

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

Level: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss these questions.

- What are the differences between subtitles, closed captions, and dubbing?
- Who would most likely watch a film or TV show with which, and why?

b. Scan the article to check and elaborate on your answers.

2 Key words

a. Write the correct word(s) from the wordpool next to the definitions below. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context.

abundance	awkward	earning	gist	glossed over
gosh	gripes	irritated	linger	notorious
peers	profoundly	scripts	subservient	talent crunch

1. getting something as a result of your efforts or achievements _____
2. written words of plays, films, speeches, etc. _____
3. complaints about something that is annoying but not very important _____
4. too willing to obey other people _____
5. ignored because it was difficult _____
6. famous for something bad _____
7. slightly wrong and not smooth or appealing _____
8. a mostly old-fashioned exclamation word used for showing that you are surprised or a little annoyed _____
9. annoyed or impatient about something _____
10. a very large quantity of something _____
11. the gap between the supply and demand of skilled workers _____
12. in a great way _____
13. people who belong to the same social or professional group _____

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Level: Advanced

14. last or continue for a long time; stay for longer than expected _____
15. the main idea or most important point of something that someone has written or said

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

1. The city is _____ for its traffic jams.
2. They were _____ influenced by the Beatles.
3. In some parts of Canada, snow may _____ well into early summer.
4. The lake attracts an _____ of wildlife, especially in spring.
5. I left work early as I really wasn't in the mood to listen to his _____ again today.

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Subtitling is an essential art form. So why, as the streaming giant scores more global hits, isn't it trying harder to find the right words?

Viv Groskop

14 October, 2021

- 1 “Once you overcome the one-inch*-tall barrier of subtitles, you can watch so many amazing films,” said the director Bong Joon-ho, as he accepted his Oscar in 2020. The success of Netflix’s Korean series *Squid Game* has proved him right. It has become Netflix’s biggest hit yet, earning the title of its No 1 show in 90 countries. But it has also sparked a debate about what gets lost in translation – and raised questions over whether Netflix is investing enough in 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). This is partly about global viewers being increasingly open to seeking out the best entertainment experiences.
- 3 The optimistic inquiry “Can I speak a language fluently just by watching TV?” yields 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 really watch the same show,” concludes Youngmi Mayer. She released a TikTok video unpicking the flaws in *Squid Game*’s subtitles, which has had more than 12m views. Her gripes? One of the lead female characters is represented as more subservient and less intelligent than in Korean. The first game is not properly translated, and the concept of “gganbu” (a link between two equals) is glossed over.
- 4 *Squid Game*’s “lost in translation” moments have even led to accusations of cultural and political bias. “Netflix is notorious for its weak translations of Korean dramas,” wrote Sharon Kwon. “How will people learn about our culture if the streamer is mistranslating the language?”
- 5 Watching the show as a non-Korean speaker, I realized that, yes, some of these subtitles did feel awkward. Is “darn” a word that anyone would say? It popped up repeatedly. Similarly, in the first episode, Seong Gi-hun uses the word “gosh” four times. But he doesn’t say it again for the rest of the series.
- 6 The debate around *Squid Game*’s subtitles has revealed the difference between subtitles, closed captions and dubbing. “Closed captions” were initially devised 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 another script entirely. In these, the translation has to fit across the screen and correspond to a pre-set reading speed. But they are often seen as a more accurate translation than the dubbing script.
- 7 Viewers who are deaf or hard of hearing, however, don’t have the choice between the subtitle script and the dubbing script. And many fans are irritated that Netflix seems to be investing more heavily in dubbing than in subtitles.
- 8 A dubbing script translation is less accurate as it faces two challenges. First, it must translate a phrase in such a way that it takes exactly the same amount of time to say out loud in both languages. Second, if there is any opportunity to copy the mouth movements, then you’re supposed to take it.
- 9 Max Deryagin has been subtitling English to Russian for 11 years. “The abundance of content has caused a ‘talent crunch’ in subtitling in recent years,” he says. There just aren’t enough translators to go round: “Netflix has so much programming that they have changed our industry profoundly.”
- 10 Deryagin explains how differences between different languages present challenges for him and his peers. “English is considered 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 while respecting the viewer’s reading speed. The Scandinavians are the most experienced at all this, he says. “In Scandinavia, they believe in longer subtitles that linger on the screen. But in other countries, they want shorter subtitles that preserve more

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Level: Advanced

of the dialogue but retain 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).

- 11 Youmee Lee, a deaf Korean-American artist, wishes that Netflix – and other streaming services – would put more effort into monitoring the translation process. “We, the deaf viewers, deserve access to the same information as hearing viewers so we all can share the experience.”
- 12 With series like *Squid Game* becoming as successful as they are, 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 answer that they’ve based their entire life on it. If one word was mistranslated, they would be incredibly angry.”

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First published in *The Guardian*, 14/10/2021

*one inch = 2.54 cm

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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, once you are willing to accept subtitles, you ...
 - a. have a greater chance of winning an Oscar.
 - b. can watch a greater variety of 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. putting enough of their resources into producing good subtitles.
3. Mistranslated scripts can lead to ...
 - a. a lack of cultural understanding.
 - b. less intelligent scripts.
 - c. a decrease in the number of viewers.
4. Which aids usually provide viewers with the best translations?
 - a. dubbing
 - b. subtitles
 - c. closed captions
5. What have streamers been putting most money into?
 - a. dubbing
 - b. subtitles
 - c. closed captions
6. Newly dubbed scripts should ...
 - a. be available immediately.
 - b. be culturally and politically correct.
 - c. follow mouth movements as much as possible.
7. Subtitles in less compact languages ...
 - a. are able to stay on the screen longer.
 - b. can often only show the main elements of the original script.
 - c. need fewer words and less screen space.
8. Viewers who are unable to hear well ...
 - a. are refusing to pay their Netflix subscriptions until more money is invested in dubbing.
 - b. would like to be able to enjoy films as much as everyone else.
 - c. care more about translations than other viewers.

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Level: Advanced

4 Key language

a. With a partner, and *without* looking at the article, decide which verbs you need to complete the verb phrases from the article. The first letter of each verb is given to help you. Then, go back over the article to check your answers.

1. o_____ a barrier
2. p_____ someone right
3. s_____ a debate
4. y_____ results
5. u_____ the flaws
6. s_____ to do something
7. g_____ round
8. p_____ (more) effort into something

b. Talk about their meanings, looking up any you are not sure about, and then use each one in a new and unrelated sentence of your own.

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?

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

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 two versions for speakers of your own language – one with subtitles, and the second to dub the video. As much as possible, make the subtitles keep up with the images on the screen. And try to make the dubbing script fit the mouth movements of the speakers.

- c. **With the rest of the group, discuss how easy or difficult it was to do this task well.**