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Subtitle quality in the streaming era—The subtitling professional’s perspective

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Previous research in audiovisual translation has investigated subtitle quality and quality assurance without giving much consideration to the subtitler’s perspective. This paper analyses data from an email interview study with 19 freelance subtitling professionals producing German-language subtitles, capturing their accounts of these issues. As data had already been collected from 59 subtitling professionals from the same linguaculture a decade ago, the data allow the evaluation of how subtitlers understand and theorize subtitle quality over time. The subtitlers’ narratives reveal a shift in quality perceptions that may be interpreted in light of the rise of multilingual global streaming services and their business model. Whereas subtitlers view themselves as professionals carrying out complex language work and seeking first and foremost to be good at their job, they consider that streaming companies take a mercantile approach to language and subtitles, foregrounding the control of cost and time over quality, thereby devaluing the work of subtitlers. Future research should investigate the effect of shifting business practices on the subtitler’s role and competence profile and, ultimately, on subtitle quality.

Introduction

This paper explores subtitling professionals’ perceptions of subtitle quality. The term ‘subtitles’ is used to refer to interlingual subtitles for a hearing audience—for instance French- and Italian-language subtitles of Swiss German TV productions distributed on the streaming platform Play Suisse. I will not deal with the large body of research published on intralingual subtitles for the D/deaf and hard-of-hearing, often produced (semi-live) via respawning (for an overview, see [Romero-Fresco 2019](#)). Moreover, as data were collected from a specific subtitler group—freelance subtitling professionals producing German-language subtitles—no claim is made regarding the representativeness of the data for other linguacultures. However, survey data on subtitle quality were collected with a comparable group of subtitling professionals in 2010–2011, which allows the identification of possible shifts in quality perceptions in the German-speaking subtitling ecosystem over time. These shifts are evaluated with regard to the CIA model of subtitle quality ([Künzli 2021](#)), which was constructed on the basis of the quality statements provided by the subtitling professionals participating in the previous survey.

Subtitles and the reception of subtitles have often and rightfully been at the fore of researchers' attention, whereas the agents who produce subtitles and their perceptions regarding specific aspects of their work such as subtitle quality have received much less interest. This paper is therefore a contribution to the field of Audiovisual Translator Studies (cf. [Chesterman 2009](#)), which investigates the identity, role, and status of translation professionals as well as their interaction with other stakeholders in the professional translation ecosystem—in the present case, in subtitling.

In what follows, I will first review the literature on quality in subtitling and the way quality might be affected by the emergence and expansion of streaming media, which are exerting increasing pressure on the subtitling profession and subtitling workflows. I will then present the methodological framework of the study, i.e. email interviewing, participant characteristics, and the data. Thereafter, I will delve into the analyses, focussing on changes in subtitling professionals' quality perceptions. Finally, I will suggest future directions in research into subtitle quality and the subtitling ecosystem.

Related research

Quality-related issues in audiovisual translation have been investigated in a series of studies. Still, the number of works that have moved beyond atomistic descriptions related to specific translation phenomena (e.g. humour, cultural references, dialect) is rather modest. This is somewhat surprising, as courses in audiovisual translation are offered at many translator training institutes ([Valdez et al. 2023](#)). This raises the question: which quality criteria or quality models are used to assess the audiovisual translations produced in these and other settings?

For intralingual live subtitling, [Romero-Fresco and Martínez-Pérez \(2015\)](#) have developed the NER model (number of words, editing errors, and recognition errors), which is used by broadcasters to assess their respeaking services. The NTR model (number of words, translation errors, and recognition errors), developed by [Romero-Fresco and Pöchhacker \(2017\)](#) on the basis of the NER model, provides a quality assessment model for interlingual live subtitling that incorporates findings from simultaneous interpreting research. Two models are available for interlingual pre-produced subtitles, each distinguishing three overall quality dimensions and a number of underlying quality parameters: [Pedersen's \(2017\)](#) FAR model (functional equivalence, acceptability, and readability) and [Künzli's \(2021\)](#) CIA model (correspondence, intelligibility, and authenticity). One of the differences between the two models lies in their conception: whereas the FAR model was inspired by the NER model and existing assessment practices in subtitler training, the CIA model is the result of an analysis of how subtitling professionals understand and theorize subtitle quality. Since the CIA model will be used in this contribution as the basis for evaluating the shifts in subtitling professionals' quality perceptions, it will be presented in more detail in the 'Analysis' section. As regards dubbing, the first attempt at integrating general quality expectations such as synchrony between sound and lip movements and the imitation of natural speech into a quality model was recently made by [Spiteri Miggiani \(2023\)](#) with the textual parameters or TP model. In audio description research too, research on quality assessment has so far been limited. [Fryer \(2019\)](#) outlines a quality model that applies findings from interpreting research to audio description. The model has hardly been taken up in research yet. However, it can be assumed that as a result of the significant expansion of audio description services by public and commercial broadcasters, the issue of quality (assessment) will be given more attention in the future.

In parallel, there is a recent empirical research strand investigating audiovisual translation from a workplace psychology or sociology perspective. Studies suggest that the emergence of streaming platforms has had a disrupting effect on professional subtitling practice and workflows. Structural changes were implemented in the name of productivity and technological innovation, resulting in a conflict between how these globalizing forces view subtitling on the one hand, and how established subtitlers understand their role on the other. Examples are the generalization of template-centred workflows and pivot subtitling, i.e. 'subtitling by means of

a template with time codes and an interlingual translation in a language that differs from the language of the original audiovisual content and the final subtitles' (Torres-Simón et al. 2023: 205), meaning that subtitlers are no longer required to master the source language of the audio file. Another example is the fragmentation of subtitling work: audiovisual translation jobs are broken down into small chunks and divided up between several subtitlers in order to maximize efficiency as viewers expect immediate releases of streaming media content in a variety of subtitled, dubbed, or audio-described versions (cf. Moorkens 2020: 19). For many freelance subtitling professionals, this microtasking leads to cumbersome and anonymous workflows and the absence of feedback. Other trends are the emergence of new professional profiles, able and willing to take on such microtasks for micropayment (Künzli 2023), and the technologization of subtitling workflows with automatic transcription, automatic spotting, and machine translation (Karakanta et al. 2022).

To be precise, some of these developments reflect changes that are the result of the transformative influence of the platform economy on translation work more generally. In cloud-based translation settings, teams, processes, and technologies are integrated within a unified digital framework, leading to increased standardization and automation (Firat, Gough and Moorkens 2024). As workflows appear to be structured more towards delivery times than quality, they represent a challenge for translation professionals' desire to act according to their deontological ethics. As a result, translation professionals often associate translation work on digital platforms with a lack of control over the workflow and the final quality, disparity between translators' competences, diminishing bargaining power, insufficient remuneration and, in the end, substandard working conditions (Gough et al. 2023).

The commodification of subtitling that is the result of this gradual devaluation of human expertise is interpreted by subtitlers as a threat to their status and to how they view their role as professionals who 'seek first of all to be good at their work' (Chesterman 2006: 19). There is research suggesting potential side-effects, such as flaws in the linguistic and technical quality of subtitles, as a result of tighter and tighter turnaround times in translation workflows and reliance on AI-powered technologies in the streaming context (Massidda 2023). I therefore decided to revisit subtitle quality in order to identify possible shifts in how freelance subtitling professionals understand subtitle quality on the one hand; and contributing factors to these shifts on the other hand.

Methodology and data

The study was conceived as a qualitative email interview study as a follow-up to a quantitatively dominated online questionnaire survey among subtitling professionals conducted between 2010 and 2011. To recruit participants for the new study, I chose a convenience sample. Several organizations of (audiovisual) translation professionals were asked to advertise the study on their website or in their newsletters. Three inclusion criteria were defined: work experience as a subtitler for at least three years, German as a working language, and being active in interlingual subtitling. The first criterion was set to explore possible shifts in the subtitling ecosystem associated with the growth of the streaming industry in recent years. The second criterion was chosen to allow for time-lag comparisons with my earlier study of the subtitling profession. The third criterion was set to obtain a homogenous sample, the differences between intralingual (live) subtitling and interlingual (prepared) subtitling being substantial in terms of the production process.

Email interviewing was the data collection technique used, which involves asynchronous online communication between a researcher and a research participant exchanging a series of messages over a period of time. Email interviews have been used in social science research since the early 2000s (Hunt and McHale 2007). In translation studies, they are under-represented, although they offer a series of advantages compared to face-to-face and video interviewing (Künzli and Gile 2021). Participants may contemplate their answers carefully before delivering them to the researcher while the researcher may ask follow-up questions after considered

reflection as well. In addition, email interviewing offers access to remote communities such as freelancers working as digital nomads on different continents, since no time differences need to be considered. This turned out to be a further advantage, as the data collection partly coincided with the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

The email interviews were conducted with fourteen female and five male subtitlers between November 2019 and January 2021. The gender distribution (74% female and 26% male) reflects the more general predominance of women in the translation business. At the time of starting the interviews, participants had between 3 and 39 years of professional experience (mean: 15.5 years). All participants indicated working as subtitlers of fictional productions, followed by documentaries and corporate videos.

The interviews were conducted by means of a semi-structured interview guide with mainly open-ended questions (see [Supplementary Appendix](#)). Question 1 aimed to collect background information and build rapport with the interviewees. Question 2 aimed to identify major trends and changes in the subtitling ecosystem. Questions 3, 4, and 5 dealt with subtitle quality criteria, quality assurance steps, and the skills of subtitling professionals. Question 6 collected feedback on email interviewing as a research technique. Participants were asked what they thought of this way of doing an interview and whether they thought they would have given the same answers in a face-to-face or video interview. Before participating, all subtitlers read and signed an informed consent document. Data collection followed the ethical research standards set by the University of Geneva at the time of the study design.

The data corpus consists of a transcript of 26,663 words/190,577 characters. All segments that could be interpreted as indicators of statements on subtitle quality were coded in QDA Miner version 6.0.11. The quality statements were mapped against the quality dimensions and quality parameters of the CIA model of subtitle quality ([Künzli 2021](#)). Next, statements that could be interpreted as expressions of contributing factors to shifting quality perceptions were identified in the interviews. All information that could lead to the identification of participants (e.g. city names, country names, and company names but also detailed information from company style guides) was removed from the excerpts reproduced in the next section. Finally, all excerpts, which come from seven different interviews, were translated from German into English.

Analysis

I will first give a short overview of the existing version of the CIA model of subtitle quality, focusing on aspects that are relevant for the subsequent comparison with the updated model. A detailed presentation of the existing model, its quality dimensions and quality parameters is provided in [Künzli \(2021\)](#).

The model consists of three overall subtitle quality dimensions: Correspondence, Intelligibility, and Authenticity. *Correspondence* refers to the degree of necessary similarity between the original version and the subtitles, that is, the transfer of the original's semantic value, atmosphere, language, and individual aesthetic properties to the subtitles. It is an essential quality criterion from a translation theoretical perspective. *Intelligibility* refers to the degree to which subtitles are comprehensible in terms of both their physical presentation (legibility) and the way in which the original message is reformulated (readability). The model distinguishes five intelligibility parameters—perceptibility, simplicity, conciseness, structure, and correctness. *Authenticity* looks at the subtitles in themselves, independently from the audiovisual source text. It refers to the subtitles' potential to reflect some degree of spontaneous-sounding conversation (orality) and natural and appropriate language use in the given context (idiomaticity), not least due to the co-presence of the original soundtrack with the subtitles. Of course, there is always a trade-off between these three quality dimensions. Depending on the genre or the audience, intelligibility may be more or less of an issue than linguistic authenticity, for instance. It is hypothesized that if the different quality dimensions are satisfied, subtitle reception will lead to a flow experience.

The subtitling professionals' quality statements in the new study were mapped against this model, its three overall quality dimensions, and their underlying quality parameters. Figure 2 presents the updated version of the model, taking into account the new data.

The comparison of Figs. 1 and 2 above reveals that the three overall quality dimensions remained stable. In other words, the interview data from the new study could be categorized according to the quality dimensions of the existing model. Subtitling professionals still consider that subtitles should render the original message well, be comprehensible, and sound natural. There are, however, several shifts in underlying quality parameters. In what follows, I will focus on the most salient ones.

Regarding the quality dimension *correspondence*, the previously separate quality parameters *connotational* and *formal-aesthetic* have been merged into *stylistic*, both focussing not on the primary semantic, i.e. descriptive, value conveyed by a message, but on its secondary subjective meanings and formal qualities. Also, the quality parameter *pragmatic*

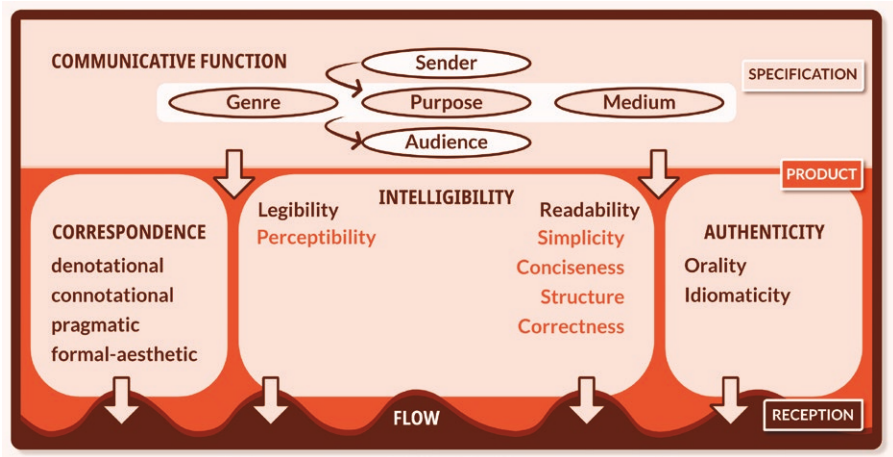


Figure 1. The CIA model of subtitle quality (Künzli 2021).

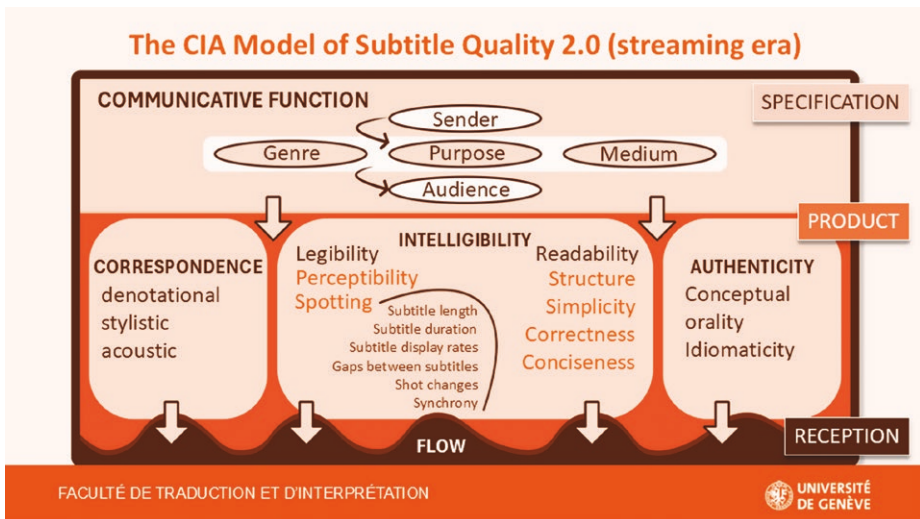


Figure 2. The updated CIA model of subtitle quality.

correspondence, defined in the original model as the effect subtitles are expected to have on the audience, has been removed, as gearing the subtitles to the target viewers' needs and expectations may be considered to be part of the general translation strategy that subtitlers define in the previous stage of *specification*. This is also what is suggested by the subtitling professionals' statements in the interviews. However, an additional quality parameter was constructed within *correspondence*. Thus, *acoustic correspondence* refers to the audience's expectation that the order in which the verbal elements of the original soundtrack are audible is reproduced in the subtitles. Acoustic correspondence is a quality parameter that distinguishes subtitling from translation proper, i.e. text translation, where the target text is processed independently from the source text.

Subtitling professionals' narratives suggest that the appearance of this quality parameter is not entirely separate from the boom in streaming media that has brought subtitles to audiences who were not previously exposed to them. Thus, there may be a certain discrepancy between what long-standing consumers of subtitles and established professional subtitlers on the one hand, and more recent viewer groups (and possibly newcomers to the subtitling profession) on the other hand, consider appropriate. In fact, several of the interviewed subtitling professionals state that viewers will react negatively if they feel that the subtitles deviate too far from the original and suspect that something is missing in the translation. This viewing behaviour seems to be linked to the fact that streaming companies apply higher reading speeds, entailing less editing, than more established subtitle buyers. We will come back to this later.

In a recent study, Bucaria (2023: 346) raises the question of to what extent viewers who criticize audiovisual translations are aware of professional standards and practices, such as the time and space limitations that affect choices in subtitling and other forms of audiovisual translation. She concludes that streaming platforms' willingness to take on board audience reactions as part of a strategy to build brand loyalty may override established subtitling professionals' opinions. Obviously, this strategy may affect the quality of the collaboration between subtitling professionals and streaming services or their translation partners.

Another change in the model is suggested for the quality dimension *authenticity*. The interview analyses indicate that the quality parameter *orality* is more correctly referred to as *conceptual orality*, a term originally coined by Koch and Oesterreicher (1985). It is used here to refer to the fact that although medially written, i.e. realized in the graphic code, subtitles are expected to display some of the qualities of spoken discourse, such as the spontaneity and conversational nature of oral communication. This is so despite the fact that spoken discourse in fictional audiovisual content is manufactured, i.e. conceived as spontaneous, but actually represents 'planned unplanned discourse' (Ochs 1979: 77), and that the degree of expected conceptual orality varies depending on the audiovisual genre. The interviews reveal that where to place subtitles on the continuum between conceptual orality and literacy is a recurrent quality-related challenge in subtitling professionals' decision-making.

The most prominent shifts concern the quality dimension *intelligibility*, on which I will focus in what follows, illustrating key observations by means of interview excerpts that highlight how subtitlers understand and theorize underlying subtitle quality parameters.

Spotting is a step within the overall subtitle production process to which the interviewed subtitling professionals attach high importance. Also known as *timing* and *cueing*, it consists in 'determining the in and out times of each and every one of the subtitles in a film, i.e. deciding the exact moment when a subtitle should pop up on screen and when it should leave, according to a series of spatial and temporal considerations' (Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2021: 34). Alongside translation, spotting is one of the two main phases of the subtitle production process.

In the existing version of the model, spotting was covered by the quality parameter *perceptibility*, which refers to the ease with which a text can be discerned by our senses and made accessible for further cognitive processing. Spotting now represents the only quality parameter I felt I had to divide into a series of sub-parameters due to the number and intensity of the subtitlers' statements relating to this quality aspect. The interviewed subtitling professionals provide many reflections in which they theorize spotting in light of the impact that streaming media are having on the professional subtitling ecosystem and subtitle quality, as the following excerpts reveal:

Excerpt 1: I view 17 characters per second (and often more) very critically [...] My personal assumption is that reading speed is set this way because it means less editing which makes the job easier for inexperienced subtitlers. Working time is saved, which in the end also saves on costs. In general, my impression is that many rules are being watered down; on the one hand to allow untrained subtitlers to do the job and then pay less for it, and on the other hand to pave the way for machine translation and automatic checking algorithms.

Excerpt 2: [Name of streaming company] sets a reading speed of 17 characters per second. I myself was trained at 12 characters per second. I can't manage to read more than 15 myself and certainly not for a long time, although I certainly read plenty of subtitles at work and in my private life. You can work faster with 17 as a standard because you don't have to shorten as much, but you wouldn't produce anything that is actually useful. That goes against my professional pride, to put it that way.

These testimonies are related to the spotting sub-parameter *subtitle display rates* and indicate a clash between subtitling professionals' desire to act according to their deontological ethics, which expresses itself in their strivings for quality—here regarding what they feel is appropriate with respect to the audience's reception abilities in terms of reading speed—and streaming companies' strivings to maximize profit by resorting to automated solutions. Higher reading speed implies less editing of the source text, which means that subtitling jobs can be more easily (semi-)automated and hence become accessible to subtitlers who neither need to be familiar with established subtitle norms nor with subtitling software as they will receive an already pre-spotted source text in Word or Excel format.

It is important to stress that subtitling professionals are not averse to automation solutions—as is sometimes claimed—but that they do have an opinion on how to successfully integrate such solutions into subtitle production. Therefore, they tend to react with scepticism when their expertise is not called upon when making such decisions (see [Koskinen and Ruokonen 2017](#) for a discussion on translators' technology acceptance in general); when improperly implemented machine subtitling makes their work more tedious; and when quality-related aspects are demoted by the subtitle buyer's strivings to maximize profit. For all these reasons, many subtitling professionals associated the technologization of subtitling with a limitation on their autonomy, a loss of status and, ultimately, deprofessionalisation. The interviews as well as recent manifestos published by audiovisual translators' associations on a variety of topics such as machine subtitling suggest that streaming platforms and their preferred translation partners are not (yet) very receptive to the subtitler's view—while they do not seem opposed to taking on board audience reactions in an attempt to avoid financial detriment and reputational damage, as indicated in the above-mentioned study conducted by [Bucaria \(2023\)](#).

Creativity is another concept that was identified in the interviews as significant in this context. Work in text-oriented translation studies has related creativity to deviations from literal translation but the concept is also associated with positive personality traits such as cognitive flexibility, the capacity for decision-making, and critical analysis ([Rojo 2017](#): 350–2). Creativity would seem particularly relevant in subtitling as the source text needs to be processed according to a series of spatial and temporal parameters during spotting. The subtitlers' narratives reveal that they interpret the spotting-related aspects of their job as a positive challenge, as a hurdle that spurs their creativity:

Excerpt 3: For me, quality subtitles are subtitles where the translator/subtitler has created the spotting him- or herself. The distribution of the subtitles always depends on the subtitler's creativity in the target language. The spotting has to be adapted to the translation.

In the excerpt above, subtitle quality is theorized in light of the tendency of streaming media to resort to templates. In these templates, the original soundtrack has been segmented and timed for further processing into a series of target languages such as French, German, or Italian.

Subtitling professionals experience locked templates as a major annoyance, meaning master files in which subtitlers do not have the possibility to adapt the spotting to the target language. One may argue that splitting the subtitling process into a spotting and a translation phase is in the interest of subtitlers, who are then able to focus on the (supposedly) more creative part of the subtitling job, i.e. the translation. However, the interviews also reveal that it gives subtitlers pleasure or even a sense of pride to tackle the more technical aspects involved in the subtitle production process and to create a spotting that does justice to the rhythm of the language in the original production.

Let us move on to the next quality parameter, *correctness*; a quality parameter that many intelligibility models do not take into account, although one may assume that language errors hamper text comprehension, especially in subtitling, where rereading is not always possible. However, even in high-prestige streaming media productions, subtitles often do not respect basic language rules according to the interviewed subtitling professionals, who attribute these flaws to superficial or non-existent quality assurance processes, as the following excerpt reveals:

Excerpt 4: When I was working for [name of streaming company], I sometimes had the impression that nobody checked my subtitles as no QC reports came back (and it is absolutely unlikely to make zero mistakes). It often concerned series that could perhaps be described as B-series (Korean drama, romance, Kung Fu, etc.), but once even a rather 'high-quality' series. As a result, there are now errors running across the screen, e.g. missed full stops at sentence endings or other typos.

This testimony must be seen in light of the acceleration of production processes in the streaming context—a challenge that most subtitling professionals address in the interviews. This is where the iron triangle concept comes to mind; in other words, the relationship between the three central success criteria of project management: time, cost, and quality (Pollack, Helm and Adler 2018). A shift in one criterion, for instance in response to customer demands or resource limitations, can put pressure on the other criteria. To judge by the interviews, streaming companies tend to focus on saving time and costs which is at odds with subtitling professionals' quality standards. It must be stressed that subtitling professionals make a distinction between big conglomerates, represented by global streaming platforms and their translation partners, and small- and medium-sized subtitling companies. The latter are suggested to be more driven by quality, including the quality of their collaboration with subtitling professionals, than by monetary considerations—even if costs cannot be completely ignored in this context either, of course.

Another quality parameter that has been extensively addressed by the interviewed subtitlers is *conciseness*. Traditionally, quality subtitles have been equated with subtitles that render the essence of the soundtrack. Subtitles should be maximally concise in terms of both the amount of information given and the number of signs used to express this information, in order to minimize the effort the audience has to make in reading them. The ability to condense a message is therefore considered a key skill in interlingual subtitling (Ludera, Szarkowska and Orrego-Carmona 2024). Excerpt 5 below reveals, however, that this quality criterion is coming under increasing pressure as new global subtitling norms replace established local ones:

Excerpt 5: [B]uyers who have little knowledge of subtitling do not respect the basic subtitling rules. I'm thinking of Internet streaming providers like [company name], whose subtitles sometimes fill three lines and are so long that you can't even finish reading them. The new policy for Internet streaming services is to subtitle everything that is said because otherwise viewers might think that something is missing.

Diverging quality expectations between global subtitle buyers and subtitling professionals as well as the supplanting of established local subtitling norms by new international norms defined

by global streaming giants is a growing concern among subtitling professionals, as the following testimony evidences:

Excerpt 6: As already mentioned, [name of streaming company] unfortunately has a totally different vision of quality, as the company comes from a country where subtitles are/were largely unknown. [Name of streaming company] also stipulates, for instance, that subtitles should disappear [number] frames after the end of the audio, which looks insanely hectic. [Name of streaming company] then tries to make up for this with 17 characters per second. Unfortunately, there are also other clients who now set reading speeds of up to 18 characters per second.

Professional organizations are increasingly picking up on the discontent expressed by individual subtitling professionals. Thus, the quality standard for interlingual subtitles published by AVÜ *Die Filmübersetzer*innen* (2020: 2), the largest professional organization defending the interests of audiovisual translators in Germany, explicitly states: 'As in all countries with a subtitling tradition, there are tried, recognized, and longstanding local subtitling norms in Germany too [my translation]'. This statement as well as other quality criteria listed in the standard can be interpreted as a strategy to defend established working patterns and, beyond that, decent working conditions. Hardly surprisingly, the standard also takes a critical stance on other practices promoted by global media platforms such as template-centred workflows. The situation is complicated by the fact that these new global subtitling norms are often adopted by other subtitle buyers as illustrated in the following excerpt (and as already implicit in Excerpt 6 above):

Excerpt 7: I have the feeling that the spillover of the American guidelines (which in my early days were still adapted to German guidelines and habits) has somewhat divided the subtitler community, because many subtitlers are only used to the new guidelines. Also, the [name of streaming company] guidelines are often adopted by other subtitle buyers as well.

The excerpt moreover reveals that new global subtitling norms not only risk disrupting well-functioning local working patterns, according to the interviewed subtitling professionals, they also widen the gap between different subtitler communities: the established ones, used to working according to recognized local norms and (relatively) decent working conditions for local subtitle buyers; and the newcomers to the subtitle profession, who enter the field via microtasks for micropayment for global players.

In a process-oriented study, *Ludera, Szarkowska and Orrego-Carmona* (2024: 72) have recently observed higher text condensation rates among subtitling professionals than among trainee subtitlers. Moreover, the subgroup of professionals that showed the highest degree of text condensation had the longest professional experience. The authors interpret the higher degree of text condensation among this group as a 'resistance to change' and 'the significant role of familiar conventions in shaping one's approach to subtitling'. While one cannot rule out this hypothesis, subtitlers themselves appear to have a different understanding of the situation. The interviews reveal that they are aware that established norms are changing. If they nevertheless express a preference for a more 'traditional' approach to subtitling, then it is with the viewers and their assumed reception capabilities in mind, as the following excerpt suggests:

Excerpt 8: In the discussion, I remind them [i.e. subtitle buyers] that you should also trust the image and that viewers can draw a lot of information from the actors' facial expressions, intonation, and body language provided you have the time and the image is not hidden by text. This actually makes sense to everyone.

The subtitler portrays here a situation in which they discuss translation choices with a buyer from outside the streaming industry. This testimony highlights the fact that audiovisual source texts are polysemiotic, even if the recent trend towards higher reading speed and lower text

condensation rates brings subtitling closer to text translation. All in all, the quality expectations of relatively new stakeholders such as multilingual streaming platforms and their audiences are thus contributing to subtitling becoming more monosemiotic. The decisive quality criterion becomes fidelity to the audio-verbal code. This trend is seen by many established subtitlers as leading to the impoverishment of the job of a subtitler and a skills drain.

In this section, I have presented an overview of subtitling professionals' quality perceptions as revealed by the interviews I conducted with subtitlers producing German-language subtitles. In addition, I have discussed shifts in quality perceptions as a possible result of the increasing influence exerted by streaming platforms on the subtitling ecosystem. I would like to conclude with a summary of key observations, the potential limitations of my study, and some directions for future research.

Conclusion

The purpose of this contribution was to gain a better understanding of how subtitling professionals theorize subtitle quality on the one hand; and to identify potential shifts in quality perceptions on the other hand. Data were compared from two studies: an online survey administered between 2010 and 2011 among freelance German-language subtitling professionals, and an email-interview study conducted between 2019 and 2021 with a comparable group of subtitlers. The CIA model of subtitle quality (Künzli 2021) was used as the basis for evaluating shifts in quality perceptions.

There are three key observations from the present research. Firstly, the interviews suggest stability in subtitling professionals' perceptions of overall subtitle quality dimensions. When analysing the quality perceptions of the two groups, I found that the subtitling professionals participating in the more recent interview study still consider that subtitles should render the original message well, be comprehensible, and sound natural. Data analysis did not suggest any need to reshuffle or supplement the CIA subtitle quality model's (Künzli 2021) three main quality dimensions of *correspondence*, *intelligibility*, and *authenticity*. There were, however, a series of shifts regarding their underlying quality parameters, which brings me to the second point. The most important shifts are related to the quality dimension *intelligibility* and in particular to *spotting*, *correctness*, and *conciseness*. The extent of the quality statements linked to spotting in the new data is striking. A similar trend can be observed for the quality parameters *correctness* and *conciseness*, albeit to a somewhat lesser extent in terms of number of cases. Thirdly, the interview analyses reveal that these shifting quality criteria can be interpreted in light of the emergence and expansion of global streaming media. The structural changes implemented by these stakeholders in the subtitling ecosystem affect a variety of factors such as workflows, quality assurance, subtitling norms, and corresponding viewer habits. Subtitling professionals believe that global streaming platforms do not attach the same importance to subtitle quality, and notably spotting and readability, as they do. This assumption may have prompted them to theorize these quality parameters extensively for themselves—and myself—in the interviews. At the same time, it must be recognized that certain challenges identified by the interviewed subtitling professionals cannot be attributed solely to the emergence of the streaming phenomenon. Thus, Gottlieb (1998: 247) anticipated the spread of pivot templates, which today are on the rise in the streaming context, more than thirty years ago.

One cannot rule out that some of the observed differences between the two studies are due to methodology, i.e. the difference between short open-ended questions in the self-administered questionnaire in the first study, and a flexible, semi-structured interview guide in the second study. However, methodological aspects hardly account for all the differences. Participants in both studies had the opportunity to contemplate answers carefully before typing and delivering them to me. Also, the fact that data were collected within a time-lag study (i.e. with different participants) rather than a longitudinal study (i.e. with the same participants) has to be recognized as a potential limitation to be addressed in future studies, as the conclusions in this contribution

are based on the assumption that the two groups are comparable. Finally, one cannot exclude either that some facets of subtitling professionals' quality perceptions result from culture-specific translation norms. Quality perceptions can be regarded as 'contextually valued models for performing the social role of translator' (Assis Rosa 2016: 193). German-speaking subtitlers' quality perceptions may not match in every respect those prevalent in other linguacultures. At the same time, one may argue that the subtitling ecosystem is slowly moving towards a global, more, or less uniform subtitling ecosystem, characterized by the norms and workflows set by the multilingual global streaming giants—as the present observations also indicate. A study I am currently conducting on subtitling professionals' job satisfaction in three different linguacultures will shed further light on this issue.

In terms of future research, it would be interesting to extend the current observations by examining how quality models can be developed into quality assessment models. The number of training programmes in audiovisual translation is increasing worldwide, which raises the question of how audiovisual translations produced within these curricula, but also in professional settings such as onboarding tests, are assessed. The updated CIA model will be integrated into the audiovisual translation classes offered at the University of Geneva by developing its quality dimensions and parameters into a rubric for the grading of student work. Audiovisual translation is often taught in multilingual classrooms, i.e. with students representing a range of target languages, which may be challenging for trainers. While grading the CIA model's quality dimension *authenticity* will need native-language competence, to some extent *correspondence* can be assessed by trainers who are not necessarily native speakers but who have a solid passive knowledge of the language of the subtitles. Checking *spotting* as an essential quality parameter of *intelligibility* does not require native-speaker competence. Trainers in multilingual classrooms could therefore decide to focus the assessment of student work on this quality criterion.

I would like to wrap up with some reflections on the larger context in which much of today's professional subtitling work takes place. Subtitling may be considered a type of wordsmithing in the field of movies and audiovisual media, i.e. an ostensibly privileged kind of professional language work (cf. Thurlow 2020). It evokes notions of creativity, complexity, and sometimes even glamour, as revealed by the subtitling professionals' testimonies. Key stakeholders such as global streaming giants and their preferred translation partners tend to overlook this complexity. This was also found in case studies that have detected quality flaws as a result of excessively tight turnaround times in the streaming context (Bucaria 2023: 346). The situation that Thurlow (2020: 12) has described for voice actors, i.e. insecure work 'in the midst of one of the world's most lucrative industries', seems to apply to subtitlers too. Subtitles certainly are lucrative for subtitle buyers, but they are not a lucrative business for those who produce them, i.e. the subtitlers. The following testimony from one of my interviewees gives further evidence of this state of affairs:

Excerpt 9: And unfortunately, attempts are being made to push prices down again and again. Particularly the big companies sometimes offer me rates that are below the level of 20 years ago. Unfortunately, there is always someone who will work for even less money.

Many subtitling professionals feel that they are operating in an increasingly precarious field in which they have become interchangeable and replaceable although they carry out creative language work. As a result, they view the multilingual streaming phenomenon as a globalizing force that is commodifying subtitling.

Much more work needs to be done before a full understanding is established of the extent of this clash of interests and the risk of deprofessionalisation and competence loss that subtitling professionals fear will be the consequence of the prioritization of cost and speed over quality in the global streaming service model. Maybe the growing research strand on slow media (Rauch 2023) could inform research into slow translation, a concept that is starting to be discussed in practice-oriented literature (Hurot 2022)—I am indebted to one of my interviewees for pointing this out to me. Of course, a slow approach to translation and subtitling will hardly ever represent

more than a niche product; Hurot rightly remarks that slow food didn't kill fast food. However, the concept may provide some clues for subtitling professionals who wish to follow a different path. After all, the current streaming media ecosystem does not promote sustainable growth and decent work for established subtitling professionals. This is also what the following testimony from one of my interviewees suggests, with which I would like to conclude:

Excerpt 10: To make a long story short, it's not about quality anymore in most cases, and certainly not about translation quality (because many—though of course not all—technical aspects can be easily automated, as well as checked and displayed in the software without much background knowledge), but only about keeping rates down.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data is available at *Applied Linguistics* online.

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Data availability

The data that support the analyses presented in this paper are available from the author, upon reasonable request.

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