Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

UNIT 3A. EASY-TO-UNDERSTAND (E2U) AND SUBTITLING

ELEMENT 2. LINGUISTIC ASPECTS

SUBTITLING PARAMETERS: CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

Video Lecture Transcript

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This is Unit 3A. Easy-to-Understand and subtitling. Element 2. Linguistic aspects. Video lecture: Subtitling parameters: contextual information.

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Multimodal communication uses different modes of communication to create messages. The verbal, linguistic mode usually makes up the most content in subtitle events, that is the spoken words. However, sometimes, other modes need to be made explicit to enrich the spoken words. The aim is to make the context clearer and enable an easier understanding of the message. This additional contextual information can be, for instance, identifying a speaker, music, sounds, or suprasegmental information, such as tone, stress, or rhythm. By the way, suprasegmental features are also known as prosodic features.

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This practice is well-established in subtitling for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing, in short SDH. Conversely, research in this area is very scarce in the context of Easy-to-Understand subtitling.

The following criteria from SDH subtitling and text simplification can help us to decide when and how to add contextual features.

First, relevance. This means that a piece of information should only be added if it is necessary, for instance, to resolve ambiguity. Second, the way the information is displayed on screen should be easy to understand and to remember by viewers. Lastly, the way of presenting the information should remain the same throughout the whole show. As you know, understandable, easy to remember and predictable are also usability criteria.

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Identifying a character or a speaker on a screen aims at resolving ambiguity as to who is speaking. Ambiguity can occur, for instance, when an active speaker is off-screen or else when more than one person is actively talking, speaking. This is sometimes the case in dialogues.

There are different techniques to identify speakers on screen. These techniques come from SDH subtitling. Italics are often used to indicate off-screen voices. This technique is quite a standard practice in many countries. Conversely, techniques for resolving ambiguity when speakers, or characters, are on screen, are manifold and not standardised across countries.

For instance, while the use of colours, such as white, yellow, cyan, or green is frequently used in the United Kingdom and in Spain, the technique is less used in Germany, in Sweden or The Netherlands.

Speakers and characters can also be identified by other techniques. These are dashes, labels, or displacing subtitles towards a speaker. Sometimes, subtitlers combine different techniques.

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We can only speculate about which technique would be more easily recognised by a viewer that is not used to SDH conventions or practice.

The use of colours demands from a viewer to understand why a colour has been assigned to a speaker and to remember the colours throughout the whole show. These tasks may become even more challenging if we take into consideration that not all countries use this technique or prioritise the colours in the same way. One last aspect that should be mentioned is that some multimedia players do not support the use of multi-coloured subtitles.

An alternative may well be to use techniques for character identification that are used in print, such as play scripts or transcripts. These would lend us to choose labels with names or dashes instead of colours.

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Now, music. There are also different ways or techniques to indicate music in subtitles. Sometimes only a musical note symbol appears in round brackets. Sometimes the title of a song or even the author are displayed, often in brackets as well. In other cases, the type of music and the source

are described, or even the lyrics appear subtitled, because the content is relevant.

Trying to find a balance between providing enough information to convey the intended meaning and mood, and avoiding cognitive overload should become key. You, as subtitler, will have to decide in each particular case depending on the genre, on the role of the music, and the scene.

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Now, sound effects. Adding sound effect information to a subtitle is a descriptive task that aims at capturing the audio context. The name of the action should be used. For instance, we would say "gunfire" instead of "a shot from a gun".

Sound effects can be written in both small and capital letters, and are often displayed in round brackets.

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As for prosodic or suprasegmental features, they can also be included in subtitle events. This contextual information is linguistic but non-verbal. Some examples are to indicate the use of an ironic tone of voice, or the volume, such as whispering or shouting, or to indicate pauses in the middle of a sentence to convey hesitation.

As in the case of music, this information is often displayed on screen in round brackets, in small or capital letters, or using ellipsis points.

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We can summarise by saying that subtitling contextual information is, indeed, very difficult. Not only because there is no standardised practice in general but also because there is very little empirical data available for easy-to-understand subtitles.

Text simplification recommendations can help us in the decision-making process. In this line, small letters could be prioritised over capital letters. Also, we could choose a technique that viewers may be more familiar with from printed texts, such as the use of dashes for identifying a speaker.

Lastly, the use of special characters seems to be necessary to indicate that this type of contextual information is additional information and not spoken words. Here, again, it would be at your discretion as an expert to decide which special characters are necessary.

Our advice is to follow SDH recommendations until more data is available from research in easy-to-understand subtitling.

Thank you very much.

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This video lecture has been prepared by Rocío Bernabé, from the Internationale Hochschule SDI München, in Germany, in collaboration with the Universidade de Vigo, in Spain.

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