Viewers, readers, users and enjoyers

Audience perspectives on TV and film subtitles

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Subtitles, the translated text at the bottom of the screens of foreign films, TV programmes, and other videos, are one of the most widely consumed text types in Finland. Even those who are not avid readers of books often read subtitles, which means that subtitles have a notable impact on Finnish people's literacy. Additionally, subtitles as a text type are particularly intriguing because they are typically accompanied by the original sound of the programme, that is, foreign speech. Therefore, the viewer sees and hears the text in two languages at the same time and can even learn some of the foreign language as if by accident. Similarly, viewers can expand their knowledge of their own languages. Great translations provide insight into language by showing the viewer how an interesting foreign word, be it a difficult term or a slang word, can be translated and expressed in their own language. Thus, subtitles influence the people who receive them in many ways, which is why the quality of the subtitles available to people matters.

Subtitle quality and functionality is no simple matter. Not all translation issues have an easy and universal solution: How is it possible, for example, to convey dialects in another language? Or how can spoken language in general be written in a way that feels authentic to the characters of the TV programme but is not too hard to read? How can the humour in puns be translated, especially when the pun is partly visual and further restricts the translator's choices? For example, an English-speaking TV programme could show a jar of jam flying into a radar antenna accompanied by someone saying, "jam the radar". In Finnish the words used for jamming a radar are not similar to the word *hillo*, meaning jam, so the humour must be found elsewhere.

How about cultural references embedded into programmes? How can they be made transparent in a way that allows a person from another culture to understand the terms and phenomena associated with the source culture? How can one, for example, translate culturally specific terms like *muurinpohjalettu* (a type of Finnish crepe fried on a specific pan) or *savusauna* (a type of sauna that fills with smoke when in use)? Or how should the concept of a *nimipäivä* ("name day") be translated for a Japanese or Brazilian viewer? In addition to all this, the translator must consider how the subtitle will fit into just two rows at the bottom of the screen, and how it can be timed to work with the programme's rhythm. Translating audio-

visual material into subtitles is a balancing act. It is like a multidimensional jigsaw puzzle with ill-fitting pieces that the translator must nonetheless fit together. The result must be a seamless text that makes sense to the viewer, even if some aspects have to be compromised in the process.

Speaking of puzzles, the viewer must also be quite a puzzle-master. Subtitles are not read as an independent text, but as part of a programme. Thus, the viewer not only reads subtitles but also watches and listens to the programme, navigating between these different messages and using them to understand the content. The viewer must, among other things, decide between how much they will focus on listening to the foreign speech and how much on reading the subtitles. The viewer might not be aware of all this decision-making, but watching a subtitled programme is a complex process. This is why it is necessary to research how viewers watch subtitled programmes as well as how they read subtitles. We must understand what viewers do when they watch a subtitled programme, what kinds of opinions they have about subtitles, and how their needs regarding subtitles could be met in the best way possible.

There has already been a great deal of research into the reception and reading of subtitles. Admittedly, the results of these studies are not unambiguous. After all, viewers are all individuals who watch programmes in their own ways and in different situations, cultures, and periods. This is why we will never have a definitive answer to what subtitles should be like. Rather, the studies provide guidance on what to look out for and what elements might prove problematic.

So, what can research tell us about the reception of subtitles? Among other things, research has shown that translating humour is particularly challenging, and that it may be harder to make an audience laugh with a translated joke than with the original. Similarly, understanding terms and references associated with the source culture in a translated programme can be surprisingly difficult for viewers, even when the source culture is relatively familiar. Fortunately, the human imagination is quick at interpreting things. It allows viewers to interpret the programme through their own experiences, even if they do not exactly understand the specific cultural context. The meaning of references may be altered slightly, but this does not necessarily disrupt the experience or enjoyment of watching a programme. It is good to leave room for the viewer to realise things on their own, as over-

explaining kills even the funniest of jokes and wittiest of references.

Occasionally, research on reception shakes up even the most persistent ideas on the field. One example of such a case is the translation of swear words. The traditional view is that swear words are more impactful in written form than when they are heard, which is why they should be watered down in translation and subtitling. However, some studies have noted that this is not the case. In fact, watering down swear words can seem clumsy and unnecessary to viewers. In my own research, I have found that swear words are a specifically noticeable element in a film's language. Viewers pay a lot of attention to swear words, which is why their translations matter. Subtitles may also be a way for viewers to learn what foreign vulgar expressions mean in their own language, in which case the use of watered-down equivalents in translating swear words can lead to some unfortunate misunderstandings.

However, not all reception studies focus solely on understanding the meaning of texts. One of the greatest difficulties in following subtitles is being able to read text at the programme's pace, which is why a multitude of eye-tracking studies have been conducted to analyse where viewers' attention is focused on while watching a programme. These studies also examine how different elements of subtitles affect viewers' eye movement on the screen. For example, some studies have investigated how word choices, text arrangement within subtitle lines, and translation errors affect subtitles' readability. A core finding in these studies has been that if there are subtitles on the screen, viewers will most likely pay attention to them. Subtitles matter even in cases where viewers understand a programme's source language and listen to its speech. Subtitles might even play a role when viewers think that they only focus on speech while watching a programme. I found this in my study, where participants were able to quote subtitles word for word, even though they had said they never read subtitles. Reading subtitles is therefore almost unavoidable but often very subconscious.

Subconscious reading is only possible if it can happen smoothly and simultaneously with the programme. The effortlessness of reading is a very important feature of subtitles. While a subtitle that is difficult to read may still facilitate understanding the programme, reading it can distract attention from the programme, thereby diminishing the overall enjoyment of the viewing experience. Since the aim of watching subtitled programmes is to enjoy them, it is important to explore what kinds of

subtitles enhance that enjoyment rather than merely settling for conveying the content.

A key question concerning subtitles' enjoyability is how much time viewers need to read them. Reading speed determines how much text can be shown on screen at once, so that the viewer can not only read text, but also follow everything else happening on the screen. Today, many streaming services offer subtitles that are packed full and go by quickly, which unfortunately makes it harder for some viewers to follow them. In cases like these, using a more traditional Finnish subtitling method would be justified: speech is summarised into compact lines that are shown on the screen for at least a few seconds. This allows viewers time to read them properly. Deviation from this norm could indicate a desire to update subtitling conventions not based on research, but rather an attempt to make subtitle-creation easier and cheaper than before. Issues like these highlight a need to consider how research can be used to improve subtitling conventions and how viewers can be incentivised to react to problems regarding subtitles, so that the subtitle providers are motivated to pay attention to quality and the wishes of the audience.

Today, one important factor that affects subtitles' enjoyability is the use of machine translations in subtitling. Just like any other translation field, subtitling takes more and more advantage of automation. For example, many YouTube videos use automatically generated subtitles, and machine translation is often used as a basis for professional subtitles as well. Alongside the discussion on technological development, there is a need for greater focus on the audience of translations. Do machine-created subtitles serve viewers adequately, and how do they affect viewing experiences compared to subtitles that have been produced by a human from start to finish?

Although technology keeps on advancing, automatically generated subtitles are often not satisfactory from the viewers' perspective. Still, a few studies have shown that even weak automatic subtitles do convey the main content of the programme and allow the viewer to follow it. Studies have also shown, however, that following such subtitles is tiring and the whole viewing experience can suffer. When seeking enjoyment and meaningful experiences, the work of a skilled professional plays a crucial role. Machine translations edited by humans can be good, but they can also contain remnants of machine translation problems since the editing of the text is more complex than it may seem.

What can be considered a good-enough translation is also dependent on its end-users and the context that the text is used in. For example, an immigrant living in Finland who is not yet able to follow Finnish-language news may be genuinely grateful even for a machine translation that conveys the main points of the news; in contrast, a film enthusiast accustomed to high-quality subtitles and seeking an immersive experience has every reason to find such translations inadequate.

Subtitles can have many different functions, and the viewer's relationship with them can be considered from many different angles. In the title of this lecture, I gave four different names to the audience of a subtitled programme, as it illustrates this diversity. No viewer represents a single category but instead, they usually fit into all these four roles – and many more – all at once. First and foremost, each audience member is a *viewer* who has decided to watch a certain programme. To do so, they might require subtitles to assist them. However, subtitles do not take the centre stage. Because of this, subtitles need to be easy to read and comprehend while also being unobtrusive. The viewer is also a *reader* to whom the content and form of text matters, because many viewers depend on subtitles to find out what a programme is saying. Thus, subtitles cannot be only partially correct nor a pruned version of a programme's content. Even though they often aim to present a programme's speech in a concise manner, subtitles should use lively language, and they should align with the programme's style. The viewer is also an intentional *user* of subtitles. This means that they might decide to only partially read the subtitles and get some of a programme's content by listening to speech, or be absorbed in the visual aspect of the programme. So, subtitles should allow viewers to engage with a programme in a multitude of ways. Here again it helps if the text is effortless and formatted according to the viewers' expectations. And finally, the viewer is also an *enjoyer* whose main reason for watching any TV programme, film, or other audiovisual media is usually to immerse themself in the world of the programme and enjoy the viewing experience. The best way to ensure this is to create subtitles that are natural and unnoticeable, and to use creative, lively language that aids the audience's enjoyment of both the programme and its translation. Quite a challenge for both the translator and the viewer.

It is common to hear jokes made at the expense of poor translations, but studies have shown that people actually do trust subtitles quite a lot when watching programmes. Additionally, audiences tend to not focus on translation mistakes in a

normal viewing situation. Subtitles can be a natural part of viewing experiences and people's lives, especially in countries like Finland where they are used often. Even though an increasing portion of translation tasks could be partially or entirely handled by machines, human input is still needed to understand and creatively respond to the needs and preferences of the audience. Hence, it is important to provide education for those who desire to become translation experts.

A well-versed translator can formulate the best possible subtitles for the audience, evaluate and, where necessary, critique translations, and contribute to the debate on the appropriate role of machine translation and AI in the field of subtitling. And of course, the world also needs researchers who work in the field of translation and audiovisual translation to examine the role of subtitles in an ever-changing media landscape, and whose work provides us with information about watching subtitled programmes. We also need collaboration between research in the field and the professional community, so that the research is grounded in real-world practices and so that useful research findings reach professionals and influence the subtitles on screen. Viewers benefit greatly when various types of skills, knowledge, tools, and people are involved in the field of subtitling.

About the author

Tiina Tuominen works as a Professor of English at the University of Turku. Her research interests include audiovisual translation with a particular focus on subtitling, the reception of translations, user-centered translation, and audiovisual translators' communities.

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