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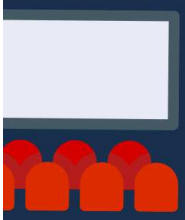


Revisiting subtitling for enhanced accessibility

Audiovisual products are inherently multimodal, comprising a complex interplay of elements beyond just spoken language. Current subtitling practices operate under several flawed assumptions, limiting full accessibility and engagement for viewers.
This report presents preliminary research findings on the impact of a new approach to subtitling.

Presented at *Languages and the Media 2024*, Budapest
Content and design: Sara Ramos Pinto, University of Leeds, UK

Challenging Traditional Assumptions

Assumption 1

Translating one mode is sufficient to make the film accessible.
This assumption overlooks the complexity of audiovisual content and its multimodal nature.

Assumption 2

Most visual and auditory elements are universal.
In reality, the interpretation of visual and auditory cues requires culturally specific knowledge.

Assumption 3

Visual and auditory elements establish similar intermodal relations with any language.
Different languages create different meanings relationships with visual and auditory components.

Assumption 4

Subtitles can be invisible.
In fact, subtitles significantly impact viewing patterns and are an active part of the viewing experience, not a transparent layer.

How accessible and engaging are subtitled audiovisual products?

Research Evidence and Industry Trends

Subtitles significantly impact viewing patterns, changing how viewers interact with and perceive the content.

Viewers face challenges identifying and interpreting certain visual and auditory elements, particularly those with cultural significance.

Creative titles result in higher enjoyment and engagement, suggesting that innovative approaches to subtitling can enhance the viewing experience.

The international subtitling market is growing, indicating greater diversity of viewers and potential cultural gaps that need to be addressed.

Enhanced Subtitling: A New Approach

Accessibility 1

Create necessary conditions for identification and interpretation of visual and auditory elements

- Information is added on screen when necessary
- Use of formatting (italics, different font sizes) to convey intonation differences
- Subtitles follow the rhythm in which they are spoken

Placement 2

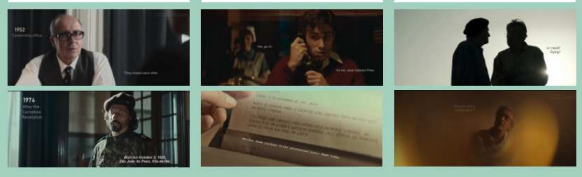
Maintain existing vectors of attention

- Placing subtitles close to the focus area
- Aligning with existing visual vectors
- Ensuring subtitles don't cover critical visual information

Form 3

Integration into the film's visual composition to avoid introducing a different aesthetic into the film

- Using colours that already exist in the scene
- Applying effects (e.g., fading) to blend with visuals



Reception Study: Preliminary Results

An exploratory reception study involving 66 English students at the University of Leeds. Participants watched the film "Clear Shadows" (directed by Fernando Vendrell, subtitled by Sara Ramos Pinto) in a cinema room under two conditions: Professional vs. Enhanced Subtitling. Participants answered an individual post-screening questionnaire with a combination of multiple-choice and open questions focused on collecting data on their interpretation of the film and opinions regarding the subtitling.

I have enjoyed the film

Professional subtitling:	26%
Enhanced subtitling:	65%

I feel I understood the film

Professional subtitling:	42%
Enhanced subtitling:	81%

I would likely Watch Another Portuguese Film

Professional subtitling:	42%
Enhanced subtitling:	92%

I found the subtitles easy to read

Professional subtitling:	93%
Enhanced subtitling:	95%

Character identification: Censorship officer?

Professional:		Enhanced:	
Correct answer	23%	Correct answer	78%
Incorrect answer	68%	Incorrect answer	22%
Too confused to answer	9%	Too confused to answer	0%

Conclusion

The initial data from this study provides compelling evidence that "enhanced subtitling" dramatically improves audience enjoyment, comprehension, and engagement with foreign-language films. By addressing the challenges in identifying and interpreting non-verbal or subtle visual cues, enhanced subtitling creates a more accessible and engaging viewing experience for audiences, potentially opening new markets for international cinema.