

## **Submission to Ofcom's consultation on *The Quality of Live Subtitling***

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### **1. Response to Ofcom's consultation questions**

*Q1. Do consultees agree with the proposal to require broadcasters to measure and report every six months on the average speed of live subtitling in a variety of programmes, based on a sample of segments selected by Ofcom?*

Yes.

*Q2. Do consultees consider that broadcasters should be asked to report separately on different types of live programming? If so, do they agree with the suggestions in paragraph 6.19, or would they suggest different categorisations, and if so, why?*

Yes, we agree that broadcasters should be asked to report separately on different types of live programming. We agree that live news programmes should be included. We view chat shows and entertainment programmes as being similar in scope so either one would make a suitable case study. We would also suggest reports on unscripted discussion programmes (e.g. *Question Time*) where the conversation structure is perhaps less rigid than in news interviews, and programmes which include specialist vocabulary (e.g. outside sports broadcasts). These would offer further measures of how robust any improvements to subtitling actually are.

*Q3. Do consultees consider that the guidance on subtitling speeds should be reviewed? Do consultees agree that, for the time being, it would not be appropriate to set a maximum target for the speed of live subtitling? If not, please explain why.*

Yes. Reading speed is likely to vary between those deaf viewers who have never had hearing and those who have had hearing and lost it. Consequently, it is likely to be difficult to arrive at a target which will work equally well for all deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHOH) viewers.

*Q4. Do consultees agree that it would not be appropriate at this stage to set a maximum target for latency? If not, please explain why.*

Yes.

*Q5. Do consultees agree with the proposal to require broadcasters to measure and report every six months on error rates, on the basis of excerpts selected by Ofcom from a range of programmes?*

Yes – though we suggest in section 2 of our submission that greater clarity is required on what constitutes accuracy of subtitling.

*Q6. Do consultees have any views on the advantages and disadvantages of scrolling versus block subtitles for live-subtitled programmes? Taking account of both the advantages and disadvantages, which approach would consultees prefer, and why?*

We would hypothesise that scrolling subtitles may cause viewers to vary their reading speed, which may in turn prove distracting to them. For this reason we currently view block subtitles as being preferable. However, there may be circumstances where the former is to be preferred. For example, in broadcasts of live comedy, a block subtitle may reveal a punchline ahead of time, thus spoiling the joke. Similarly, in live drama,

where a pause is required between two speaking turns for dramatic effect, a block subtitle may ruin this. In such cases, it may well be that scrolling subtitles are preferable. We would recommend investigating the likely effects of the two subtitling formats on particular types of programmes.

*Q7. What are the factors that might facilitate or hinder the insertion of a delay in live transmissions sufficient to improve the quality of subtitling? Ofcom would particularly welcome the views of broadcasters on this question.*

We can envisage that such a delay may be used as an excuse to censor live broadcasts, which we would not be in favour of.

## **2. Additional information concerning accuracy of subtitling**

We have recently carried out a research project funded by the British Academy (grant no. SG113185) in which we investigated the impact of DHOH subtitles on characterisation in TV drama (specifically, HBO's *The Wire*). Although we concentrated solely on pre-prepared subtitles, we believe that our results have some relevance for live subtitling, particularly of certain types of programmes, e.g. drama, entertainment. (N.B. This section of our submission incorporates elements of our report to the British Academy on the outcomes of our research, and on a draft academic article [McIntyre and Lugea, under review], available on request from the authors).

### *2.1 Description of the research*

Frequently, hearing-impaired subtitles in television drama omit elements of the original character audio dialogue. This is primarily for reasons of space and time: subtitling software allows for only a limited number of characters to be displayed on screen and reading speeds limit the amount of dialogue that it is possible to show. The purpose of this study was to find out whether such omissions are likely to affect the characterisation process that deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHOH) viewers engage in. We carried out a case study of the opening three scenes of the US television drama, *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-08). We compared the DHOH subtitles with a transcript of the original dialogue and isolated all the instances where omissions were made in the subtitles. We then used a model of characterisation developed in stylistics to ascertain whether the elements omitted were likely to contribute to characterisation. In answer to our research questions, we found that: (1) DHOH subtitles of character dialogue can have a detrimental effect on characterisation, though not all changes and omissions are problematic for viewers; (2) whether or not particular linguistic cues for characterisation can be omitted from subtitles without damaging the characterisation process is dependent on the context of the scene, the linguistic behaviour of other characters, and elements of *mise-en-scene*; and (3) stylistic theories of characterisation can inform techniques of DHOH subtitling and potentially improve subtitling practice.

### *2.2 Sample analysis*

This sample of the analysis we carried out is extracted and adapted from McIntyre and Lugea (under review). We analysed three scenes from the first episode of *The Wire*. Scene 3 takes place in a courtroom where a prosecuting attorney is interviewing witnesses in a murder trial. In the quoted subtitles below, underlining indicates an addition to the original audio dialogue while [square brackets] indicate omissions.

S[subtitle] 86 is part of a sequence of questions to the witness, Nakeisha Lyles, from Assistant State Prosecutor, Taryn Hansen: '[And is that] The guard booth in the lobby of the Fremont Avenue high-rise?' A similar omission is made in S88: '[And you're] behind bulletproof glass, with a clear view of the lobby?' While these coordinating conjunctions, subjects and predicates are not necessary for the coherence of the subtitles, their removal means that the sense of the prosecutor building an argument through the sequencing of information is lost. This is compounded by the omission of the proximal deictic *now* in S90: '[Now] Ms Lyles, I know this may be difficult [for you], but can you tell us what you saw?' The function of the deictic *now* is to indicate that this is the culmination of the argument that Hansen has been building through Lyles's responses. Its omission means that this pragmatic effect is lost on DHOH viewers. Furthermore, the deletion of *for you* removes the implication of empathy from Hansen towards her witness. The cumulative effect of these omissions is that a number of characterisation triggers are lost from Hansen's subtitles. The omission of elements of courtroom register may cause DHOH viewers to conceptualise her as less professional than the prototypical lawyer, while the interpersonal elements omitted may well affect the degree to which Hansen is viewed as an empathetic character.

### 2.3 Primary findings

Our primary finding was that DHOH subtitles can impact negatively on the characterisation process for viewers relying on those subtitles. To this end we were able to demonstrate the value of linguistic analysis for informing subtitling practice, thus validating Luyken's (1991) speculation that a better understanding of the semantics and pragmatics of language transfer would be valuable for subtitlers. In addition, we were able to identify two main mechanisms by which characterisation was affected through omissions in the subtitles. The first was as a result of the omission of discourse markers (e.g. *Look, I mean*), which affected potential impressions of interpersonal relations between characters. The second was the omission of register-specific language, which impacted on the functional stylistic effect of whole scenes and their constituent characters. As a result of our research, we have been able to explain the potential effects of particular stylistic choices on the part of subtitlers and, from this, offer a number of suggestions for improving the practice of subtitling for DHOH viewers.

### 2.4 Implications for subtitling practice

Our findings for pre-recorded drama pertain equally to live drama, as well as to all live programmes that include spontaneous conversation (as opposed, for example, to scripted monologues from newsreaders). In line with Luyken (1991) and Gottlieb (1994) we advocate the value of insights from linguistics, which enable a systematic means of assessing the functional effects of particular stylistic choices. For example, the BBC's current Online Subtitling Editorial Guidelines (BBC 2009) include the advice 'Although it is often tempting to edit by removing conversational phrases like "you know", "well", "actually", and so on, remember that such phrases can often add flavour to your text.' Insights from linguistics enable us to explain precisely the effects of such phrases and their impact on characterisation specifically, beyond the vague notion that they 'add flavour'. Consequently, training in linguistics (and particularly stylistics) is likely to be a valuable addition to the skill set of professional subtitlers.

## *References*

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