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Report on the results of an online survey on subtitle presentation times and line breaks in interlingual subtitling

Part 1: Subtitlers

by Agnieszka Szarkowska

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The project **"Exploring Subtitle Reading Process with Eye Tracking Technology (SURE)"** has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant Agreement No. 702606. It is carried out by Dr Agnieszka Szarkowska at the Centre for Translation Studies, University College London, under the supervision of Prof. Jorge Díaz Cintas.

The goal of the project is to experimentally study the subtitle reading process to establish quality indicators on optimum subtitle presentation times (reading speed) and line breaks (segmentation).

Phase 1 of the project identifies current market practices on the subtitle presentation times and line breaks in an online survey among professional subtitlers (Part 1) and subtitling companies (Part 2). Results of the surveys will be used in the next phase of the project to inform the design of the eye tracking study on subtitle presentation times and segmentation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Agnieszka Szarkowska is currently Research Fellow at the Centre for Translation Studies, University College London (2016-2018). Since 2007, she has also been Assistant Professor in the Institute of Applied Linguistics, University of Warsaw. She is the founder and head of the Audiovisual Translation Lab (AVT Lab, www.avt.ils.uw.edu.pl) and specializes in audiovisual translation, especially subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing and audio description. She is a member of European Association for Studies in Screen Translation (ESIST), European Society for Translation Studies (EST) and an honorary member of the Polish Audiovisual Translators Association (STAW).

Email: a.szarkowska@ucl.ac.uk
www.facebook.com/SureProject

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Centre for Translation Studies
University College London
Gower Street
London
WC1E 6BT
UK

Results of an online survey on subtitle presentation times and line breaks in interlingual subtitling conducted among professional subtitlers

1. INTRODUCTION

This study is about subtitle presentation times and line breaks in interlingual subtitling. Comfortable presentation times and line breaks allow viewers to follow the text in the subtitle and to have enough time to look at the on-screen action. If the subtitle presentation rate is too fast and the segmentation is poor, viewers may find it difficult to follow and understand the subtitles.

Subtitle presentation time (also known as **reading speed**) is usually expressed using either characters per second (cps) or words per minute (wpm). The most famous rule on the subtitle presentation times is known as 'the 6-seconds rule' (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007). According to this rule, a full two-line subtitle of should be displayed for the maximum of six seconds – not less, because viewers will not have time to read the subtitle, but not more, as they will re-read it if it is displayed longer. The 6-seconds rule translates into **12 cps** and **144 wpm** (Martí Ferriol 2013, p. 203; Romero Fresco 2009, p. 114). However, some broadcasters now use higher reading speeds on the grounds that viewers are now able to read faster (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007).

Subtitle segmentation (also referred to as **line breaks**) is about how words are placed in the first and second line in two-line subtitles. Segmentation can be based on semantic and syntactic considerations, where linguistic units are put together, or on more visual considerations regarding the shape of the subtitle (a pyramid/trapeze or a rectangle).

The changing audiovisual landscape calls for more up-to-date research on how fast people can read subtitles and to revisit the quality standards accordingly. This study sets outs to investigate optimum subtitle presentation times and segmentation. As the first step, an online survey with professional subtitlers was conducted to establish current market practices and subtitlers' views on quality, particularly with regard to reading speed and line breaks.

2. THE SURVEY

The survey was addressed to professional subtitlers. It was distributed online in August 2016 through subtitling organisations (AVTE, Polish Association of Audiovisual Translators STAW), Facebook Page (www.facebook.com/SureProject), LinkedIn, social media and personal networking.

It consisted of 16 close- and open-ended questions using online Microsoft Forms (see the Appendix), as shown below:
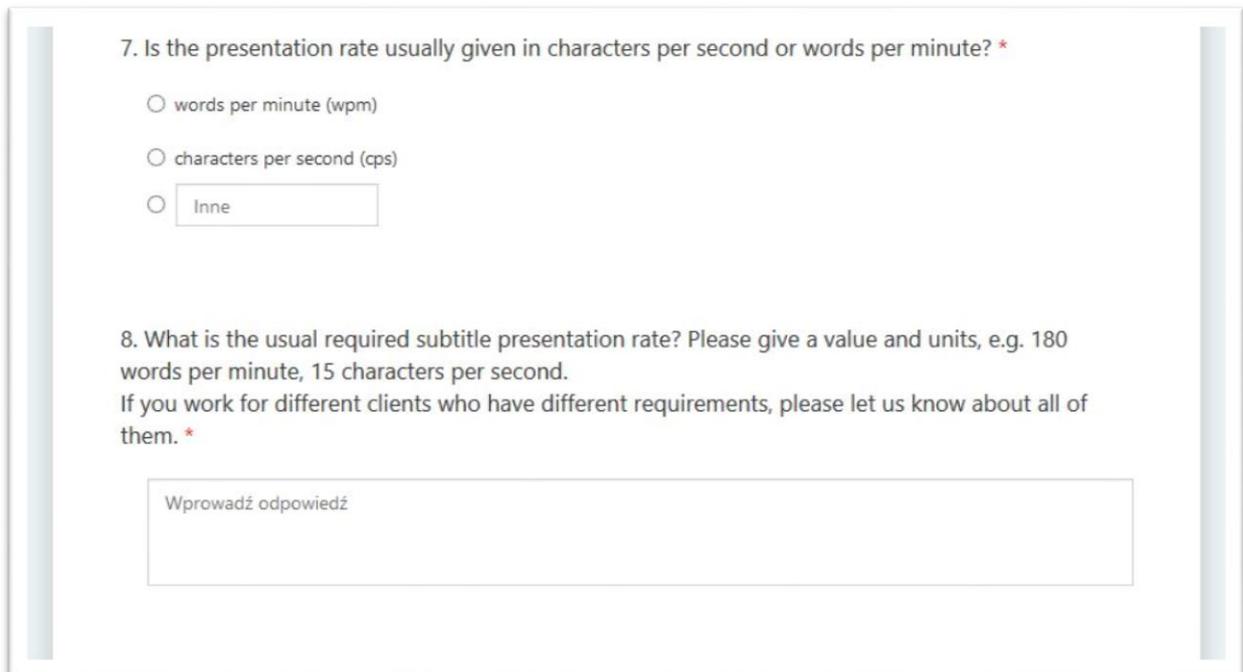
The survey was completed by 237 professional subtitlers from 27 countries.

Below I report on the results, starting from the profile of respondents, their views and market practices related to subtitle presentation times and segmentation, concluding with general aspects of the quality of interlingual subtitling.

3. PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

How long have you worked as a subtitler?

Respondents who took part in the survey were at various stages of professional career: from very experienced subtitlers to novices.

Most of them had at least a few years of experience in professional subtitling.

The mean number of years of experience in professional subtitling reported by respondents was **12.6 years** (SD=9), ranging from 1 to 40 years.

Which country are you based in?

Respondents came from **27 countries**, both in and outside Europe, as shown in the table on the right.

The largest group of respondents came from countries with long-standing subtitling traditions, such as the Netherland, Finland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. However, the countries with dubbing and voice-over traditions, including France, Spain, and Poland, were also well represented.

Country	Number of respondents
Argentina	1
Australia	2
Austria	1
Belgium	3
Brazil	1
Canada	1
Croatia	4
Denmark	13
Finland	37
France	18
Germany	5
Greece	1
Iran	2
Israel	1
Italy	4
Netherlands	36
New Zealand	1
Norway	9
Poland	21
Portugal	15
Slovakia	1
Slovenia	4
Spain	24
Sweden	8
Switzerland	2
UK	21
USA	1
TOTAL	**237**

Do you mostly work for companies based in your country or for international companies?

Most subtitlers work for local companies (118 people) or for both local and international companies (62 people), while 40 people declared to work mostly for international companies.

Are you usually required to do spotting (insert the in- and out-times of subtitles)?

A vast majority of subtitlers declared to spot the subtitle files they work with. Only 22 people said they work with master files that they are not allowed to change.

This shows that the respondents were familiar not only with translation-related aspects of the subtitling process, but also with technical intricacies related to timing.

Are you required to spot subtitles?	No. of respondents
Yes, I usually spot the subtitle files I translate.	152
No, I mostly work on templates with time codes and I am not allowed to change them.	22
No, I mostly work on templates, but I am allowed to change them if necessary.	47

Taken together, the group of subtitlers participating in this survey are a large and varied sample of experienced subtitlers representing different parts of the world and different segments of the audiovisual translation market.

Being acquainted both with the translation and spotting aspects of the subtitling process, they are well-suited to provide informative answers to the questions posed in this study and to help paint a comprehensive picture of the current market practices related to subtitle presentation times and segmentation.

4. SUBTITLE PRESENTATION TIMES

What is the usual maximum number of characters per line?

Given a variety of languages the subtitlers work with, the maximum number of characters reported by the respondents varied greatly: from 12-13 in the case of Chinese characters to 45-50 characters in the case of languages with alphabetic script.

The most frequent range provided by the subtitlers was between **37 to 42 characters per line** (for alphabetic script). However, as stated by a number of respondents, the maximum number of characters per line is not relevant when working with proportional font, where each character can take up different amount of space depending on the character width.

The number of characters per line reported by the subtitlers in this study shows a slight increase compared to classic sources on subtitling, e.g. by Prof. Géry d'Ydewalle and his colleagues (see d'Ydewalle, Van Rensbergen and Pollet, 1987 or d'Ydewalle, Praet, Verfaillie, and Rensbergen, 1991) who used **32 characters** as the maximum displayed for 6 seconds. The reason for this change may stem from technological developments in subtitling and multimedia equipment, particularly increase in the size of TV screens compared to the 1980s, when many studies on subtitling were conducted. What is more, modern films and TV series seem to be more tightly-worded than before, which in turn puts more pressure on subtitlers in terms of reading speeds.

Most importantly, **higher number of characters per line translates into an increase in reading speed**.

In your work as a subtitler, are you usually given instructions on the subtitle presentation times (reading speed)?

Most subtitlers in this study stated that they are given instructions on the presentation times "always" or "most of the time". This may be taken as evidence of the professionalization of the audiovisual translation market and subtitling as being a largely norm-governed activity.

Some respondents who did not state that they are given instructions on the subtitle presentation times believed that instructions are not necessary: *"After 25 years I need no instructions"* and *"It is common knowledge which reading speed rules to apply"*.
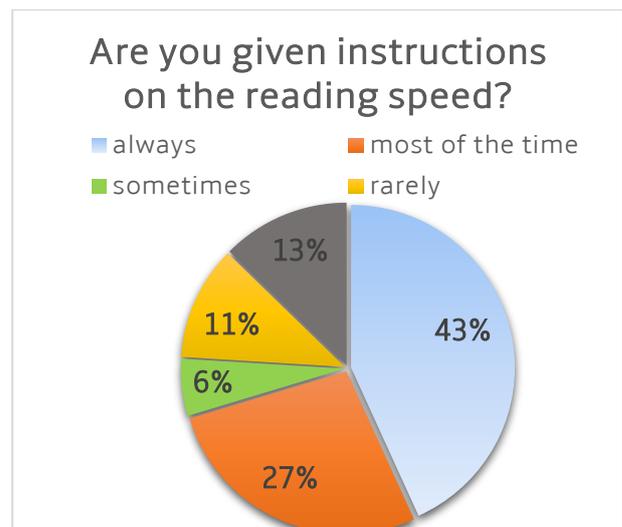

One subtitler noted that instructions on reading speed are not necessary when working with templates as they are already included in the template.

Is the presentation rate usually given in characters per second or words per minute?

Most subtitlers in this study (117 people, see the chart on the right) are given instructions in **characters per second** (cps). Some people are provided with both cps and wpm values.

It was also noted that different subtitling programmes may use different algorithms to calculate the presentation times, which may lead to some inconsistency.

The subtitlers who are given instructions in **words per minute** are based mostly in the UK, Australia, Spain, Portugal and Iran.
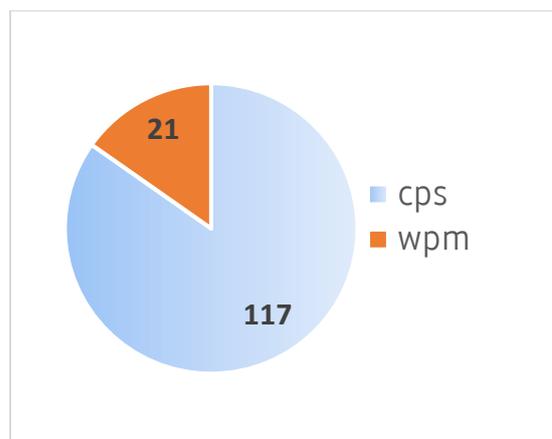
Other measures reported by the subtitlers included **characters per minute** (cpm) and **lines per second** (one full line – 3 seconds, two full lines – 6 seconds).

What is the usual required subtitle presentation rate?

The answers to this question varied greatly, ranging from 10 cps to 24 cps. Several subtitlers stated that some clients do not have any maximum subtitle presentation rate.

The most frequently reported subtitle presentation times were:

1. For cps: 10, 12, 15, 16 and 17
2. For wpm: 160, 180 and 200
3. For characters per minute: 820-850

Subtitle presentation times were found to depend on countries, with many subtitlers reporting the following rates for their countries[1].

- 9-10 cps in Norway (17 cps for Netflix),
- 10-12 cps in the Netherlands,
- 12 cps in Denmark,
- 12-15 cps in Germany,
- 12-16 cps in Finland,
- 14 cps for Sweden and Brazil,
- 15-16 cps for France,
- 15-17 cps for Poland,
- 180 wpm in the UK.

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[1] This is not to say that all subtitlers from those countries consistently reported the same rates.

There were individual differences among the subtitlers in each country, but wherever general patterns emerged, they are presented above.

An interesting pattern regarding subtitle presentation times emerged from the answers and comments provided in open-ended questions with regard to **Nordic countries**. Many subtitlers reported quite a low subtitle presentation rate of **10-12 cps**, together with the need to make considerable cuts in the original text. This approach is best summed up by the following quote from a subtitler taking part in the survey:

*"I think the Nordic model is pretty good. By that I mean **a relatively low reading speed with a high degree of content compression**. When I watch non-Nordic films subtitled into English, there is sometimes so much text on the screen for such a short time I don't have time to read everything. And if I do, there is no time left to enjoy the visuals. A compressed subtitle is better, giving the viewer more time to enjoy the actual film."*

Many subtitlers said that they use the measurement based on the number of lines and seconds, for instance at least 2 seconds for 2-4 words, 3 seconds for one full line and 6 seconds for two whole lines, the maximum of 7 seconds per one whole subtitle.

Some subtitlers were not sure about the exact presentation times they use. One person stated: *"Not sure what the presentation rate is (in numbers), since this is indicated visually in the subtitling tool that I use. I just need to make sure the subtitle is in 'the green zone'."* And another declared: *"I don't know. It is in the settings of the software."*

If you are not given any instructions regarding the subtitle presentation rate, what is the rate you use? Why?

Whenever subtitlers are not instructed on the required presentation time, they use the rate they believe is the best.

This rate, again, differs between different subtitlers and different countries, most often ranging from **12 to 16 cps**.

12 cps was the standard declared to be used by in Finland, based on *"a long history and extensive experience in quality subtitling"*.

However, another person stated that the rate of 14 cps was used for Swedish subtitles in Finland, and 16 cps for Finnish *"based on investigations and recommendations"*. A rate of 14 cps was declared to be widely used in Sweden because, as argued by one subtitler in the survey, *"that is what is needed for subtitles in Swedish, according to research"*.

A number of subtitlers declared to use 15 cps as their preferred rate, stating:

- *"I feel this is what the average viewer will probably be able to read comfortably."*
- *"It seems to me to be the optimal setting, both for the viewer and me as a subtitler/translator."*
- *"It's a generally accepted norm."*
- *"It is the standard used in the industry."*
- *"It's a comfortable reading speed for most viewers."*
- *"A maximum of 15 characters per second. Because more is hard to read."*

At the same time, the rate of 15 cps was strongly opposed by other subtitlers who claimed that:

- *"The suggestion that 15 characters per second could be acceptable is ridiculous."*
- *"15 cps does hardly force subtitlers to compress the contents of the text (which is usually the part of the job that is most time consuming) so that one can easily produce 400-500 subtitles a day or more. This of course affects the quality of the subtitles substantially."*

A person who subtitles at 16 cps said: *"I think 16 cps is fine for most viewers who read the subtitles in their native language"*. Another subtitler who uses the rate of 6-8 words per 3 seconds explained that *"This is the general norm for easy reading to allow for comprehension and appreciation of medium."* One subtitler declared to use the rate of 150 words per minutes, arguing that *"this is the standard rate that I think it's perfect for average viewer for a text of average complexity"*.

To recap, **subtitlers generally agree that some sort of maximum presentation time is necessary** to provide viewers with time to comfortably read the subtitles and to follow the film. The exact time, however, is different depending on the country and on individual beliefs of particular subtitlers. It also shows the need for more up-to-date research on optimum reading speeds that could inform current practices.

How do you make sure that you stay within the limits of the required presentation times?

The vast majority of people (207 out of 237) declared they use their subtitling software to make sure they stay within the reading speed limits. 16 people said they know from experience how much time people need to read a subtitle and 3 people declared to use a table with maximum number of characters per unit of time that they consult.

"It's a rule of thumb. If the software indicates one particular subtitle is "in the red" (e.g. too many characters), you use your own judgement. No point being robotic about it. But on the whole, very few subtitles I hand in will be in the red."

Do you sometimes send your subtitle files back to the client without complying completely with the reading speed requirements?

Subtitlers taking part in the survey reported that they generally strive to adhere to the requirements regarding the presentation times, but they are also ready to sacrifice the rates if absolutely necessary.

Out of 237 people, 70 said that they always send the files which completely meet the reading speed criteria specified by the client in every single subtitle and 141 admitted that they sometimes send the assignments with some subtitles not meeting the reading speed criteria. Only 6 people stated that they prioritise content over reading speed, so their subtitles frequently do not meet the required reading speed criteria.

These findings are important as they demonstrate **the existence of professional ethos**, manifested by **the recognition of professional norms and standards** as well as the readiness to follow them.

At the same time, the results also show that the rules on subtitle presentation times are not set in stone: subtitlers do not act mechanically, but make informed decisions based on their beliefs regarding viewers and their needs as well as on the type of audiovisual material they are working with.

This is visible in the statements below:

- *"When it comes to reading time, I think a lot about content, language of origin and editing. **The more difficult the content (for instance science or verse), the longer the reading time.** When I subtitle from Italian to Danish, I try to give the viewer more reading time than when I subtitle from English because Danes in general are much more familiar with English than with Italian. It is also my experience that **the more edits there are, the longer it takes for people to read the texts** so I try to allow for more reading time when a scene/program has many edits."*

- *"The default presentation times are one thing, and I always do my best to comply with them, but there is more to it than meets the eye. I always take into consideration **the topic and the target group**. If the programme is mostly meant for children, elderly people, immigrants etc., I translate in such a way that leaves more time for the viewers to read the subtitles. Same thing when the topic is very demanding."*

- *"I use 14 cps as my rule of thumb, but always try to consider things like the **intended audience, the style and speed of the programme** itself, the total amount of visual information presented to the viewer at any given moment (captions on screen, etc.)*

Some subtitlers pointed out lack of knowledge about subtitling on the part of clients and the need to educate them. One person said:

- *"The company I work for often sends the subtitles to the client, who often doesn't understand why everything isn't translated. It's often a problem to explain that I also want the viewer **to enjoy the images on the screen and not just be glued to the subtitles**. The company I work for and I have differing opinions on this issue, as I subtitle into English, and many of the people who read the subtitles, I believe, are not native speakers of English and therefore need more time to read the subtitles."*

This shows the need for subtitling organisations and academia to reach out to the general public and educate them in crucial aspects of audiovisual translation in general and subtitling in particular.

In your career as a subtitler, have you observed any changes in the subtitle presentation times?

Surprisingly, no clear-cut answer emerged in the question whether subtitle presentation times have changed over the last years.
85 respondents believe that they haven't changed, while 74 stated they have gone up. Only 19 argued they have gone down.

However, when we look into the answers provided only by subtitlers with a greater experience, there is a slight prevalence towards **the reading speed going up**:
out of 94 subtitlers who had 15+ years of experience in subtitling, 39 people stated the presentation times went up, 7 people that they went down, and 31 people argued they haven't changed much.

At the same time, in open-ended questions, a number of participants argued that the presentation times have actually gone up, stating that viewers are now able to read at a faster pace than before:
"I think modern man can handle a higher presentation rate."
Some people claimed that the presentation times have gone up as a result of **the arrival of international companies on local subtitling markets**:

- *"It's clear that the presentation rate has gone up on the Dutch market since the rise of DVD and VOD subtitling and the involvement of UK/US companies.
These do not have a subtitling culture like the Netherlands, where subtitling has been around for over 80 years. I used to impose stricter reading speeds on my work than the ones required by clients and try to convince them of the need to reduce speed. However, with declining payment rates, I don't have the scope to do this anymore, plus it seems to be a losing battle anyway."*

- *"They went up everywhere around us. Since I have some influence on how we configure the software at my main employer, I've taken care we never changed the value upwards from 10.
However, not everybody observes the rule as strictly."*

Another issue raised by the respondents in connection with increasing subtitle presentation times was cost: since condensation is one of the most time-consuming aspects of interlingual subtitling, **increase in presentation times allows for less condensation of the original text** and enables people to work faster:

- *"The companies I work for use the lower pay rates of other companies that allow their translators to work with reading speeds of 15 cps as an excuse to lower their own pay rates. 15 cps does hardly force subtitlers to compress the contents of the text (which is usually the part of the job that is most time consuming) so that one can easily produce 400-500 subtitles a day or more.*

*This of course affects **the quality of the subtitles** substantially. In order to be able to compete with those other companies, my clients gradually have been lowering their standards and number of quality control people. I still keep working the way I have always done, 200-250 subtitles a day, reading speed 10-12 cps, always doing necessary quality checks, etc. Even if this means that I have to make longer working days to maintain a similar level of income."*

Someone argued that:

- *"There seem to be more clients who will allow a higher cps these days but they are usually the clients who pay their translators the lowest rates."*

Do the subtitle presentation times differ depending on the format? (DVD, cinema, TV, VOD)?

Many people confirmed that the presentation times may depend on the format (113 – yes, 39 – no, I don't know - 72), with the DVDs being fastest.

- *"I know that for cinema supposedly you could use more characters, because those subtitles are "easier to read" or something. I don't know if there's any scientific research backing this up and I tend to be wary. For TV, especially the main public channels, guidelines are usually adhered to a little more strictly. The DVD market seems to be a bottom rate market where anything goes. (Same goes for the quality of the translations there.)"*

- *"When people complain about poor subtitles, they tend to come up with examples of bad translations but when I watch DVDs that have poor subtitles, the main problem is usually that the subtitles aren't condensed enough with literal translations leading to absurd reading speeds, which means you can no longer watch the programme since you're just reading the subtitles."*

Some people stated this depends more on the client than on the format.

5. SUBTITLE SEGMENTATION (LINE BREAKS)

How do you usually segment a two-line subtitle (divide it into two lines), assuming the subtitles are centre-aligned?

The majority of subtitlers recognise the need for the good quality of line breaks and segmentation,
both within and between subtitles:

- *"I think a good segmentation with good separation in semantic units is paramount to have good subtitles."*

- *"The division of multi-subtitle sentences should be done with great care and in a fashion that allows the viewer to follow the sentence easily."*

- *"Good subtitles are concise and easy to read. They are divided and segmented logically and the audience has enough time to read them."*

- *"A good and precise translation, with properly divided semantic units are the keys."*

- *"I think good segmentation makes a huge difference. I always keep the semantic units together, even if it means I have to shorten my translation."*

- *"I try to keep related content together; I try to avoid having the second half of one sentence together with a new sentence that starts a new topic. And I don't want to end up with subtitles that contain the end of one sentence plus the beginning of another sentence."*

Most respondents stated that they prioritise **keeping semantic units together** and that these considerations override line length preferences. When asked to choose between the first or second line shorter, more subtitlers opted for **the first subtitle line to be shorter**, resembling a pyramid or a trapeze:

- *"I prioritise keeping the semantic units together, but try to form the subtitle in such a way that the first line becomes shorter naturally. If it isn't possible, then the first line may be longer."*

- *"The good subtitles are easy to read, i.e. semantic units are kept together, the subtitle is divided after a punctuation mark. If possible I tend to keep the upper line shorter than lower so that the subtitle is faster to read."*

- *"I prefer the pyramid structure, but a natural, readable text division always has priority, even if this leads to a much shorter second line."*

However, a number of other subtitles stated they prefer the subtitles of similar line length.

- *"I segment my subtitles at logical semantic breaks in the sentence so that they read logically. I prefer them to be symmetric whenever possible (roughly same width for both subs), because it looks better, but segmenting in a logical spot takes precedence."*

The issue of line breaks relates not only to the layout of information within a two-line subtitle, but also to the maximum number of speakers in one subtitle.

- *"Some clients insist that there should only be two speakers per subtitle. That leads to quite ridiculous subtitles, with the top line being a full 37 characters, and the bottom line containing as few as four. And that looks awful and draws too much of the viewer's attention to it."*

Segmentation may also depend on the country. In countries with bilingual subtitles like Finland, cinema subtitles are presented both in Finnish and in Swedish simultaneously, one per row, so the issue of line breaks is not relevant. Some subtitlers from Scandinavian countries noted that subtitles there are always left-aligned, which makes the pyramid/trapeze dilemma less relevant.

In Russian, where words tend to be longer than in English, as stated by one respondent, *"keeping semantic units together is more difficult"* and *"semantic units, especially smaller ones, are less pronounced in Russian. Thus, I personally have more relaxed requirements to segmentation when I work with Russian subtitles."*

Does the way you segment two-line subtitles depend on the format? (DVD, TV, cinema, VOD)?

Some subtitlers stated they only work with one format (TV mostly), so they were unable to give an informed opinion. For most of them, however, the format does not impact segmentation (29 –yes, 168 – no, 27 – I don't know). One person argued that the quality of segmentation in web videos is much lower:

- *"Fortunately, segmentation is usually OK in my country when it comes to TV and cinema subtitles - in web videos segmentation is often disastrous, but that's another story. This too is important since it helps the viewer to process the subtitle texts so each and every subtitle should be a grammatical unit."*

To conclude, line breaks are often included in the house style guides by many companies and can be considered a straightforward parameter of subtitling quality. However, the existence of many differing styles and different beliefs which of them are most efficient may lead to confusion, and calls for more research.

- *"More subtitlers should divide the subtitles based on semantic units, that is how the brain processes language."*
- *"It's all a matter of common sense. Which is why some subtitlers persist in leaving trailing articles and in splitting sense groups for the whole of their career without understanding what is required of them."*

6. QUALITY

In their final comments in the survey, subtitlers raised a number of issues related to quality, reading speed, segmentation, spotting, and the rates they are paid.

Invisibility

The most frequently cited principle was that **good subtitles are 'invisible'**, as shown by the comments below:

- *"A good subtitle is like a pair of glasses. It helps you get the picture, but it doesn't distract in any way. (quote: Floris Blommaert, Dutch subtitler, 1953-2016)"*
- *"For me, good subtitles should be close to invisible. They should be read easily and at a glance so one can enjoy the image."*
- *"Good subtitles are those which you don't see. You read them without noticing them."*
- *"Good subtitles don't stand out on the screen."*
- *"Subtitles are good when the viewer doesn't notice them."*
- *"I try to make my subtitles as 'invisible' as possible, but I also like playing with language and can use lots of time finding rhymes and making jokes work."*
- *"A good subtitle should not detract the viewer from watching content."*
- *"Good subtitles are the kind you don't notice, since they're idiomatic and without misinterpretations and spelling errors."*

- *"For me, good subtitles are the ones you don't notice. Where the translation, dialogue flow, reading speed, nuances of language etc. all form a synthesis that enhances the viewer's experience."*
- *"Good subtitles are the ones you don't even notice, but afterwards you feel like you understood every word that was being said – in a language that you don't understand at all."*
- *"Good subtitles are clear and concise and easily understood. You could say that subtitles are best when they are in a sense invisible e. g. the reading experience is so smooth that the viewer hardly notices she/he is reading."*
- *"Subtitling is not a mathematical issue. Subtitles are meant to render a viewer the best viewing experience possible. Subtitles should be "invisible". Accomplishing this requires skill and experience. It's an art form."*

The comments above confirm that the invisibility of subtitles is a frequently reiterated theme, both in the subtitling profession and the academia. Gottlieb (2001, p. 51) speaks of 'transparent' translation and Lindberg, in his guidelines for Danish subtitlers, states: "Good subtitles are those you *never* notice" (Pedersen, 2011, p. 22). Pedersen (2011) even proposes to extend Coleridge's concept of 'suspension of disbelief' to subtitling, claiming that subtitlers try to make their work "as unobtrusive as possible" (p. 22) to facilitate the reception of subtitles for viewers.

Drop in quality

In the eyes of many translators, the quality of subtitling has gone down in recent years. According to study participants, the reasons for this include the fall in rates, rise in reading speed, widespread use of templates, lack of proofreading/quality control and an influx of inexperienced people to the profession.

- *"The quality of subtitles is not as important as 15 years ago, unfortunately. Companies are paying less and less and **do not hire proof readers** to save money. Companies are hiring young, unexperienced staff to get the work done cheaply.* **Since the introduction of templates, spotting is not as important as it used to be**. *I feel it's a downward spiral with more and more viewers complaining about bad quality. This can only be solved by **introducing a minimum fee per subtitle**."*
- *"In general, I find subtitle quality declining, especially in the DVD market and new media [...]. Poor Dutch translations, **ridiculous reading speeds** and **lousy spotting**."*
- *"The quality of subtitling in the Netherlands is dwindling fast because of the competition of international translation agencies who seem to care very little for **the income of their translators** who are usually freelancers."*
- *"I think there are many subtitling companies nowadays which do not care enough about the quality of subtitles. They care more about making money. **Rates for subtitlers are generally too low**. This has a negative effect on the quality of subtitles."*
- *"The quality is going down fast, mainly because the world of subtitling/broadcasting is based on stinginess and greed. Networks, even the big ones [...] only care about money and have never given a toss about quality. My priority is quality, but that's becoming harder every day and I'm forced to find other work in the translation and/or language field."*
- *"Subtitling is a specialty. Not every good translator is automatically a good subtitler. Unfortunately for many companies offering subtitling work **low rates** are much more important than high quality."*
- *"Due to the severe **drop in rates and the use of templates**, reading speeds have become ever higher. Highly trained subtitlers are deemed too expensive, so people who have had little or no training now simply type Dutch words into English templates without much regard for reading speeds or quality."*
- *"As with all good work, high-quality subtitling takes time and I only ever accept jobs that allow me to do my work to the best of my abilities... and that pay accordingly."*
- *"DVD subtitles seem to be of lower quality than the ones seen on TV and cinema, 'cos the DVD subtitlers are paid less and work with too tight schedules and with **templates that simply should be banned (you can't fit different languages into the same format without making a poor outcome** – sentence structures vary between languages so much that there's no point in using templates - the outcome is unnatural)."*
- *"DVD **presentation times seem to be downright ridiculous today** (too fast). Accompanied by **illogical semantic breaks** this contributes to significant deterioration in cohesion and viewer experience."*

Important as it is, the quality of subtitling is difficult to assess using objective measures; therefore, it is often the case that stakeholders focus mainly on the aspects of subtitling which are more tangible and measurable, like the reading speed or spotting. However, as noted by one subtitler, the quality of the actual translation, that is the transfer from the source to the target language, tends to be neglected:

- *"Unfortunately, I find both my work place and the clients **focus much more on the technical aspects** of the subtitling (such as cps, technical preferences such as centre alignment, italics or no italics, raising, etc.) **than on the actual translation**. I work full time as a subtitler for a company with many clients, and I fill in a score card every week. It is sometimes frustrating that everyone seems to focus on* the technical aspects, rather than the quality of ones work!"

- *"**Quality in subtitling is a major issue and it cannot be assessed based on technical /linguistic /cultural questions only**. The quality of subtitles must be seen in the context of the quality of the subtitled product as a whole. In that sense, professional realities, academic assessments as well as subjective perceptions of what a good set of subtitles looks like must be taken into account."*

Condensation

Many subtitlers in the survey stressed the necessity to condense the text. Interestingly, this is what distinguishes interlingual subtitling from its intralingual counterpart for the deaf and hard of hearing, which has seen heated debates on whether subtitles should be verbatim or edited (Szarkowska, Krejtz, Klyszejko, & Wieczorek, 2011). **In interlingual subtitling, text reduction and condensation seem to be unquestionable** (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007) and the translation aspect of the job is brought to the fore:

- *"All too often you see translations where someone's just been busy translating a text word for word, without **paying attention to the actual video product**: they haven't looked at the function of the dialogue, at what's being said and what's important (and what you can easily leave out in the translation without harming the viewers' experience)."*

- *"I think the subtitles should often represent not the literal meaning but **the intention of the original text**."*

- *"Many subtitling translations are way **too literal**, resulting in gibberish Dutch, or in a text that may be a literal rendering of the dialogue spoken, but not of the intent behind the words."*

- *"In Denmark**, we condense quite a lot**, so we prioritize the reading speed. But that only means (I think) that we focus even more on getting the *meaning* across, even if **we often can't translate very literal** because of the time restraint. So, to me (and many Danish subtitlers), good subtitles get the meaning of the dialogue across to the viewer; not only *what* is being said, but also *how* it is being said."*

- *"Interestingly, Dutch subtitlers used to be very proud of their ability to condense. Recently, some of them tried to get the companies to allow more characters per line. They believed they could earn more money that way, but of course* **the art of subtitling degrades into the art of fast-typing***."*

- *One middleman client (no spotting, I work with an English template) accepts increasingly high reading speeds. It's bordering on the ridiculous. Their software flags subtitles with too much text to the time, but no one cares. If I do proofs for them I always try to shorten the subtitles, but the company is not bothered. They always prioritize content. But* **what's the point of translating everything that is said** *("hm", anyone?)* **if the viewer can't follow the plot***?*

- *"Some subtitles are poorly done, obviously work of amateurs, when there is* **too much content and there is not enough time to read** *and poor cueing.* **Good subtitles should be concise** […].*"

- *"I think that good subtitling is imaginative and makes good use of the possibilities that the target language offers. It neither can nor should follow the original too rigidly, because this tends to kill style and beauty and lead to empty, albeit perhaps formally correct, translations."*

- *"I think reading speed is a very important factor in determining subtitle quality. I sometimes get subtitle files that have been done elsewhere based on an English template file and these subtitles invariably have far too high reading speeds of 18 to (in some cases) over 30 cps! When people complain about poor subtitles, they tend to come up with examples of bad translations but when I watch DVDs that have poor subtitles,* **the main problem is usually that the subtitles aren't condensed enough with literal translations leading to absurd reading speeds***, which means you can no longer watch the programme since you're just reading the subtitles."*

The need to condense the text and to avoid excessive subtitle presentation times is rooted in the conviction that apart from reading the subtitles, viewers also need time to follow the on-screen action:

- *"Good subtitling requires really processing the spoken text. Because the viewer can't usually go back to check, the thought behind the words must be superclear, eloquently expressed, logically segmented and sufficiently concise to allow an unhurried presentation rate."*

- *"A quality translation gives the spectator enough time to also enjoy the picture, you have to know and take the time to compress the message to its essence."*

- *"There has to be time to look at the whole image on the screen, not just the subtitles."*

- *"They should be concise in order to allow viewers to both watch the images and read the subtitles."*

8. CONCLUSIONS

This study has brought a number of interesting observations on the quality of subtitling in general and on subtitle presentation times and segmentation in particular.

Most subtitlers declare to work with **characters per second**, with the average reading speed ranging from **10 to 16 cps** and the maximum number of characters per line from **37 to 42**. For the (in)famous 6-seconds rule, this increase in the maximum number of characters per line (from 32 in the 1980s) means that more text can be displayed using the same subtitle presentation time: max. 64 characters per subtitle in the 1980s and max. 84 characters now.

Differences in the subtitle presentation times were found to depend on the country and region – with Scandinavian countries preferring lower presentation times and more degree of text condensation, and English-speaking countries accepting higher rates. The reason for this may be attributed to the audiovisual translation traditions in these countries: in Scandinavia, interlingual subtitling has a long and well-established tradition, with many subtitlers adhering to the rules of the profession that had been established many years ago and followed ever since.

A great number of subtitlers taking part in this study declare that delivering good quality subtitling is important to them and is part of their professional ethos. Being language and translation professionals, they are aware of **subtitling norms** and recognise the importance of following them. This includes having some sort of maximum subtitle presentation time to enable viewers not only to read the subtitles, but also to follow the on-screen action. At the same time, given a significant decrease in the rates they are paid, many subtitlers are concerned about the quality of subtitling going down. Some attribute this drop in quality to increased use of templates and to rising reading speeds, making subtitles contain more text which appears and disappears at faster speeds. **As condensation in interlingual subtitling is one of the most time-consuming elements of the job, having more space on the screen (e.g. 42 instead of 32 characters) and higher reading speed limits (15-18 cps instead of 10-12 cps) makes it possible to include more text in the subtitles, and as a result, to speed up the translation part of the subtitling process**. This, however, inevitably leads to more literal subtitles, prevents viewers from following the plot on screen and makes them more focused on subtitles. In a way, it also gives subtitles more 'visibility', which is widely regarded as a flaw, since – as stated by many people in the study – best subtitles are supposed to be 'invisible'.

Another aspect of subtitling quality is segmentation and line breaks in two-line subtitles. It is generally acknowledged that line breaks should take into

consideration semantic and syntactic units, which are given priority by most subtitlers over aesthetic considerations like pyramid/rectangle shape. **Good segmentation is perceived as an indicator of quality and of the professional competences of a subtitler**, or, put differently, poor segmentation signifies lack of professional subtitling skills.

Among other issues raised by subtitlers in this study is **the lack of recognition of subtitling as a profession** and the lack of awareness of what it actually involves to translate and time-code subtitles. The former issue leads to falling rates being paid for subtitling and an outflow of experienced subtitlers from the profession. The latter often results in misunderstandings between the client and the subtitler or in errors being made by novice subtitlers. It seems that these problems should be addressed by all subtitling stakeholders, such as professional organisations, and academia, by raising public awareness on subtitling and audiovisual translation.

A number of subtitlers taking part in the study supported their views with referring to some studies on subtitling, however without giving any details on those studies. It appears that many of the issues discussed above **call for an up-to-date research on subtitle presentation times and line breaks**, which could inform market practices and subtitler training.

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APPENDIX

Survey on subtitle presentation rates and segmentation in interlingual subtitling

My name is Agnieszka Szarkowska and I'm the author of this survey. The survey is part of the EU-funded project on the quality of subtitling that I carry out at the Centre for Translation Studies at University College London as part of my Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship.

Your answers will help me find out about subtitling rules regarding subtitle reading speeds and segmentation in different countries.

Please note that this survey is about pre-recorded interlingual subtitling in films and TV series only. It is NOT about live subtitling. It is NOT about subtitling for the deaf or hard of hearing.

The survey will take you less than 10 minutes to complete.

It will be active until the end of August.

If you have any questions or comments related to the survey or to subtitling quality, please email me at a.szarkowska@ucl.ac.uk.

You are also welcome to follow my project on Facebook: www.facebook.com/SureProject.

Thank you!

1. How long have you worked as a subtitler? Please give the number in years.

2. Which country are you based in?

3. Do you mostly work for companies based in your country or for international companies?
   a. I work mostly for local companies in my country
   b. I work mostly for international companies
   c. I work for both local and international companies

4. Are you usually required to do spotting (insert the in- and out-times of subtitles)?
   a. Yes, I usually spot the subtitle files I translate.
   b. No, I mostly work on templates with time codes and I am not allowed to change them.
   c. No, I mostly work on templates, but I am allowed to change them if necessary.

5. What is the usual maximum number of characters per line? If you work for different clients who have different requirements, please state all of them.

6. In your work as a subtitler, are you usually given instructions on the subtitle presentation rates (reading speed)?
   a. Always
   b. Most of the time
   c. Sometimes
   d. Rarely
   e. Never
   f. Other

7. Is the presentation rate usually given in characters per second or words per minute?
    a. words per minute (wpm)
    b. characters per second (cps)

8. What is the usual required subtitle presentation rate? Please give a value and units, e.g. 180 words per minute, 15 characters per second. If you work for different clients who have different requirements, please let us know about all of them.

9. If you are not given any instructions regarding the subtitle presentation rate, what is the rate you use? Why?

10. How do you make sure that you stay within the limits of the required presentation rates?
    a. My subtitling software indicates this for me.
    b. I know from experience how much time people need to read a subtitle.
    c. I have a table with the maximum number of characters per unit of time, which I consult.
    d. Other

11. Do you sometimes send your subtitle files back to the client without complying completely with the reading speed requirements? For instance, some clients allow for some degree of tolerance, letting the subtitlers prioritise between rendering the content of the dialogue and the reading speed.
    a. I always send the files which completely meet the reading speed criteria specified by the client in every single subtitle.
    b. I sometimes send the assignments with some subtitles not meeting the reading speed criteria.
    c. I prioritise content over reading speed, so my subtitles frequently do not meet the required reading speed criteria.
    d. Other

12. In your career as a subtitler, have you observed any changes in the subtitle presentation rates?
    a. Yes, they went up.
    b. Yes, they went down.
    c. No, they haven't changed much.
    d. I don't know.
    e. Other

13. Do the subtitle presentation rates differ depending on the format? (DVD, cinema, TV, VOD)?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. I don't know
    d. Other

14. How do you usually segment a two-line subtitle (divide it into two lines), assuming the subtitles are centre-aligned? (You may choose more than one option and add other answers below)
    a. I try to keep the first line shorter (a subtitle looks like a pyramid)
    b. I try to keep the second line shorter (like an inverted pyramid).
    c. I try to keep both lines of similar length (like a rectangle).
    d. I try to keep the semantic units together.
    e. Other

15. Does the way you segment two-line subtitles depend on the format? (DVD, TV, cinema, VOD)?
     a. Yes
     b. No
     c. I don't know
     d. Other
16. If have any comments on the quality of subtitles, presentation rates or segmentation, please state them here. For instance, what do you think good subtitles are like? What do you prioritise in your work as a subtitler?