote a more systematic inception of reception studies into audiovisual translation research. More specifically, it reports on a series of experiments carried out at major Italian film festivals (Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica di Venezia and Torino Film Festival), with the aim to evaluate audience reception of subtitled films and their awareness of what contributes to, or jeopardizes, quality in subtitling. The experiments described in the article were carried out on three different occasions, between 2009 and 2011, and their focus ranged from a general appreciation of subtitled films, to a more specific evaluation of their comprehension under varying circumstances. On the whole, results from over 230 reception tests are reported and discussed.

1 Introduction

Subtitling is the first activity falling within current definitions of audiovisual translation (AVT) to have been the object of scholarly interest: Jan Ivarsson's book *Subtitling for the Media* (1992) was the very first monograph published in Europe and devoted entirely to this translation practice. It consisted essentially in a series of reflections on subtitling activities, being therefore more on the normative side, as often happens with initial contributions to a specific (sub)field. As Luis Pérez-Gonzalez recalls, the study of audiovisual translation emerged in the early Nineties and derived precisely from the practice of subtitling, the first observers and analysts being practitioners themselves. Still, as Pérez-Gonzalez continues, audiovisual translation research – and the study of subtitling within it – has moved rather reluctantly from practice to full-fledged theorization, for a number of reasons which include the difficulty of building homogeneous and comparable corpora, issues of copyright, the often extremely lengthy processes behind the collection, transcription and analysis of audiovisual translated dialogue, etc. (Pérez-Gonzalez 2014: 92-94). The move beyond descriptivism (i.e. the contrastive analysis of source and target texts) has so far proven equally difficult, in particular with reference to certain forms of AVT, including subtitling (Gambier/Ramos Pinto *forthc.*). And if studies focusing on the very process of subtitle creation are scanty, due to the extremely varied environments in which subtitlers work – often from home – large-scale experiments aimed at evaluating

the reception of interlingual subtitles are virtually non-existent, although they would be extremely useful for feeding back into both research and practice. Over the past ten years, the use of interdisciplinary methods for empirical research, and with them the recourse to specific technological tools such as eye trackers, have opened up new avenues for the evaluation of perception and reception of audiovisual texts in translation. Along this line see, for instance, the work done by Orero and Vilaro (2012), Kruger (2012, 2014), Perego (2012), Di Giovanni (2013) and Romero Fresco (2015). Although these and other studies have strengthened the over-all field of audiovisual translation research by injecting a considerable dose of truly interdisciplinary approaches, there is still, to date, ample space for experimenting and developing further empirical protocols.

This article advocates the full-fledged inception of reception studies into audiovisual translation research by presenting and discussing three subsequent experiments aiming to evaluate the reception of interlingual subtitling, all of them carried out at Italian film festivals between 2009 and 2011. Although Italy has always been and still is an eminently dubbing country (Paolinelli/Di Fortunato 2005; Chaume 2012), interlingual subtitling is systematically used in several contexts, among them film festivals. The two main experiments reported here aimed precisely at evaluating the reception of subtitles at film festivals, through a series of questionnaires administered to the general audience and those specialized viewers who fall under the somewhat fuzzy category of ‘the industry’ (journalists, film technicians, directors, critics, etc.), at the *Mostra Internazionale d’Arte Cinematografica di Venezia* (VFF) and the *Torino Film Festival* (TFF) in 2009. A third experiment, carried out in 2011 at the *Torino Film Festival* (TFF1) will also be briefly reported in the following pages, mainly to show how the first two experiments naturally led to exploring specific issues. Whereas the first two aimed to elicit film festival goers’ knowledge and appreciation of subtitles, by means of written questionnaires, the third focused specifically on subtitle segmentation, how it affects readability and the overall comprehension of subtitled films.

However, before embarking on a description of the three experiments, the reasons which led to their design and development, as well as the theoretical framework in which they are embedded, will be the object of the next three sections.

2 Project Design and Rationale

The first two experiments (VFF and TFF) here reported originated out of a positive synergy between professional operators in the field of subtitling (subtitling company managers, subtitlers, proofreaders, etc.)¹ and researchers with a great interest in the reception of the final products of audiovisual translation processes, in this case subtitles. They also stemmed from the awareness that studies on media accessibility have been steadily

¹ The author of this article wishes to thank Mr Federico Spoletti and his subtitling team working at the film festivals where the experiments were carried out. Their collaboration and precious insights were essential throughout.

gaining ground within audiovisual translation research over the past five to ten years, and they currently lead the way in user-based studies. Although this seems to be a natural tendency, as both the research and the practice of media access for the sensory impaired are deeply grounded in the knowledge and involvement of the end users, it has also highlighted the scarcity and limited scope of reception studies in relation to the more traditional audiovisual translation techniques. Inspired by the above considerations, the first two experiments were developed with the overall aim to shed light on the awareness and fruition of subtitles in Italy. As we shall see in detail, the questionnaires elicited responses on general preferences for subtitling or dubbing, then asked participants to more specifically describe what contributes to, or spoils, quality in subtitling. The very first experiment absorbed the functions of a pilot test, to such an extent that the replies which were given led the researchers to fine tune the questionnaire in view of the second experiment at the Torino Film Festival (TFF). However, the set of questions for VFF and TFF only differed slightly, therefore the two experiments remain largely comparable. The third experiment (TFF1), moving from the previous ones, aimed to gauge questionnaire responses against the more objective data obtained from eye tracking tests. Before proceeding with the illustration of the three experiments and the discussion of their results, let us better define our methodological framework.

3 Audience Research as Social Research

Audiences are hard to analyze because, in the first instance, they are difficult to define.

(Ruddock 2001: 8)

As Ruddock put it, audiences are hard to define, especially when they are media audiences. Media audiences are masses on the move; they are large, multifarious, dynamic groups, and whenever we attempt to draw up an image of them, their face has already changed. However, should this discourage, or even rule out audience-centred research? Or should it rather be taken as a starting point and a challenge? The latter was the chosen approach when designing our first two experiments, which set out to evaluate individual and collective attitudes to the reception of films through subtitling (May 2001). Approaching, investigating, understanding people's attitudes in specific contexts fall within the realm of social research, which, as May states, informs and is in turn informed by social theory:

Social theory informs our understanding of issues which, in turn, assist us in making research decisions and sense of the world around us. [...] Our experiences of doing research and its findings also influence our theorizing. In other words, there is a constant relationship that exists between social research and social theory.

(May 2001: 29)

Thus, this type of research approach has the merit of reflecting on actions and attitudes in broad contexts, but also, and equally significantly, of seeing the consumption of audiovisual translation within the larger framework of social theory.

As for the tools to be employed for social research, there is hardly any closure or limitation: aiming to reflect on attitudes and actions in multidimensional contexts, social research neither privileges nor rules out any tool, while also encouraging their combination (Berg 2009).

The three experiments presented in this article, notwithstanding the fairly high number of participants, are more in line with the principles of qualitative research. As a matter of fact, film festival goers were asked to express opinions through open or partially closed questions, differently from what happens in large, quantitative surveys largely based on closed questions. The evaluation of opinions thus expressed is at the same time more complex, nuanced and revealing of individual as well as collective preferences.

Qualitative research is thus generally more flexible, “phenomenological”, a sort of “interpretative discovery” (Berg 2009: 37). It is precisely an interpretive discovery that led us through the three experiments, initially based on an inductive approach (May 2001), then on interpretation of the first set of data obtained, which in turn informed and led to slightly revise the second experiment. The same happened with the passage from the second to the third experiment, which was inspired and informed by the previous two.

We shall now move one step forward in the exploration of our methodological framework, to see how media reception studies feed into audiovisual translation studies, in particular with reference to the experiments presented in the following pages.

4 Media Reception Studies and Audiovisual Translation

Media reception research is the empirical study of the social production of meaning in people’s encounters with media discourses. It seeks to illuminate audience practices and experiences and it is, like audience research, informed by social theory but also, at varying degrees, by psychology, anthropology and cultural studies. Moreover, the great value of media reception studies lies in its providing precious feedback for the advancement of the very disciplinary fields which inform it, just like empirical social research feeds back into social theory (see section 3 above).

As Schrøder et al. put it,

a reception study aims to find out how people make sense of a particular media product, or it addresses the sense-making question towards higher level units. A few reception studies have also extended their scope, encroaching on the territory of media ethnography in aiming to explore people’s uses, taste preferences and experience of one media.

(Schrøder et al. 2003:148-149)

Certainly scantier are the studies which have focused on the reception of media translated texts, in comparison with, or independently from, the original version. As outlined above, the recourse to technologies and methodologies from other fields, such as eye tracking, has recently been changing the landscape, although the number of studies so

far produced is still limited and, above all, these tools and methods normally encompass small number of participants and focus on specific issues.

The first two experiments presented in this paper aim at a general exploration of how people consume subtitled films, but also at eliciting their preferences and opinions about quality in subtitling. Moreover, relying on a large group of participants, these experiments are less limited in scope and type of feedback received, thus contributing to a broader exploration of attitudes towards the consumption of translated media texts. These studies seem to be needed just like the more specific ones, as exemplified by the third experiment here presented. However, it is our conviction that, without wide-spectrum empirical research, more specific studies can hardly fill the void of reception related AVT studies.

5 Questionnaire at the *Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica di Venezia* (VFF)

The 2009 edition of the *Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica di Venezia* (VFF) took place between 2 and 12 September. A total number of 66 respondents filled out our questionnaire while leaving theatres for the screenings of two films: *Harragas* (Allouache 2009) and *Choi Voi* (Bùi Thạc Chuyên 2009), both deliberately chosen for their being shot in a language other than Italian and English and thus featuring a double set of subtitles (Italian and English) as is required at all screenings in Venice and at other Italian festivals. The precise nature of the films, the overall style and the specific translational choices made by subtitlers for these films were not relevant for our research, which aimed at eliciting more general reflections and comments. Nonetheless, we decided to avoid using films which had English as a source language, so as to ensure that the viewing experience preceding the questionnaire was, indeed, guided and (almost) totally filtered by the subtitles. For each film, we administered our questionnaires at the screenings reserved for the general public and those for the industry. The questionnaire itself was rather compact, appearing on one page only, with the Italian version on one side and the English on the other. We received 80 questionnaires but only 66 proved to be valid, i.e. duly filled out.

As for the nature of the respondents, we had a fairly homogeneous spread of male and female (29 female vs 37 male), whereas the number of non-Italian participants was much lower than the figure for Italy (11 non-Italian vs 55 Italian). Unfortunately, even the spread of members of the general audience and people in the film industry cannot be said to have been equal, although we have reasons to believe that most of the 12 individuals who did not specify their occupation (see Figure 1 below) were indeed involved in the film industry, as they filled in the questionnaire after screenings reserved for the industry.

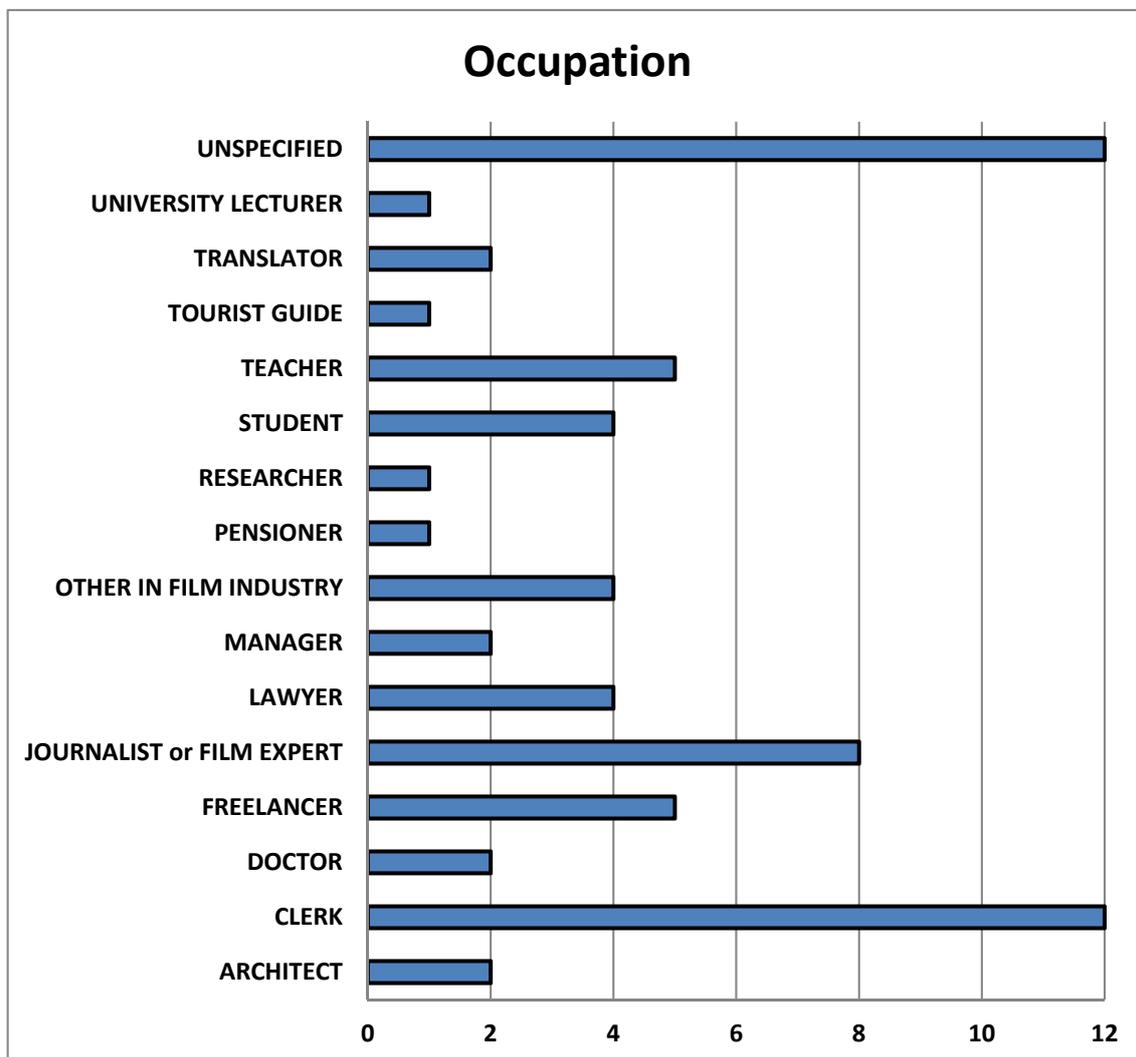


Fig. 1: Occupation of respondents at the VFF

As for the respondents' age, two thirds were between 20 and 50, although the highest number (17 % of the total) were between 30 and 40, a datum which seems to reflect the average age of general viewers at film festivals.² After a short set of demographic questions (age, gender, occupation), the next two focused on the appreciation of subtitling over, or less than, dubbing, with reference to cinema and subsequently to television. The first question, referred to cinema, yielded the results shown in Figure 2.

² See, for instance, the data about attendance at Italian film festivals which are occasionally provided by AFIC, the Italian association of film festivals (AFIC n.d.).

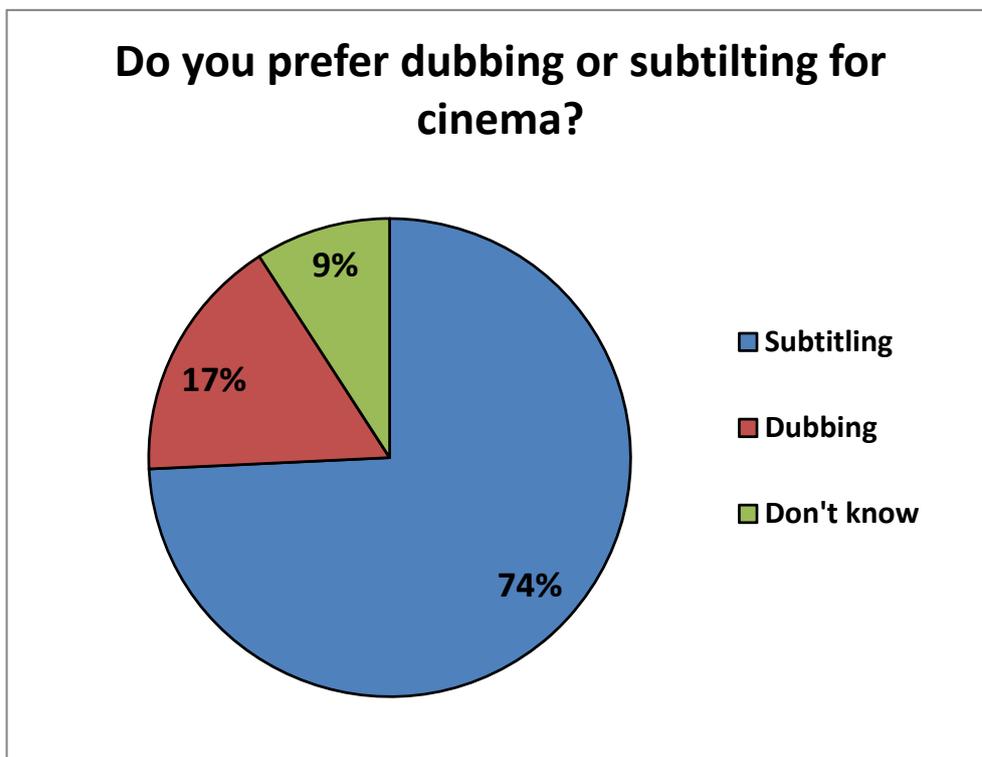


Fig. 2: Preferences for dubbing or subtitling for cinema at the VFF

49 out of 66 respondents (74 %) answered “subtitling” for cinema, whereas, 17 %, i.e. 11 individuals, opted for “dubbing” and only 6 expressed no preference (“don’t know”). The question which followed yielded equally interesting results: when asked to express their preference for dubbing or subtitling for television, the number of respondents who opted for subtitling dropped to 33, which is still, however, a strong 50 % of the overall participants, whereas 20 of them, i.e. less than 30 %, opted for “dubbing”. This shift highlights an interesting distinction made by the respondents to this question: although perhaps unconsciously, they associated a different type of audience and engagement with television as opposed to cinema. Moreover, it is important to say that all the Italian respondents opted for dubbing with reference to television, and that the 11 non-Italian all selected subtitling. Observing the replies with reference to the respondents’ age is not particularly revealing, as a more or less even majority expressed a preference for subtitling in all age groups. In the 20 to 30 age group, 8 out of 11 individuals opted for subtitling and 7 confirmed their choice for television. This datum might be taken as proof of the preference for subtitling among the younger generations, but in fact even 10 out of 12 subjects between 50 and 70 stated that they preferred subtitles (and 8 confirmed for television), thus reinforcing one of our initial assumptions, i.e. that the audiences who choose to attend screenings at festivals are indeed ‘special’ in terms of translation preferences (see, for instance, Di Giovanni 2012).

Perhaps predictably, the two respondents who declared that they were translators in their questionnaires chose subtitles both for cinema and television, confirming translators' (outside the audiovisual translation domain) overall tendency to prefer watching films in their original versions with the perhaps less obtrusive aid of subtitles. Out of the 5 participants who stated they were teachers, 3 selected subtitles for both cinema and television, whereas the respondent who declared that s/he was a university lecturer opted for dubbing in both cases.

If we focus on the data from the industry, journalists in particular (8 people), we cannot but notice a wide variety of responses: 5 out of 8 selected "subtitles" in both questions, 1 opted for "subtitling" for cinema and "dubbing" for television, whereas two others went for "don't know" in the first question and "dubbing" in the second. These data, although resulting from a very small number of respondents (8), may nonetheless be taken as revealing a more critical attitude on the part of this section of our interviewed audience, whose preference perhaps also varies according to the nature and prestige of each film and may also have been influenced by the film they had just seen.

Amongst the issues which emerged from the answers to these two opening questions, it is also worth noticing that a good share (17 %) of the respondents who expressed their preference for subtitling for cinema then replied with a "don't know" in relation to television, whereas all those who replied "don't know" to the first question then selected "dubbing" for television. And perhaps rather predictably, all non-Italian respondents replied expressing a clear and firm preference for subtitling in relation to both media.

The next question, which aimed to investigate further the respondents' preference for, or resistance to, subtitling, was the following, shown in Figure 3.

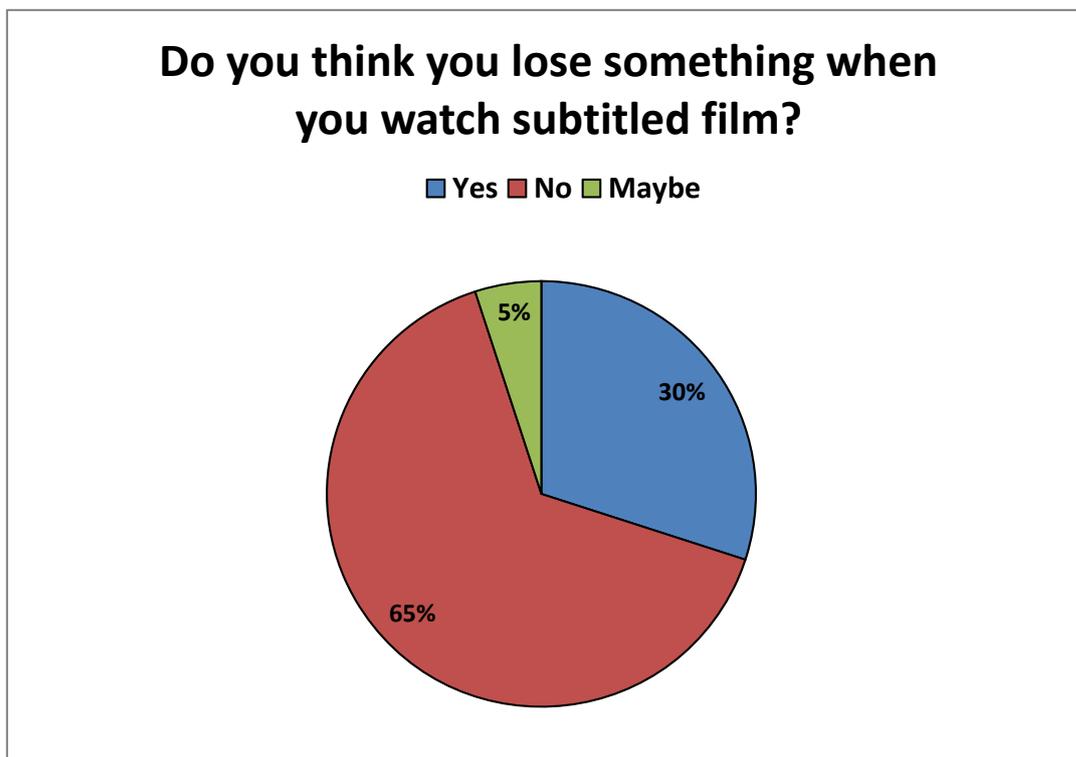


Fig. 3: Losses in subtitling at the VFF

The use of a non-specific verb and object in the question (“lose” and “something”) was deliberate, aiming to elicit a rapid, spontaneous reply, which was followed by a request for explanation. The next question was open and asked respondents to specify what they thought is lost when watching a subtitled film. The explanations provided by those who had replied “yes” to the question in Fig. 3 (20 individuals) were interesting, although the most common reply was perhaps predictable: 10 out of 20 respondents declared that you lose the “images”, and 4 out of these 10 added “scene details”, which is a slightly more accurate reply. Two individuals (a journalist and a PhD student) declared that what you lose is “the complexity of the dialogue/dialogue depth”, revealing an awareness of the dialogic film development and also pointing to a rather stereotyped vision of subtitling, which associates it with reduced dialogue complexity and loss of semantic nuances. One person stated that you lose “one third of the screen”, whereas another specified that you sometimes lose the “deep meaning” of words, as well as certain wordplays, but finally added that “it would be the same with dubbing”.³

The following questions reversed the structure of the previous two, with extremely interesting results. When asked “Do you think you *gain* something when you watch a subtitled film?” 80.3 % of the respondents (53 out of 66) replied “yes” and only 5 of them

³ It might be interesting, in this last case, to point out that the respondent’s declared occupation was “researcher”.

(7.5 %) said “no”. When asked to specify what they thought was gained through subtitling rather than dubbing, the respondents, who were entitled to express more than one preference, provided the following answers:

Respondents' answers	Number of answers
The actors' original performance and voice	20
Original soundtrack	9
Original language	8
Flavour of the original film	8
Practice/fluency in the foreign language	4
Original intention for dialogues	4
Real understanding of a different culture	1
Expressivity	1

Fig. 4: Replies to the question “What do you gain with subtitling?”

Though some of the replies above partly overlap, on the whole they draw a fairly thorough picture of the positive aspects normally associated with subtitles: the original soundtrack remains untouched and so does the “flavour” of the original film, which allows one to get the real idea of “a different culture”.

The next two questions the respondents found on their sheets referred more specifically to the technical and linguistic features of subtitling, indirectly pointing to the perception of, and expectations about, quality in subtitles. When asked, “do you think that incorrect or poorly adapted subtitles can interfere with your appreciation of a film?” 41 out of 66 individuals (62 %) replied “yes”, 7 selected “no” and as many as 17 people opted for “maybe”. Next, a more explicit response was required: respondents had to reply to the question “what is the worst feature of a badly subtitled film?” by selecting one or more options shown in Figure 5:

Respondents' answers	Number of answers
Lack of synchrony with the dialogues	42
Lack of synchrony with the images	18
Spelling mistakes	13
Grammar mistakes	19

Fig. 5: Replies to the question “What is the worst feature of a badly subtitled film?”

The figures above seem to point to greater attention to technical rather than linguistic problems. The lack of synchrony with the dialogues has been selected by almost 2/3 of the respondents as the worst feature of bad subtitling, followed by grammar mistakes, which, nonetheless, scored almost the same result as the lack of synchrony with the images. It ought to be pointed out, however, that the options which were offered did not include translation mistakes, which might have elicited different responses. This assumption is confirmed by the replies which were given to the next question, shown in Figure 6.

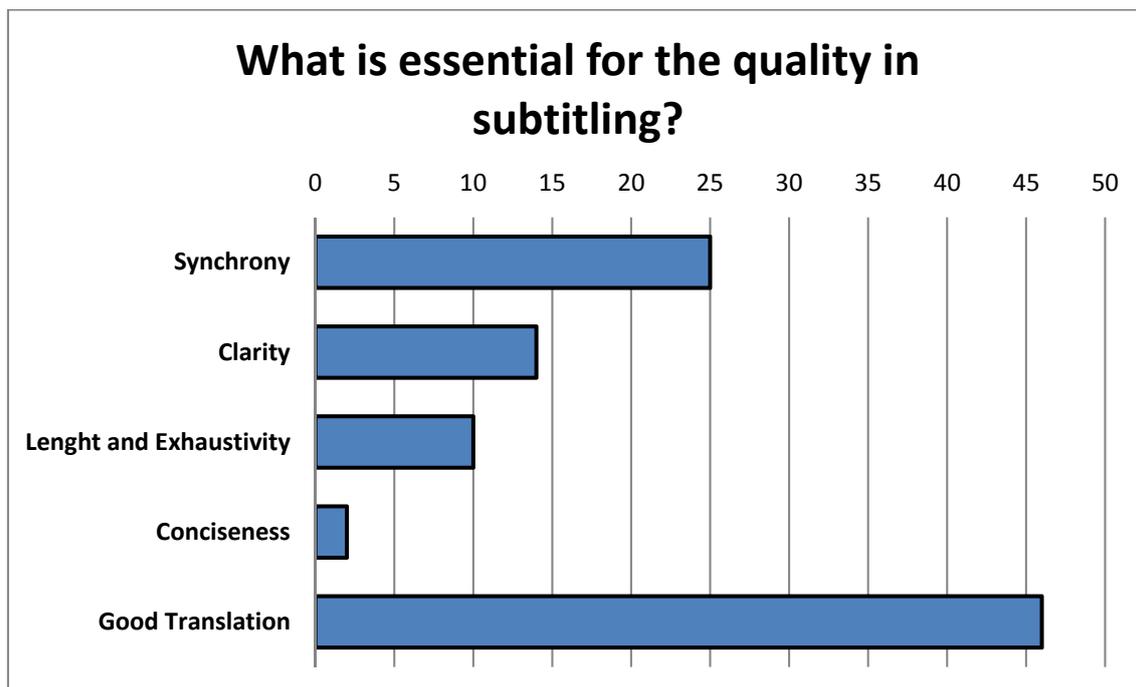


Fig. 6: Enquiring about subtitle quality

The last question in our questionnaire referred directly to the issue of quality in subtitling and aimed to elicit the opinion of film festival audiences on this specific issue. Once again, respondents were left free to select one or more options, and most of them chose more than one.

The replies to this question were particularly satisfactory for the audiovisual translation researchers and practitioners who planned this experiment: the vast majority of individuals (almost 70 %, or 46 out of 66) selected “good translation” as the most important feature for achieving quality in subtitling. A largely-acknowledged awareness (38 %, or 25 out of 66) of the importance of synchrony as the main technical issue in relation to subtitled film fruition was much appreciated, but perhaps even more interesting are the results related to the respondents’ idea of what makes a translation “good”: 7 of the respondents who selected “good translation” paired it with “clarity”, while only 2 opted for “length and exhaustivity”. On the whole – and again, this is a comforting datum – clarity was selected as a distinctive trait of quality subtitling by 14 individuals, whereas 10 chose “length”, presumably as it was paired with “exhaustivity” and therefore was interpreted as a synonym for thorough translation. The final two questions included in the VFF questionnaire aimed to evaluate audience awareness of the difference between electronic and laser printed subtitles, as requested by the practitioners involved in the planning of the experiment. However, since the replies were somewhat confused and pointed to a general lack of understanding of what were perhaps too technical questions, the latter were deleted from the questionnaire administered two months later in Turin.

6 Questionnaire at the *Torino Film Festival* (TFF)

The festival was held between 13 and 21 November 2009 and featured more than 260 films, ranging across 18 different sections. Our questionnaires were administered on the occasion of screenings for three different films: *Adás* (Vranik 2009), *Grandmother* (Kawamura 2009) and *Nanayomachi Nanayo* (Kawase 2008). The language of all three films was again neither English nor Italian, and in order to obtain feedback from both the industry and the general audience the questionnaires were again distributed at screenings reserved for each group. After the Venice experience, our questionnaire was slightly revised: as anticipated, the questions aiming to elicit response on the technical production of subtitles were eliminated. The other minor differences will be pointed out as the results of this second experiment are analyzed. In total, 90 questionnaires were returned, but only 80 were considered valid (44 by women and 36 by men), i.e. not lacking any required response. The initial questions aiming to classify our respondents in demographic terms (age, gender, occupation) were left unchanged and the questionnaire was once again bilingual, on a single sheet. The respondents who filled out the questionnaire in English were a minority (12.5 % of the total), which proves what is a well-known datum in the business, i.e. that the VFF is attended by more international critics and viewers than the TFF.

Another interesting set of data emerges by looking at the respondents' age: the largest group consisted of young people in the 20 to 30 age range (30 %), with all the other groups having more or less the same number. As for the respondents' occupations, the data obtained were much clearer than those of the VFF: 34 respondents declared without reserve that they were either journalists or operators within the film industry, thus making it clear that the members of the general audience were the remaining 46 individuals. These, in turn, stated that they were 15 students, 8 teachers/lecturers, 8 freelancers/professionals, 6 clerks, 6 pensioners, 2 consultants and 1 unemployed, highlighting the high number of students who probably fall into the 20 to 30 age range and make up a large portion of the audience at the TFF. This festival is attended by connoisseurs more than mainstream, glamorous events like the VFF, and it was interesting to discover that a good section of this group of film buffs is made up of young people.

After the demographic questions, a transition question was inserted to smoothen the passage to more specific sections of the questionnaire. The question was:

Do you normally watch films...

- (1) out of passion?
- (2) for work?

The results turned out to be extremely interesting, especially if we consider that almost half of the respondents had declared that they work within the film industry. 77 individuals selected "out of passion", stating that what drives them is their love of cinema, along with

their work commitment (27 individuals among the 77 above also ticked “for work”). No more than three individuals opted for “for work” only.

The following two questions were left unchanged from the VFF experiment. Figure 7 below displays the results obtained for the first of the two questions aiming to elicit preference of dubbing or subtitling in cinema and television.

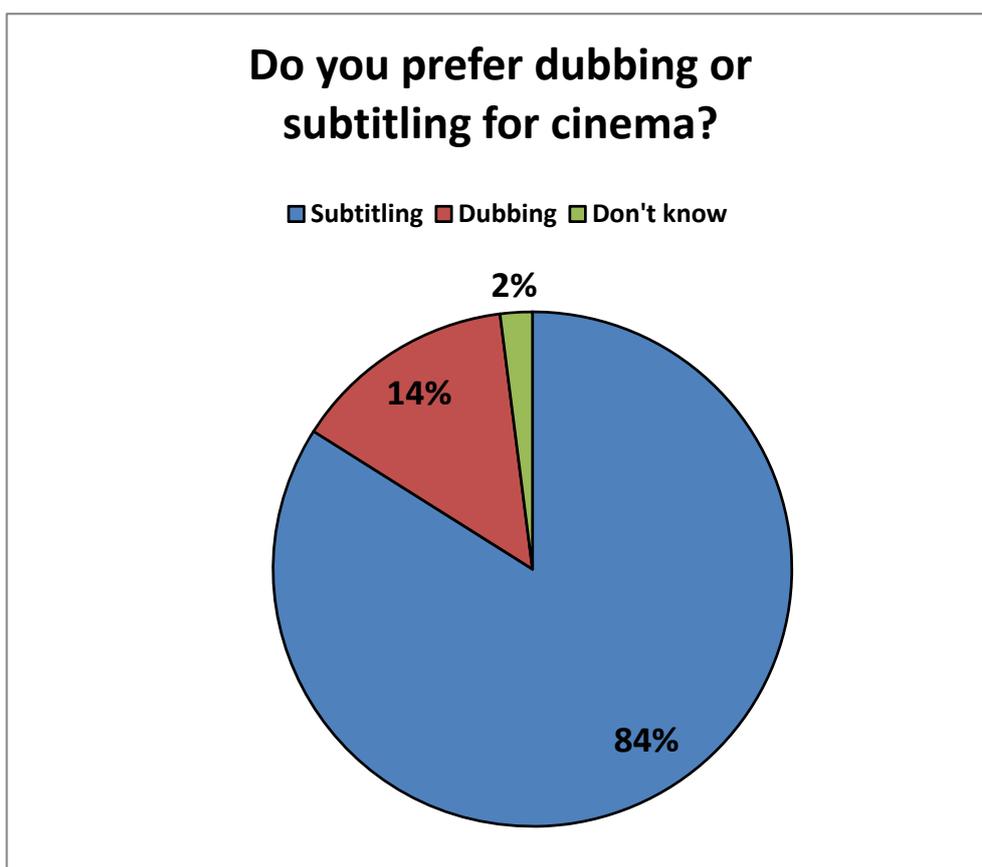


Fig. 7: Results for the first question at the TFF

The rather impressive answers to the first question (84 % of the respondents said they prefer subtitling for the cinema, compared to 74 % at the VFF) confirm what has been said about the nature of the audience at this festival: besides the ‘specialized’ viewers from the industry, the general public is made up of film lovers and experts, young but also not so young, who are positively inclined to enjoy films in their original version with subtitles as guidance. The VFF is, on the other hand, more of a festival for all, including tourists in the Venice area and VIP spotters amongst its audience. However, the film festival context makes all viewers more inclined to accept and even prefer subtitling over dubbing. As previously demonstrated, TV and cinema viewers in Italy normally express a much stronger preference for dubbing rather than subtitling, due to their standard viewing habits (Di Giovanni 2012).

When asked about subtitling or dubbing for television, a high percentage of respondents at the TFF proved to be aware of the differences in terms of fruition which the two media involve: almost half of them (46 %) stated that dubbing is to be preferred as a translation mode when it comes to television, whereas 44 % still opted for subtitling. On a couple of occasions, comments were added to this closed question. A clerk working in the film industry, for instance, wrote “I’d prefer subtitles for television, if only they were available”, thus implying that dubbing is preferred for this medium mainly because the long-standing Italian tradition is hardly ever challenged as regards television.

The next set of questions followed the same pattern as the questionnaire administered at the VFF, featuring four questions which aimed to elicit responses on the loss/gain associated with watching subtitled films. When asked “do you think you lose something when watching a subtitled film?” 55 respondents (68.8 % of the total) replied “no”, whereas those who said “yes” added that what you lose is part of the images/visual details (8.7 %), or part of “the meaning” of the film, since “not everything can be translated” (5 %). These and the other open replies to this question were in line with the results obtained in Venice, where the percentage of individuals who selected “no” for the first question was analogous.

The third question in this short sequence enquired about “gains” viewers identify in the recourse to, and fruition of, subtitles for films. When asked “Do you think you gain something when you watch a subtitled film?” a striking 89 % (71 out of 80) of the respondents firmly said “yes”. Subsequently, they were required to specify what the gain consists in: they provided an array of answers, mostly in line with those provided by the participants in the VFF experiment. A large number of these answers can be brought down to a common core, i.e. the “gain” of the actors’ original performance (28.7 %) or, more in general the “authenticity” of the film itself, its “identity” and the director’s intentions (18.7 %).

The last two questions were very much in line with those of the VFF and aimed to enquire into audience expectations about quality in subtitling. While the first question was left unchanged (“what is essential for quality of subtitles?”), the second was slightly rephrased, to reintroduce the concept of quality in a negative form (“what spoils the quality of a subtitled film?”).

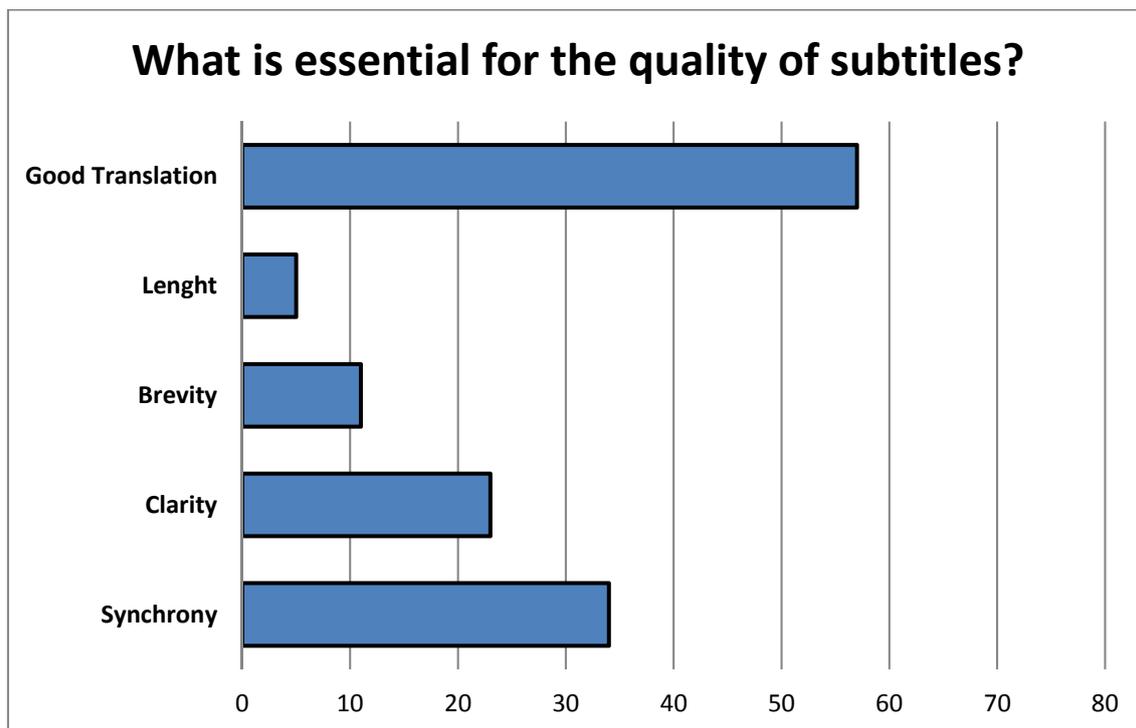


Fig. 8: Enquiring about quality in subtitling at the TFF

As the respondents were left free to select one or more options, 50 of them ticked more than one. On the whole, however, the results show the absolute prominence given to “good translation” as an essential feature of quality in subtitling, a result that is reinforced by the feedback provided for another question, the last in the questionnaire. When asked “is the quality of a subtitled film mainly due to linguistic or technical aspects?” more than 66 % of the participants selected “linguistic” as a unique option, whereas an additional 10 % selected both “linguistic” and “technical”. Only 14 respondents out of 80 chose “technical” as their only response, most of them from the industry and mainly involved in technical aspects of the filmmaking process. Finally, unlike the respondents at the VFF, those who filled out our questionnaire in Torino did not consider “length” as an important feature for determining the quality of a subtitled film. Only 7.5 % of the respondents selected this option, even if they had the opportunity to choose more than one from the list and could have ticked it along with others. In Venice, more than 15 % of the participants selected “length”, although the higher percentage is probably due to the pairing of “length” with “exhaustivity” in the VFF questionnaire, which was removed as an option from the TFF questionnaire.

For the final question, illustrated below, responses did not differ greatly from those provided by participants in the VFF experiment. It is, however, worth noting that 37.5 % of the respondents selected “excessive length” as a more problematic issue than, for instance, “excessive brevity” (27.5 %). Although both can jeopardize overall film

comprehension to varying degrees, excessive length is far less frequently acknowledged as a potential problem outside specialists' circles. Due consideration of reading speed rates and the ensuing necessary reduction in subtitling are, very often, only perceived as important within the specialists' circles. Thus, it is reassuring to discover that the non-specialists do not expect subtitles to be wholly comprehensive and that they do not see any threat in well-dosed condensation.

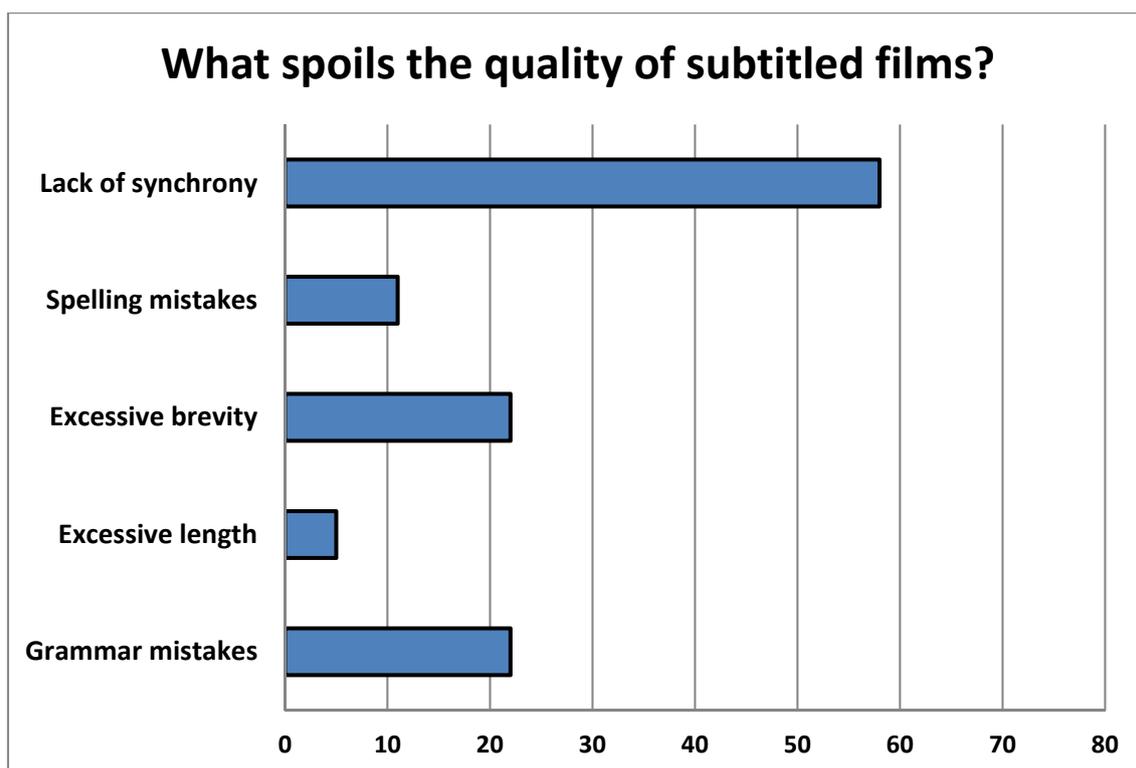


Fig. 9: Enquiring about quality in subtitling at the TFF

7 One Step Further: Testing Awareness and Reception of Subtitle Segmentation (VFF1)

Experimenting with reception of subtitled films at two festivals in 2009 had been an extremely enlightening and constructive experience. For this reason, attempts were made in the following years to take the experiments forward, by testing comprehension and appreciation of different types of subtitles. More precisely, in 2011 the team of researchers and practitioners who had designed the first set of experiments carried out in 2009, decided to address further efforts to the testing of subtitle segmentation. This is one of the first elements to be taught to trainee subtitlers and it is considered a priority in the creation of quality subtitles within the industry. Nonetheless, awareness of the importance and impact of correct and incorrect segmentation on reception is virtually

non-existent with non-specialists, and no reception test on this issue had been reported up to that date. Therefore, we decided to take advantage of yet another film festival, i.e. the TFF in its 2011 edition, to test audiences on the comprehension and overall reception of poorly and regularly segmented subtitles. The experiment was carried out on one of the films shown during the festival, i.e. *Fat City* by John Huston (2009). The film, released in 1972, was shown as part of a retrospective. The test was administered in one of the halls leading to a cinema, not in connection with screenings of *Fat City*. Participants were asked to spare a few minutes for a research experiment, to sit in front of a computer and a large screen, wear headsets and watch and listen to the first, then to the second clip. In total, 56 people participated in the experiment, over two festival days. Six questionnaires had to be eliminated due to a lack of responses, and 50 were retained as valid. The participants' age range was 24 to 50, 38 % female and 62 % male. In order to test different segmentation styles, more specifically what is generally considered incorrect and correct segmentation in the practice of subtitling, two comparable clips from *Fat City* were selected. They were comparable in terms of length (100 seconds), dialogue density (two or three characters always speaking, no significant pauses), scenes (the two clips were taken from subsequent scenes, both of them rather static and mainly characterized by medium-long shots and dense dialogue).

The first clip featured subtitles as they were originally created for the film screenings, with some minor alterations so as to make segmentation as correct as possible. Thus, all the basic and 'golden' rules pertaining to it were respected, namely avoidance of single words on each subtitle line, respect for semantic units, the un-breaking of article-noun, adjective-noun, or preposition-noun links. Examples are provided below.

Original Dialogue	Italian Subtitles
Sorry I got up on my hind legs,	Scusate se non ho collaborato,
but you tryin' to rope me made me nervous.	ma mi avete innervosito con le vostre accuse.
Miles gettin' killed upset me, then you birds crackin' foxy.	La morte di Miles mi ha sconvolto, e poi voi così sospettosi...
It's all right now that I know what it's all about.	Ma va bene, adesso che so come stanno le cose.

Fig. 10: *Fat City*: Original version and subtitles (correct segmentation)

After the first clip was shown, participants were given a questionnaire featuring five closed questions. These aimed to evaluate comprehension by enquiring specifically about the understanding of the subtitled text. Without entering into detail about the questions (i.e. "Who went for a walk to reflect?" – "Where did the person who was killed live?"), it is worth focusing on the percentage of correct answers, which ranged from 66 to 38 %, with an average 53.6 %.

For the second clip, segmentation was modified, going against all the golden rules listed above. Examples are provided below.

Original dialogue	Italian Subtitles
Drink?	Bevete qualcosa?
You break the news to Mile's wife, Sam?	Hai dato la notizia alla moglie di Miles, Sam?
How'd she take it?	Come l'ha presa?
- I don't know anything about women. - Since when?	-Non me ne intendo di donne. - Da quando?
What kind of gun do you carry?	Che tipo di pistola hai?

Fig. 11: *Fat City*. Original version and subtitles (altered segmentation)

The showing of the clip was followed by a short questionnaire, featuring four comprehension questions similar to those for the first clip (i.e. "What is Sam's relationship with guns?" – "Who chased Thursby?"), and two open questions to recap on the overall viewing experience. Percentages of comprehension for the first four questions ranged from 16 to 26 %, with an average 20 % as opposed to 53.6 % for the first clip. The final open questions asked, respectively:

- (1) Did you notice any difference in subtitles for clip 1 and clip 2?
- (2) Did you encounter any difficulty in reading the subtitles?

The first question saw 26 % of the respondents stating they had not identified differences, whereas 32 % left the question unanswered. The remaining 42 %, however, replied affirmatively and 64 % of them went on to specify that problems lay with the second clip ("too difficult to understand", "too little time to read", etc.).

The second open question had 32 % negative replies, whereas 20 % did not provide a reply. The remaining 48 % of the respondents replied they had encountered difficulties, and again all of the difficulties which were made explicit ("lines were difficult to read", "I had to read them twice and there was no time", etc.) referred to the second clip.

The figures above would deserve more detailed analysis, taking into account all the variables involved and all the open answers provided by the respondents, which clearly, although unconsciously, point to a higher degree of difficulty in processing and understanding the poorly segmented clip.

8 Conclusion

This third, more specific experiment carried out in order to evaluate the reception of differently segmented subtitles on film, leads us to conclude by reviewing all our findings. Let us start by briefly going back to the initial aims set for the first two, broader experiments and consider to what extent we managed to fulfil them. Our primary concern was to cast light on the audience of subtitled films in Italy and their overall attitudes towards subtitling. We moved from the initial hypothesis that reception and appreciation of subtitled films was somehow biased, considering that most of our respondents were Italian, i.e. individuals who are born and raised with dubbing as the most common translation technique for both television and cinema.

Nonetheless, the audience we were able to investigate and analyze turned out to be diverse and well aware: it covers a wide age range and a variety of occupations, but, most importantly, it has clear attitudes and opinions when it comes to enjoying films through subtitles. Contrary to expectations, our questionnaires did not reveal significant differences in the answers provided by the general audience and the film industry operators (journalists and other). Both groups displayed an awareness of the importance of subtitling and its features; they stated what their ideas and expectations were, in terms of quality, and they also framed the contextual differences of reception for dubbing and subtitling in a traditional dubbing country. All of these results appear even more interesting if we consider that the audience at a major film festival like the VFF, for instance, is far from being small and elitist, as one may be inclined to think: 1,600 accreditations for the industry were issued in 2009; 7 theatres, for an overall total of 5,300 seats, were in use from 9.00 a.m. to 12.00 p.m. over the 10 days of the festival, for parallel screenings of more than 220 films.

Besides casting light on, and giving voice to, the audiences at film festivals, we also aimed to evaluate their reception of subtitled films and their awareness of what we deemed to be invisible, technical issues such as condensation and synchrony, for instance. The feedback which the participants provided at both the VFF and the TFF was indeed precious and highly informative; it stimulated reflection and inspired further investigation.

This came in the form of a third experiment, which focused on one of the main features which are generally deemed essential for the quality of subtitling, and therefore also in the appropriate reception of a subtitled film. We use the term 'deem' here since no systematic, large-scale study on the comprehension and reception of differently segmented subtitles has been published to date. Therefore, the results of this experiment deserve a more detailed discussion, and the experiment ought to be repeated in other contexts, as well as with other films. Nonetheless, the figures presented above point to significantly lower comprehension for poorly segmented subtitles, with open comments supporting the figures.

This paper and the experiments presented here have no claim to exhaustivity. They certainly wish to contribute to raising awareness of the usefulness, and uniqueness of

the data emerging from reception studies on audiovisual translated texts. The receivers of translated films *can* and indeed *should* lead the way in the definition and enhancement of quality, for the benefit of the industry, the translators, the academic community and, ultimately, the receivers themselves.

References

- AFIC (n.d.): AFIC Associazione Festival Italiani di Cinema – <http://www.aficfestival.it> (14 June 2016)
- Berg, Bruce L. (2009): *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Boston/New York: Allyn and Bacon
- Chaume, Federico (2012): *Audiovisual Translation: Dubbing*. London/New York: Routledge
- Di Giovanni, Elena (2012): "Italians and Television: a Comparative Study on the Reception of Subtitles and Voice Over." Silvia Bruti, Elena Di Giovanni (eds): *Audiovisual Translation across Europe: an Ever-changing Landscape*. Oxford: Lang
- Di Giovanni, Elena (2013): "Visual and Narrative Priorities of the Blind and Non-Blind: Eye Tracking and Audio Description." *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 22 [1]: 136-153
- Gambier, Yves; Sara Ramos Pinto (eds) (forthc.): *Audiovisual Translation: Theoretical and Methodological Challenges*. *Target* 28 [2]
- Ivarsson, Jan (1992): *Subtitling for the Media. A Handbook of an Art*. Stockholm: TransEdit
- Kruger, Jan Louis (2012): "Making Meaning in AVT: Eye Tracking and Viewer Construction of Narrative." *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 20 [1]: 67-86
- Kruger, Jan Louis; Faans Steyn (2014): "Subtitles and Eye Tracking: Reading and Performance." *Reading Research Quarterly* 49 [1]: 105-120
- May, Tim (2001): *Social Research. Issues, Methods and Process*. Maidenhead: Open University Press
- Perego, Elisa (ed.) (2012): *Eye Tracking in Audiovisual Translation*. Roma: Aracne Editrice

trans-kom

ISSN 1867-4844

trans-kom ist eine wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für Translation und Fachkommunikation.

trans-kom veröffentlicht Forschungsergebnisse und wissenschaftliche Diskussionsbeiträge zu Themen des Übersetzens und Dolmetschens, der Fachkommunikation, der Technikkommunikation, der Fachsprachen, der Terminologie und verwandter Gebiete.

Beiträge können in deutscher, englischer, französischer oder spanischer Sprache eingereicht werden. Sie müssen nach den Publikationsrichtlinien der Zeitschrift gestaltet sein. Diese Richtlinien können von der **trans-kom**-Website heruntergeladen werden. Alle Beiträge werden vor der Veröffentlichung anonym begutachtet.

trans-kom wird ausschließlich im Internet publiziert: <http://www.trans-kom.eu>

Redaktion

Leona Van Vaerenbergh
University of Antwerp
Arts and Philosophy
Applied Linguistics / Translation and Interpreting
Schilderstraat 41
B-2000 Antwerpen
Belgien
Leona.VanVaerenbergh@uantwerpen.be

Klaus Schubert
Universität Hildesheim
Institut für Übersetzungswissenschaft
und Fachkommunikation
Universitätsplatz 1
D-31141 Hildesheim
Deutschland
klaus.schubert@uni-hildesheim.de

- Pérez-Gonzalez, Luis (2014): *Audiovisual Translation. Theories, Methods and Issues*. London/ New York: Routledge
- Orero, Pilar; Anna Vilaró (2012): "Eye Tracking Analysis of Minor Details in Films for Audio Description." *MonTI4*: 295-319
- Paolinelli, Mario; Eleonora Di Fortunato (2005): *Tradurre per il Doppiaggio*. Milano: Hoepli
- Romero Fresco, Pablo (2015): *The Reception of Subtitles for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Europe. UK, Spain, Italy, Poland, Denmark, France and Germany*. Bern: Lang
- Ruddock, Andy (2001): *Understanding Audiences*. London: Sage Publications
- Schrøder, Kim; Kirsten Drotner, Stephen Kline, Catherine Murray (2003): *Researching Audiences*. London: Arnold

Films

- Allouache, Merzak (2009): *Harragas*, Algeria
- Bùi Thạc Chuyên (2009): *Choi Voi*, Vietnam
- Houston, John (2009): *Fat City*, USA
- Kawamura, Yuki (2009): *Grandmother*, Japan/France
- Kawase, Naomi (2008): *Nanayomachi Nanayo*, Japan
- Vranik, Roland (2009): *Adás*, Hungary

Author

Elena Di Giovanni is Associate Professor of English Translation at the University of Macerata, Italy. She has a Degree in Specialized Translation and a PhD in English and Audiovisual Translation. She has taught audiovisual translation and media accessibility for over 15 years, throughout Italy as well as in Spain, the United Kingdom, France, the USA and Egypt. Since 2008, she has been Visiting Lecturer at Roehampton University, London, MA in Audiovisual Translation. She is consultant to national broadcasters, audiovisual translation companies, theatres and festivals. Her research interests span from audiovisual translation and media accessibility to literary translation in postcolonial settings.
E-mail: elena.digiovanni@unimc.it

Neu bei Frank & Timme

TRANSÜD. Arbeiten zur Theorie und Praxis des Übersetzens und Dolmetschens

Herausgegeben von
Prof. Dr. Klaus-Dieter Baumann,
Dr. Susanne Hagemann,
Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Hartwig Kalverkämper,
Prof. Dr. Klaus Schubert

Susanne Hagemann: **Einführung in das trans-
lationswissenschaftliche Arbeiten.** Ein Lehr-
und Übungsbuch. ISBN 978-3-7329-0125-8

Anja Maibaum: **Spielfilm-Synchronisation.**
Eine translationskritische Analyse am Beispiel
amerikanischer Historienfilme über den
Zweiten Weltkrieg. ISBN 978-3-7329-0220-0

Franziska Heidrich: **Kommunikationsoptimie-
rung im Fachübersetzungsprozess.**
ISBN 978-3-7329-0262-0

FFF: Forum für Fachsprachen-Forschung

Herausgegeben von
Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Hartwig Kalverkämper

Eva Martha Eckkrammer: **Medizin für den
Laien: Vom Pesttraktat zum digitalen Rat-
gebertext.** 2 Bände im Schuber.
ISBN 978-3-86596-312-3

Kommunikation – Partizipation – Inklusion

Herausgegeben von
Dr. Bettina M. Bock,
Prof. Dr. Ulla Fix,
Daisy Lange

Nathalie Mälzer (Hg.): **Barrierefreie Kommuni-
kation – Perspektiven aus Theorie und Praxis.**
ISBN 978-3-7329-0231-6

TTT: Transkulturalität – Translation – Transfer

Herausgegeben von
Prof. Dr. Dörte Andres, Dr. Martina Behr,
Prof. Dr. Larisa Schippel,
Dr. Cornelia Zwischenberger

Marc Orlando: **Training 21st century translators
and interpreters: At the crossroads of practice,
research and pedagogy.** ISBN 978-3-7329-0245-3

Christian Trollmann: **Nationalsozialismus auf
Japanisch?** Deutsch-Japanische Beziehungen
1933–1945 aus translationssoziologischer
Sicht. ISBN 978-3-7329-0281-1

