Subtitling is easy
European advice

;-)

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The Basics

"Subtitling Is Easy" is a simple & select crash course in subtitling, also called subbing or captioning:

You bring your rhythm, your curiosity, your knowledge of language of origin and destination language (*MOST important*), a host of idioms and sayings, and *patience*, to the original text of the film, translate the text in your head, and *then* you make subtitles – which integrate into the flow of the film, allowing for your artistic expression in the pacing of the text, but always letting the subs *support* the understanding of the foreign language and *not* take away the attention from what's happening in the story.

I hope *that* got your attention. There are many, many people out there, who have little or *zero* understanding of the BASIC principle of subtitling:

That subbing is *not* a trans-literal print of what is being said. Nobody can read at the pace, which people hold a dialogue, much less get the totality of the film, if the pace of subtitling is not adjusted to just *present the essence* of the film's text.

TV formats often differ from movie formats by aligning on the left side in left-to-right writing cultures, while movie subs are often centered. Think 'left' and 'right' brain, and 'left and right and a big, dark room excluding all other impressions'. You get the picture …

Simultaneously there are many different video formats in use on video, DVD, TV and movie screen (and we won't delve into *that* here), which offer and demand different things, when it comes to placement of subs, but in the end it all comes down to one thing:

Pace.

And *pace* means: Breath, rhythm, meaning. "Should you pace the subs fast, change the spots (the distance between the subs) to make the pace more aggressive?" "Should you leave the subs hanging just a little bit longer than normal to make for a slow, leisurely pace?"

Pacing is your art, your decision and freedom as a subber. OR your pay-master's ... but on your own time, as a freelancer, you *should* be entitled to your artistic freedom of interpreting the film, as pacing of the text *should* integrate INTO the film, and *that* can only be achieved if you make a conscious choice to actually *feel* the film – just as the film cutter build the film by adding frames to frames to form coherent scenes and the rhythm of change, which is the real soul of the film:

The original story is fine and all. The attempts to film the original story are also fine. But the *real* story happens on the cutting board, often as a one-person-process, as a composition that demands great sense of rhythm, poetry, drama, sensitivity. And *this* rhythm, this soul emanating out of the cutting board, is what you should follow. If you

are permitted the time to do it.

All rules can be broken, when absolutely necessary, so all advice here is to be taken with a grain of salt, naturally. But be a master first, *then* break the rules.

With routine and the right equipment 90 minutes/900 double lines of subbing can be done in two days or less. Fansubbing with only normal PC software takes longer. A lot longer.

Just remember: Have fun. If you can afford it.

Dos and Don'ts

The DOs and the DON'Ts are not and cannot be absolutes.

Just as this tiny manual represents a personal opinion, every subbing nations, especially nations new to subbing, still have their personal preferences as represented by their subbers, of which there are not many, all counted.

Even well educated '1st world' nations with a high degree of literacy and cinematic prowess still replace foreign actor's voices with national actors speaking the nation's language. This is called dubbing and is an honorable profession for actors along the lines of voice work in animated movies.

In my opinion, though, there is nothing to convey the original choice of actor's voice (and body and sensitivity to the script) like a empathic subtitling blending in to support the film's cut and the depth of the dialogue.

Pace

• 37 characters pr. line incl. syntactically correct leading dialogue indicator (mostly for TV).

• Max two lines of subs.

• A third line, eg. for an essential sign on-screen before characters begin to talk, can be on simultaneously with subs, but then longer total exposure OR no spots between sign text and the addition of subs = first sign text on-screen, then sign-text + subs, and no spot in-between.

• Song sometimes convey part of meaning, overlapping dialogue. IF absolutely essential and there IS NO other way, then make three lines (remember to compensate for reading time on-screen). BEST is to interspace italicized song lines with dialogue, but keep it as short as possible to maintain continuity.

• Exposure time: 12 characters pr. second = 5-6 seconds on-screen for double lines, 2-3 for single lines.

• Minimum 2-second lines, avoid 1-second lines.

• Only single-words for 1-second lines - most viewers can correctly understand or guess at single word exclamations.

• Spots (the distance between subs) can be 4, 6, 8 or more frames in a given dialogue, but in most cases THE SAME to maintain a calm rhythm.

• With irregular dialogue – characters not firing back and forth – KEEP spots, which are longer than 0,5 -0,75

seconds rather than connect them to the following: Follow the beat of the editing/dialogue if possible – it keeps attention on the film rather than on the subs.

• Keep suspense if possible: Don't put questioning text together with clarifying text, unless there is no break in verbal dialogue, eg. due to scene change. But don't sacrifice intelligibility for suspense; maintain proper reading time and good pace.

• Go for essence. Examples
        1. Skip 2nd person question, if question is answered in fast dialogue,
        2. Skip 2nd person confirmation, if speaker continues un-interrupted,
        3. Keep focus on the essence of every scene, which will aid the viewer later on in the film, and dump all the rest, which there is no time for - and IF there is time, keep it.

• You can turn questions into statements and vice versa, if it doesn't break or brake rhythm or the story's inner truth.

Scenes

• No subs overlapping scene changes, i.e. from garden to mountain, or from room to street, unless images are part of dialogue

• If subs absolutely need to overlap un-connected scene changes, leave on-screen long enough to give impression of necessity, and clear from screen ASAP.

    = Alternately minimize sub to one or two words and get them off before the cut.

• If subs 'blink' at cuts, they need to come off earlier OR later, but preferably earlier.

• If *cuts* 'blink', subs need to come off closer to the cut OR earlier.

• Basically, if any frame 'blink', when subs come on or off, you are either very tired or you need to look at the distance in time to cuts or at the length of spots between subs. 'Blinking' makes the viewer lose concentration. And it makes your eyes tired.

• Spotting evenly takes pro-software; manual spotting up against clips = find a frame "distance" to the cut that fits your own eyes, when your eyes are still fresh, 'cause after a while they seem to blink all the time, because you focus too much

Syntax

• Leading dialogue indicator can be "- ", but is culturally based (and TV mostly). Adhere to your own culture's

habits and choices, or go the hard way and try and change them to your own liking.

• Refer to your own culture's habits, if any, but sub-position is often at left margin on TV and centered at the movies.

• Keep recognizable words in speech in similar position to text ("En VOLVO er den bedste bil" should not be written as "The best car is a VOLVO".

– This even counts, when language of origin and the language of destination have different roots; eg. technical terms, names and places tend to migrate into every language, and by corresponding these recognizable sounds roughly to the writing on-screen, the mind will connect the two as one.

• When two speakers are on-screen simultaneously in two lines, put "." or "..." after second speaker in dialogue, even if his dialogue continues to the next sub.

= do NOT indicate that speaker's dialogue continues by using "-".

= Begin the following sub with capital letter.

• Max. 2 sentences with ".", "!" or "?" in each line in two-line dialogues. More makes for longer exposure time and

harder reading.

• Italics are used for voices far off screen, radio, person calling from a bridge etc. or during a song. But use only in double lines interspaced with dialogue, if it doesn't fuck up readability or rhythm.

• Song sometimes convey part of meaning, overlapping dialogue. IF absolutely essential and there IS NO other way, then make three lines (remember to compensate for reading time on-screen). BEST is to interspace italicized song lines with dialogue, but keep it as short as possible to maintain continuity.

• Subs covering up action: Move subs if necessary elsewhere on screen, but try not to; it halts continuity.

• Subs for signs and the like are placed under the sign, if sign is not in center focus and needs to be understood for the sake of continuity.

Culture

• Be very certain, when you translate the un-translatable cultural reference to a *similar* cultural reference in the destination language. You will be proud, when you get it right. And everybody will tell you, when you get it wrong.

• Translate measurements to the destination norm – eg. metrics to inches, when subbing for the US marked – unless there is no meaning inherent in the mentioning.

• *Look at the movie* – sometimes standard phrases would *seem* to need a change of polarity, in order to convey the meaning in the destination language. Example: "Are you alright?" Person nods: "Yes." This cannot be translated as "Were you hurt?" "No."

• Abbreviations - all *normal* kinds can be used. But use them correctly or they will slow down the flow of the film.

• Tribal speak, tech speak and other narrow idioms is translated IF cultural emphasis *equals* need of understanding - but it needs longer exposure time.

• Curses and swear words: Translate/transculturate only what is needed to describe a person and remember images often un-necessitate words.

Proofreading

• *Look up the spelling of names and idiomatic terms, even if you believe you know how to spell them!!!*

• Have a manual look at the spot periods to see if any are too short compared to the amount of text being presented.

• *I Don't Understand What Is Being Said!*

=When after 2 hours back and forth on the same exclamation in the film you *still* cannot understand, what is being said, and your pride is hurt, and you want to hit something, or someone … don't!

= Do not despair! Instead make 'rubber subs'. Under these circumstances you are permitted to guess at or anonymise the painfully incoherent mumblings and make up or ignore a subtitle to not break/brake rhythm or story. Even if it hurts to fake it, you won't go to hell for it! Promise!

= Most likely scenario: Two days later, as you are *at* or *past* your deadline, the incomprehensible mumblings suddenly become obvious as shadows in daylight.

= OR, *even more likely*: Your moron friend comes by for coffee and will upon exposure to your woes immediately and matter-of-factly identify the actor's incompetent mumblings, while staring at you in obvious wonder over by what means you in fact make your living …

= Don't hit your friend - say 'thanks!' and ask him over more often. Coffee is cheap medicine for this ailment, which every subber knows.

• Proofreading is even more necessary in subs than in printed text, as every little flaw will force the brain to stop and identify the flaw, thus halting continuity: The viewer is forcefully exited from the flow of the film by the brain's need to *know* that which it sees.

Are you with me now?

Essentials to good Subbing.

• Trust your sense of rhythm, your ears, your learning and your understanding of essence in the story that you are conveying. You are the maker here.

• Subbing is NOT a literal transcription of the spoken dialogue.

• Subs are readable essence, meant to AID non-speakers.

• Subs confer movie's rhythm.

• Subbing is an art form - as much dealing with essence as any other art form.

• Subbers are LOYAL advocates of the cinematic artwork with a right to their own interpretive art and viewer beneficial style.

• Subs carry the essence of the film and must therefore work just as well as the film itself at pulling the viewer into the alternate universe that is the controlled pace of events.

• So, good subbing is where nobody notices your work.

There is no
UNITED Subtitling industry.

A few industry examples below, but there are many, many more. For most instructive result Search for subtitling examples in your own language. There are many habits and false beliefs and really just un-caring attitudes in the subbing business. Especially English speaking countries seem to have a regard for other languages that are either superior, overly respectful and even fearful. Subbing therefore often never gets the respect it *could* deserve ...

BTW: Subbing bloopers are often great fun :-)

http://captionmax.com/services/style-gallery/http://captionmax.com/services/style-gallery/ for industry examples on how NOT to do it! HINT: They write every word being said, thus putting all focus on the subs and taking focus away from what's happening in the film. Subtitling is an assistance, and viewers only need to be assisted - even subbing for the deaf need have proper reading time on-screen for the video to be enjoyed!

http://www.cpcweb.com/webcasts/webcast_samples.htmfor an example of captioning, where the spots are too close together for this documentary style setting, allowing for a very aggressive pace. It could have been remedied by a decision to make longer spots, and then adjust the online-time and content based on that decision. But like most

subbing firms in the English speaking world these subbers believe subbing is about putting all spoken content into writing.

It is not!

2 examples of fan-subbing

Here lines are translated literally, or the mother tongue DVD subs are translated into English, without regard for line length. Note, that since this is a Cinematic film and not TV, the choice to center the subs is made:

Original w 4 lines:

zitra vstanu a oparim se cajem.avi

Amongst our personal luggage there'll
be a suitcase with the hydrogen bomb.

07:20

Corrected:

zitra vstanu a oparim se cajem.avi

In our personal luggage is a
suitcase with the hydrogen bomb.

07:20

Original w 3 lines:

Mr. Karel Bures,
pilot of the Universum Company,
Prague.

Corrected:

Mr. Karel Bures, pilot of
the Universum Company, Prague.