

The Subtitling Process

Part One

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The client, normally a production or a distribution company, or a television station, contacts the subtitling company with a commission. General details concerning the title of the film, the name of the client, the project manager and translator assigned, etc. are entered.

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Somebody in the company watches the film to make sure that the copy is not damaged, to verify that the dialogue list is complete and accurate – if the film comes with one – and to check if there is any other information (songs, inserts, and the like) that needs to be translated too. In the event that the dialogue list is missing, the dialogue exchanges need to be transcribed *ab initio* from the soundtrack.

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A working copy is made of the original film. To avoid illegal dubbing of material, special anti-pirate inserts might be included in the new copy. Some companies may only give translators the scenes that include dialogue, leaving the rest in black. Others add inserts throughout the film reminding the viewer who the legal owner of the copyright is.

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Spotting, also known as **timing** or **cueing** and more recently **originating**, is the next task. It consists of determining the precise moments when a subtitle should appear on screen – known as the **in-time** – and when it should leave the screen – known as the **out-time** – according to a set of space and time limitations. To guarantee optimal quality it is desirable that, if the task is performed by technicians, they have a working knowledge of the language spoken in the film. In an ideal situation, the spotting should be done by experienced translators themselves. In certain cases, the film may come with a very detailed combined continuity and subtitle/spotting list, containing all the dialogue already segmented into master titles for the translator to follow.

SAY YES TO THE DRESS

Simple Dialogue List – Sample

| TIME CODE | CHARACTER NAME | DIALOGUE |
|-------------|----------------|--|
| 00:00:00:01 | | |
| 00:00:01:01 | WOMAN | ... supposed to close any sale. I don't think I'm really doing anything wrong, to be honest. |
| 00:00:05:07 | CLAUDIA | Okay, we shall be revealing the dress for the very first time, the new dress. |
| 00:00:09:28 | NARRATOR (VO) | One week after they've done battle in the fitting room, the Rossi family is back. |
| 00:00:14:07 | GIUSTINA | Today, I came in with my mom and my dad to see the finished product. |
| 00:00:18:00 | TITLE | GIUSTINA ROSSI BRIDE |
| 00:00:19:00 | WOMAN | Look at the color; they're like twins. |
| 00:00:20:25 | GIUSTINA | Oh, my God. |
| 00:00:20:25 | MOM | Wow! |
| 00:00:22:04 | GIUSTINA | I didn't expect to get the call so fast. I really thought it was going to take the whole month. I even thought, maybe, two months. Ma, look! |
| 00:00:29:10 | SISTER | Oh, my God! Mom! |
| 00:00:30:20 | GIUSTINA | Mom, that's my dress! |
| 00:00:31:20 | WOMAN | Wait, look at the color. |
| 00:00:33:02 | MOM | Beautiful. Perfect. |
| 00:00:34:10 | GIUSTINA | My flower! |
| 00:00:35:11 | MOM | Perfect. |
| 00:00:36:12 | DAD | They found your gown. They found the girl who was crying, trying to get into it. They sent her home. |
| 00:00:44:24 | MOM | Oh, beautiful. |
| 00:00:46:21 | WOMAN | Is it not-- I mean, it's night and day! |
| 00:00:48:26 | GIUSTINA | He's crying. |
| 00:00:49:26 | DAD | This is how I felt the day you took the-- first time you tried it on. That's the dress. |
| 00:00:53:20 | MOM | Beautiful. |

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A copy of the film and the dialogue list are then forwarded to the translator, although on many occasions only one of the two is actually sent. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon in the profession to have to work from paper without access to the images, or from the soundtrack without a copy of the written dialogue.

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The reasons are varied. Sometimes, it is for fear that illegal copies will be made. On other occasions it is sheer lack of time, and whilst the film is still being finished, the distribution company wants the translation to be underway so that the movie can be shown at a film festival, for instance. It may also be that the subtitler works from a different city or simply cannot go to the studio to watch the programme. In all these cases, a thorough revision is in order at the end to make sure that the soundtrack dialogue coincides with the exchanges provided on paper, and that the subtitles do not enter into conflict with the image. Until recently, audiovisual programmes were always sent on a VHS cassette but these days they tend to be digitized and sent to the translators on CD or DVD. Translators can also download the material to be subtitled via Internet (FTP) from the company's server.

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Watching the film or programme in its entirety before proceeding to translate is highly advisable, although not always very realistic when having to work to really tight deadlines. If time allows for it, and the translator works from a written dialogue list, it may be a good idea to take notes of the points and issues that could prove problematic at a later stage. Torregrosa (1996) suggests three areas that the translator ought to take into account during the first viewing of the programme, to which we add a further two:

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1 – Words and phrases that lend themselves to a polysemous reading in the original. The French *encore du rouge* can be translated as ‘a bit more of red colour’ or ‘a bit more red wine’ depending on the image. ‘Funny’ in English can have a myriad of meanings, even opposed ones, depending on the context and the intonation.

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2- The gender and number of some nouns, pronouns and adjectives that are not marked in English. 'You are great' can have many different translations into other languages, depending on whether the addressee is male or female, whether we are talking to one or several people, or whether we are being polite or informal.

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3- The degree of familiarity shown among the characters, to decide whether a formal or informal form of address is required, and their identity when being referred to by pronoun. The English 'you' can refer to several people in a language like Spanish: tú (singular, informal), Usted (singular, formal), Ustedes (plural, formal), vosotros (plural, informal, masculine) and vosotras (plural, informal, feminine).

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- 4- Deictic units as ‘this/these’, ‘that/those’, ‘here/there’, etc. may have referents that appear on screen and do not need to be translated. Alternatively, obscure or long terms that are difficult to translate may refer to objects that appear on screen and can be rendered by means of a deictic.
5. Exclamations with no fixed meaning that can only be appreciated in a given context, such as ‘oh, my’, ‘Christ’, ‘blimey’, and the like.

THANK
YOU

