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## Behind the Scenes of Subtitling

### *Introduction*

In the past decade, more people have been watching movies and TV series not just on television, but also on online platforms such as Netflix, Disney+, Max (formerly known as HBO and HBO Max), SkyShowtime, etc. The amount of content is increasing year by year, and because of this, the demand for either a dubbed or a subtitled version is increasing, too. The translators in this field of work, audiovisual translators, or in Hungarian commonly known as dubbing scriptwriters,<sup>1</sup> are asked to create the texts for dubbing or subtitling, then the target-language text ‘miraculously’ appears on the platforms. But what exactly does the audiovisual translator do, and what difficulties does he or she face in producing the text in the target language? In this article, the author would like to give the readers a sneak peek into the ways of official (e.g., paywall-protected) Hungarian audiovisual translation, focusing on the creative process of Hungarian target language subtitles, translated from Japanese source language movies and series. What are the technical requirements for creating an official Hungarian subtitle? What are the old and new difficulties in this field of translation? How can someone in Hungary enter this field of work that seems so distant for the average cinemagoer? All these additional questions will be answered in the article.

### *Audiovisual translation*

The term ‘audiovisual translation’ (AVT) is used to describe the translation of a product that has both an audible (audio) and a visible (visual) element. The categorization of these translations varies, but the simplest approach might be to divide them into two categories. The first category is revoicing, where an actor or actress is used to say the translated text aloud. The second category is subtitling, which will be the main topic of this article and explained in the next sub-chapter.

In Hungary, the audience of audiovisual products prefers revoicing to subtitles, such as lip-synchronized dubbing and voiceovers. In the case of revoicing and subtitles, the translator not only translates the spoken text (audio) of the source language, but also considers, among other things, the visible (visual) part of it, as well as all verbal or non-verbal signals. He or she pays attention to the scene of

<sup>1</sup> SEREG Judit, *A szinkronnyelv befogadói értékelése és hatása az anyanyelvi nyelvhasználatra*, PhD dissertation, ELTE, Budapest, 2020, 35.

the movie or the episode when finding the appropriate meaning for a situational sentence, i.e., phraseologies,<sup>2</sup> and does not translate the sentences without watching the video. Ideally, the translator should have enough time to watch the video at least once before starting to work on the translation, but there might be cases where there is, for example, a Hungarian vendor who provides the materials to the translator, and for some reason is late in providing them, or the original creator responsible for the given materials does not provide enough time for the translator. This could be because the bureaucracy between the foreign (e.g., Japanese) and domestic (Hungarian) parties takes too long, or because the foreign party is only a stepping stone in the whole process and must pass the files on to another party. In the case of the largest streaming sites, there is usually a domestic vendor intervening between the Hungarian translator and the foreign party.

In Hungary, the audience is most likely to encounter lip-synchronized dubbing. This type of revoicing requires a target-language text that is of the same length as the source-language text and which also considers phonetic (e.g., lip movements) and kinetic (e.g., body language) factors. In addition, the translator must bear in mind that the text has to indicate the pauses made by the source language actor or actress, as well as all reaction sounds.<sup>3</sup> In other words, every sound and every word uttered by the source-language actor or actress, as well as any pauses made by them must be indicated in the target-language text. In this type of multimodal translation, the translator provides a translation which will be used by the Hungarian actors and actresses, and their voices will replace the voice tracks of the source language actors and actresses.

In the case of a voice-over, the ‘rules’ are slightly different. The purpose of voice-overs in Hungary is to convey the meaning of the original within a similar time interval. The length of the target-language text does not have to be the same as that of the source language text, it is recommended to be slightly shorter. The lip movements, pauses, and reaction sounds do not have to be retained, it is usually sufficient to have a summarized source text with indications of longer (e.g., at least 3-second) pauses. The source-language voice track is not replaced, but it is softened, and the target-language voice track is heard over it.

There are other types of audiovisual translation, too, such as translation for advertisements, translation for hearing-impaired people, etc., which will not be discussed here.

<sup>2</sup> KLAUDY Kinga, ‘A frazeologizmusok szó szerinti fordításáról’. *Magyar Nyelvőr*. CXII/3 (1988), 305–314, 305.

<sup>3</sup> Luis PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ: ‘Audiovisual translation’. In Mona BAKER – Gabriela SALDANHA (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, Routledge, London/New York, 2011, 13–20, 17.

*Subtitling*

Subtitling is very different from revoicing. For target-language texts intended for subtitling, the translator only needs to ensure that the subtitle remains on screen for as long as the source-language actor is speaking the text, also considering kinetic factors, of course. In Hungary, however, the translator is also expected to be familiar with the technical aspects of subtitling. This includes creating the subtitle file, time-coding it, adhering to its formal requirements, etc. Currently, the maximum length of a subtitle is two lines, and sentences must be broken into semantic or syntactic units.<sup>4</sup> In Hungary, subtitles are centered and appear at the bottom of the screen. If there is already text in the subtitle area, such as the credits list, the Hungarian vendors for the streaming platforms require the subtitle to appear at the top of the screen, centered, for the duration of the ‘disturbing’ text.

However, this alignment at the top is not implemented on all streaming sites or television channels. There are television channels whose satellites are unable to transmit the signals necessary to display subtitles, or they are unable to meet the technical requirements of top alignment for other reasons. Streaming sites may not have prepared the program codes for top-alignment or may simply not want to burden translators with this formatting requirement. However, in the case of illegal or other fan translations, the subtitles are left to the skill of the fan translators. In their translations, we can see more than two lines of text on the screen at once, unlike in official Hungarian subtitles, where only two lines of subtitles are displayed. However, in the case of some German subtitles on the streaming website called Crunchyroll, which started as a not entirely legal website, the audience can encounter more than two lines on the screen at the same time, for example in a TV series by Kurokawa Tomoyuki 黒川智之, as seen in Figure 1. In the case of Netflix’s Japanese subtitles, for example, it is allowed to align the subtitles both horizontally and vertically, even at the same time.<sup>5</sup>

The number of characters per line is also important in subtitles, as broadcasters and streaming services allow different numbers of characters due to their technical and other parameters. While this number is 42, including spaces, for the Netflix streaming service, it is usually less in cinemas or on television channels.<sup>6</sup> Researchers have also suggested this number,<sup>7</sup> but the audience may encounter cases of 38 or even only 35 characters per line.

The speed at which subtitles are read is also important, as children and adults can read different amounts of text in the same time interval. This reading speed is usually expressed in a ‘characters per second’ unit (CPS), which can be set and announced in advance by the international or domestic studios, and the subtitling

<sup>4</sup> PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ, ‘Audiovisual translation’, 14–16.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Japanese Timed Text Style Guide’, [partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com](https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com).

<sup>6</sup> ‘Hungarian Timed Text Style Guide’, [partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com](https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com).

<sup>7</sup> Fotios KARAMITROGLOU, ‘A Proposed Set of Subtitling Standards in Europe’, [translationjournal.net](https://translationjournal.net)



Figure 1. An example for a subtitle consisting of more than two lines. Kurokawa Tomoyuki: *Dead Dead Demon's Dededede Destruction* デッドデッドデーモンズデデデデストラクション (series) S1 E2, 19'50", crunchyroll.com, 2024.

programs can set and display this unit. In other words, the translator does not have to calculate anything, as the program automatically indicates if the translator has exceeded the allowed limit. The free downloadable program called Subtitle Edit has all the features and settings that a Hungarian translator might need when writing subtitles, but nowadays some companies have started using their online, cloud-based subtitling websites, where the user interface displays all the necessary parameters for the user. In this way, companies are less likely to experience information leaks, incorrect settings used by the translator, or files being lost or deleted from the translator's or proofreader's computer, as everything is stored and configured in the company's cloud. In specific cases, the translator must create the entire subtitle file, which means not only writing the text for the time intervals given in each subtitle box, but also creating the subtitle from scratch.

One of the aims of subtitles is to be concise. For example, in a scene of a street demonstration where people are talking over each other, only the texts of a maximum of two speakers can be displayed at the same time, in separate lines, each beginning with a dash. This means that the translator must decide which of the speakers is more important to the storyline.

### *Lyrics, dialects, sign language, and other tough nuts*

Once the translator knows all the technical requirements and expectations, the creative part of subtitling comes into play. Translating a monologue or dialogue while keeping in mind the multimodal context is one thing, but what happens when the translator encounters lyrics, sign language, dialects, or even just another

text existing on the video? The short answer would be that the foreign or domestic party decides what to do. But there is always a longer answer.

It is always important to know what the film or episode is trying to convey to the audience, i.e., its creative intention. In the case of both dubbing and subtitling, the translator should be given a show guide or a brief description of how to handle unconventional texts (e.g., lyrics, foreign dialogue, etc.), but in the case of subtitling, the translator may not always receive additional guidance before starting to work. The best course of action is to ask the party from whom the translator received the files, and inform them as soon as possible about the unexpected content. Lyrics can be translated with rhymes, without rhymes, or skipped altogether if they are not relevant to the plot.

Dialects require a different approach. If they are not plot-relevant, then the domestic vendor, for example, can ask that the translator translate a dialect as if it were not a dialect, in other words, to use the standard language. If they are not necessarily plot-relevant but can be highlighted, or if they are plot-relevant, then the translator should ask his or her supervisor whether he or she can be creative or not. If the answer is positive, then the creative work can begin. In Hungary, however, the use of Hungarian dialects gives a different feeling to the audience than a Kansai or Osaka dialect. A dialect from Szeged, for example, can be seen as very local,<sup>8</sup> and therefore strange in a Japanese context, while other dialects can be derogatory and can again convey a strange feeling. It is recommended to convey the original culture and what the original creator intended to say.<sup>9</sup>

The Netflix guidelines take a similar approach to foreign dialogues.<sup>10</sup> If they are relevant to the plot, the translator should translate them, and in addition, some Hungarian providers require the translator to format them in italics, for example, to show that these dialogues were not said in the main language of the film or episode. In the movie *A Far Shore* (*Toi tokoro 遠いところ*) by Kudo Masaaki 工藤将亮, the heroine's grandmother uses one of the Ryukyu languages, most likely Okinawan, given her place of residence in the movie. Since UNESCO recognizes Okinawan and other Ryukyu languages as languages,<sup>11</sup> it is logical to assume that her lines would be displayed in italics, but in the end, she only uses incorrect grammar in Hungarian to represent the Okinawan language, and there is no indication of the language change in the English subtitles.

1a) あんたには、うちなあぐちはつうじらんさ。(Anta ni wa, uchinaaguchi wa tsuu-jiran sa.)<sup>12</sup>

1b) You don't understand Okinawan.

1c) Te nem érted okinavai nyelvé.

<sup>8</sup> DALLOS Szilvia, *Magyar bangja*, Nap Kiadó, Budapest, 2018, 163.

<sup>9</sup> DALLOS, *Magyar bangja*, 171.

<sup>10</sup> 'Localization Best Practices – Nonfiction Content', partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com

<sup>11</sup> HIDVÉGI Zsófia, *The Revitalization of the Ryūkyūan Languages: A model proposal for affect-analysis based impact measurement*, PhD dissertation, ELTE, Budapest, 2023, 42.

<sup>12</sup> KUDO Masaaki, *A Far Shore*, 37'44", Studio Nayura, Japan, 2022.

In the case of sign language, the translation again depends on the creative intention and the provider of the work. Of course, learning a sign language for a film or an episode is too much to ask and too much to do, so translators are usually given a transcription or English translation of the sentences signed by the actor or actress. For example, in the movie *Small, Slow but Steady* (*Keiko, me wo sumasete* ケイコ、目を澄ませて) by Miyake Sho 三宅唱, the signed sentences are transcribed on the screen after the heroine's, Keiko's, signing, making it understandable even without knowing sign language. These texts are called forced narratives, and in Hungarian, they must be indicated in the subtitle, which means that they have to be written in all capital letters. In another movie, *Drive My Car* (*Doraibu mai ka* ドライブ・マイ・カー) by Hamaguchi Ryusuke 濱口竜介, the sign language of the Korean Lee Yuna is not translated, but at the end of the film, the audience can see a translation of her signing, which is integrated into the frames of the film, meaning that the translation of her signing appears in the film on a big screen, but in the very far background. The translation on this screen was so far away from the audience that it was impossible for them to read. For the first two hours of the film, the English or Hungarian subtitles were the only help for the audience to understand the Korean sign language, except for a few cases in which Lee Yuna's husband translates her signing into Japanese with his own words.

### *Conclusion*

In the case of official Hungarian subtitles, despite the technical and time constraints, subtitles can provide the audience and the translator with a wide range of opportunities to learn about the culture and nuances of the source language. The translator needs to be aware of all the technical requirements, which in some cases means creating the entire subtitle file from scratch. In addition, the party providing the work files to the translator can specify what the translator should or should not translate, including, for example, lyrics, dialects, foreign dialogue and sign languages. But once the translator is given the green light to translate, he or she can use all kinds of translation methods to translate and be as creative as possible. In fact, it is like the incredible balancing act of a tightrope walker who, while balancing, still has a certain amount of freedom to use his or her excess energy and room for maneuver.

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*Abstract*

*When translating films and series, I have often experienced how complex and difficult my work is, especially when translating from Japanese. Translating an original English film is like performing an incredible balancing act, e.g., tightrope walking. Translating a Japanese text is, by contrast, like tightrope walking with an umbrella in one hand (with a ball rolling on the umbrella), and the original Kojiki text in the other hand as one tries to verbally adapt it to the modern Japanese language. In my article, I would like to offer a glimpse into the background of this almost absurd performance through my work, and briefly show what an audiovisual translator, more commonly known as a dubbing scriptwriter, can do with sign language, lyrics, dialects, and other Japanese-specific themes in films and series as he or she adapts all these to the world of subtitles.*

**Keywords:** audiovisual translation, AVT, subtitling, subtitle, Netflix, Disney+, HBO

*Rezümé**A filmfordítás kulisszatitkai*

*Munkásságom során nem egyszer tapasztaltam, hogy a filmek és sorozatok fordítása mennyire összetett és nehéz feladat, főleg ha japán forrásnyelvből történik. Egy angol forrásnyelvű film fordítását talán egy kötéláncos elképesztő egyensúlyozásához lehetne hasonlítani, miközben egy japán szövegnél ez a kötéláncos ráadásként egy esernyőt kapna az egyik kezébe, labdákat is forgatna az esernyő tetején, és mindeközben a másik kezében a Kodziki eredeti szövegét tartaná és szóban átültetné a mai japán nyelvre. Tanulmányomban szeretnék a saját tapasztalataimon keresztül betekintést nyújtani ennek a már-már abszurdnak nevezhető mutatványnak a hátterébe, és röviden bemutatni, miből kezdhet egy audiovizuális fordító, avagy szinkron dramaturg a japán filmekben és sorozatokban található jelnyelvvél, dalszövegekkel, dialektusokkal és más japánnyelv-specifikus témakörökkel, mindezt átültetve a feliratok dimenziójára.*

**Kulcsszavak:** audiovizuális fordítás, AVT, feliratozás, felirat, Netflix, Disney+, HBO