PROPER USE OF LINGUISTIC ASPECTS IN SUBTITLING MOVIES AND TV SERIES

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Abstract: Subtitling in movies and TV series is a multifaceted process that demands a sophisticated application of linguistic principles to ensure seamless communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries. This article provides an in-depth exploration of how linguistic aspects—syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and cultural adaptation—are strategically employed in audiovisual translation (AVT) to produce effective subtitles. Through a detailed qualitative analysis of subtitling practices in globally distributed English-language media, the study examines the interplay between linguistic accuracy, technical constraints, and audience reception. Examples from popular series and films illustrate how these elements enhance comprehension and engagement. The findings emphasize that high-quality subtitling requires a delicate balance of fidelity to the source text, readability under time-space limitations, and sensitivity to cultural nuances, offering valuable insights for AVT professionals and researchers.

Keywords: Subtitling, audiovisual translation, linguistic aspects, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, cultural adaptation, readability, cohesion, media accessibility, multilingualism

Introduction. Subtitling, as a cornerstone of audiovisual translation (AVT), bridges linguistic divides by converting spoken dialogue into written text, typically in a target language, while preserving the original soundtrack. Unlike dubbing, which replaces the audio, subtitling operates within a constrained visual and temporal framework, requiring translators to condense and adapt language without sacrificing meaning or intent. [1] The linguistic aspects involved—syntax (sentence structure), semantics (meaning), pragmatics (contextual usage), and cultural adaptation—are critical to producing subtitles that are both accurate and viewer-friendly. With the rise of global streaming platforms like Netflix, Disney+, and Amazon Prime, the demand for high-quality subtitling has surged, making linguistic precision more essential than ever. [2] This article delves into the proper application of these linguistic elements in subtitling movies and TV series, analyzing real-world examples to uncover best practices and challenges. By exploring how subtitlers navigate linguistic complexities under technical limitations, the study contributes to the evolving discourse on AVT and its role in global media accessibility.

Relevance of Work. The importance of linguistic aspects in subtitling cannot be overstated in today's media landscape, where audiovisual content crosses borders at an unprecedented scale. Subtitles serve not only hearing audiences seeking foreign-language content but also deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers, making accessibility a key concern. [3] Inadequate subtitling—marked by literal translations, cultural insensitivity, or poor readability—can distort narratives, confuse viewers, and diminish the cultural richness of the original work. As streaming giants invest heavily in multilingual content (e.g., Netflix's 190-country reach), the need for linguistically sound subtitling practices grows, impacting viewer satisfaction and industry standards. This research is relevant to AVT practitioners, media producers, linguistic scholars, and educators, offering a framework to refine subtitling techniques and enhance cross-cultural communication in an increasingly interconnected world.

Purpose. This article aims to comprehensively investigate the proper use of linguistic aspects in subtitling movies and TV series, addressing three primary objectives: (1) to identify how syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and cultural adaptation are applied in practice; (2) to evaluate their effectiveness in overcoming subtitling's inherent challenges, such as brevity and screen space; and (3) to propose strategies for optimizing subtitle quality. By examining diverse linguistic phenomena—from sentence simplification to idiomatic translation—the study seeks to illuminate the intersection of theoretical linguistics and practical AVT, providing actionable insights for improving translation workflows and viewer experiences.

Materials and Methods of Research. This study adopts a qualitative methodology, analyzing a purposive sample of English-language movies and TV series subtitled into Spanish, Arabic, French, and Chinese. The corpus includes *The Crown* (Netflix, 2016-2023), *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), and *Squid Game* (2021, subtitled from Korean to English as a comparative case). These works were chosen for their linguistic complexity, global popularity, and varied subtitling demands (e.g., multilingualism, slang, cultural specificity). Subtitles were sourced from official releases on streaming platforms, DVDs, and fan-subtitled versions for comparison. The analysis framework integrates Gottlieb's (1992) subtitling strategies (e.g., transfer, condensation, omission) and Pedersen's (2017) FAR model (Functional Equivalence, Acceptability, Readability), supplemented by linguistic theories of cohesion and pragmatics. [4] Data collection involved comparing source dialogues with subtitles, coding for linguistic features (e.g., syntactic reduction, semantic shifts), and reviewing secondary sources from Google Scholar, including peer-reviewed articles and books on AVT.

Results and Discussion.

Syntax: Balancing Structure and Brevity

Syntax in subtitling must reconcile linguistic correctness with the medium's strict constraints—typically 35-40 characters per line and 3-6 seconds of display time.^[1] In *The Crown*, a verbose English line like "The monarchy must adapt to the changing tides of public opinion" is condensed in Spanish to "La monarquía debe adaptarse a la opinión pública," reducing syntactic complexity while retaining grammatical coherence. Similarly, Arabic subtitles for *Breaking Bad* simplify "You're gonna pay for this" into "هذا ثمن ستدفع" (You will pay for this), aligning with Arabic's concise verb-initial structure. However, rigid adherence to source syntax can falter; literal translations into Chinese often produce awkward phrasing, as character-based limits (around 12-15 per line) clash with English's wordier constructions. Effective syntactic adaptation thus prioritizes natural flow over verbatim fidelity, a strategy Gottlieb (1992) terms "condensation."

Semantics: Preserving Meaning Under Pressure

Semantics focuses on meaning preservation, a task complicated by subtitling's need for brevity. In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White's iconic "I am the danger" carries a layered threat, which Spanish subtitles ("Soy el peligro") successfully mirror, but French versions ("Je suis le danger") occasionally lose intensity due to neutral phrasing. [2] Semantic fidelity often requires creative solutions—paraphrasing or substitution—as seen in *Squid Game*'s English subtitles, where Korean slang like "깐부" (gganbu, meaning close friend) becomes "old pal," sacrificing literal accuracy for emotional equivalence. Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2007) argue that such shifts are justified when they maintain the narrative's core intent, though over-simplification risks diluting

subtext, a common critique of rushed commercial subtitles.

Pragmatics: Capturing Context and Intent

Pragmatics governs how context shapes meaning, a critical yet challenging aspect of subtitling. In *Inglourious Basterds*, Quentin Tarantino's multilingual script blends English, French, and German, with characters switching mid-scene. French subtitles use brackets (e.g., "[en anglais]") to signal these shifts, preserving pragmatic clarity, while Arabic versions sometimes omit such cues, assuming viewer inference. [3] Pragmatic nuances like sarcasm or politeness also test subtitlers; in *The Crown*, Queen Elizabeth's understated "One hopes" (implying skepticism) is rendered in Chinese as "希望如此" (I hope so), flattening the tone. Research suggests that explicit markers (e.g., italics for emphasis) or brief glosses can enhance pragmatic accuracy, though they may clutter the screen if overused.

Cultural Adaptation: Bridging Cultural Gaps

Cultural references pose unique linguistic hurdles, requiring adaptation to resonate with target audiences. In *Breaking Bad*, the American idiom "breaking bad" (going rogue) lacks a direct Spanish equivalent; subtitles opt for "volverse malo" (turning bad), a functional yet less vivid choice. [4] Conversely, *The Crown*'s "tea and sympathy" becomes "café y consuelo" in Spanish, adapting the beverage to a culturally familiar alternative while retaining the sentiment. Pedersen's (2017) FAR model highlights the trade-off between functional equivalence and acceptability—omitting untranslatable references (e.g., British parliamentary jargon in Arabic subtitles) preserves readability but sacrifices depth. Successful cultural adaptation thus demands a deep understanding of both source and target contexts.

Readability and Cohesion: Enhancing Viewer Experience

Readability ensures subtitles are digestible within fleeting display times, while cohesion links text across shots for narrative continuity. In *Squid Game*, English subtitles maintain cohesion by consistently translating "Player 456" as a recurring identifier, avoiding pronoun ambiguity. [5] Poor segmentation, however, disrupts this; splitting "I didn't mean to hurt you" across two lines ("No quise / hacerte daño") in Spanish breaks syntactic unity, slowing comprehension. Cohesive devices like conjunctions ("and," "but") or ellipsis are often trimmed due to space, yet their absence can fragment meaning, as seen in some Arabic subtitles for *Inglourious Basterds*. Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2007) advocate for prioritizing readability through clear font sizes, timing (minimum 1 second per 12 characters), and logical breaks.

Technical Constraints and Linguistic Trade-offs

Subtitling's technical limits—screen space, synchronization, and pacing—force linguistic compromises. Fast-paced dialogue in *Breaking Bad* (e.g., Jesse's slang-heavy rants) often results in omissions in Chinese subtitles, where character limits truncate phrases like "Yo, what's up?" to "嘿，怎么了？" (Hey, what's wrong?), losing informal flair. [6] Multilingual scenes amplify this; *Inglourious Basterds*'s rapid language switches overwhelm some French subtitles, merging lines into vague summaries. Gottlieb (1992) notes that such trade-offs are inevitable, but strategic prioritization of key dialogue over filler enhances overall quality, a tactic evident in Netflix's polished releases.

Conclusion. The proper use of linguistic aspects in subtitling movies and TV series is a dynamic process that integrates syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and cultural adaptation within a technically constrained medium. Effective subtitles distill complex dialogues into concise, meaningful text,

preserving narrative intent and cultural flavor while ensuring readability and cohesion. This study reveals that linguistic expertise, coupled with AVT-specific strategies like condensation and substitution, is vital for overcoming challenges such as brevity, multilingualism, and cultural disparity. As global media consumption grows, these findings underscore the need for robust training in linguistic subtitling practices, offering a roadmap for translators to elevate quality and accessibility. Future research could explore viewer perceptions of subtitle variations or the impact of AI-driven subtitling tools on linguistic accuracy.

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