

Working In The Movies

Subtitling is an exciting part of the translation profession. Melanie Leyshon talks to Virginie Verdier of London translation company VSI about the glamour and the grind.

When people ask French translator Virginie Verdier what she does for a living, it must be tempting to say enigmatically: 'Oh me? I'm in the movies'. It's strictly true, but her starring role is behind the scenes. As translating goes, it doesn't get more entertaining or glamorous than subtitling films. If you're very lucky, you get to work on the new blockbuster films before they're in the cinema, and if you're just plain lucky, you get to work on the blockbuster movies that are going to video or DVD.

Virginie is quick to point out that this is as exciting as any translating job. 'You work hard. It's not all entertainment as you are doing the translating. You need all the skills of a good translator and a top-notch editor. You have to be precise and, of course, much more concise than in traditional translation work.'

The process starts when you get the original script and a tape. 'We would start with translating and adapting the film script. The next step is what we call 'timing', which means synchronising the subtitles to the dialogue and pictures.' This task requires discipline. You play the film, listen to the voice and the

subtitles are up on your screen ready to be timed. You insert your subtitle when you hear the corresponding dialogue and delete it when the dialogue finishes. The video tape carries a time code which runs in hours, minutes, seconds and frames. Think of it as a clock. The subtitling unit has an insert key to capture the time code where you want the subtitle to appear. When you press the delete key, it captures the time code where you want the subtitle to disappear. So each subtitle would 'have an 'in' point and an 'out' point which represent the exact time when the subtitle comes in and goes out. This process is then followed by a manual review, subtitle by subtitle, and time- codes are adjusted to improve synchronisation and respect shot changes. This process involves playing the film literally frame by frame as it is essential the subtitles respect the visual rhythm of the film.'

Different subtitlers use different techniques. 'I would go through the film and do the whole translation and then go right back from the beginning and start the timing process. But you could do it in different stages, translate let's say 20 minutes of the film, then time this section and translate the next 20 minutes, and so on. It's just a different method.'

For multi-lingual projects, the timing is done first to create what is called a 'spotting list', a subtitle template, which is in effect a list of English subtitles pre-timed and edited for translation purposes. This is then translated and the timing is adapted to the target language with the help of the translator for quality control.

‘Like any translation work, you can’t hurry subtitling,’ says Virginie. ‘If subtitles are translated and timed in a rush, the quality will be affected and it will show.’ Mistakes usually occur when the translator does not master the source language and misunderstands the original dialogue. ‘Our work also involves checking and reworking subtitles when the translation is not up to standard. However, the reason for redoing subtitles is not just because of poor quality translation. We may need to adapt subtitles to a new version of the film: the time code may be different. The film may have been edited or the subtitles may have been created for the cinema rather than video. If subtitles were done for cinema on 35mm, we would need to reformat the timing for video, as subtitles could be out of synch or too fast. If the translation is good, we would obviously respect the work of the original translator.’

On a more practical level, there are general subtitling rules to follow, says Virginie. ‘Subtitles should appear at the bottom of the screen and usually in the centre.’ She says that different countries use different standards and rules. In Scandinavian countries and Holland, for example, subtitles are traditionally left justified. Characters usually appear in white with a thin black border for easy reading against a white or light background. We can also use different colours for each speaker when subtitling for the hearing impaired. Subtitles should have a maximum of two lines and the maximum number of characters on each line should be between 32 and 39. Our company standard is 37 (different companies and countries have different standards).’

Translators often have a favourite genre, whether it’s war films, musicals, comedies (one of the most difficult because of the subtleties and nuances of comedy in different countries), drama or corporate programmes. Each requires a

certain tone and style. 'VSI employs American subtitlers, which is incredibly useful as many of the films we subtitle are American,' says Virginie. 'For an English person, it would not be so easy to understand the meaning behind typically American expressions, and vice-versa.'

Questions 1-5:

Complete the flow chart below.

Use NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS from the passage for each answer. Write your answers in boxes 1-5 on your answer sheet.

THE SUBTITLING PROCESS

Stage 1: Translate and adapt the script.

Stage 2: 1 -matching the subtitles to what said Involves recording time codes by using the 2 and keys.

Stage 3: 3 – in order to make the 4..... better.

Multi-lingual projects

Stage 1: Produce something known as a 5 and translate that.

Questions 6-10:

Do the following statements agree with the information given in Reading Passage 177?

In boxes 6-9 on your answer sheet write

TRUE **if the statement agrees with the information**

FALSE **if the statement contradicts the information**

NOT GIVEN **if there is no information on this**

6. For translators, all subtitling work on films is desirable.

7. Subtitling work involves a requirement that does not apply to other translation work.
8. Some subtitling techniques work better than others.
9. Few people are completely successful at subtitling comedies.
10. Every single movie has the same tone and style.

Questions 11-14:

Complete the sentences below with words from Reading Passage I.

Use NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS for each answer.

Write your answers in boxes 11—14 on your answer sheet.

11. Poor subtitling can be a result of the subtitler not being excellent at
.....

12. To create subtitles for a video version of a film, it may be necessary to
.....

13. Subtitles usually have a around them.

14. Speakers can be distinguished from each other for the benefit of
.....

ANSWER
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Timing2. insert, delete3. Manual review4. synchronization5. spotting list6. TRUE7. TRUE8. NOT GIVEN9. NOT GIVEN10. FALSE11. the source language12. reformat the timing13. thin black border14. the hearing impaired