

Code of Good Subtitling Practice

"I can't define it, but I know it when I see it."
Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart

Subtitle Spotting and Translation

- 1) Subtitlers must always work with a (video, DVD, etc.) copy of the production and if possible, should have a copy of the dialogue list and a glossary of unusual words, names and special references.
- 2) It is the subtitler's job to spot the production and translate and write the subtitles in the (foreign) language required.
- 3) Translation quality must be high with due consideration of all idiomatic and cultural nuances.
- 4) Straightforward semantic units must be used.
- 5) Where compression of dialogue is necessary, the results must be coherent.
- 6) Subtitle text must be distributed from line to line and page to page in sense blocks and/or grammatical units.
- 7) As far as possible, each subtitle should be semantically self-contained.
- 8) The language register must be appropriate and correspond with the spoken word.
- 9) The language should be (grammatically) "correct" since subtitles serve as a model for literacy.
- 10) All important written information in the images (signs, notices, etc.) should be translated and incorporated wherever possible.
- 11) Given the fact that many TV viewers are hearing-impaired, "superfluous" information, such as names, interjections from the off, etc., should also be subtitled.
- 12) Songs must be subtitled where relevant.

- 13) Obvious repetition of names and common comprehensible phrases need not always be subtitled.
- 14) The in- and out-times of subtitles must follow the speech rhythm of the film dialogue, taking cuts and sound bridges into consideration.
- 15) Language distribution within and over subtitles must consider cuts and sound bridges; the subtitles must underline surprise or suspense and in no way undermine it.
- 16) The duration of all subtitles within a production must adhere to a regular viewer reading rhythm.
- 17) Spotting must reflect the rhythm of the film.
- 18) No subtitle should appear for less than one second or, with the exception of songs, stay on the screen for longer than seven seconds.
- 19) The number of lines in any subtitle must be limited to two.
- 20) Wherever two lines of unequal length are used, the upper line should preferably be shorter to keep as much of the image free as possible and in left-justified subtitles in order to reduce unnecessary eye movement.
- 21) There must be a close correlation between film dialogue and subtitle content; source language and target language should be synchronized as far as possible.
- 22) There must be a close correlation between film dialogue and the presence of subtitles.
- 23) Each production should be edited by a reviser/editor.
- 24) The (main) subtitler should be acknowledged at the end of the film (or if the credits are at the beginning, then close to the credit for the script writer).
- 25) The year of subtitle production and the copyright for the version should be displayed at the end of the film.

Technical Aspects

- 1) Subtitles should be highly legible with clear lettering and a font which is easy to read. The characters should have sharp contours and be stable on the screen.
- 2) The position of subtitles should be consistent, e.g.
 - a) centred for film applications;
 - b) left-justified or centred for TV and video applications. (With the globalization of broadcasting, subtitled television and video programmes are often shown not only on domestic channels. Many broadcasting stations worldwide still transmit their programmes with a logo in the lower left-hand corner, which inevitably covers the first couple of characters of all left-justified subtitles. Furthermore, at video festivals video productions are usually projected on large screens. It is easier to read subtitles on large screens if they are centred rather than left-justified.)
 - c) two-person dialogue in one subtitle should be left-justified or left-centred; individual speakers should be indicated by a dash at the beginning of each line.
- 3) In video applications, character clarity can be enhanced by a drop shadow or a semi-transparent or black box behind the subtitles.
- 4) In laser subtitling, sharp contours and removal of residual emulsion can be achieved by precise alignment of laser beam focus and accurate adjustment of power output.
- 5) In laser subtitling, the base line must be set accurately for the projection format of the film.
- 6) The number of characters per line must be compatible with the subtitling system and visible on any screen.
- 7) Due to the different viewer reading times and the different length of lines for TV/video and film subtitles, TV/video subtitles should be adapted for film application and vice versa.