UNIT 1. MEDIA ACCESSIBILITY

ELEMENT 5. MEDIA ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES

SUBTITLES FOR THE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING

Video Lecture Transcript

Slide 1

This is unit 1, Media Accessibility; element 5, Media accessibility services, video lecture Subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing.

I am Anna Matamala, from Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

Slide 2

In this lecture I will be talking about subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing. I will be referring to them as SDH.

Slide 3

The first thing to say is that I am using this terminology because it is quite established in Europe, but I wonder if this is the best option. Why? Well, from my point of view, SDH are not only for the deaf and hard of hearing. They can actually benefit more users. For instance, if the audio

quality is bad or you are in a crowded bar where the TV is on, but the audio is off, SDH may be useful.

Slide 4

What makes these subtitles different from other types of subtitles created for a hearing audience? Any type of subtitle transfers the oral linguistic elements into written linguistic elements, but SDH goes beyond that: it also transfers any oral non-linguistic element, be it produced by the characters (sneezes, coughs, etc.) or by the environment (music, a door slam, etc.). It also adds indications so that the audience can identify the character who is speaking and, if necessary, their mood, their emotions. Put briefly, SDH transmits not only what is said and heard but also who says it and how, when this, of course, cannot be easily understood from the images.

Slide 5

To identify the characters, there are different systems in place: a colour can be assigned to each character; a label before the name of the character can be used; subtitles can be positioned close to the character who is speaking, or an icon or avatar representing the character can be used. Check the subtitles you normally watch and identify the system they use. I think that you will probably find out that it is either a colour or a label.

Slide 6

SDH also transfers paralinguistic elements such as laughs, sneezes, sighs, cries, vocalisations, etc. It also transfers prosodic elements such as

volume, tone, speech rhythm. These elements can actually provide the audience with relevant information about the emotional state of the speaker. Although some tests with icons have been performed, descriptive labels are the usual way of transferring this information. For example, you may have a character backwards saying "What did you say?". To indicate she says these words in an angry mode, you may want to add this label before so that it reads "(ANGRY) What did you say?"

Slide 7

Labels can also be used to identify the language being spoken, when it is not the usual language in the production, or the channel. For instance, if a character speaks on the radio or on television.

Sound effects are also a typical element that is transferred in subtitles: a telephone ringing, a dog barking, a door slamming. These sound effects can be transferred through labels describing the sound or an onomatopoeia reproducing the sound, although some consider that onomatopoeia may be confusing. Experiments with icons have also been performed.

Slide 8

Music is another element to be transferred. Depending on its function, a general description ("piano music") sometimes indicating the emotion that it transmits ("scary music") will be enough. In other contexts, a specific indication of the work being played will be needed. If music is sung, and words can be understood, then lyrics are generally reproduced, with a signal marking those are lyrics. If lyrics are sung in another language and cannot be understood, some general indication such as "sings in Italian" may work.

Beyond these elements, SDH follow some other general subtitling rules, especially when they are recorded.

Slide 9

Subtitles need to be positioned in a way that important parts of the image are not covered. This means that generally speaking subtitles are positioned at the bottom of the screen, although in some situations you can find them on top, for instance, when credits appear on screen on film.

Generally speaking, it is recommended that subtitles have a maximum of two lines, with a limited number of characters per line: generally, between 20 and 42, being 36-37 typical standard numbers. It is important to break the lines adequately, for instance not to put an article at the end of the first line and then the noun at the beginning of the next.

Subtitles should be on screen long enough so that the audience can read the subtitles and watch the audiovisual content. A maximum of 15 characters per second is a usual standard for SDH although, again, this depends on the provider.
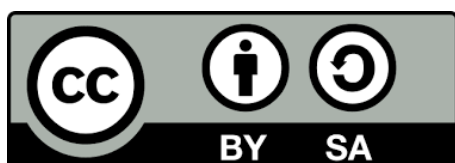
When subtitles are produced live, there are some specificities to be considered and some of these recommendations may not be followed. I will explain all these specific features in another video.

Slide 10

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Partners: