

Lost in translation? The one-inch truth about Netflix's subtitle problem

Level: Elementary

1 Warmer

- a. Have you ever watched *Squid Game* (Korea), *Lupin* (France), *Elite* (Spain), *Dark* (Germany) or *Money Heist* (Spain)? If so, in which language?



2 Key words

- a. Write the words from the wordpools next to the definitions below. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context.

characters

culture

debate

ignore

scripts

series

1. a set of television programmes that are all about a particular subject, person, or group of people _____
2. the written words of films and television programmes _____
3. the people a TV series, a film, or a book is about _____
4. not think about something because it isn't important to you _____
5. the ideas, beliefs, and ways of behaving of a particular country _____
6. a discussion in which people have different opinions about something _____

accurate

closed captions

deaf

dubbing

subtitles

viewers

7. a translation at the bottom of the screen of what people are saying _____
8. the spoken words and sound descriptions of a TV programme or film at the bottom of the screen for people who do not hear well _____
9. replacing the voices of a film with ones in a different language _____
10. not able to hear anything, or not able to hear very well _____
11. people who watch television programmes _____
12. correct or true in every detail _____

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b. Use some of the key words above to complete these sentences.

1. Someone who does not hear well can watch TV with the _____ on.
2. We speak the same language, but their _____ is very different to ours.
3. He's _____ in one ear.
4. Tonight's programme is the last of the _____.
5. Children shouldn't _____ their parents when they speak to them.
6. The violence and bad language in the series shocked many of the _____.

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Viv Groskop

14 October, 2021

- 1 "There are so many amazing films and series with subtitles," said director Bong Joon-ho. Netflix's Korean series *Squid Game* shows that he is right. It is Netflix's number one show in 90 countries.
- 2 Before *Squid Game*, some of Netflix's biggest hits were "foreign language" series, including *Lupin* (France), *Elite* (Spain), *Dark* (Germany) and *Money Heist* (Spain).
- 3 But people ask what gets lost in translation – and whether Netflix puts enough money into creating good foreign-language scripts.
- 4 "If you don't understand Korean, you didn't watch the same show," says Youngmi Mayer. She explains that, in the subtitles, one of the lead female characters seems less intelligent than in Korean.
- 5 Others say the first game is not properly translated and the series ignores important cultural aspects. "How will people learn about our culture if the streamer is mistranslating the language?" wrote Sharon Kwon.
- 6 The debate around *Squid Game*'s subtitles shows the difference between subtitles, closed captions and dubbing. "Closed captions" were first written for deaf viewers and have audio descriptions. ("A door closes.") The dialogue on closed captions is usually the same as the dubbing script.
- 7 Subtitles use a different script. In these, the translation has to fit across the screen and match viewer's reading speed. Subtitles often give a more accurate translation than the dubbing script.
- 8 A dubbing script translation is less accurate because it must translate a phrase so that it takes the same time to say it in both languages. And the words should fit the actors' mouth movements.
- 9 Max Deryagin explains that subtitlers often leave out "filler words" (um, er, you know).
- 10 Deryagin writes Russian subtitles for English films and TV. But now, he says, "Netflix has so many programmes that there aren't enough translators to do the work."
- 11 Youmee Lee, a deaf Korean American, wants Netflix – and other streaming services – to check the translations more closely. "We, the deaf viewers, deserve the same information as hearing viewers so we all can share the experience."
- 12 With series like *Squid Game* so successful, why do people care so much about accurate translation? Youngmi Mayer says, "You could ask, do people care about *Star Wars*? Some people don't care about *Star Wars* at all. And other people say that it's a big part of their lives. If one word was mistranslated, they would be very angry."

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3 Understanding the article

a. Are the sentences true or false according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. Bong Joon-ho says that films with subtitles are not very good.
2. All of Netflix's biggest hits around the world are in English.
3. People are asking whether Netflix is spending enough money on good subtitles.
4. Dubbing usually gives viewers the best translation.
5. Dubbing is harder to get right because the words have to fit the actors' mouth movements.
6. Closed captions use the same words as subtitles.
7. Accurate translations of film and TV series are very important to everybody.
8. Viewers who cannot hear well would like to be able to enjoy films as much as everyone else.

4 Key language

a. How many film and TV genres can you think of? Write them in the box. Use a dictionary to help you.

e.g., *action, historical drama*

b. What genres are these?

James Bond films _____

Downton Abbey or *The Crown* _____

Harry Potter films _____

Think of other films or TV series for each of the genres in your box.

c. Say which you prefer and why.

I like to watch ... films because ...

I don't like to watch ... TV series because ...

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- What was the last British or American film you watched?
- Did you watch it with subtitles, or did you watch a dubbed version? Why?
- How has watching films, videos, or TV series helped you learn English?

6 In your own words

- Work with a partner who speaks your first language. Find a short one-to-two-minute English-language video on an everyday topic that has a good, clear script and a speaker or presenter (e.g., one about animals, gardening, cars, a sport, how to make a cup of tea, etc.).
- Watch the video and decide how you would translate (into your own language) what the speakers is saying.
- Play the video *without sound* to other students. Tell them what is happening on the video in real time.
- Finally talk about how easy or difficult this task was.