The subtitling profession in Croatia

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Abstract

This paper is based on personal experience, a survey carried out among subtitlers and an interview with the Head of the Translation and Subtitling Department of Croatian state television Hrvatska Televizija. The main goal is to find out the kind of professional training that practising subtitlers have received and, if none, whether they would be interested in any potential form of professional training. It also aims to gauge their opinion as to whether research is important and relevant for their daily work.

1. The history of public subtitling in Croatia

The information in this section is based on an interview with Ms Bojana Zeljko-Lipovscak, Head of the Translation and Subtitling Department at the state Croatian Radio and Television (HRT). Hrvatska televizija (HTV), part of HRT, the Croatian Radio and Television state broadcasting corporation formerly known as RTVZ (Radio Television Zagreb), began broadcasting in 1956. In the first couple of years the company rebroadcast Austrian and Italian programmes without translation, and in the 1960s it began producing and broadcasting its own programmes, which included foreign films and TV series with Croatian subtitles, signalling the birth of television subtitling in the country. Until the 1970s, programmes were broadcast live and subtitlers had to be present in the studio during transmission so that they could perform the time cueing of subtitles. As is the current practice at most film festivals today, they were responsible for technically launching the subtitles live: this inevitably compromised the accurate synchronisation of dialogue and subtitles.

The profession gathered momentum with the establishment of the Translation and Subtitling Department (TSD) at HTV in 1989, the use of VHS tapes and the introduction of new subtitling technology that enabled better quality subtitles. The separation of Croatian Radio and Television from the network of TV and radio broadcasters of the former Yugoslavia was also a positive step for the growth of the subtitling profession, since it meant that all foreign programmes were to be broadcast from Zagreb and not by the various TV and radio broadcasters in the Yugoslav republics, as had
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previously been the case. Zagreb was thus confirmed as the principal media
centre, with Croatian as the main
language. In addition, there was a
considerable increase in the number of foreign programmes that were
broadcast with Croatian subtitles.
The TSD currently handles about 100 hours of programmes a week
and provides subtitles for films, TV series, documentaries (partly dubbed),
cartoons (occasionally dubbed), news reports and domestic productions for
the overseas market (i.e. subtitled into the foreign language). To cope with
the demand, over the past two decades several hundred subtitlers have been
trained at HTV. Since subtitling is a freelance profession and beginners are
generally young, the turnover of subtitlers is rather high and constant
recruitment is necessary.

According to the Head of the TSD, the following characteristics are
desirable in a subtitler: high linguistic competence in both the target and
source languages, the ability to condense text, and an adherence to the
company’s language standards, PC literacy, manual and technical dexterity,
williness to work to short deadlines and at unusual times. In her opinion,
professional and practical training in subtitling is necessary and the steps
taken by HTV in this respect have shown good results. However, this is not a
simple task since good supervisors are needed and prospective subtitlers must
ideally be monitored for a certain period of time at the beginning of their
careers, which, in most cases, is impossible.

TDS cooperates with some 70 subtitlers who translate into a wide
range of languages, English being the main source language of most
programmes. Of these, around 40 work exclusively for HTV as freelancers.
However, new developments in the Croatian TV market have opened up new
opportunities for Croatian subtitlers. In 2000, national commercial television
stations were introduced in Croatia (Nova TV and RTL Televizija), as well as
foreign owned cable and satellite channels – such as HBO, Hallmark, Viasat
History, Viasat Explorer, National Geographic and TV 1000 – and local TV
broadcasters. Given that Croatia has traditionally been a subtitling country,
all of these new stations decided to subtitle their foreign language
programmes in Croatian. In addition, the growth of the DVD market and
easier internet access have allowed Croatian subtitlers to work for companies
based overseas. This means that the number of professional subtitlers has
increased greatly and, given the potential of new technological advances, like
internet television, it can only be expected that, as the number of subtitled
channels increases, so will the demand for new subtitlers. However, one of
the main drawbacks in Croatia is that there is no formal, institutional
subtitling training in the country, though some agencies do organise their
own in-house training. This situation is not unique to Croatia and is shared by
many other countries, as is highlighted by Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007:41-
2). The question is whether any form of training is perceived as necessary from the perspective of the subtitlers themselves.

2. Survey

A survey was carried out in 2007 in the form of a questionnaire distributed amongst professional subtitlers working for Croatian Television’s Subtitling Department (TSD) and colleagues who work for a large multilingual subtitling company based in the USA (henceforth The Company).

2.1 Methodology

The questionnaire was sent by email to all 70 subtitlers who work for HRT and to 15 who work for the subtitling company. As far as HTV was concerned, the subtitlers were sent the questionnaire by the head of the TSD, in order to make sure that they all received it. As for The Company, I personally sent the questionnaire to all the colleagues.

I decided to use open questions because they enabled respondents to be more descriptive in their answers. All participants were asked the following questions:

1. How long have you been working as a subtitler?
2. Do you consider yourself a full-time subtitler?
3. Have you finished or taken a course at a specialist translation school?
4. If available, would you study subtitling or take a course in subtitling?
5. Do you think that research in translating for TV is necessary and would you be interested in the results?
6. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a subtitler? What would you change if you could?

2.2 Findings: subtitlers working for HTV

A total of 27 completed questionnaires were received, 21 from HTV’s subtitlers and six from The Company’s. HTV’s subtitlers gave the following answers:

1. How long have you been working as a subtitler?

Answers varied from one year (two subtitlers) to 19 years (two subtitlers). The average period was seven years of experience. However, it was very
obvious that, at least among those subtitlers who returned the questionnaires, there were very few subtitlers who had worked for more than 10 years.

2. Do you consider yourself a full-time subtitler?

Nine subtitlers answered ‘yes’ and twelve answered ‘no’. Out of those who said ‘yes’, one mentioned that that s/he also worked as a translator but considered her/himself to be a full-time subtitler; another one said that s/he was a subtitler but also translated for the theatre; and the last one stated that whilst s/he had another full-time job, s/he was involved in both jobs full-time and considered her/himself to be a full-time subtitler. One of the main reasons for this ambivalence was the fact that subtitlers tend to earn less nowadays than they used to some ten years ago, which forces most of them to have a ‘day job’ and work in subtitling as an extra job.

3. Have you finished or taken a course at a specialist translation school?

Only two subtitlers answered ‘yes’ to this question, which represents 9.5% of the respondents, although on closer inspection, the schools they mentioned were specialist centres for the training of conference interpreters, not subtitlers or translators. Nonetheless, this state of affairs was actually expected because of the lack of specialist translation schools on Croatian territory. Not only are there no schools in the country, but in the rapidly growing literature on subtitling (Gottlieb, 1994:263) there are virtually no works dealing with Croatian subtitling.

4. Would you, if it were possible, study subtitling or take a course in subtitling?

Out of 21 subtitlers, ten said ‘yes’ (47%), nine said ‘no’ (43%), and two said ‘maybe’ (10%). Eleven subtitlers (52% of the total number of respondents) had four or less years of experience and nine of these less experienced professionals (i.e. 85%) showed a willingness to enrol for a subtitling course.

On the other hand, only one subtitler with 15 years experience or more, out of the six in this group, answered ‘yes’. The rest from this group of experienced subtitlers answered ‘no’.

The four subtitlers in the group of professionals with four to 15 years experience (21% of the total number of respondents) answered ‘no’. This distribution was to some extent understandable as a subtitler with many years of experience, for example 19, would not be interested in becoming a subtitling student, while those with only a couple would be more willing to do so.
5. Do you think that research in translating for TV is necessary and would you be interested in the results?

Only two subtitlers were of the opinion that research was not important, whilst the other 19 answered ‘yes’. In this particular case, respondents provided more detailed responses such as: “yes, I would be interested if competent people were involved”. One subtitler said that she would not only be interested in the results, but would be willing to participate in such research and another said that s/he would be interested in research and the attitude of viewers towards subtitling and dubbing. The conclusion therefore is that research, at least in principle, would be interesting to practitioners of subtitling.

6. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a subtitler? What would you change if you could?

Respondents felt this question was stimulating and engaging, which resulted in an array of more detailed answers. The advantages can be grouped into both personal and professional considerations.

With respect to their personal considerations, the subjects mentioned an individual approach to work and sometimes wonderful films which were a pleasure to subtitle as being among the advantages of the job. Some said that it enabled them to see programmes they would otherwise never have seen and many considered that the diverse formats of films, TV series and cartoons enabled them to express their creativity. For some, the job was not too difficult and some professionals thought that permanent contact with the source language and the various cultures and subcultures was a real plus point. Regular exposure to new words; constant improvement through one’s own work and learning to express thoughts in a concise way were also seen as very positive. Interestingly, “taking a holiday when one wants” was a great bonus for one of HRT’s subtitlers.

Regarding working conditions, some of the main advantages included the ability to accept as much work as one wanted as well as the possibility of working from home. For some, the television format was short, which was seen as an advantage, so that it would only take a couple of days to subtitle a film, as opposed to translating a book. Some subtitlers felt that the fact that they did not have to work for one employer was an asset, meaning that if one has a ‘day job’, one has one employer, and if one is a freelancer, one can have one, two or more employers.

The disadvantages were also grouped into personal and professional considerations. However, the principal and the most frequently expressed disadvantage was perhaps both personal and professional. According to all
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subtitlers, the job was underpaid, or ‘painfully underpaid’ as was pointed out by one subtitler.

Personal reasons included having to work sometimes with terribly bad films (“shallow content, a lot of aggression and vulgarity”, said one subtitler). For another subtitler, it was “an autistic job unacceptable to many”. Some respondents thought that the subtitler was a figure on show, allowing viewers to praise someone’s work or, more regularly, to criticise subtitlers very rudely.

As far as professional considerations were concerned, there were various disadvantages according to the respondents, one being that a guess or a careless translation never goes unnoticed, a point that has also been discussed by Ivarsson and Carroll (1998:105). The “total ignorance of the viewing public about who and under what circumstances subtitles are created” was also a negative point according to one of the subtitlers.

The fact that subtitlers were often left to rely on their own resourcefulness was a disadvantage for some, as well as the fact that it was a freelance job, which, as mentioned before, was perceived as an advantage by other subtitlers. Short deadlines and poor and outdated equipment were disadvantages of the job, the latter being mentioned by almost all the subtitlers, i.e. the use of VHS cassettes in an age of DVDs. Some language restrictions were also perceived as being negative: “such as the restrictions when using slang which are unnecessary, sometimes even damaging because they impoverish the translation”, as was stated by one of the respondents. This agrees with what Assis Rosa (2001:219) calls centralization, that is an attempt to use standard language as much as possible, as opposed to local variants, resulting in an impoverished translation.

There were subtitlers who thought that it was a stressful job, for example when they had to deal with texts out of context, referring to segments used in various TV programmes, like the statements of politicians. Working nights, weekends and on holiday was a disadvantage for many, as well as the fact that subtitlers had no professional body representing their interests, meaning that there was nobody to help negotiate better prices with employers, a fact which added to the lack of networking and communication amongst colleagues.

Most respondents thought that the contracts signed by subtitlers stripped them of any rights as authors although, under the Berne and World Conventions, translators are entitled to the same copyright as writers and therefore have the right to be given credit for their work (Ivarsson and Carroll, 1998:59). Working on the principle of "take it or leave it’ and the unpredictability of the job market were criticised by many. “The names of Croatian proofreaders of subtitles do not appear on the screen at the end of a programme together with the subtitler’s name and the fact that nobody knows
that they are the ones who work on the text before broadcasting” was a disadvantage according to one subtitler.

2.3 Findings: subtitlers working for the multilingual subtitling company (The Company)

The six subtitlers working for the subtitling company had all been working as TV subtitlers for less than a year except one, which was understandable as The Company only started operations in Croatia in June 2006, just one year before this survey was carried out. It opted for hiring primarily new, unqualified subtitlers, presumably to cut costs.

None of the six respondents considered themselves to be a full-time subtitler and none had finished or attended a specialist school in Translation. Four of the subtitlers mentioned that they would be interested in following a programme of study in subtitling, whereas the other two declined this opportunity, arguing that they thought they were too old for such a training course. All six were unanimous in showing an interest in the results of research. When it came to commenting on the advantages and disadvantages of this profession, the answers were very similar to those put forward by HRT’s subtitlers. Significant, though, was the negative statement given by one of the subtitlers: “since it will never be a well paid job, this discipline will always be treated with disrespect, the same as any other form of translation of material that is truly interesting”.

An advantage, according to one subtitler, was that “subtitling is incomparably better than other types of translation, like the translation of legal documents, regulations, manuals etc.”.

3. Challenges in the profession

Just a mere glance at the above comments and results leads to the conclusion that there seem to be more disadvantages than advantages to the job according to HTV’s subtitlers. Whether this is really the case in practice is difficult to ascertain since people tend to complain a lot about their jobs. Nonetheless, the general conclusion was that the job is not an easy one and that is not very well paid in relation to the difficulty and responsibility entailed. On the other hand, subtitlers new to the profession are mostly positive about it.

Subtitling for television is in many ways specific differing from other translation forms. At first glance, it is the size of the audience that makes it specific, since a programme shown on Croatian Television is available to millions of viewers, unlike printed translations. Furthermore, it is a translation format in which consumers (viewers) immediately see the
results and they are able to compare it with the original. Most foreign programmes subtitled into Croatian are originally in English and there is a prevalent feeling that ‘everyone speaks English’, which seems to empower many people to comment on a subtitler’s work. HTV is a state-owned company for which viewers pay an annual licence fee and they therefore feel free to comment on the service provided by the TV station, including the subtitles. The internet boom has made this process even easier and viewers can post their comments on the HTV’s official on-line forum expressing whatever they wish, under a pseudonym if they so desire. Subtitlers are always credited at the end of a programme meaning that their identity is in the public domain, a situation that new subtitlers find especially sensitive. This can make the job rather stressful for the subtitler.

Although the immense wealth of resources available on the internet has made the job a lot easier for subtitlers, the speed at which some commissions must be carried out in order to meet impossible deadlines means that subtitlers simply do not have time to carry out proper research and revise their translations before submitting them. This is obviously a recipe for poor translations, particularly when working with audiovisual programmes in which slang or any specialised jargon abound.

Working for television means working to very tight deadlines, and a couple of subtitlers pointed out that this is not always a very positive thing since it generates a lot of stress. Although deadlines vary depending on the distribution channel (Díaz Cintas and Remael, 2007:38), the professional reality is that they tend always to be very stringent and some subtitlers find it very hard to cope. Clients can impose short deadlines for a variety of reasons that can be attributed to the nature of the medium itself and, as part of a team, subtitlers must be prepared to complete their translations in a given time. Many respondents commented on the fact that, because the work is freelance, clients do not consider the conditions in which subtitlers work, whether at night, at weekends, on holiday or for very long hours, and consequently these ‘extras’ will not be reflected in the rates they pay. This is one of the main reasons why subtitlers quit the profession. On the bright side, it is an ideal job for those who dislike 9 to 5 jobs or who like to work at ‘unusual, unsocial hours’.

According to the answers provided in the questionnaires, all subtitlers feel that they are underpaid and that the rates do not reflect the difficulty of the job they have to perform. Subtitling rates probably reflect the attitude of employers towards subtitling as a profession and there is no sign that this will change in the near future. If subtitlers want to make a living solely from subtitling, they must work hard and long hours, which again brings us back to the question of quality. Some subtitlers tend to take on more work than they perhaps should.
When it comes to the use of language, many subtitlers feel that they are not independent enough in their work given the language constraints imposed by some of the broadcasters. Usually, it is not subtitlers who are the last to see their subtitled work, but rather a proofreader at HTV or a simulator at The Company. Since these professionals also work to stringent deadlines, there is often not enough time to check the changes that they want to introduce with the subtitler before proceeding to implement them. Subtitlers are very unhappy about this situation, as it is their name that is shown at the end of a programme. Having said that, the fact that someone else checks the subtitled material tends to improve the quality of the final product by eliminating ‘typos’ and other punctuation mistakes.

As an activity, subtitling is, as many subtitlers stressed in their questionnaire, repetitive. However, it is a form of translation that enables them to learn many new things not only in linguistic terms. Subtitlers may subtitle a mind-numbingly dull film one day and work on something completely different, like a documentary on the Roman Empire or a corporate video on the banking system the next. All the subtitlers employed by the subtitling company pointed out in their questionnaires that they liked their job precisely because of the quality of the programmes. Seen from this perspective, subtitling has the potential to expand a subtitler’s knowledge and views. Other commercial TV stations do not usually broadcast such high quality programmes (Nikolić, 2005:33). So the opportunity to learn does, in many ways, depend on the client.

As mentioned before, new technologies like ADSL high-speed internet connections, integral subtitling programmes and the DVD have enabled subtitlers to produce better quality translations. However, this can also be a negative factor since most subtitlers, especially those who work for subtitling companies, do not have to leave their PC in order to subtitle. This can make it a very solitary job and not everyone is very comfortable doing it as a freelancer, which is why some subtitlers give it up after a couple of years.

4. The future of the profession

The consolidation of the DVD industry has undoubtedly changed the profile of the profession (Díaz Cintas and Remael, 2007:35). Since there is a growing number of TV companies in Croatia, it seems logical to expect that the demand for subtitlers will increase in the years to come. As technology gets better and more user friendly, clients will probably expect subtitlers to work to even shorter deadlines, for more ‘challenging’ fees and with no errors. However, subtitlers are only human, and will probably expect more money for their work, better working conditions and more realistic deadlines.
It remains to be seen how these two opposing views will be reconciled in the future.

**Bibliography**


