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The Art & Craft of Subtitling by Dave Watterson

No one loves subtitles. They come into the category of necessary evils.

But that's the point: sometimes they **are** necessary.

The obvious use is when someone in your film speaks a different language, but you may need them if a subject's speech is distorted by a physical handicap, they use sign language, or where a noisy environment partially obscures the words. Mostly subtitles are used when films are sent between countries that do not share the same language.

Sometimes they are even used for deliberate comic effect as in this fake news broadcast ...

The Art

Do **not** translate every word of the original. I've seen it done on a very powerful movie with a poetic voice-over ... the result was three or four lines of subtitles obscuring much of the image and flashing by too fast for anyone to follow.

> The purpose of subtitles is to convey to the audience **only** things they may not understand otherwise. If someone drops a hammer on their toe there is no need to translate what they shout. The difference between the same words said between lovers and between enemies ("I understand you") does not need to be stressed by exclamation points. The drama and tone of voice will give the required emphasis.

It is possible to do a basic translation using automatic systems. Google's free translation service is pretty effective. The trick is to shape the input dialog as short, simple sentences. Try to avoid metaphors or poetic language which does not translate easily. You can even use the web to find effective translations of common expressions / slang / proverbs. These are often best expressed by their equivalent in the target language rather than a direct translation. Our expressions

- "To make a mountain out of a molehill" might be given in German as "Aus einer Mücke einen Elefanten machen." (Literally: To make an elephant out of a mosquito.)
- "Two heads are better than one" might become in French "Du choc des idées jaillit la lumière." (Literally: From discussion springs forth the light.)
- "Beggars can't be choosers" might become "A falta de pan, galletas" in Spanish. (Literally: In place of bread, cakes are good.)

It is rarely necessary subtitle proper names. If they are a little strange I might subtitle the name the first time it is used but afterwards the audience knows who David is or who Joanna is.

I t is a matter of personal taste, but I often hold the subtitle on screen after the words have finished and stop them either when the next sentence starts or the scene changes. That seems less distracting for the audience.

Try to keep to a single line of subtitles wherever possible, centered and near the foot of the screen. Audiences are used to seeing titles that way. Bite your fingers off before even considering scrolling subtitles. They require the total attention of the watchers who therefore miss the action being shown on screen completely.

If dialog is interrupted by an off-screen voice - perhaps from a radio or tv - consider writing the interruption in italics. (Sometimes when subtitling for the deaf, people use different colors to indicate who is speaking. Which is fine provided the person watching is not color-blind ! Normal subtitling assumes the audience can hear which voice is speaking so this is not necessary.)

Don't forget to subtitle any important signs that appear in shot "Beware of the dog", "Office of the President" and so on should get italic text or text in brackets. Opinions about subtitling songs vary. My view is that if the lyrics are relevant to the movie then translate them. If the filmic value is in the melody don't bother.

Don't forget to subtitle the movie's main title!

Scene subtitled using the titling tool that comes with Adobe Premiere. Coloured text and heavy black outline.

Scene subtitled using the default font in Adobe Encore DVD authoring program. White text with thin black outline.

The Craft

The simplest approach is to use the titling tool in your editing program.

- Set up the first title so that it lies centered, on the bottom line of the "safe" area indicated on screen.
- Choose a light-color (but not pure white which is hard on the eyes.)
- A font about 30 in size works well - aim to get about 30 to 35 characters in a line.
- Choose a font (or set the properties in the tool) to give the letters a black outline and/or a heavy shadow - that way the text is visible even against light backgrounds.
- Of possible check your first few titles by watching them on both a regular tv and a video projector. The impression and readability may be very different from how they appear on your computer screen or small monitor.

Save the first title. Call it up again, edit it to the words for the next subtitle, then use "Save As" to save it with a different name. That way all the titles stay in the same place on screen instead of bouncing up and down. As for names ... having tried various ways I usually give them numbers: 001, 002, 003 and so on. (*Note that computers like our editing systems sort numbers out in a very simple way so that "2" on its own would come before "001". Assign three digits numbers and you should be fine. Even the talkiest half-hour movies I know come in around 300 subtitles.*)

I will admit that my neat 001, 002 subtitle labels sometimes get the odd 003a and 0125b when I realise on trial screenings that I have missed something or that a long title needs to be broken up into two short ones!

Subtitling Programs

There are various free programs which claim to help you create subtitles, though all I have found actually prepare subtitle **files** for use with DVDs rather than burning subtitles onto the video for export to tape. Here are three chosen at random:

- Subtitle Workshop from www.urusoft.net is one such program where it is possible to export the titles are a video layer which can be superimposed onto the video - but it is a fiddly business.
- DivXL and Media Subtitler from www.divxland.org/subtitler.php works by producing files for DVDs only.
- Jubler is an open-source option (www.jubler.org) which again is only really appropriate for DVDs.

  If you want to go down this route my own favorite stand-alone program is
- DVD Flick (from www.dvdflick.net) which is primarily a DVD authoring program but does allow for subtitling.

Subtitling DVDs

As implied above creating subtitles for DVDs is a different ball game.

The DVD format was designed to include several different sets of subtitles - or come to that several different sets of soundtracks ... so if your film only uses voice-over consider tracking down someone to record it for you in the target language. (You may even find a sympathetic narrator through a web search - or try asking through the website of the national amateur film organization in the target country - see our list here.)

Normally users have to choose a subtitle language - as anyone who has watched a commercial movie DVD will have spotted in the "Languages/Set Up" menu. But you can set up subtitles as the default - or even the only option - in most DVD authoring systems, which avoids the risk of the recipients not realising they need to choose.)

There are a couple of systems used for DVD subtitles, but the simplest is to supply a plain text file. Each line of the file shows the subtitle number, start frame for each title, finish frame and then the words. *If French characters are not handled by your browser you may see some odd characters in this example.*

#	Start	End	French
001	00:00:34:06	00:00:35:07	Ecoute.
002	00:00:35:08	00:00:38:01	Nous utilisons trop d'énergie
003	00:00:38:02	00:00:41:03	combustibles fossiles: charbon, pétrole.

Many DVD Authoring programs allow you to type in subtitles manually or to import such a file. You need to choose the point on your timeline where you want each subtitle to begin and end. Most editing systems have an option which lets you view the timing in this degree of detail.

Just to add to the fun ... by the time you have transferred your movie to DVD the subtitles may appear in the wrong places. The reason is that your editing system will have counted frames from the start of your leader, whereas on DVD you usually chop-off or skip over the leader. That's why most DVD Authoring programs have an "Offset" option which lets you compensate.

The catches in DVD subtitling are that you often have little or no choice about the style of font to use ... and that those subtitles cannot easily be transferred to a tape copy without loss of picture quality.

Foreign characters

If you need special characters like the French e-acute you should be able to type them in to most programs by holding down the ALT key and tapping numbers on the Number Pad - e.g. ALT +0233 produces **é** (*Ironically I have to put this on the page here as a tiny picture in case your computer is not set up to handle foreign characters!*) You can find the keys needed

to produce many special characters in lots of places like Carnegie-Mellon's Modern Language Resource Center http://ml.hss.cmu.edu/mlrc/links/keyboardhelp.html

 I usually write in MS Word then export it as a text file. When I tell Word to save as a plain text file a box pops up with several options: "Windows Default / MS Dos / Other". I choose "Other" and from the list beside it choose "Unicode (UTF-8)" That retains accents. I cut and paste from the text file into Premiere's title tool without problems.

Check the Subtitles

You, your long-suffering partner or friends can check mechanical details like whether the titles start and stop at the right places, whether they are on screen long enough and so on. But wherever possible ask a native speaker of the language to check them. I sometimes even send copies to friends in the country concerned.

Sending the script with the subtitles alongside is very much second-best. We are dealing with film, where what you see and hear are a vital component. Mere words on a page cannot convey all the necessary information to help your friend know what is going on.

There really is no substitute for local knowledge. For example in one drama film someone referred to events in "the Big Brother house" ... which had to become "in the Big Brother loft" to suit the way the French version of the show names it. A German film I subtitled into English had a reference to "dancers wearing cylinders" ... eventually I learned that "cylinder" is an old German nickname for a top-hat.

Subtitling other people's work is great

It is always hard for a film maker to subtitle his or her own work. After all they have chosen every word carefully and the partial version of the script which translation provides can seem like sacrilege. On the other hand I find working on other people's films a great way to really understand what they were doing, why they cut here and not there ... in short it becomes a short exercise in film appreciation. It is hard work - like every part of making a good movie - but if you can help bring your own work, or someone else's to a wider audience ... it is well worth it.

- Dave Watterson