Surtitling and captioning for theatre and opera

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Article 27.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 states that ‘[e]veryone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits’ (United Nations 1948). It is within this general framework that the current chapter will introduce and discuss two access services, namely captioning and surtitling for theatre and opera.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines captions as ‘appearing across the lower portion of a cinema screen, or of the frame of a television programme, video recording, etc., and typically supplying a translation of the dialogue, or a version of it for the benefit of the deaf or hard of hearing; (also) a similar caption provided for the audience of an opera or other stage performance’. Surtitles, on the other hand, are defined as ‘caption[s] projected on to a screen above the stage during the performance of an opera, esp. to translate the libretto or explain the action’ (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). In Low’s (2002: 97) terms, a surtitle is ‘a kind of caption displayed above the stage during a live performance, giving a written translation of the audible words—though not all of them—which are being sung at any given moment’. As the differences between these definitions may still leave space for confusion, this chapter will use the terms ‘captions’ and ‘captioning’ when referring to monolingual transfer, and ‘surtitles’ and ‘surtitling’ when discussing an interlingual product—usually, although not exclusively, in a live theatre or opera setting. Finally, the term ‘titles’ will be used to refer generally to the product generated in both of these scenarios.

Brief history of the field

It is well documented (Low 2002, Mateo 2007, Oncins 2015) that opera surtitling originated in Canada, with the Canadian Opera Company creating the first surtitled production in 1983. Burton (2009) acknowledges the presence of titles in an opera house in Hong Kong before that, in the early 1980s, but they do not fit the definition of sur- or subtiles, as they were displayed vertically on the side of the stage. Shortly afterwards, other opera companies around the world, including Covent Garden, began to provide this service.
The beginnings of captioning, and especially its growth, are closely linked to the approval and enforcement of legislation regarding provision of access services, for televised programmes in particular. The 2003 UK Communications Act specifically requires provision of subtitling, signing and audio description for TV products; it also sets quotas—80%, 5% and 10% of programmes, respectively, for each of these three audiovisual translation (AVT) modes—to ‘be reached by the tenth anniversary of the relevant date for each channel, as well as a subtitling quota to be reached by the fifth anniversary (60%)’ (Ofcom 2006: 1). At the European level, the Audiovisual Media Services European Directive on access services was introduced in 2009, and the EU Directive on Web Content Accessibility in 2015. Internationally, different strategies are gradually being put in place and it is clear that this sector is growing in visibility.

The presence of captions on TV, at cinemas and online has also brought a certain pressure to offer them as a default in theatres as well. To get a sense of the number of accessible performances today, using the UK as an example, it suffices to look at events delivered or supported by StageTEXT (StageTEXT, n.d.), a leading British organization dedicated to making theatre and culture accessible to deaf, deafened and hard of hearing audiences and readers. In 2013 alone, StageTEXT ‘made nearly 400 events accessible to deaf, deafened and hard of hearing audiences’ by working with 150 museums, galleries and arts venues across the UK (StageTEXT 2015: 11). The efforts are even more impressive if we look at the number of hours of captioned TV content, for example 100% of BBC1 output (Ofcom 2006, 2017). This is quite substantial if we consider that this is not a closely monitored sector, although arts organizations are legally required to make their events accessible to disabled patrons. This figure is particularly impressive if we also take into account that a little over two decades ago this service did not exist.

**Audience**

Action On Hearing Loss estimates that by 2031 ‘there will be 14.5 million people with hearing loss in the UK’ (2011: 11). Deafness is often something that is experienced as people get older, so more than 70% of over 70-year-olds and 40% of over 50-year-olds have some form of hearing loss (ibid.). Many of these people would find it difficult to understand a play without support, so captions are invaluable for them.

For opera-goers, surtitles provide the translation needed to understand the text written originally in another language. Yvonne Griesel (2005: 6) talks about three possible target audiences for interlingual surtitles. Source language audiences, target language audiences and audiences with knowledge of both source and target languages. Interlingual surtitling can be therefore regarded as different from captions—even though, in essence, it also helps opera-goers to overcome language barriers.

However, this is not the whole picture when it comes to understanding the audience for these two types of services. One of the most exciting changes is the identification of an undeclared audience, i.e. individuals who appreciate surtitles and captions but are not necessarily recognized by theatres and operas as potential beneficiaries of the service. In our ever more globalized world, where large numbers of people have the language of their host communities as their second language (e.g. 4.9 million people in the UK speak English as their second language, according to StageTEXT 2015), the audience for captioning is changing. Theatres in the UK such as the New Wolsey and the West Yorkshire Playhouse ran surveys to assess the extent to which this undeclared audience exists. The results show a significant difference between those audience members who book access tickets and those who report to have
found the service useful (Secară and Allum 2011). The surveys involved asking members of the audience to place a card in a designated box, on their way out at the end of the performance, if they had found the captions useful. The results were then compared to those who had specifically booked access tickets. In the New Wolsey case, out of 359 people in the audience, 29% reported to have found the captions useful while only 4% had booked access tickets. In the West Yorkshire Playhouse case, the figures were 18% and 3% for a 522 house. These two examples would seem to be indicative of the important potential of captions.

In bilingual contexts such as Canada, interlingual surtitles were reported to act as a bridge between official language communities, and hence as a vehicle for reaching new audiences. The translation of surtitles should therefore be regarded as different from existing translations of plays. In the former, the text of the surtitles needs to stay closer to the original, as both the source and target texts need to harmoniously coexist during the live performance. Moreover, in these bilingual situations surtitles can also introduce a new layer of interpretation. As Carlson (2006: 199, in Ladouceur 2014: 53) puts it, ‘an additional “voice”, especially in the case of multilanguage audiences, can use its inevitable difference from spoken text in more original and powerful ways, for the production of additional meanings’. For example, Marc Prescott’s *Sex, Lies et les Franco-Manitobains* (2001) contains rap slang which, even in translation, can remain inaccessible to certain members of the audience. Due to this, Prescott added in the surtitles, ‘If you don’t understand what this guy is saying, don’t worry—Neither does 50% of the rest of the audience’ (Prescot, 2009: slide 602, in Ladouceur 2014: 53). Therefore the surtitles also become projections of the translators’ opinions and thoughts, share the same space as the play, and become relevant to all the members of the audience.

**Description of surtitles and captions and techniques**

According to Mateo (2007), surtitling can be explored from a textual, ideological and technical perspective. The remainder of this section delivers an overview of both captioning and surtitling techniques structured around these three perspectives.

**Textual implications**

Some scholars have raised the question of what should be regarded as the source text for the production of surtitles: the full prose libretto, the singable version or even the original work on which the libretto is based. Irrespective of the source used, there are elements that require careful consideration. Relying on her experience as a librettist translator, Orero (in Orero and Matamala 2008: 263) underlines the importance of four elements when translating for the opera. Firstly, the translation should rely on the music score and follow the stage instructions; secondly, rhythm takes precedence over rhyme; poetical feeling should be prioritized, which effectively entails the need to avoid compensation by explanation; finally, all elements which convey a certain atmosphere—e.g. the use of an archaic tone, specialized vocabulary or register to mark social differences—should be recreated in the translation. The complexity of creating surtitles that engage with and prioritize these four aspects can be illustrated by the long—and yet, not exhaustive—list of issues and difficulties that Orero and Matamala (2008: 266) have identified based on previous research. These include ‘condensation, ensembles, variation in the density of words, repetitions, melismas, poetic or overblown styles, archaism, synchronization, adaptation of cultural, humoristic and historical references, the need to create comprehensible surtitles that form a logical unit, the avoidance of previous translations and the avoidance of representing in writing both
onomatopoeias and all sounds which are clearly recognisable by the public, since they may detract attention’.

While ‘the aim of surtitles is to convey the meaning of what is being sung, not necessarily the manner in which it is being sung’ (Burton 2009: 63), the aim of the captions is to provide both the meaning and the way in which the lines are being delivered. Moreover, identifying the source text for captions is less problematic, as it will always be the work as it appears on stage. As far as the text itself is concerned, the list of issues is also very specialized and the main potential challenges pertain to the use of dialect and non-standard varieties of language—which should be rendered in such a way that allows for an accessible reading experience; overlapping dialogue and decisions regarding the timing of different bits of speech; the density of words and repetitions; and the need to provide accurate and appropriate sound captions. Examples 1–4 below illustrate each of these aspects using titles from captioned plays. All the examples come from captions created by the author for plays performed at the West Yorkshire Playhouse theatre in Leeds, UK.

Firstly, the portrayal of dialect, non-standard language varieties and accents can be either rendered phonetically or a description can be inserted:

**Example 1**

*The Secret Garden*

MARTHA: Can’t tha’ dress thissen, Miss?

*Privates on Parade*

[AS DIETRICH] / [GERMAN ACCENT]

Overlapping dialogues are incredibly challenging as they affect the speed of the caption display. A lag can therefore be introduced if a decision is taken to include all the lines of the source text; alternatively, a label can be included to alert the audience to the existence of an overlap, which allows for the omission of the overlapping lines:

**Example 2**

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

[GOODBYES ARE SHOUTED DOWNSTAIRS]

GOOPER: Big Mama!

BIG MAMA: Hold those people down there, don’t let them go!

When repetitions occur, the captioner can either repeat the lines or simply resort to a label that indicates what is going on and gives the viewers more time to look at the stage, rather than at the caption unit:

**Example 3**

*Crouch, Touch, Pause, Engage*

ALL: [SHOUT] One, two, three, four, five.

ALFIE: Better.

[THEY REPEAT]
Sound captions need to be included only when they add to what is happening on the stage. If sounds have a purely decorative value, the captioner should resist the temptation of creating a caption. In the example below, the sound caption is absolutely necessary as there is a reference to the sound in the text:

**Example 4**

*Caucasian Chalk Circle*

[WATER DRIPS]

LAVRENTI: What’s that dripping noise?

There are many aspects linking surtitles to television interlingual subtitling. Low (2002) provides a list of features that these two types of activities have in common. He notes that, insofar as both surtitles and interlingual subtitling provide a legible version of the verbal material, the presentation aspect is crucial in their reception by the target audience. Both are size- and time-constrained and therefore rely on condensation in order to achieve an optimal display, both from a formal and temporal perspective. Due to the relatively short time available to display surtitles, the target language version needs to be easy to process and therefore the translation choices need to take into consideration the readability factor. This is different from a traditional translation environment, where lexical and phraseological choices are not necessarily conditioned by temporal constraints. Due to this, ambiguity must be avoided and features which enhance the reading experience, such as grammatically accurate line breaks (Perego 2008), encouraged. Moreover, to enhance the reading experience, each title should represent one idea or unit of information, which may or may not be commensurate with one sentence. Punctuation follows normal rules, repetition is avoided, and all semiotic channels considered when deciding whether to include or exclude brief or ambiguous utterances whose meaning can be retrieved without actually including them in the text of the surtitle. Burton (2009) also calls for simplicity and highlights the importance of avoiding ‘flowery or poetic turns’ (*ibid.*: 62), musical repetitions and interjections such as ‘Ah!’ and ‘Oh!’.

Captioning also shares some of these features, especially the need for legible and easily readable text, use of standard punctuation, reliance on all the semiotic channels to render meaning, use of line breaks and idea units. However, for captioning, the text is never altered and summarization is not an option. The script provided is very rarely modified and the titles are a verbatim representation of the original. In terms of differences between television subtitles and surtitles and captions, the one that stands out is linked to the timing aspect. In television subtitling timing is done in line with the target audience’s reading speed. The BBC monolingual subtitling guidelines (BBC 2009), which follow recommendations from the UK media industry regulator, Ofcom, set 800 characters per minute as the preferred standard for the creation of monolingual English subtitles. Because of this, condensation is at times needed; on other occasions, a verbatim textual transfer is possible due to the editing of the TV material that may incorporate, for example, generous speech–pause ratios. However, in an opera or theatre scenario, back-to-back dialogues are more frequent, and therefore the display time for any given caption potentially much shorter. As text needs to be rendered verbatim and no condensation is possible, reading speed standards are not adhered to. Captions are simply timed following the exact rhythm of the live performance. This may seem counter-intuitive as, in most situations, the speech rates are higher than reading rates.
and therefore the delivery of a line spoken by a character will be usually faster than the time one would need to read it in written form.

It may be argued that synchronizing captions and surtitles with the rhythm of speech delivery may make them inaccessible to the target audience. Empirical studies on this issue are lacking but, as Burton and Holden note, ‘live surtitles should be painted with a broader brush; the text should hang above the audience’s heads as a guide to comprehension, not distracting their attention by cramming in too much text or by flashing past too quickly’ (in Orero and Matamala 2008: 265). This may also apply in the case of captions, as the text displayed on the captioning units is at times used as an anchoring device that assumes a certain degree of residual hearing or familiarity with the play on the part of audience members, or simply that viewers will make use of other meaning-making resources conveyed by other semiotics of the multimodal text.

It is acknowledged that there should always be a link between the captions or the surtitles and the mise-en-scène. Indeed, Ladouceur (2014: 45) maintains that surtitles can actually act as an additional voice through which a second interpretation of the performance is possible. Drawing on an example of a bilingual theatre in Canada, she successfully argues that surtitle translation ‘exceeds its primary function and takes on a creative role within the performance’ (ibid.). She also contrasts the translation of plays with the translation done for surtitles and concludes that the latter needs to stay closer to the original as they co-exist in the delivery. Moreover, surtitles become the voice of the translator as their thoughts and opinions are superimposed on the translation. This is in total contrast to Burton’s suggestion that ‘the subtitler’s aim should be transparency, or even invisibility’ (2009: 63). For captioning, more recently, companies such as Ramps on the Moon made accessibility a central part of their thinking and aesthetics. This involves fully integrating access services—captioning, sign language and audio description—in every play performed by their disabled and non-disabled practitioners.

Another textual aspect worth mentioning at this point pertains to the need to comply with house styles when creating both captions and surtitles. Burton (2009) lists six categories of conventions that may vary depending on the specific technology used in a given assignment or the preference of the company commissioning the work.

1 Number of characters per line. As in the case of subtitling, where strict limits on the number of characters per line apply, each caption or surtitle contains on average up to a maximum of 40 characters. This depends on the size of the safe area where the lines are to be displayed, but also on the font and font size to be used. Preferred fonts are typically Arial, Courier New or Helvetica, with size set typically around 16.

2 In surtitling dashes may be used if a duologue occurs. In captioning, every character’s line begins with a name label, identifying that character. A dialogue between Richard and Hastings in Richard III, will usually be depicted as illustrated in Example 5:

Example 5

Richard III

HASTINGS: Good time of day unto my gracious lord.

RICHARD: As much unto my good Lord Chamberlain.

3 The timing or cueing of the titles, as they are done live, need to keep with the rhythm and the pace of the performance. It is therefore crucial not to give away dramatic
punch-lines too early. It is also important to be aware of the possibility that actors may skip lines at any point, which would make it necessary to quickly adapt the titles to the actual performance.

4 Italics are only used in surtitling and indicate that the voice is off-stage or are used for emphasis. In captioning italics are not used and emphasis is signalled with the help of punctuation or the use of all capitals.

5 Quotation marks are used for reported speech and brackets may identify an aside, although a label such as ASIDE may be used in captioning for this purpose.

6 Titles are usually centred or left aligned. However, just as in subtitling, alignment can follow the position of the characters on the stage. This can be useful especially if two characters’ lines overlap and therefore their renditions can be presented simultaneously. This aspect goes hand in hand with that of mobility, ‘whether or not the text moves synchronically with its emission by the actor (i.e. scroll up) or whether it instead appears on the screen in blocks and remains fixed’ (Oncins 2015: 53). In captioning, scrolling up is used more frequently, whereas in surtitling a blocking style is favoured.

Social implications

Low (2002) points out that the advent of surtitling in the late 80s is linked to a change in the way opera started to be viewed. He suggests that an ever-growing need to make opera accessible in the audience language, long supported by composers such as Wagner and Puccini, played a part in the uptake of this service. As opera had started to alienate audiences, especially younger generations, due to a certain lack of intelligibility, the advent of surtitling brought a solution not only in terms of provision of a more ‘audience-friendly’ performance but also one which could potentially lead to financial gains by an increase in the number of patrons attracted by this service. Low also highlights a third, interesting aspect. Surtitling has made possible a revitalizing of the programming of opera houses: lesser-known works can now be performed, as lack of familiarity with or understanding of the sung original is no longer an impediment.

By providing accessible captioned performances, opera and theatre houses benefit from an increased diversity in their audience. With more than ten million people who are deaf or hard of hearing in the UK alone, this is a population segment which can no longer be ignored. The use of surtitles or captions also marks a change in our consumption preferences. In a text-dominated society, our expectations and abilities to manipulate and use text are rather different now. As Burton (2009: 61) argues, ‘[n]o longer do we sit in the dark for hours at a time, listening to whole acts of Wagner or Richard Strauss with only the dimmest idea of what is actually going on. Surtitles are now largely a necessity and there are likely to be complaints if they are not provided’. Moreover, the presence of surtitles can highlight specific functions of the original text. For example, the humour in Papageno’s opening lines from Mozart’s Magic Flute could potentially be lost to an English-speaking audience, if presented only with the original German. This also brings pressure on directors and actors to remain faithful to the original form of the performance.

Technical implications

Captions and surtitles should allow opera- and theatre-goers—some of whom are deaf, deafened or hard of hearing people—to access the words and formal aspects of a performance. From a practical point of view, the text is usually presented on one or several
display units that are located on, near the set or close to the audience members. A professional captioner or surtitler, sitting in the control box or in a dedicated area, but always in line of sight of the stage and the units, cues the lines of the pre-prepared script in sync with the live performance.

There is no standard system implemented across the world at the moment for providing surtitling and captioning, as the needs of every venue may be different. Display scenarios can vary from a relatively uncomplicated one, where slides are projected on a screen using a digital projector, to settings equipped with complex LED screens, hand-held devices or intelligent glasses. The reminder of this section explores a number of these options and provides an insight into the advantages and disadvantages of each of these systems.

In many venues, projecting slides on a screen located at the top of the proscenium, or on a TV usually situated at the side(s) of the stage, is the only display option available. This usually involves pre-preparing the text using an off-the-shelf general software application such as MS PowerPoint and live cueing the text using the same tool. The simplicity and affordability of this set-up has a number of additional advantages, as it allows professionals to customize text positioning, colour, font and alignment. Moreover, it allows for a block display of text, which has been shown to be more user-friendly than scrolling text (Romero-Fresco 2012). With the help of eye-tracking technology, this research shows that reading patterns are influenced by the way in which the text is displayed. However, notwithstanding its advantages, it is relatively difficult in such a context to handle unexpected situations, such as actors skipping lines, as ideally, when this occurs, the captioner should be able to navigate fast in the script and jump to the point that might require the removal of a caption. Also, text may be washed out by stage lighting—unless the venue is equipped with a high-specification projector.

The second type of ‘open captioning’ environment is represented by large LED display screens used in the set or at the side of the stage. These dedicated special units allow captions to be visible to everyone, while allowing a great deal of customization when it comes to brightness and display of the text. These units make text very readable from a distance, can be customized to display a letterbox shape, and usually come with dedicated software which allows for easy live navigation within the script; crucially, they are reliable and visible under stage lighting conditions and outdoors in the sunshine (Secară and Allum 2010). However, they are expensive, sometimes perceived as unattractive, and are heavy and cumbersome to transport.

‘Closed captions’ implementations, where personal devices are employed, is the third scenario to be considered in relation to the delivery of surtitles and captions. Matamala and Orero (2007) provide an example of the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona where Thin Film Transistor screens installed at the back of every seat provide a customized experience for audience members. They can choose between Catalan, Spanish or English input. Soon after the introduction of these systems, hand-held devices followed. These rely on SD cards or apps for each receiver with text already uploaded or transmitted via wireless technology. Most of these scenarios involve pre-cuing, meaning that the presence of a live captioner is no longer needed, and they may also allow patrons live navigation through the text. This type of closed captioning equipment has the advantage of being unobtrusive and therefore not interfering with the look of the show, which is important for the director. Moreover, if automated, it works from any seat in the house and can be used in all performances. However, they can be expensive to install, the automated timing may not be very accurate and they can cause eye strain as the viewer is exposed to different depths of field, i.e. reading close but looking far away at actors and the stage (Secară and Allum 2010).
In terms of software, a wide variety of tools is available. From PowerPoint to Figaro, Vicom, Naoteck, Supertitles, Opera Voice and Jayex all have been used in surtitling or captioning of live performances. For a comparison of their features, including information on text positioning, typography, format and brightness, see Oncins (2015).

New developments in technology in general, and captioning technology in particular, have revolutionized the way captioning is created in venues where accessibility services are available. Although there are significant differences from one context to another, common trends in the way technology is used in the provision of captioning can be observed. From the point of view of creation and delivery, new tools and technologies are now being combined.

From the point of view of reception, technological developments linked to caption display mechanisms now mean that physical access to surtitles can take a completely new form. In April 2012, the announcement of the new Google Glasses (Forbes 2012) opened the door to a new way of presenting captions. In 2015, winners of the European Living Lab prize brought multilingual surtitles using smart glasses to the internationally acclaimed Avignon theatre festival. As the festival organizers noted, ‘[t]his glasses project fits the Avignon Festival because it offers a way to share cultures in a simple fashion, to make the “others” accessible to a very diverse public. It brings us the surtitling solution for which we have been searching for years: individualized, comfortable and adjustable, without interfering with the overall show’ (Rondin 2015). Therefore, similar to a trend observed in TV broadcasting a few years ago (Byford 2008), we are moving towards solutions which provide viewers with a customized experience and diversify the way in which information is presented to an ever more segmented and discerning audience. At Avignon, two shows were multilingually surtitled: Shakespeare’s King Lear was surtitled into French, English and Mandarin, while Return to Berratham by Angelin Preljocaj was rendered into English, French, German, Italian and Polish. The users were able to customize the colour, size, position and brightness of the text and therefore were in control of the viewing experience. The user could also take control of the timing and what text got projected on the glasses. One of the advantages of this set-up, when compared with the traditional captioning context with display units near the stage, is that viewers enjoy a certain freedom to view the performance and text from whatever seats they choose. By contrast, in traditional caption-unit settings, opera and theatre houses, the seats available to ticket holders requiring accessibility services have been confined to areas of maximum visibility. Moreover, when using the glasses, viewers reported that the physical reading experience was enhanced by having text displayed in an easier to access format (Rondin, ibid.). They preferred this display option over traditional methods, where captions and surtitles are displayed on open screens or at the top of the proscenium. However, while promising, the results reported by the organizers were not scientifically proven and therefore more research is needed to gauge the real impact of using these new technological advances in the cultural sector.

For delivery, speech recognition tools such as Dragon Naturally Speaking are also being tested, especially for remote captioning of live events and for captioning of Q&A sessions at the end of a play or opera. Speech recognition tools are therefore used when a pre-prepared script is not available. In terms of process, the captioner respeaks into a microphone the lines being uttered on stage and the tool, previously trained to recognize the speech patterns of the captioner, uses a customized language model to turn the respoken content into lines of text. These then become available on the display tool of choice, whether these are traditional units and TVs of hand-held devices.

A similar speech recognition tool was used in a recent project carried out by StageTEXT and a variety of other partners. The project, called CaptionCue (CaptionCue
Project, n.d.), looked into the possibility of using speech technology and other triggers from the sound and lighting desk to automatically cue and display pre-prepared captions or surtitles. The project also tested the advantages and disadvantages of different display methods, with captions displayed ‘on an LED screen integrated into the seat, on two LED screen at the side of the stage and on tablets resting on holders for viewers sitting in the balcony’ (StageTEXT 2015: 7). Their findings suggest that the volunteer audience was generally happy with the quality of automatically cued captions even if they were not always synchronous with the speech. Following from that, the National Theatre in London announced the launch in 2017 of its Open Access Smart Capture initiative to revolutionize accessibility in its theatre performances. Its first phase, the ProFile project, enables deaf and hard of hearing audiences to access automatically cued captions via speech technology on smart glasses. The system, which ‘enables users to see captions projected onto lightweight smart glasses’, has been developed by Epson. With this new software application, ‘the captions are automatically cued [and] users can personalise the position, font and background colour of the captions’ (VocalEyes 2017). In terms of display, in the CaptionCue project the context allowing viewers to spend ‘the most time watching the stage and the least time on captions were screens on the side, followed by the integrated screen and, worst of all, tablets’ (ibid.: 8). It is clear that the way in which surtitles and captions are produced and then displayed does have an influence on their reception by the target audience. With more solutions being offered on the market today, and with technological advances continuing apace, it is important to continue investigating and testing different solutions and suggesting scenarios for various contexts that may contribute to maximizing the viewers’ experience.

Reception of surtitles and captions

To understand the importance of the linguistic and technical factors described above, we shall now discuss briefly the reception of surtitles and captions by target viewers. We will take inspiration from the words of Riitta Virkkunen who considers that ‘surtitling has a very specific function: The audience uses the surtitles for communicating with other symbolic modes used in the performance for creating meanings. In practice this means that surtitles mostly serve as a medium for the verbal content but also help to comprehend music and acting’ (2004: 93).

The titles should therefore first and foremost facilitate comprehension and convey meaning. It is thus unfortunate that current captioning display solutions are not ideal from a reception point of view. Indeed, surtitles ‘forcing spectators to shift their focus, even if momentarily, away from the stage, are much more disruptive, since they are directly competing with other stimuli to the visual channels, leaving unimpeded the auditory channel’ (Carlson 2006: 197). Oncins points out that ‘no reception studies have been undertaken to evaluate user satisfaction according to the various positions and presentations’ (2015: 47). Although we can now refer to the StageTEXT study mentioned in the previous section to shed some light on this topic, further studies are needed. In particular, we can draw inspiration and gain significant insights from the multitude of studies carried out in the fields of subtitling and the arts using eye-tracking technology.

We already know that the reading style of every individual will adapt to the situation in which the reading takes place. We should however bear in mind that when reading a multimodal dynamic text such as captions or surtitles, the reading style will adjust to the pace imposed by the display of the information, as long as the resulting strain is not disproportionate.
In these contexts, reading competes with other types of information processing, such as listening and visual search, and may therefore lead to significant cognitive load. In a multimodal context ‘the viewer has to not only manage cognitive resources across different sources of information (verbal and nonverbal, visual and auditory) but also do so without having control over the speed of presentation, unlike in static reading of written or some multimedia texts’ (Kruger and Steyn 2013: 106). Reading in a multimodal environment therefore assumes the management of various simultaneous sources of information that compete for attention. Nevertheless, in a coherently constructed product that needs to be processed, these sources are not to be seen as obstacles but rather as elements that are very frequently used successfully to disambiguate information. This interactive account of language comprehension was documented by Trueswell (2008), who shows that, in linguistically complex situations, the readers’ syntactic parsing decisions are made using the visual referent world. Adults use the visual context to guide their initial interpretation of an ambiguous phrase (Trueswell 2008). In a surtitling and captioning environment, for example, this means that time will be distributed proportionately, depending on their perceived centrality, across the channels delivering linguistic and non-linguistic information, both of which are crucial to the understanding of the intended message.

However, our attention span is known to be limited, and therefore conducting competing strenuous activities is difficult and, sometimes, impossible. For this reason, it is essential to ensure that the way in which we present captions—in terms of font, brightness, display, cueing—is in sync with the needs and abilities of our target viewers. For example, results from research looking into the perception of art works may teach us where to place captioning display units. These studies tell us that, when viewing paintings, fixations made by different groups of people tend to cluster in so-called regions of interest, thus forming areas of maximum fixation on a fixation map. Wooding’s (2002) analysis of the eye movement patterns of different individuals concludes that most people seem to focus on similar zones of interest or centres of interest, even if the viewing order and eye trajectory are different. This seems to be supported by experiments carried out by film editors to determine ‘predicted gaze position[s]’ with a view to incorporate their findings into video coding processes (Peli et al. 2005). In their experiments, using different clips with varying levels of motion, shown on monitors of standard size, Peli et al. (ibid.: 4) report that ‘1/2 time the gaze of more than 15 subjects (out of 20) was contained within an area that was less than about 13% of the movie scene or about 5% of the screen for 4 subjects’. They also report differences between patterns within age and gender groups, whereby ‘the older and male observers’ COIs [centres of interest] were more tightly grouped than the younger and female observers’ (ibid.). If we regard the stage as a canvas or a screen on which a story is projected, it would seem logical to present captions in those areas in or surrounding the stage where our spectators’ visual attention will focus, given the amount of action or volume of information that is being presented there. It could then be argued that, by integrating the captions in an area where the attention of the spectators is maintained, eye strain (Carlson 2006) would be limited if not completely eliminated.

A recent subtitling study, Fox (2014) manipulates the positioning of the subtitles to follow the centres of interest where the visual attention is naturally concentrated during a film scene and shows that viewers’ processing speed is enhanced when presented with subtitles which change position following visual centres of interest in the programme watched. In theatre captioning, this type of integrated captioning has been used by the UK based company Graeae. With accessibility a recognized characteristic of their productions, Graeae is
‘committed to pioneering and evolving the “aesthetics of access”, continually exploring new ways to weave in layers of accessibility and communication (such as BSL interpretation and audio description)’ (Graeae 2015).

The StageTEXT (2015) study mentioned earlier in this section shows that attention when watching captions is efficiently and evenly distributed between the stage and the captioning display unit. Attention while watching captions displayed on LED screens at the side of the stage was divided as follows: 43% of the viewers’ attention focused on the captions and 56% on the actors. In the case of the stage integrated LED, the distribution was 45% and 51% for captions and actors, respectively. Finally, when exposed to captions displayed on the mobile devices, 52% of the viewers’ attention focused on the captions, with the remaining 43% on actors. These findings suggest that the newer display technology proved the most problematic. At any rate, even if the differences between these three display methods were statistically significant, the distribution of attention in all three display environments was deemed efficient for the overall aim of the service.

Looking to the future

According to Laura Arends, former Director of Communications at StageTEXT, the main obstacles to providing captioning services include the lack of ‘awareness that they exist, the scarcity of resources, both financial and in terms of staff time; the fact that there isn’t a good awareness in the arts and culture sector of the number of people who would benefit from the service; and the perception that hearing audiences will find captioning distracting and complain’ (personal communication). Arends also acknowledges the central role technology plays in the provision of captioning services. As she puts it;

when we started, we used displays that we bought over from America and had to be mended in France. They had far fewer LEDs, so they couldn’t show any special characters, and the software was really hard to use. We collaborated with a UK-based software and LED company and created our own bespoke software and displays, which are much better. We’ve really benefitted from the development of technology recently. In particular, the rapid development of Dragon Naturally Speaking software means that we can now use a re-speaker for some events; cheaper Android tablets and the rise in WiFi and SSIS technology have boosted the adoption of hand-held captioning and live subtitles for tours. Moreover, live streaming has improved and is much more able to deal with larger amounts of data, which means we can now offer live subtitling of streamed events. And while GoogleGlass hasn’t transferred into the mainstream, we are now seeing the development of Sony Eyeglasses and other personal captioning technology that could really change captioning in the future.

When asked about the future of captioning, Arends mentions the CaptionCue project aiming to automate captioning in cultural venues, and expects to see more open captioned performances in more theatres—including amateur and all the corners of the country that have not been reached yet. Captioning on demand is an aim for the future. For VocalEyes (2017), the automatic captioning implementation at the National Theatre brings the potential for a new ambitious initiative to automate audio description. Speech technology will be central to that project as well, as various speech models will need to be tested, developed and implemented to deliver the description.
Research questions

A great deal of research has already been carried out in this area. This has involved documenting the history of the field, identifying the translation difficulties the source text poses, as well as the techniques for dealing with those challenges. However, many areas remain unexplored. For example, we are quite some way away from designing and undertaking a sound reception study to assess the way in which titles are read and processed by end users under different experimental conditions—primarily various presentation settings and types of venue. It would also be necessary to carry out a study addressing the evolving needs of title users, and the extent to which their changing needs are met by the services they are being provided with. Conducting a comprehensive evaluation of existing technological tools and exploring the potential integration of new tools in the workflow—e.g. speech recognition for post-show discussions or computer-assisted translation tools for text segmentation and pre-processing—would also pave the way to gain a better understanding of this field and deliver a better service for those who need and enjoy surtitling and captioning. Finally, as we move towards on-demand services, options available to offer surtitling and captioning should also be explored.

Summary

This chapter has provided definitions of surtitling and captioning for theatre and opera and examined the history of these practices. It has surveyed the key features of surtitling in the opera, where surtitling originated as a service, before moving the focus of the discussion to theatre captioning, which enables productions to reach different types of audiences. After discussing the textual, social and technical aspects of surtitling and captioning in these contexts, the chapter also explores the growing formal experimentation driven by technological advancements in the industry.

This chapter has attempted to show that surtitling and captioning services are not to be regarded as ‘un mal necessaire’ (‘a necessary evil’) (Marleau 1982), emerging instead as practices that are nowadays enjoyed and demanded by various groups of people, and even included as an integral element in various theatre companies’ performances. It has been argued that this is possible due to the ever-changing target audience needs and expectations (Secără and Allum 2011, Dewolf 2001), as well as the general enthusiasm surrounding these types of services and the wider opportunities they offer.

Further reading


Şerban, A. and R. Meylaerts (eds) (2014) ‘Multilingualism at the Cinema and on Stage: A Translation Perspective’, Special Issue of Linguistica Antverpiensia 13 | This special issue contains a number of articles on translating for the stage.


Related topics

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7 Respeaking: subtitling through speech recognition
8 Audio description: evolving recommendations for usable, effective and enjoyable practices
17 Multimodality and audiovisual translation: cohesion in accessible films
22 Eye tracking in audiovisual translation research
31 Accessible filmmaking: translation and accessibility from production

References


