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

Level: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Discuss these questions.

What are the differences between subtitles, closed captions, and dubbing? Scan the article to check and improve your answers.

Which of these people would most likely watch a film or TV programme with subtitles, closed captions, or dubbing?

- Someone who likes to watch in the original version but doesn't understand that language well.

- Someone who does not hear as well as other people.

- Someone who doesn't like to read while watching.

2 Key words

a. Find words in the article that match the definitions below. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. a discussion in which people or groups state different opinions about a subject

   _____ (paragraph 1)

2. forms of something that are different from other forms or from the original (paragraph 1)

   _____

3. too willing to do what other people say _____ (paragraph 3)

4. an idea of something that exists (paragraph 4)_____

5. let something become known, such as information that was not known before

   _____ (paragraph 5)

6. a written copy of the exact words that someone said (paragraph 5)

   _____

7. written words of plays, films, television programmes, speeches, etc. (paragraph 5)

   _____

8. things that need a lot of skill to deal with or achieve (paragraph 9)

   _____

9. can be expressed clearly using few words (paragraph 9) _____

10. the main idea or most important point of something that someone has written or said

    _____ (paragraph 9)

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

1. The report _____ that the house had a worrying problem with damp and mould.

2. The eye-witnesses gave three different _____ of how the accident happened.

3. It's important to teach children to understand the _____ of sharing.

4. I must admit, I only really understood the _____ of what he said.

5. There are many exciting new _____ in this job.

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Viv Groskop

14 October, 2021

1 "When you accept subtitles, you can watch so many amazing films," said director Bong Joon-ho. The success of Netflix's Korean series *Squid Game* shows he is right. It is Netflix's number one show in 90 countries. But it has also started a debate about what gets lost in translation – and people are asking whether Netflix puts enough money into creating accurate versions of foreign-language scripts.

2 Even before *Squid Game*, some of Netflix's biggest hits were "foreign language" series, among them *Lupin* (France), *Elite* (Spain), *Dark* (Germany) and *Money Heist* (Spain).

3 The search question "Can I speak a language fluently just by watching TV?" gives 10.4 million Google results. However much we might wish this to be true, the debate around the subtitles to *Squid Game* suggests the answer is no. "If you don't understand Korean, you didn't watch the same show," says Youngmi Mayer. She explains that one of the lead female characters is represented in the subtitles as more subservient and less intelligent than in Korean.

4 Other complaints are: the first game is not properly translated, and the concept of "gganbu" (a link between two equals) is ignored. "How will people learn about our culture if the streamer is mistranslating the language?" wrote Sharon Kwon.

5 The debate around *Squid Game*'s subtitles has revealed the difference between subtitles, closed captions and dubbing. "Closed captions" were first written for deaf viewers and include audio description. ("A door slams.") The dialogue used on closed captions is usually a direct transcript of the dubbing script. Subtitles use a completely different script. In these, the translation has to fit across the screen and match viewer's reading speed. Subtitles are often a more accurate translation than the dubbing script.

6 Viewers who are deaf or hearing impaired, however, don't have the choice between the subtitle script and the dubbing script. And many fans are annoyed that Netflix seems to be putting more money into dubbing than in subtitles.

7 A dubbing script translation is less accurate because it must translate a phrase so that it takes exactly the same amount of time to say it out loud in both languages. And, the words should try to fit the actors' mouth movements.

8 Max Deryagin has been subtitling English to Russian for 11 years. But now, he says, there just aren't enough translators to do the work: "Netflix has so many programmes that they have changed our industry."

9 Deryagin explains how differences between different languages present challenges for translators. "English is compact, like Japanese and Chinese. Arabic and Spanish are not." These are huge differences if you are trying to fit a translation into a few words on screen at the viewer's reading speed. The Scandinavians are the most experienced at all this, he says. "In Scandinavia, they have longer subtitles that stay for longer on the screen. But in other countries they want shorter subtitles that keep more of the dialogue and keep the gist." (If this sounds an impossible task, then that's pretty much because it is.) Subtitlers are constantly cutting out "filler words" (um, er, you know).

10 Youmee Lee, a deaf Korean American artist, wishes that Netflix – and other streaming services – would check the translations more closely. "We, the deaf viewers, deserve the same information as hearing viewers so we all can share the experience."

11 With series like *Squid Game* so successful, some may wonder why people care so much about translation. Youngmi Mayer says, "I guess you could ask, do people really care about *Star Wars*? Some people would tell you they don't care about *Star Wars* at all. And other people would say that it's a big part of their lives. If one word was mistranslated, they would be incredibly angry."

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3 Understanding the article

a. Choose the correct answers according to the information in the article.

1. According to Bong Joon-ho, when you accept subtitles, you …

   a. have a greater chance of winning an Oscar.

   b. can watch many more great films.

   c. will be able to log into Netflix in other countries.

2. People are asking whether Netflix is …

   a. showing enough foreign language series.

   b. earning too much from *Squid Game*.

   c. spending enough on good subtitles.

3. What usually gives viewers the best translations?

   a. dubbing

   c. subtitles

   b. closed captions

4. What do streamers put most money into?

   a. dubbing

   c. subtitles

   b. closed captions

5. Dubbed scripts should …

   a. be available immediately.

   b. be culturally and politically correct.

   c. follow mouth movements as much as possible.

6. Viewers who are unable to hear well …

   a. are refusing to pay their Netflix subscriptions until more money is put into dubbing.

   b. would like to be able to enjoy films as much as everyone else.

   c. care more about translations than other viewers.

4 Key language

a. Find and circle all the words in the article that describe people who are important to the film and TV industries.

b. Write two sentences for each word: one related to the article and one about a different topic.

c. Now expand the vocabulary field by adding words that describe other people who are important to the film and TV industries.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- When did you last watch a film or TV programme with subtitles? What was it? Why did you use the subtitles?

- You want to see a new British film at the cinema: will you go to see the dubbed, subtitled, or original version? Why?

- You plan to binge watch an American TV series at home on Netflix (or another streaming service) with your partner. Will you watch the dubbed, subtitled, or original version? Why?

- How has watching films, videos, and TV series affected your language skills?

6 In your own words

a. Work with a partner who speaks your first language. Find a short two-to-three-minute English-language video on an everyday topic that has a good, clear script and a speaker or presenter (e.g., one about wildlife, the environment, a work process, gardening, cars, a sport, how to make a cup of tea, etc.).

b. Watch the video, listen to the script, and translate it into your own language. Write subtitles for speakers of your own language. As much as possible, make the subtitles keep time with the images on the screen.

c. With the rest of the group, discuss how easy or difficult this task was.