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In this issue:

Subtitling Decluttering Tips
Tips for Dictation Software
Global English (Globish)

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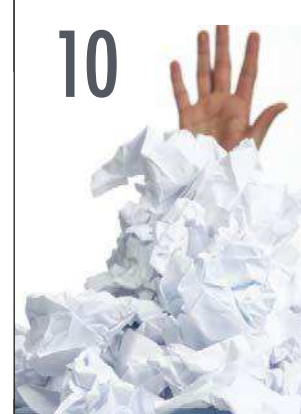
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Time to Declutter! 15 Decluttering Tips for Subtitling (And Other Media)

*By Bianca Bold and
Carolina Alfaro de Carvalho*

The greatest challenge for translators of subtitles has to do with the formal features that are inherent in this activity: space and time limitations, which entail intelligibility constraints. Most of the tips that work for translators of subtitles are also valid for those who work with space constraints that exist in marketing/advertising, social media, and localization in general. Even the editorial market may impose limitations, when editors ask us to keep the text the same size as the original so that the same layout can be used. In other contexts, sometimes the translation has to fit within a button, banner, or space designated for a heading, presentation slide, or other limited areas. So wordiness is out of the question.

Space Constraints

When subtitling, your main goal is to convey a clear, concise message that fits in a maximum of two lines, according to most standards, and is displayed long enough to be read. Line length depends mostly on the medium and font size and usually varies from 30 to 40 characters, including punctuation and spaces. The

task of segmenting the stream of oral discourse into one- or two-line blocks is often called “spotting,” and includes both external (where each subtitle starts and ends) and internal aspects (what goes in the first and second line).

Space limitations usually are not the main issue in subtitling. We will often not use all of the space available due to time constraints. On occasion, however, such as when two or more individuals engage in quick dialogue—during arguments, for instance—not all of the oral discourse might fit. Since a single subtitle can reproduce the speech a maximum of two interlocutors at a time (one per line), we need to judge what is more relevant and what to leave out.

Time Constraints

Another important limiting factor is related to the time during which the subtitles need to be displayed so that they can be read properly. This depends on the duration of the oral speech and usually varies from one to six seconds.

One major concern in subtitling is synchrony, which plays a crucial role

in defining the formal constraints discussed here. When a subtitle is in sync, viewers see the target text appear at the same time as they hear its oral counterpart. The subtitle should ideally remain on the screen until the end of the speech segment, or slightly longer. Bad synchrony is a distraction and may hinder the viewing experience.

There are different ways of calculating the optimal display time, which considers the average reading speed of the viewers. Most clients prefer to use a maximum of 15 characters for each second of subtitle duration. Because it takes longer to decode written information than oral speech, the translation has to be shorter and more “economical” than the original. If the character-per-second ratio is not taken into account, the function of the translation might fail. There is no point in rendering a perfect, detailed, fancy text if the public will not have enough time to read it.

Intelligibility Constraints

Viewers of subtitled material interact with this media differently than readers of written texts, who can

flip pages and take their time before they move on to the next section. When watching a subtitled movie, you usually have enough time to read each subtitle once. If the information cannot be easily understood at first sight, chances are viewers will not be able to retrieve that part of the message. Therefore, texts should be concise, uncomplicated, and free of unusual lexical items or wordy structures.

Let's Declutter!

To comply with the formal requirements and allow viewers to understand the message quickly, you can use strategies to convey the main idea with fewer characters and segments that are easy to read. Although nuances may be lost and the focus of the message may shift, you should change the textual structure, syntax, or style, as necessary, for the sake of global comprehension.

Below are some of these strategies, categorized as omission and simplification. In the pairs of sentences shown as examples, the second line illustrates a "decluttered" subtitle.

Omission

You should avoid omissions as a general rule. However, in extreme cases, such as concomitant, long, or fast-paced speeches, it is a survival strategy: if you do not omit some of the text, viewers might miss it all. Here are six situations in which omission is acceptable and, sometimes, even recommended, when the available space can be better used for more important information.

1. Vocatives: Omitting vocatives is usually welcome after a portion of the video has been shown, when viewers are likely to have learned who is who in the film.

Most of the tips that work for translators of subtitles are also valid for those who work with space constraints that exist in marketing/advertising, social media, and localization in general.

- **Andrew,** lock the door.
- Lock the door.

- It's great to see you, **sister.**
- It's great to see you.

2. Hesitation, stuttering, self-correction, etc.: Subtitles are not meant to replace the original material, but rather to convey the message effectively. Since viewers can observe the rhythm, intonation, and body language in the film, some orality markers tend to be omitted. Their insertion could generate confusing written segments and hinder direct understanding.

- The truth is **... hmmm ...** I need cash.
- The truth is I need cash.

- She **vi-vi-vi-visited** her niece.
- She visited her niece.

- Joe is in room **705 ... no, wait ...** 706.
- Joe is in room 706.

3. Onomatopoeic words: Words that sound like the noise they refer to may be understood by foreign-language viewers. In these cases, viewers do not miss much if onomatopoeia is omitted to make room for more relevant information. Besides, attempting to convey in writing a typically oral concept may become a hindrance or cause an unintended comic effect.

- **Tick tock ...** time's running out.
- Time's running out.

- I heard the explosion: **badaboom!**
- I heard the explosion ...

4. Redundancies and repetitions: Although repetitions and redundancies are often used as emphasis, the essence of a message should take precedence when the space available is too tight. As a general rule, you should avoid redundant structures, which are common in spoken language.

- **I told you! I told you** it wouldn't work!
- I told you it wouldn't work!

- Maria **saw what he did.** She's sure because she **saw it.**
- Maria **is sure because she saw what he did.**

- **The problem is ... is that** we're out of supplies.
- **The problem is** we're out of supplies.

5. Background speeches: With concomitant background and foreground speeches, you should prioritize the most relevant information, which is usually the most audible utterance. This is often the case for scenes in crowded places and when someone speaks while a television or radio is on. ➡

6. Succinct replies: Utterances such as “OK”/“Yes”/“No” are sometimes grasped from the context or even body language.

Simplification

You should simplify the text to make subtitles easy to read so that viewers understand them at first sight. The nine tricks below often create simpler and more concise texts, so feel free to use them on a regular basis, and not only when struggling with space or time constraints.

1. Direct word order (vs. indirect order, intercalations, etc.): The usual word order in English is subject-verb-object and normally results in more natural, logical, and concise structures. Indirect word order and intercalations (of adverbial phrases, for example) require the use of commas or other particles that lengthen the sentence.

- At the beginning of the year, Paul started his project.
- Paul started his project at the beginning of the year.
- Being with him, she realized, was all that mattered.
- She realized all that mattered was being with him.
- It was not what they had imagined, this complicated relationship.
- This complicated relationship was not what they had imagined.

2. Coordination (vs. subordination): Coordinated sentences require less cognitive effort because they are usually shorter and allow for a faster perception of the relation between the two (or more) parts of a message.

- Although I would like to go out, I'll stay home tonight.

When subtitling, your main goal is to convey a clear, concise message that fits in a maximum of two lines, according to most standards, and is displayed long enough to be read.

- I would like to go out, but I'll stay home tonight.
 - Since it was raining, we cancelled the hike.
 - It was raining, so we cancelled the hike.
 - He persisted in spite of being exhausted.
 - He was exhausted, yet he persisted.
- 3. Modulation:** You can often portray the same (or similar) situation from various perspectives. This strategy is called modulation and is widely used in translation in general. By slightly changing the point of view, you might make a message fit in the short space available.
- Our flight didn't take off on schedule.
 - Our flight was delayed.
 - Those cookies were made by us.
 - We made those cookies.
 - It's not such a bad idea to go on vacation.
 - Going on vacation is a good idea.
- 4. Transposition:** As with modulation, transposition is also commonly applied in other translation areas. With transposition, there is a change in word class or part of speech.
- Here's a picture of when I graduated.
 - Here's a picture of my graduation.
 - Ted got by with support from his father and mother.
 - Ted got by with his parents' support.
 - Every time she thought of him, it made her smile.
 - Thinking of him made her smile.
- 5. Simple verbs (vs. compound verbs or verb phrases):** There are differences in terms of verb aspect and style between simple verbs and compound verbs. However, sometimes you need to compromise this detail so that the space is used wisely to convey the overall idea, which is more important.
- Have you eaten yet?
 - Did you eat?
 - They were finally taking control of the situation.
 - They finally took control of the situation.
- 6. Direct questions and imperative forms (vs. indirect questions and requests):** Conventionally, indirect questions and requests represent politeness. Here again, some nuance may be lost in order to allow for a general, faster understanding. Space and

Useful Resources for Audiovisual Translators

time limits permitting, you can add “please” to imperatives.

- **I’d like to know if you signed** the contract.
- **Did you sign** the contract?
- **Would you mind closing** the window?
- **Close** the window [, please].

7. High-frequency words (vs. low-frequency words): Sometimes the length of a word is not the most relevant factor, but the frequency with which it appears in the target culture. Viewers may spend more time reading subtitles with uncommon lexical items; so the simpler the vocabulary, the better it usually is.

- My course **embodies** those topics.
- My course **includes** those topics.
- All I heard was their **yakety yak**.
- All I heard was their **noisy talk**.
- She **swathed** the baby in blankets.
- She **wrapped** the baby in blankets.

8. Using numerals (vs. spelling out numbers): Some clients have strict standards for representing numbers on the screen. While some ask that 1 to 10 always be spelled out, others leave it up to our judgment. Overall, numerals are welcome.

- They have **sixteen** grandkids.
- They have **16** grandkids.
- We celebrated our **seventh** anniversary.
- We celebrated our **7th** anniversary.

9. Abbreviations (vs. whole words) and acronyms (vs. spelled out compound words): Abbreviations are usually acceptable, except in two specific

Díaz Cintas, Jorge, and Aline Remael. *Audiovisual Translation: Subtitling* (Manchester, UK; Kinderhook, New York: St. Jerome, 2007).

Gambier, Yves, and Henrik Gottlieb. *(Multi)Media Translation: Concepts, Practices, and Research* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: John Benjamins, 2001).

Multimedia Translation

www.multimediatranslation.org

Carolina Alfaro de Carvalho’s MA thesis on subtitling (in Portuguese)

www.scribatraducoes.com.br/dissertacao

Subtitle Project

www.subtitle.agregat.net

Subtitling and Translation

www.transedit.se

Translation Client Zone

www.translationclientzone.com/tag/audiovisual-translation

Video Help

www.videohelp.com

cases: 1) when the word is functioning as a noun on its own, and 2) when the abbreviation is uncommon and hinders immediate understanding. Acronyms that are well known to the target audience are usually welcome.

- We saw **Doctor** Smith.
- We saw **Dr.** Smith.
- I live in **apartment** 304.
- I live in **apt.** 304.
- The country’s **Gross Domestic Product** increased 5%.
- The country’s **GDP** increased 5%.
- ~~We saw the **dr.**~~
- We saw the **doctor**.

- ~~I love your **apt.**~~
- I love your **apartment**.
- ~~Chris doesn’t speak your **lang.**~~
- Chris doesn’t speak your **language**.
- ~~We developed an **OS** application.~~
- We developed an **open-source** application.

Useful Resources for Audiovisual Translators

We will end here by listing a few helpful resources, both print and online, in the box above. We hope the strategies discussed here get you started on the road to clutter-free subtitles.

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