



Multimodality in Subtitling

Results of an Online Questionnaire Targeted to Professional Finnish Subtitlers

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Abstract

This article discusses the concept of multimodality of audiovisual texts in relation to results from an online questionnaire targeted to professional Finnish subtitlers. Audiovisual texts, such as movies, are multimodal; they use both visual and auditory channels to convey meaning. The aim of this study is to examine the experiences and opinions of Finnish subtitlers regarding audiovisual texts' multimodality and how they use the pictures and sounds in the subtitling processes. Research data was collected with an online questionnaire that was answered by 42 subtitlers. The results indicate that, even though professional Finnish subtitlers are a heterogenous group with varying experiences and opinions, they recognize the importance of audiovisual texts' multiple modes in the translation process. Multimodality is an asset to subtitlers; they can use the different modes, for instance, to make condensations and reductions in the subtitling process. Based on the results, I suggest that subtitling and subtitles should be characterized foremost by their multimodal nature as they create meaning through various modes in interaction with each other. It is this intertwined web of meaning-making in which subtitlers operate to convey messages of audiovisual texts to other cultures and languages.

Keywords: audiovisual texts, multimodality, subtitles

1 Introduction

The study of multimodality in Translation Studies has gained more academic attention in the recent two decades (e.g., Taylor 2004; Perego 2009; Tuominen et al. 2018). For example, Jieyu Chen (2016) and Yves Gambier (2013) have noted that research of audiovisual texts is too often limited to the linguistic aspects of translation. Consequently, more studies of multimodality are needed; especially studies that take the other modes and their interaction into consideration. The concept of multimodality offers intriguing insights into how meaning is constructed in texts that combine several modes of communication. Audiovisual texts, such as movies, use verbal and non-verbal as well as visual and auditory channels to convey feelings, ideas and meanings (Gottlieb 1998: 245). Moreover, information from all channels of audiovisual texts contribute to the overall

meaning in interaction with each other. It is this interwoven system within which subtitlers operate when they translate, that is, subtitle, audiovisual texts.

Subtitling is often defined and characterized through limitation such as time and space restrictions. It is true that subtitles are only seen for a short while on the screen and they must be clear and easy to read with one glance. Consequently, subtitlers need to use various condensation and reduction strategies in their subtitling process; subtitles must be fitted to the moving picture and contain the most essential information in a concise form to meet the time and space restrictions (Bogucki 2004: 72). Subtitlers are often instructed to take the pictures and sounds of audiovisual texts into consideration when translating audiovisual texts – this is a general guideline mentioned, for example, in the quality standards for Finnish subtitlers (SKTL 2020a) and subtitling guidelines of some of the biggest subtitle suppliers in Finland (Lång 2013).

In this article, I present the results of an online questionnaire targeted to professional Finnish subtitlers. My aim was to gather information about the subtitling processes and practices of professional Finnish subtitlers as well as their experiences and opinions regarding the use of pictures and sounds of audiovisual texts.

The structure of this article is following: First, I define and discuss the two main terms of this study, that is, multimodality and audiovisual texts as well as how they are connected to Translation Studies, in particular to Audiovisual Translation Studies. Next, I introduce the material and methods used in this study. Then, I present the key findings and points of interest that emerged from the questionnaire answers and what kind of implications these results might have in the field of Audiovisual Translation Studies. Finally, I conclude with some suggestions for further research that could shed more light on how to utilize multimodality of audiovisual texts in subtitling.

2 Multimodality of Audiovisual Texts

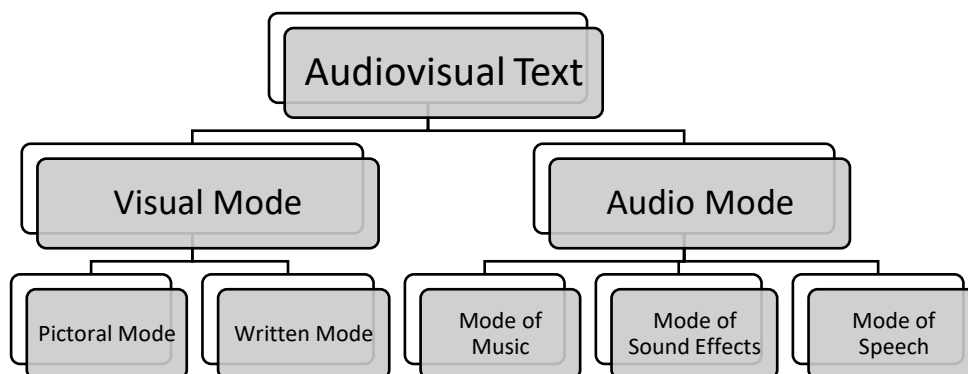
To better understand the term multimodality, it can be divided into parts, in which “multi” naturally refers to multiple, several. Mode, in turn, refers to resources for meaning-making that are used for representation and communication (Kress 2010: 82). Simply put, modes are particular “ways of doing something; a particular type of something” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries 2021).¹ As Tiina Tuominen et al. (2018: 3) point out, what constitutes a mode usually depends, for instance, on the nature of the multimodal material analyzed. In multimodal research, the terms mode and channel are often used in overlapping and concurrent manner as these terms refer to similar issues from different viewpoints: channels usually refer to sensory channels such as seeing and hearing that in turn correspond to visual and auditory modes that make meanings material and sensible.

Studying multimodality is by no means a novelty in audiovisual translation research. For example, interaction between modes has been studied in audiovisual translation research, even though it might not have been called multimodal research at the time (see, e.g., Gottlieb 1997; Zabalbeascoa 1997). Yves Gambier (2006: 6) has even stated that no

¹ For example, Stöckl (2004), Kaindl (2013) and Chuang (2006) have examined the term “mode” in their writings.

text is strictly monomodal, making all texts – and therefore their research as well – in fact, multimodal. Moreover, Luis Pérez-González (2014: 182) noted almost a decade ago that multimodality is becoming one of the frameworks in which particularly audiovisual translation is studied. This statement is as relevant now as it was then. Today’s society is increasingly affected by new technologies and media resulting in a need of intercultural communication such as audiovisual translation.

Picture 1: Modes and Sub-modes of Audiovisual Texts²



Audiovisual texts’ modes and sub-modes can be categorized in many ways; the categorization here is based on the five information channels distinguished by Christian Metz (1974). Modes and sub-modes of audiovisual texts are illustrated in Picture 1. Audiovisual texts are “archetypal multimodal texts” (Taylor 2013: 98) as they combine several modes in interaction with each other to create meaning. It is then no wonder that Pérez-González (2014: 126) has noted that especially subtitling is a strand of translation studies that has benefitted from multimodal line of inquiry. As the name suggests, audiovisual texts are meant to be both seen and heard. Then how to describe watching or viewing audiovisual texts, such as movies, if the verb should, in fact, include both seeing and hearing? Possible solutions could be to use verbs such as *experience* or *sense*. In the questionnaire I used mostly verbs such as *katsoa* (*view*), that does not include hearing, but this aspect is implicitly included in the viewing process of, for instance, movies. In this article, I wish to, however, pay attention to this discrepancy in the terminology and refer to the process of seeing and hearing audiovisual texts as experiencing them.

As illustrated on Picture 1, audiovisual texts are combinations of pictures and sounds. The term **text** must be understood in a broad sense here; audiovisual texts include moving pictures, sounds and various written texts (including the subtitles but not limited to them³). Patrick Zabalbeascoa (2008: 26) has categorized different audiovisual texts

² I first used similar picture to illustrate the modes of audiovisual texts in my Master’s Thesis *Multimodal Scene and Sequence Analysis: Condensation and Reduction Strategies in the Subtitles of The Dark Knight* (2017).

³ Other texts include for example street signs, news paper headings, letters and other writings seen on the picture that in some cases are subtitled if they include relevant information. These subtitles are called captions.

depending on “the relative importance of sound in the audio weighed against visual signs” and the resulting categorization spans from television news to speeches. In this study, audiovisual text is understood as an umbrella term that encompasses all these different types of products combining audio and visual elements. However, the focus here is on audiovisual texts that can be subtitled from one language to another (interlingual subtitling).

Multimodal studies originate from the study of semiotics (e.g., Halliday 1978 and later adapted by Kress & van Leeuwen 1996; 2001). Tuominen et al. (2018: 2) have pointed out that multimodal studies have most likely “emerged from the need to understand how verbal meaning-making resources relate to and are affected by resources that are non-verbal”. This, indeed, is how audiovisual texts operate – they use multiple modes concurrently and in relation to each other. In this context, the subtitler acts as an intermediary between two languages and cultures enabling audiences to understand the original audiovisual texts better. Subtitlers’ job is to understand and absorb the message of the original audiovisual text and then reformulate and translate it to the target language. All modes of the original audiovisual text are needed in this process. They are especially important because the subtitler can use them when applying condensation and reduction strategies in their translation process. The subtitler needs to understand how the vast networks of modes operate and create meaning.

Subtitlers need to take the multiple connections between the verbal and the non-verbal elements in the audiovisual source text into consideration (Pérez-González 2014: 120). If the connections are ignored or overlooked, the overall meaning might be lost. The same can be said about all the modes since they all contribute to the overall meaning of the audiovisual text. The composition of such texts change, however, as the text is translated from one language and culture to another. According to Gottlieb (2005: 3-7) this change can be categorized as diasemiotic (the channel changes) and supersemiotic (the channels increase). When an audiovisual text is subtitled, the meaning and ideas conveyed via spoken language are transferred and translated into written language (diasemiotic change) Moreover, subtitles are added to the moving picture, thus the channels of the audiovisual text increase as it is subtitled (supersemiotic).

3 Material and Methods

I conducted an online questionnaire with professional Finnish subtitlers with the aim of examining their opinions and experiences regarding audiovisual texts’ multimodality. The idea was to find out if and how subtitlers use the pictures and sounds of audiovisual texts in the subtitling processes, particularly in relation to condensation and reduction strategies. Moreover, my goal was to gain a picture of translation practices related to multimodality in the Finnish subtitling field.

In total, 45 subtitlers answered anonymously the questionnaire: six in the pilot phase and 39 in the actual questionnaire phase. In the pilot phase, the questionnaire was sent via email to the translators of *Osuuskunta Monikieliset* which is co-operative of translation students and graduated translators from the University of Eastern Finland, University of

Turku and University of Helsinki. Minor changes, such as corrections of misspellings and the order of the questions, were made and the answers from it were included in the research material. Three respondents' contributions were excluded from the research material because they were largely incomplete: the total number of filled questionnaires in the research material examined in this study is consequently 42.

A link to the questionnaire was sent to the Section 3 of the Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters; it consists of almost 300 audiovisual translators (SKTL 2020b). This number, however, includes audiovisual translators who also work, for example, on dubbing, surtitles, closed captioning and commentaries for television, theatre and multimedia instead or in addition to subtitling itself. It is impossible to know how many professional Finnish subtitlers there are as there are no comprehensive records of the matter. The questionnaire was also shared on social media.

The questionnaire was made in Finnish as it was targeted to Finnish subtitlers⁴. The questionnaire consists of 19 questions that addressed the respondents' educational background, working life, translation processes as well as experiences and opinions regarding multimodality of audiovisual texts. Moreover, the questions covered issues such as whether subtitlers utilize pictures and sounds when they are making condensations and reductions to the original material and if so, how. The questionnaire included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The results of the questionnaire were analyzed with mostly qualitative methods. For instance, central themes, patterns and relationships in relation to multimodality were analyzed and discussed. Key themes of the analysis, in addition to multimodality per se, were the relationships between the modes, the importance of the modes and the use of the modes in subtitling processes.

I faced some common limitations and challenges of conducting a questionnaire, such as unanswered questions, ambiguous or self-evident answers and difficulties in finding respondents. In total 42 answers were examined. The number of respondents was adequate for this study as it is mostly qualitative.

4 Results

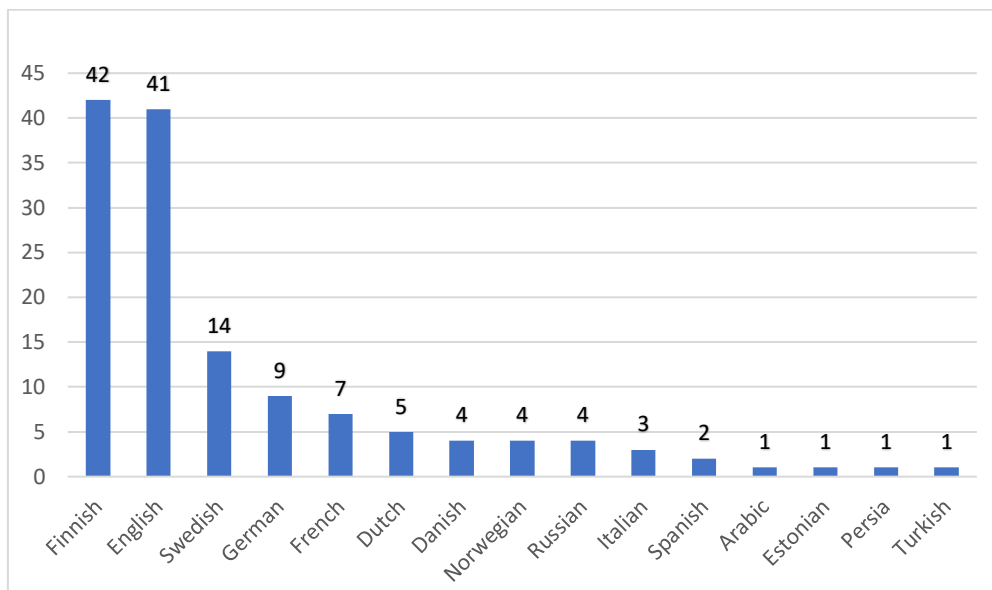
I targeted the questionnaire at professional Finnish subtitlers to eliminate, for example, fan subtitlers and students. I did not, however, give a definition of a professional subtitler because I did not want it to limit the respondent pool too much; the idea was to attract respondents who view themselves as professional subtitlers regardless of their background. The results of the questionnaire are presented in the next sections. They include information about the respondents' backgrounds and their views on multimodality of subtitles. In addition, the results shed light on issues such as whether subtitlers have access to audiovisual texts and what kind of guidelines they receive.

⁴ English translation of the questionnaire as an appendix.

4.1 Respondents' Background

Figure 1 presents the working languages of the respondents. The results indicate that Finnish and English are the most used languages of the respondents. This result is not surprising, since the majority of movies and television series broadcast in Finland originate from English-speaking countries, such as the United States or the United Kingdom. The next most used language of subtitlers is Swedish, Finland's second official language. In total, 15 languages were mentioned. In some cases, the respondent stated that they mostly work in the English–Finnish language pair even though they listed other languages as well.

Figure 1: Working languages of subtitlers (n=42)

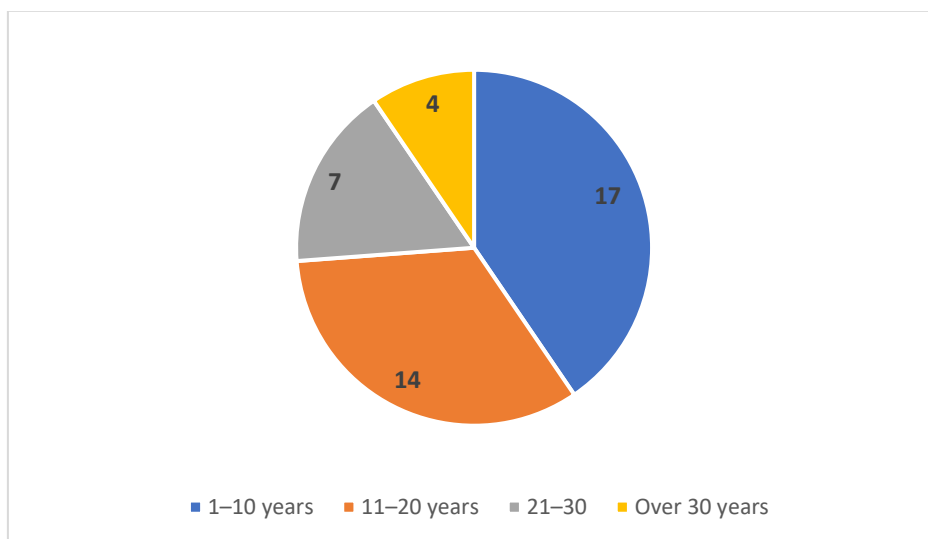


Almost all respondents (n=40) have formal education in the field of translation and/or languages: over half (n=23) have a master's degree in translation studies and one fourth (n=9) have a master's degree in language studies. A few respondents (n=4) also reported that they have taken part in other translation and/or language training, such as courses from open universities or trainings organized by professional unions or associations. Overall, the respondents are educated in their field of expertise⁵. In addition, most of the respondents have several years of working experience in the field of subtitling (Figure 2). The work experience of subtitlers ranges from one to 37 years. The majority (n=25) have more than ten years of work experience in the subtitling field and the average is a little over 14 years.⁶

⁵ Other degrees reported were bachelor's degree in translation studies (n=4), bachelor's degree in language studies (n=2) and bachelor's or master's degrees in other fields (n=2). Two of the respondents reported two degrees, therefore the total amount of answers to this question is 44.

⁶ The respondents were asked to indicate their work experience in years. The average is 14.107, the mode is 12 and the median is 12 (n=42).

Figure 2: Work experience of subtitlers (n=42)



The majority of the respondents work as freelancers, while only four respondents work as in-house subtitlers. As Kristiina Abdallah (2011: 173) has noted, audiovisual translators often work in long production networks as subcontractors and do not interact with the client directly. In addition, about one third of the respondents (n=12) stated that they work as full-time subtitlers whereas the rest subtitle part-time.

4.2 Subtitlers' Views on Multimodality

The questionnaire included several statements that measured how professional Finnish subtitlers assess the importance of audiovisual texts' different modes. In relation to general principles or practices of subtitling, the replies were fairly unanimous; however, the picture changes a little with statements related to practice. I have translated the statements from Finnish and compiled them together with the results in Table 1 (see next page).

All respondents, who answered this question, replied that subtitlers must take the picture and the audio of audiovisual texts into account when translating audiovisual texts. Additionally, all respondents think that access to the entire audiovisual text is important. These results illustrate that subtitlers perceive the multimodal nature of audiovisual texts as important for the whole meaning construction of such texts as well as for their translation process.

Even though the respondents were unanimous when it came to the ideals of subtitling, some deviation began to emerge when the statements shifted towards subtitling practices. Five respondents noted that they do not use pictures or sounds to omit parts of the original source text. One reason for this might be that they use other reduction strategies on the linguistic level. Utilizing the other modes could give additional tools for subtitlers to condense and reduce parts of the original texts: particularly since most respondents (n=40) agreed that it is difficult to meet the time and space restrictions of subtitles.

Finally, four respondents stated that they do in fact sometimes subtitle without access to the whole audiovisual text⁷ and two that it does not matter whether they have access to the audiovisual text or not. Obviously, these numbers are low. Yet, they seem to indicate that the phenomenon of not having access to the entire audiovisual text while subtitling exists in the field. Next, the reasons why are examined.

Table 1: What subtitlers should do? vs. How is it realized in practice?

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Not relevant
A subtitler must take the picture of an audiovisual text into account when subtitling. (n=42)	42	0	0
A subtitler must take the audio of an audiovisual text into account when subtitling. (n=41)	41	0	0
It is important that I have access to a video-file while I subtitle. (n=42)	42	0	0
All texts on screen must be subtitled. (n=42)	1	37	4
It is difficult to meet the time and space restrictions while subtitling. (n=42)	40	1	1
I utilize the moving picture in my subtitling process. (n=42)	42	0	0
I utilize the sounds of the program in my subtitling process. (n=42)	41	0	1
I use pictures and sounds to leave something untranslated. (n=41)	36	1	4
I sometimes subtitle without a video-file. (n=42)	4	36	2

4.3 Access to Audiovisual Text

When asked about the reasons why the whole audiovisual text is not always made available for subtitlers, three main reasons emerged from the answers. These reasons reflect the respondents’ notions of how the industry operates as well as subtitlers’ own experiences.

The first reason why the whole AV text is not available that the respondents brought up was that commissioners can be worried that the materials are accidentally or illegally revealed and distributed. Several respondents (n=12) reported cases in which video material was not made available for a subtitler due to fears of piracy. For similar reasons, subtitlers can also have only access to a video that has been distorted or in which parts of the picture have been concealed (n=6). In addition, business videos can include confidential material (n=3) and major Hollywood movies are sometimes kept tightly secret even from subtitlers (n=3) – these kinds of situations have even been reported by

⁷ The concept “whole audiovisual text” refers here to the entirety of the audiovisual text that includes both visual mode (moving pictures, texts) and audio mode (sounds, talking, music).

the Finnish media at times (see, for example, Frilander 2015⁸). It seems that the issue here is at least partially about trust. Trust plays an important role in translation processes, yet according to Abdallah and Koskinen (2007: 677) factors that build trust in production networks are often rudimentary or absent. Subtitlers are just a small part of long chains of contractors and subcontractors that create these translation production networks. Trust is diluted as these chains become longer and more complex.

The second reason the respondents brought up was commissioners' lack of knowledge of the subtitling process and the needs of a subtitler (n=3). One reason for this might be the changes in the translation field as well as in the role of a translator that have occurred during the last decade. Relationships in the field have changed from direct contact between clients and translators towards network-based production in which translation companies work between clients and translators (Abdallah & Koskinen 2007: 673–675). Moreover, “these networks’ long chains of actors generate asymmetric information and all parties are not involved when the product specifications and work conditions are negotiated” (Abdallah & Koskinen 2007: 678). It is also possible that clients do not know how to define their needs and expectations or they do not want to tell about them (Suokas 2019: 32). As a result, interaction between clients and subtitlers is a complex and time-consuming process or they do not have interaction at all.

The third reason for not having access to the whole audiovisual text includes various technical issues, for example, the files can be in a wrong format or incomplete (n=3). The files can be, for instance, not edited or cut into their final form. Moreover, subtitlers are not always given any reason for not having access to the whole audiovisual text (n= 3). The need for a translation often arises late in a production chain or is added to the end of it. Resources allocated for translations are then lacking and understanding the needs of the subtitlers are minimal. This might explain partially why translation of audiovisual texts is sometimes required even though the audiovisual texts themselves are not yet ready. In addition, in some cases audiovisual texts, such as movies, are released in several countries concurrently right after they have been finished, so there is very little time to translate them.

4.4 Parts of a Whole Audiovisual Text

There seems to be a consensus among the respondents that all the elements of audiovisual texts and their links are important in the subtitling processes. Gottlieb (2005 :14) has examined the importance of the semiotic channels of audiovisual texts and how their relevance shifts as the audiovisual text is translated (see Table 2). According to him, the image is the most important part of an audiovisual text both in the original and translated form. As Table 2 illustrates, the most significant change takes place between writing and speech. This diasemiotic and supersemiotic change is actualized as target language subtitles. The original audiovisual text can include some texts appearing on the picture,

⁸ The news was about the subtitlers who did not want their name mentioned at the end of the movie they subtitled. Reason for this was that they did not have full access to the audiovisual texts as they subtitled it. They could, for example, only see the heads of characters when they spoke.

such as news headings or street signs, but subtitles form a whole new information channel for the people who do not understand the language of the original audiovisual text.

Table 2: Importance of audiovisual texts' semiotic channels by Gottlieb (2005:14; table modified by author)

Original Audiovisual Text		Subtitled Audiovisual Text	
Image	55 %	Image	40 %
Speech	25 %	Writings	32 %
Sound effects	18 %	Sound effects	18 %
Writings	2 %	Speech	10 %

Gottlieb (2005:14) has stated that

lacking available empirical studies on audience perception of various translation methods, let alone systematic comparisons of semantic content related to semiotic structure, I have based the figures [...] partly on my personal experience as a subtitler, partly on theoretical studies by myself and others.

These rough estimates are no doubt subjective and context dependent. However, they offer one starting point to the evaluation of the importance of these channels. Therefore, I asked professional Finnish subtitlers to evaluate the importance of these channels based on their experiences. The results are presented in Table 3 as average percentages.

Table 3: Importance of audiovisual texts' semiotic channels as evaluated by the respondents (n=38)⁹

Original Audiovisual Text		Subtitled Audiovisual Text	
Speech	49 %	Writings	34 %
Image	31 %	Image	30 %
Sound effect	10 %	Speech	26 %
Writings	9 %	Sound effects	9 %

Even though the respondents stated that it was difficult to evaluate the importance of these channels and some (n=6) decided not to do so, the average numbers (Table 3) seem to roughly correspond the ones Gottlieb presented (Table 2). In both tables, the importance of sound effects remains roughly the same (18%/18% and 10%/9%) and the changes in the importance of writings (2%/32% and 9%/34%) and speech (25%/10% and 49%/26%) have shifted similarly.¹⁰ The most significant difference between the tables is the

⁹ There were some errors in the respondents' answers: in five cases the sum of the percentages did not add to an even 100% (the sums were 90–110% in these cases).

¹⁰ First two numbers in the brackets refer to Gottlieb's view on the importance of audiovisual texts' semiotic channels in the original audiovisual texts and subtitled audiovisual text. The next two numbers refer to the importance of audiovisual texts' semiotic channels as evaluated by the respondents in the original audiovisual text and in the subtitled audiovisual text.

emphasis Gottlieb puts on the image as conveyor of meaning whereas the questionnaire respondents stress speech in the original audiovisual text and writing in the subtitled one. This emphasis may, however, result from the mindset in which the respondents were while answering the question; they answered as subtitlers and not as experiencers of audiovisual texts.

4.5 Translation Process

The importance of the access to the whole audiovisual text becomes clear when respondents' answers to questions on translation processes are examined. Most responders (n=28) report that their translation process begins with a viewing¹¹ or more precisely experiencing the whole audiovisual text or they experience it in short sections as they translate the text. Consequently, two main types of subtitling processes emerge from the results. The first process type consists of three stages: experiencing the audiovisual text, then timing and translating the text and finally experiencing the subtitled audiovisual text. The second process type consists of timing and translating while experiencing the audiovisual text that is later re-experienced and corrected if needed. In both process types, the importance of experiencing the original audiovisual text is evident. It is especially important for timing which is dependent, for example, on shot and scene changes. According to the responses the respondents usually time before (n=17), after (n=10) or during (19) the subtitling process, use ready-timed templates (n=22) or translate the text, for example, in Word or Excel without timing themselves (n=7).¹² Timing processes depend on multiple factors, such as the type of the audiovisual text being translated and customers' needs and preferences. A few respondents (n=5) stated that if there is no time to experience the whole text before the translation process begins, they still experience it during or after the process. Moreover, several respondents (n=18) stated that they often experience the audiovisual text even three to six times during or after the subtitling process – if there is time. The questionnaire results illustrate that there are various stages in which the whole audiovisual text is used by subtitlers. Situations and processes vary, yet the need to use the whole audiovisual text remains.

The majority of the respondents (n=33) state that they do not nor would not take subtitling commissions without access to the whole audiovisual text which includes the original video material (pictorial and audio modes) and commonly also written materials, such as scripts, transcriptions or templates. Access to all modes is essential to most of the respondents; seven respondents even claim that it is impossible to subtitle without access to all modes. The respondents reported various reasons: without access to all the modes, it is not possible to time the subtitles; dialogue cannot be understood wholly, for example, because pronouns and other references cannot be made correctly; or it would be unethical towards the makers of the original texts as well as the experiences of the text. While most of the respondents think that subtitling without access to the entire audiovisual text is

¹¹ The respondents' used the verb to view or watch (katsoa) audiovisual texts as did I in the questionnaire form. Three of the respondents clarified that they view/watch with or without sound.

¹² Respondents were able to select several choices when stating their timing practices.

difficult or even impossible, 20% would still take a subtitling commission without access to all of the modes. Nevertheless, such respondents noted that if they would take this kind of a commission, it would be an exception and that they would report to the client that the situation is out of the norm and it can affect the translation and its quality. Furthermore, about 10% (n=5) have in fact taken a subtitling commission without access to the whole audiovisual text. What some of the respondents deem impossible (translating without access to the whole audiovisual material) is in the end a question of quality.

Almost all respondents (n=40) stated that meeting the time and space restrictions of subtitles is difficult. This is where the multimodal nature of an audiovisual text can truly assist the subtitler, for instance, to deploy condensation and reduction strategies that rely on multimodality. Subtitlers need to convey the most relevant information and the pictorial and audio modes can give additional information of the situation and support the subtitles. When asked about the use of these strategies, the respondents listed several occurrences in which they have used the pictorial and audio modes. The answers included reduced or omitted instances of irrelevant information such as fillers (n=11), exclamations (n=10), names (n=9), repetition (n=8), cursing (n=5), yes or no -utterances (n=5), vocatives (n=5), greetings (n=5) or other things that the experiences of the audiovisual text can understand from the picture, sounds or context¹³. These replies correspond to several studies listing various elements that are often reduced from subtitles since they can be seen on the picture or heard from the audiotrack (see, e.g., Pedersen 2011; Bruti & Perego 2008). On the one hand, subtitlers can use condensation and reduction strategies on the linguistic level as well, however, this can lead to partially lost information. If, on the other hand, condensations and reductions were mainly based on the other modes of the audiovisual text, perhaps not much information would be lost in translation. More studies addressing these issues are needed to understand how multimodality can be efficiently used as an asset by subtitlers.

4.6 Guidelines for Subtitlers

Subtitlers are often instructed to take the pictures and sounds of audiovisual texts into consideration when translating audiovisual texts. Lång (2013) has studied subtitling guidelines of some of the biggest subtitle suppliers in Finland. The guidelines mostly concern form and style of subtitles whereas instructions about condensing the message or selecting the most relevant information to be translated is unmentioned. The new quality standards for Finnish subtitles offer similar guidelines (SKTL 2020a). These national recommendations, however, include some instructions that can be regarded as guiding subtitlers to utilize audiovisual texts' multimodal nature. The guidelines state that the message that is being subtitled should be interpreted through the entire audiovisual text in which the message is defined as part of interplay between picture, language and sounds. This statement echoes the generic instruction to take the pictures and sounds into consideration while subtitling. The quality standards do, however, include two instances

¹³ Are there elements that you often/always leave out of the subtitles? What?

in which more concrete instructions are given. In these cases, the subtitler is guided to leave out unnecessary repetition and curse words.

As Jorge Díaz Cintas (2013: 277) has stated, various condensation and reduction strategies are the most used subtitling strategies applied by subtitlers. It is then surprising how little guidance in the matter is offered to subtitlers. On one hand, almost half of the respondents (n=18) reported that they have not received any instructions on what parts of the dialogue can be condensed or omitted and how.¹⁴ In addition, about 20% (n=8) did not answer this question at all¹⁵. On the other hand, a few respondents (n=4) mentioned that condensing and sometimes omitting parts of the dialogue is something that they are trained for. Indeed, as discussed in section 4.1, most of the respondents have a university degree in translation studies. Contents and extent of subtitling theory and practice in the respondents' studies remains unclear, though. In addition, some of the respondents have university degrees in other fields, such as specific languages. Some language studies can also include translation modules even though they translation is not mentioned in the name of the degree. It is possible that some of the respondents have completed translation courses or learned subtitling skills in their workplace. For example, Lång (2013: 58) notes that the in-house subtitlers in the Finnish public broadcasting company, Yle, often teach newcomers subtitling conventions. Freelancers, then, can learn these conventions through feedback and quality control.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to gain knowledge of professional Finnish subtitlers' subtitling processes and opinions as well as experiences regarding the use of audio and pictorial modes of audiovisual texts in such processes. The questionnaire answers were examined and discussed in relation to the concept of multimodality. Audiovisual texts are combinations of moving pictures, writings, sound effects, speech and music and all of these modes are needed by the subtitler to convey the original language and culture of the audiovisual text to the target language and culture.

The respondents recognize the importance of the multiple modes in the translation process; they are needed, for instance, for timing and making sense of the dialogue. However, all modes are not always made available for subtitlers. The respondents presented three main reasons for this: commissioners' lack of trust, knowledge and resources. In addition, subtitlers are rarely given detailed guidelines on how to utilize the multiple modes of audiovisual texts. If guidelines are presented, they are superficial at best. It is possible that subtitlers are assumed to have learned these matters during their training; however, the results of this article indicate otherwise. More information about how multimodality can be used by subtitlers is clearly needed.

Multimodality is an asset to subtitlers; they can use the different modes, for instance, to make condensations and reductions in the subtitling process to meet the time and space

¹⁴ Lack of education does not fully explain this; 8 respondent of this question had master's degree in Translation Studies.

¹⁵ Have you been instructed to leave something out when subtitling? What?

restrictions of subtitles. Condensation and reduction strategies are not used merely on the linguistic level or in a vacuum detached from the other modes of audiovisual texts. Marie-Noëlle Guillot (2019: 36) has noted that the relationship between the modes “impact on what can or should be translated in subtitles and how.” Similar thoughts have been put forward by Pérez-González (2014; 2019), who has discussed audiovisual translation and multimodality extensively. It is clearly important to shift the focus of research on audiovisual translation to the vast possibilities the multiple modes offer to subtitlers. For example, case studies of subtitling practices could give relevant information of the subject. Viable methods include post- and pre-interviews, translation diaries, think-aloud-protocol and eye-tracking, for example. The results of such studies could be used, for example, in the training of future subtitlers as well as writing more comprehensive guides for subtitlers. This kind of information could also prove to be useful for all actors in the production chain of audiovisual translation as the needs of subtitlers are rarely well known by other actors in these networks.

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Appendix: Questionnaire for Finnish professional subtitlers¹⁶

1. Education

- Bachelor's Degree in Translation Studies
- Master's Degree in Translation Studies
- Doctorate in Translation Studies
- Bachelor's Degree in Languages
- Master's Degree in Languages
- Doctorate in Languages
- Bachelor's Degree in Other Field
- Master's Degree in Other Field
- Doctorate in Other Field
- Other training connected to translation and/or languages
- No formal training in translation field

2. Work

- Freelancer
- In-house translator
- Full-time translator
- Part-time translator

3. How many years have you subtitled?

[open]

4. What are your working languages?

[open]

5. What software do you use?

[open]

6. Timing of Subtitles

- I time the subtitles myself as I am subtitling.
- I time myself before I subtitle.
- I time myself after I have subtitled.
- I use ready-timed templates.
- I translate word/excel documents.
- Other, what? [open]

7. Please describe your subtitling process shortly.

[open]

¹⁶ The questionnaire was translated from Finnish to English by the author.

8. Answer the following statements:

[Agree/Disagree/Not Relevant]

1. A subtitler must take the picture of an audiovisual text into account when subtitling.
2. A subtitler must take the audio of an audiovisual text into account when subtitling.
3. All texts on screen must be subtitled.

9. Do you wish to comment your answers or the statements?

[open]

10. How important are the following for the whole understanding of the program?

Original program:

Speech [open %]

Image [open %]

Writing [open %]

Sound effects [open %]

Subtitled program:

Speech [open %]

Image [open %]

Writing [open %]

Sound effects [open %]

11. Are there elements that you often/always leave out of the subtitles? What?

[open]

12. How do you justify these omissions?

[open]

13. Do you take commissions if you do not have access to video-file? Why/Why not?

[open]

14. Answer the following statements.

[Agree/Disagree/Not relevant]

1. I utilize the moving picture in my subtitling process.
2. I sometimes subtitle without a video-file.
3. I utilize the sounds of the program in my subtitling process.
4. It is important that I have access to the video-file while I subtitle.
5. I use pictures and sounds to leave something untranslated.
6. It is difficult to meet the time and space restrictions while subtitling.

15. Have you been asked to subtitle a program without access to video-file?

- Never
- Maybe once
- Couple of times
- Many times
- All the time

16. Do you know of cases in which someone has been asked to subtitle a program without access to video-file?

- No
- Yes, I have heard of someone.
- Yes, I know people who have been asked to do so.

17. If you or someone you know subtitles without a video-file, do you know the reason why? What is it?

[open]

18. Have you been instructed to leave something out when subtitling? What?

[open]

19. Do you have other comments regarding audiovisual translation or this questionnaire?

[open]