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UNIT 3B. EASY-TO-UNDERSTAND (E2U) AND AUDIO DESCRIPTION (AD)

ELEMENT 1. PROCESSES

WHAT ARE E2U AUDIO SUBTITLES?

Video Lecture Transcript

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This is unit 3B, Easy to Understand and Audio Description, Element 1, Processes, Video lecture "What are E2U audio subtitles". I am Elisa Perego, from Università degli Studi di Trieste.

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In this video lecture I will define audio subtitles (AST), and offer some hints on how to simplify them.

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Think of the Netflix German-American miniseries "Unorthodox" about a girl rejecting her radicalized Hasidic upbringing.

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All episodes feature a constant code switching from Yiddish to English to German.

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In the original version, the Yiddish and the German dialogues are subtitled in English.

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But how could a person with sight loss or with dyslexia, a slow reader, a person who is very far away from the screen, or anyone doing something in another room access these subtitles?

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There is only one way out: conveying them orally. In other words: reading them out loud, and - if necessary - integrating them with audio description.

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Audio subtitles are approximately as short and focused as subtitles, but this does not make them necessarily Easy to Understand.

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So: How can we enhance the comprehensibility of audio subtitles? To start with, we suggest to briefly introduce their presence to offer the necessary background to the user, and to prevent confusion.

A short text in Easy-to-Understand language – written on screen and read aloud – could suffice.

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For instance:

"This film includes audio subtitles.

Audio subtitles are subtitles read aloud."

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In fully audio subtitled films, using multiple, slightly acted voices for different characters might help to enjoy the product more while understanding and remembering it better.

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In this respect, human-voiced audio subtitles should be preferred to text-to-speech audio subtitles. In fact, we believe that the latter option could interfere with the pleasantness of the listening experience.

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Adapting the subtitle formulation when the subtitles are too complex is another brainwave. To do so, you can merge some SDH strategies with E2U principles.

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Let's take the subtitle from the film *I, Tonya* "I am so sorry, but there's no smoking on the ice". It might easily become a third-person audio subtitle: "The teacher kindly asks LaVona not to smoke on the ice rink".

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The apology (I am so sorry) is replaced by an adverb (kindly).

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The adjunct "on the ice", whose meaning is clearer if the visuals are accessed, is substuted by an expression that refers explicitly to the enclosed area of ice for skating: the ice rink.

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If "ice rink" is too jergal, "ice-skating spot" could be a simpler choice.

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And again, if the audio subtitle is too long, the adverb "kindly" can be taken out, with no major content consequences.

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Furthermore, the E2U audio subtitler might find it useful to remember the main issues of "struggling users", such as, for instance, a poor lexical and structural knowledge, and therefore choose only high-frequency words, normalise idiomatic formulations, favour short declarative sentences.

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Back to the smoking example, a direct-speech-like variation might be: "Teacher: It is forbidden to smoke here", with a word reduction from eleven to seven.

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We know that reduction normally affects the interpersonal function of language. Restoring it through intonation (a kind, mellow one in this case) is therefore crucial. And in general terms, avoiding a flat style and exploiting all the prosodic possibilities of human voice could ensure that E2U audio subtitles can really catch the attention of the listener.

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On a more technical level, we could consider enabling the the user to manage the volume of audio subtitles separately from the volume of the original sound.

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More solutions are certainly possible. The topic is wide, and we still need to explore so many factors, and answer so many questions. I'll leave you with a couple: would automatic audio subtitling work in an Easy-to-Understand context? And can we really consider synthetic voices in contexts where involvement and clarity are a high priority?

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This video lecture was prepared by Elisa Perego and produced by Andreea Deleanu, from Università degli Studi di Trieste, with the help of Ester Hedberg and Anna Matamala. You can reach me at eperego@units.it.

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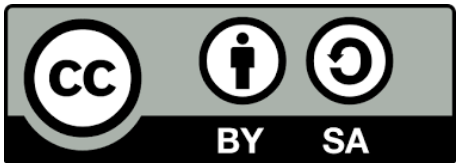

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