

Practitioner perspectives in the French subtitling industry: Insights into collaborative work practices

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Abstract

This paper investigates the often-overlooked practices and perspectives of subtitlers within the context of the French audiovisual translation (AVT) industry. It descriptively examines processes associated with different French distribution media – specifically cinema and Video on Demand (VOD) platforms – and how these shape practitioners’ practices and collaboration within subtitling production networks. Through interviews and non-participant observations with seven professional English-French subtitlers, this study explores various steps in the production process that differ according to distribution media and influence subtitlers’ workflows and interactions. It demonstrates that practices in subtitling extend beyond linguistic tasks, highlighting that navigating professional interactions and requirements within collaborative production contexts are central aspects of the subtitlers’ role. By presenting practitioners’ own accounts of their collaborative processes, the study underscores the significance of incorporating these experiences into broader discussions.

Keywords

Audiovisual translation, subtitling industry, collaboration, subtitling practices

1. Introduction

While audiovisual translation (AVT) has attracted increasing scholarly attention since the 1990s (Remael, 2010), it has traditionally been analysed from a product-oriented perspective (Beuchert, 2017), later shifting to reception studies. However, the practitioners' perspectives and practices have often been overlooked.

AVT primarily revolves around "the transfer of multimodal and multimedia speech (dialogue, monologue, comments, etc.) into another language/culture" (Gambier, 2012, p. 45). Notably, subtitling has emerged as a major focus of interest, covering both intralingual subtitling within the same language, such as subtitling for the d/Deaf and the hard of hearing, and interlingual subtitling, which enables communication between different languages. This study falls within the latter category, exploring the sphere of interlingual subtitling from English into French.

Research in the field of AVT has undergone four turns as outlined by Chaume (2018): the descriptive, cultural, sociological, and cognitive turns. The present study positions itself within the sociological branch and contributes to an area that has been relatively underexplored by adopting the Translator Studies paradigm (Chesterman, 2009). This approach allows for an examination of "translation practices and working procedures, quality control procedures and the revision process, co-operation in team translation, multiple drafting, relations with other agents including the client" (Chesterman, 2009, p. 17). Such insights are necessary, because although the products of AVT are visible and widely consumed, "its practitioners can be invisible and undervalued" (Tuominen, 2021, p. 88). The pronounced lack of recognition for translatorial professionals is even more prevalent in the AVT domain (Loison-Charles, 2022), where "[r]elatively little is known about the perceptions professionals have of their working environment and conditions, and about their role and status" (Künzli, 2023, p. 2).

With this in mind, the current study does not focus on the subtitles themselves. Instead, it investigates the intricate dynamics of subtitling practices in the French industry, emphasising the practitioners' insights into their roles and habits that shape the content displayed on our screens. A focus is placed on social interactions, exploring how interpersonal relations are embedded in these practitioners' processes. Contrary to the common perception of translators working in isolation, they are part of extensive social networks (Risku & Rogl, 2022). Collaboration in translation is not new; it occurs "not just between multiple translators but also between translators, authors, clients, project managers, editors, and myriad other (both human and textual) stakeholders in the translation process" (Alfer, 2017, p. 276). Audiovisual translators, though often freelancers, are deeply embedded in production networks, as "[m]ost forms of AVT have always involved some form of collaboration, rendering AV translators and their work dependent on other agents in the production process" (Remael, 2010, p. 15).

Central to this paper is an overarching question: How do the processes and working practices associated with different French distribution media influence the organisation of subtitlers' workflows and their collaboration within production networks? To this end, the present study emphasises the collaborative nature of subtitling in the AVT industry, in which the rising consumption of content via streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon, largely driven by globalisation (Massidda, 2023, p. 7), has significantly altered workflows. These changes have reshaped traditional practices and collaboration patterns.

Previous studies on collaboration in AVT have predominantly focused on the subtitlers' interactions with filmmakers (e.g., Romero-Fresco, 2019; Zanotti, 2020). This also applies to the French context, where research has mainly examined the same type of collaboration within the realm of *auteur* cinema (Eisenschitz, 2013; Silvester, 2022). This focus highlights a gap in understanding how audiovisual translators collaborate with each other, particularly

in mainstream subtitling distribution. In previous work (Caseres, 2023, 2024), I have noted that while studies on independent cinema reported a higher degree of collaboration with producers and directors, facilitated by the higher status of these subtitlers and the different power dynamics at play in their work (Silvester, 2022), in mainstream distribution, “subtitlers primarily collaborate at post-production level with clients, colleagues, and experts” (Caseres, 2024, p. 187). During the translation process, these subtitlers demonstrate sustained engagement with co-subtitlers, dubbing teams, and other agents such as specialists, language consultants, and external colleagues, through both formal and informal modes (Caseres, 2023), thus highlighting the multifaceted nature of their collaborative endeavours to enhance translation quality. The current study expands on these findings by shifting from the subtitlers’ individual interactions to explore the broader implications of collaborative practices in workflow organisation (i.e., the different steps in the translation process) across different distribution media. It offers insights into how working environments impact collaboration within subtitling production networks.

In what follows, I offer an overview of the French AVT industry, before introducing the main details of my research project. I then turn to some of the major findings, in particular the participants’ profiles and projects and the functioning of subtitling production networks in France. Finally, I outline working practices shaped by collaboration with other agents.

2. Context

While it is one of the largest audiovisual markets, in France, AVT has not received a lot of academic attention compared with other large markets such as Spain or Italy (Valdeón, 2022, p. 373). In particular, the French subtitling industry remains rather underexplored in the current literature, with few studies looking at the processes or the translators from a social perspective.

The practitioners’ insights are especially interesting to study in this context, because French subtitlers have the particularity of being protected by legal recognition in the form of author status and having copyright over their translations, which grants them both moral and economic rights (Gourgeon, 2014, p. 6), and allows them to receive royalties for their subtitles (Genty et al., 2021, p. 8). According to the 2022-2023 survey on working conditions in AVT carried out by the practitioners’ association AudioVisual Translators Europe (AVTE, n.d.), over 28% of French audiovisual translators’ incomes come from royalties and author rights, which is the highest percentage reported among 35 European countries.

Such advantageous positions in the industry can often be traced to the presence of strong unions and associations, which contribute to a homogenisation of working conditions – including rates, royalties, and credits – in contrast with the disparate practices seen in other contexts (Kuo, 2015, p. 189). Community collaboration among practitioners leads to visible benefits across many areas, with French subtitlers seeming to experience better circumstances in comparison to other European contexts (Caseres, 2024), in relation, for instance, to negotiating power, rates, and royalties (AVTE, n.d.). In this regard, the role of the French association for audiovisual translators, ATAA (*Association des Traducteurs/Adaptateurs de l’Audiovisuel*), has been recognised as crucial in advocating visibility, better working conditions, and contributing to the sustainability of the AVT professions (Caseres, 2024). Similar observations are reported in Silvester’s (2022) investigation of working conditions and collaborative practices in subtitling, which found that the six French-English subtitlers she interviewed reported relatively good working conditions and rates compared to other contexts, despite challenges such as tight deadlines.

Despite these relatively favourable conditions, scholars such as Genty et al. (2021) have highlighted substantial disparities in the professional practice of AVT in France across various post-production laboratories and TV channels. The imbalance between the demand for high quality and the pressures of reduced rates has been underlined in the French industry (Rosnet, 2012). The reduction in rates is an overarching concern among translators, and is also prevalent in subtitling. On the other hand, Kuo's (2015) worldwide study has highlighted that, despite the challenges facing subtitlers, the French industry stands out as particularly lucrative, with its subtitlers reporting the highest average rates. However, this finding reflects the industry context prior to the proliferation of streaming platforms, which has since introduced new dynamics.

Therefore, in this evolving landscape, considering the economic pressures and shifting working conditions that affect subtitlers' tasks and collaborative efforts is essential to provide a deeper understanding of the environment. Broader economic trends impacting subtitlers are a growing concern (e.g., Künzli, 2023). Industry discussions frequently reference a "talent crunch", describing a "small pool of skilled professionals available in the AVT sector" (Massidda, 2023, p. 13). However, despite the rising production of audiovisual content, the decline in rates and working conditions is closely tied to this phenomenon, which reflects inadequate conditions that discourage practitioners from continuing in the field rather than a lack of skilled professionals.

Similarly to trends observed in other subtitling industries, working conditions in the French context have been increasingly shaped by economic pressures, particularly declining rates and tighter deadlines. Subtitlers report facing varying remuneration models – such as payment per subtitle, per minute, or per project – depending on the distribution medium and clients (Caseres, 2024). While subtitling for cinema generally offers more favourable rates, the VOD sector has seen a downward trend in compensation. These shrinking rates are compounded by shorter deadlines, limiting subtitlers' ability to engage in thorough quality control or collaborate effectively with colleagues (Caseres, 2023). Additionally, administrative tasks associated with freelancing, such as invoicing and handling social contributions, add to the overall workload, making it difficult for subtitlers to balance work and personal life, especially under the pressure of quick turnaround times.

On the technological side, the shift towards remote and decentralised workflows, alongside the increasing use of cloud-based platforms and automation, has further strained collaboration. Cloud-based platforms have replaced traditional desktop subtitling software (Massidda, 2023, p. 8), centralising processes but limiting subtitlers' autonomy and also reducing opportunities for collaboration with colleagues or other agents in the production process. The global nature of these platforms, with its increased need for confidentiality, can also restrict access to full video content, complicating collaborative efforts to maintain consistency across episodes or projects.

The combination of economic pressures and technological transformations not only complicates individual workflows but also presents barriers to broader effective collaboration. These challenges are amplified by flawed communication, often resulting in a lack of transparency in the production networks' workflows. Insufficient communication hinders the exchange of essential information in the subtitling process, while also undermining practitioners' expertise and diminishing their creative roles.

The intersection of these challenges within the French AVT industry highlights the complex environments that subtitlers must navigate beyond their specialised skills, as working conditions impact both the subtitling processes, and the collaboration involved.

3. Current study

The findings reported here emerged from a larger project organised around two case studies which examined subtitling practices, processes, and collaboration in two distinct contexts: an amateur subtitling community and industry subtitling. The current paper focuses on the second context. Specifically, I have investigated the work of seven English-to-French subtitlers affiliated with ATAA working for cinema and Video on Demand (VOD) platforms. In the VOD category, I encompass a large spectrum of platforms to highlight the hybridity of systems (e.g., streaming platforms, platforms available through cable TV subscription, platforms belonging to TV channels, etc.). Subtitlers often work across different types of platforms, as their roles overlap due to shared content and cross-platform distribution.

The seven participants were recruited through a number of strategies: dissemination on the ATAA mailing list, posts on social media, personal email outreach and snowball sampling, notably facilitated by the proactive involvement of the first participant who recommended colleagues. The design of the data collection aimed to give central importance to the subtitlers, recognising the significant value of each participant's perspective and contribution.

Each practitioner participated in an introductory interview, followed by non-participant observation of their workday, and a retrospective interview. Both interviews followed a semi-structured approach and took around 30-60 minutes. The introductory interview focused on key information about the subtitlers' profile, work, and background. In the non-participant observation, the subtitlers' tasks and tools were recorded electronically with time stamps, following Beuchert's (2017) fieldnote template. The non-participant approach was deliberately chosen to address several ethical considerations. These included minimising intrusiveness and bias by avoiding active intervention that may influence the environment, and implementing strict confidentiality measures to ensure that neither the subtitlers nor their clients could be identified. The retrospective interview, which allowed for further investigation of some of the tasks the subtitlers performed in the process, was carried out after they had finished their working day. Both interviews were recorded and later anonymised during transcription. For each participant, the data set was therefore composed of a pre-observation interview transcription, fieldnotes and a retrospective interview transcription. These multiple data sources enabled the triangulation of information to analyse the data, identify, and report patterns using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process. This type of analysis allows for the identification and interpretation of key ideas or themes by regrouping patterns under specific labels (Saldanha & O'Brien, 2014, pp. 189–190).

The thematic analysis was conducted using a 6-phase coding process with Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis software. I initially used a "theoretical" approach, guided by predefined research questions and existing theoretical frameworks, for drawing conclusions on specific aspects of the data. Complementarily, an "inductive" approach was applied, allowing themes to be generated organically from the data without predefined categories. This combination of approaches revealed new insights, such as the importance of recognising collaboration as a pivotal factor in the analysis of subtitling processes and working conditions.

Table 1 below provides key demographic information about the seven participants, offering insights into each subtitler's profile and project(s).

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Gender	female	female	female	male	female	female	male
Age range	41-50	21-30	51-60	41-50	41-50	31-40	41-50
Experience (in years)	20	1.5	28	19	21	13	18
Project(s) observed	film for cinema	series for VOD and/or TV	film for cinema film for VOD and/or TV	film for VOD and/or TV	film for VOD and/or TV series for VOD and/or TV	series for VOD and/or TV	series for VOD and/or TV

Table 1. Description of participants

The participants in the study presented a variety of profiles, especially regarding years of experience. All participants worked as freelancers, with six having author status and one registered as a micro-entrepreneur. Each subtitler worked regularly for at least one form of VOD platform or for cinema distribution, but some also subtitled for various other media, including TV channels, DVD/Blu-ray, and film festivals.

In this study, I specifically focused on two project categories: films for cinema on the one hand, and films and series for VOD on the other. Participants often grouped the latter under the broader category of “video” subtitling, which also encompasses TV distribution. It is important to note the differences in how collaboration is organised among subtitlers based on distribution media, but also on content type. Subtitlers translating films generally worked independently. In contrast, those working on series typically collaborated with one or two co-subtitler(s), dividing the season’s episodes in half. However, Participant G was an exception, working independently on a 6-episode mini-series. Additionally, while the primary language combination for the subtitlers was English to French, Participant D worked on an Italian film using English as a pivot language.

The analysis of participants’ profiles reveals their ability to manage multiple projects across different distribution media, sometimes simultaneously. This adaptability leads to substantial variations in how they organise their work and collaborate with clients and colleagues, highlighting the diverse dynamics at play in the different environments.

4. Findings

This section first explores how the work environment associated with different French distribution media influences practices, focusing on the concept of subtitling production networks. These networks function differently depending on the specific distribution medium, which in turn affects how subtitlers organise their work and manage interactions with various stakeholders in the process. Building on this understanding of the subtitlers’ working contexts, I further examine how their workflows are tailored to meet the distinct expectations of different clients, offering a descriptive overview of specific steps in the subtitling process.

4.1. Subtitling production networks

The framework of production networks, introduced in subtitling by Abdallah (2010, 2011; Abdallah & Koskinen, 2007), has played a pivotal role in examining subtitling processes. Abdallah’s (2011) conceptualisation of subtitling production networks distinguishes such constellations from traditional in-house or freelance models, where subtitlers work directly for end-clients. Emerging in response to economic globalisation and content outsourcing,

these networks often involve intermediary suppliers. This framework enables an examination of how processes are organised and provides insights into interactions with various agents. In this study, the clients' processes differed depending on the distribution destination of the subtitles, leading to variations in guidelines, materials, and collaboration patterns from one project to another. Despite these differences, the subtitlers' interactions within their production networks can be categorised into three main levels:

1. *Translators and revisers* are mainly freelancers who co-translate and/or revise the subtitles. In the French context, revisers are known as "simulation operators". The "simulation" is a quality control step of a subtitle file, during which the subtitlers are typically assisted by one or more observers (the simulation operator and the clients), to show the subtitles in real viewing conditions in a laboratory to correct or enhance the text or adjust the timing of the subtitles (Gourgeon, 2014, p. 35).
2. *Primary clients* are production companies, which create and produce the audiovisual content, or French distributors, who purchase the rights to distribute the audiovisual content in France. In video projects, these tasks can also be carried out by VOD platforms and TV channels (Ferrer Simó, 2021). These will be the first to decide about the commissioning of subtitling.
3. *Secondary clients* are post-production companies, also called "laboratories" in the French context, which are often composed of linguistic or technical project managers. In this role, these intermediaries are responsible for providing the necessary materials to the subtitlers and clients. Nowadays, laboratories are not always French companies, but are often multinational Language Service Providers (LSPs), who are typically multilanguage vendors (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2020, p. 33). Some multinational LSPs have established a French branch, functioning as an independent local post-production company under the umbrella of the LSP, while some operate at international level through different globalised processes.

All the subtitlers mentioned two levels of clients. As Participant E explained, "there is always an intermediary as there will always be a French distributor, even when working for cinema", and she added, "I always work [...] through a laboratory". However, in cinema projects, subtitlers have a direct line of communication with primary clients, which enables them to seek clarifications, ask questions, and obtain feedback from them, notably through the aforementioned simulations. The cinema workflow can therefore be defined as more direct and transparent, as it allows subtitlers to interact directly with technical directors of the French distributors or the major company. In these scenarios, these primary clients usually initiate the request and rely on post-production companies as their technical service providers. The primary client informs the subtitler about which intermediary the subtitler will interact with, and they only go through the secondary client for technical aspects, such as to receive the materials. Therefore, cinema subtitlers interact with clients at both levels: the primary clients for content-related aspects, as in this area "there are no intermediaries in cinema" (Participant G), and the secondary clients for technical considerations and quality assurance processes in their laboratories.

On the other hand, when working for video subtitling, subtitlers only rarely interact with primary clients. As shared by Participant E: "the laboratories [...] don't want us going directly to the client because it undermines their role". Video subtitlers thus interact almost exclusively with secondary clients at a post-production laboratory or an LSP, who commission the subtitles and serve as intermediaries between agents. These secondary clients handle rate negotiations, communication, file exchanges, and payments, creating a barrier between subtitlers and the primary clients who are directly responsible for the content. As illustrated by Participant G:

The laboratory acts as an intermediary. They prefer that you do not communicate directly with the clients. So, if you have questions about the series, you write to the laboratory, which then writes to the client, who responds to the laboratory, and the laboratory then communicates the response to you.

This restricted communication with primary clients can thus have considerable repercussions on the exchange of important information, and thus hinder the “flow of information and knowledge” (Abdallah, 2011, p. 181) and the decision-making process. In the video context, it is also important to note that revision is optional and may not be consistently commissioned by clients across all projects.

The dichotomy in interactions within the two different types of production networks underscores a primary nuanced distinction between cinema and video distribution, which is also marked by variations in terms of work practices and collaboration, detailed in the following sections.

4.2. Work organisation and practices

This examination of subtitlers’ workflows focuses on the organisational structure of the subtitling projects I observed and its impact on practices. I aim to highlight often-overlooked aspects of the subtitling process, revealing behind-the-scenes practices and challenges that are typically hidden from public view. This exploration enhances understanding of subtitling as a complex field and underscores the critical, yet unrecognised, elements shaping the final product, such as the information and materials provided to subtitlers, their content viewing processes, and their management of quality control tasks. Understanding these foundational elements is essential for appreciating the collaborative nature of subtitling work, which varies significantly based on the work environment.

4.2.1. Information provided

During subtitling commission, information patterns vary among clients, with some providing detailed schedules and information on the audiovisual content, while others rely on subtitlers to research the content online and guess broadcast dates. A common element across all distribution media is the absence of a brief or systematic provision of relevant information about the target audience, such as demographics. This observation aligns with findings in other studies (Beuchert, 2017; Silvester, 2022). The absence of audience information is intriguing because it “makes it very difficult for the subtitler to take an informed approach to audience design” (Silvester, 2018, p. 116) when awareness of the target audience “could inform the subtitler’s choice of strategies” (p. 88). Sometimes the subtitlers in the present study were not even given the exact distribution destination, such as for Participants D and F, who were not entirely sure about which VOD platform would broadcast their subtitles.

In the projects observed for cinema distribution, Participants A and C received general information from the distributors regarding the titles and directors of the films, the rates and which intermediary would be the technical service provider. Then, the secondary client sent an email with all the details and materials of the film, as well as the pre-established deadlines. Participant G also detailed a similar information process for his cinema projects, however I could not observe this as he was working on a VOD project at the time of the study.

When subtitling for VOD production networks, the organisation of the information process I observed varied considerably from one intermediary to the other (i.e., post-production company or LSP). Participant D stated that usually the information process is disorganised with his post-production company and the only information he is given is the distribution medium (DVD, VOD, etc.) and the deadline. Participant B, on the contrary, had a particularly meticulous client who sent her information on the type of content, rates, duration of episodes, and the

general theme of the series, although they did not disclose the exact title in case she refused the project. Nevertheless, as they did not have the episodes yet, they could not provide her with the schedule and deadlines at the beginning. For the same end-client, but through a different LSP, Participant C received detailed written information about all the deadlines of her film, which is not the case with all her clients. This difference in organisation between clients was also highlighted by Participant E who noted a clear difference between her TV and VOD projects. While the deadlines for TV tended to be planned in advance and broadcast dates were clearly pre-established, for her VOD projects, she had to estimate broadcast dates as she did not receive clear information on this. Similarly, Participant G, who was usually given fixed deadlines for other projects, noted that for the VOD project he was working on at the time, the LSP could have changed deadlines as they were not very well organised.

In summary, most subtitlers often lack essential project details, such as audience insights, deadlines, and occasionally, the distribution destination. While cinema projects typically provide more comprehensive information, in video subtitling, less clarity can lead to diverse and unpredictable subtitling practices. This variation underscores how distinct distribution media and clients already impact the organisation of a project and create differences in communication and the networked processes from the beginning. Although common patterns are identifiable between projects intended for similar distribution, it is also important to recognise that certain aspects may exhibit slight individual variations from one project to the other.

4.2.2. Materials provided

After the information step, subtitlers are sent video files through different encrypted and password-protected methods, or can stream the video on a cloud-based subtitling platform, depending on the secondary clients' requirements. Independently of the distribution medium, many subtitlers usually work on non-final video files. As a result, they may need to adapt their subtitles at different stages of the process to reflect changes such as adjustments in timing or the addition of subtitles for new scenes. This adaptability underscores their need to remain flexible within the networked subtitling process.

In cinema projects, subtitlers highlighted that they work with spotting files, which serve as the structural blueprint for subtitles, by outlining the precise timing and placement for each subtitle on screen. These files are created by spotters and can be edited by the translators to suit their needs. While in this study, the three subtitlers generally working for cinema (Participants A, C, and G) expressed enjoyment in working on pre-spotted files as they can focus on the more creative linguistic aspects, in different linguistic contexts, separating these tasks is not the norm (Beuchert, 2017, p. 134). Cinema subtitlers are usually also sent a script which contains the dialogue in the original language and is sometimes accompanied by comments such as on context (Gourgeon, 2014, p. 33). The two cinema subtitlers observed were sent both dialogue lists and spotting files for their projects alongside the whole film.

In video subtitling, there are two approaches to materials. In the globalised chain of LSPs, templates are often sent to subtitlers to centralise subtitle creation (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2020, p. 43), and reduce time and costs (Nikolić, 2015, p. 196) thus possibly having adverse effects on both rates and professional status (Oziemblewska & Szarkowska, 2022). These master files, of variable quality, already contain subtitles, usually in English, with their corresponding entry and exit time codes (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2020, p. 43) and will subsequently be used to translate all languages, thus not leaving subtitlers much room for flexibility in adaptation, notably with non-editable time codes in the case of locked templates. In this study, four Participants (B, C, D, and G) worked on a template for VOD projects, the first two locked and the latter two

unlocked. In the case of locked templates, the subtitlers had to request project managers to merge subtitles, split them, or make them longer, as they could not change the time codes of the template themselves. Participant E also received a template for her VOD project, but refused to use it. This process reflects a more centralised and sometimes restrictive form of collaboration.

In non-globalised video subtitling, on the other hand, the norm is for the subtitlers to perform their spotting themselves, as they would only work with a video file and a script. This was the case for one of Participant E's projects, as well as Participant F's series which would both be broadcast on TV and the TV channels' platforms. Participants D, E and F expressed enjoyment of the technical aspects of this task, despite the fact that spotting adds one or two extra workdays per project, which is remunerated at a different rate than their translation work. While video subtitlers now consider spotting part of their workflow, the subtitlers who had considerable experience in the French industry shared that they considered this to be a shift in practices, because these tasks used to be separated between "technical spotting and linguistic translation" (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2020, p. 43) and should theoretically be handled by distinct professionals (Rosnet, 2012). As Participant G points out:

In TV subtitling now translators have to do their spotting, because there is no more money to do it in post-production companies. Therefore, they have this additional step of spotting all their subtitles, but at least it is well done because they know how to do it. In cinema, there is always someone external doing [the spotting file], I receive it, but don't have anything to do, I upload it. [...] This is an additional luck that we have in cinema.

This illuminates a noteworthy distinction within the video category in terms of materials that subtitlers work with: projects associated with VOD (streaming) platforms typically adhere to globalised guidelines, notably the use of templates, while VOD platforms affiliated with French TV channels do not follow these guidelines. In the case of TV projects (Participants E and F), subtitlers received minimal materials, limited to dialogue lists, while all the other subtitlers were sent a spotting or template file for other distribution media. Nonetheless, the quality of this file was variable and thus did not always improve the subtitling workflow. Additionally, it is worth noting that among the five subtitlers who received a template, only two also received a dialogue list, because as Participant G notes, clients "consider that the template they have created, which includes English, is sufficient", despite this, he specifically requested the dialogue list as well. In addition to the files sent by the primary clients, Participants A, B, C, and G also received the dubbing files from the French dubbers in order to ensure consistency between both versions.

In summary, distribution media also shape subtitling practices through the materials provided, which in turn impact the subtitlers' workflow and collaboration with other stakeholders. Cinema subtitlers benefit from scripts and pre-prepared spotting files, streamlining their work and allowing them to focus on linguistic tasks. In contrast, video projects vary: globalised VOD often imposes locked templates, while non-globalised VOD often requires subtitlers to perform their own spotting, integrating both technical and linguistic tasks. Understanding these variations in materials across local and global distribution media is essential, as the quality and type of these files can significantly influence subtitlers' collaboration and shape their interpersonal workflows.

4.2.3. Content viewing

Content viewing depends on whether the project is a film or a series. All participants working on films, whether for cinema or VOD, were able to watch the full film (though not always the final version) upon accepting the project. Participant C said that when she has time, she likes

to watch it a second time while reading the dialogues to identify technical vocabulary for which she will need a consultant. Participant D, on the contrary, begins adapting the spotting and translation of the template the first time he watches it, as he does not like pre-translation tasks and does not always have time to watch the film multiple times. This aligns with findings from other studies that have similarly noted how, given the current rates and tight turnaround times, the preview step is occasionally omitted, especially when working with templates (Tuominen, 2021).

On the other hand, when working on series, Participant B was the only subtitler able to watch the full season in advance. She had watched all the episodes upon reception one month before the episodes' translation and expressed that, as she was working with a co-subtitler, she would quickly rewatch his last episode to ensure she was well-prepared for the translation of her own current episode. Participants E, F, and G were not able to watch the full season of the series before starting their episodes as they had not received all the video files. All participants agreed on the fact that this represents a challenge in terms of contextualising translation choices within the broader context of the full season. Having to submit files for the first episodes without having seen the end of the season, and without the possibility to edit translations once the episodes have been submitted, can lead to incoherence in their subtitles, an issue often ignored by clients. While Participant G had time to watch each episode before starting to work on it, Participants E and F viewed them for the first time during the spotting process.

Examining the content viewing step reveals an additional layer of complexity beyond the cinema vs. video subtitling production networks divide: films vs. series, and the availability of full content. For video projects, especially series, the need for quick content delivery can significantly affect collaborative efforts among subtitlers. When co-subtitlers work on series without access to complete content, it can disrupt continuity and impact the overall quality of the subtitles, demonstrating how important effective communication and coordination are within these interconnected workflows.

4.2.4. Quality assurance processes

Although subtitling and revision processes differ from one subtitler to another, subtitle quality assurance is important for each of them, and they all employ their own strategies, such as simulating subtitles in real-life settings or reading them one by one in text format. Beyond these personal quality assurance methods, collaboration with clients plays an essential role in ensuring subtitle accuracy and quality. In the cases examined, when simulations take place, the revisers undertake a full revision examining both linguistic and technical aspects, sometimes in collaboration with the subtitlers. The quality assurance collaboration patterns present similarities according to distribution medium.

When working for cinema, Participants A, C, and G can often attend in-person simulations at laboratories with a reviser. Participant G described this step as a collaborative effort: "generally, [we] go to the laboratory, and we review the subtitles together with the client. And there is someone managing the technical aspects, who can also provide their input". However, participants who work on video projects rarely or never attend such simulations. Only Participant E reported that the quality assurance processes of her VOD and TV projects involve a formally commissioned simulation, which is arranged by the post-production company who appoints an external subtitler as reviser. Subsequently, Participant E mentioned an additional simulation done internally by her TV client "who has an in-house simulation operator".

When working for video projects, the other subtitlers (Participants B, C, D, F, and G) usually carry out their simulations themselves or remotely with their co-subtitler(s). Once subtitlers

have completed their own simulations, or their cross-revision (*simulation croisée*) of each other's episodes, they submit their subtitles and subsequently receive written feedback from the client, typically through email. This feedback is provided as part of the internal quality control process overseen by project managers at the post-production company. Some subtitlers believe that after incorporating this feedback, there might be a simulation or verification of the revised versions by the primary client. However, they cannot all ascertain whether this step takes place.

These quality control processes thus demonstrate a range of collaboration patterns with colleagues and clients, which are far from homogenous and vary between in-person simulation, remote simulation, or written feedback. While in cinema subtitling, practices seem to be harmonised and to foster the highest degree of collaboration, in most video projects, the subtitlers' needs and concerns are less integrated into the quality control process.

Overall, these findings highlight the nuanced and evolving nature of subtitlers' practices beyond linguistic tasks, demonstrating their high adaptability to the diverse demands and challenges presented by different clients and project types. This adaptability reflects the inherently collaborative and networked nature of their work, as subtitlers navigate the complexities of different production networks. In particular, the varying requirements and workflows across French distribution media shape these subtitlers' work practices, illustrating how their role extends beyond the individual practitioner and is embedded within broader, collaborative processes. The disparities reveal how institutional frameworks and varying client priorities influence the extent to which the subtitlers' needs are considered and their contributions are valued, ultimately determining the level of collaboration in their networks.

5. Conclusion

By adopting a human-centred, process-focused approach to exploring the French subtitlers' perspectives on their work organisation and roles within subtitling production networks, this study highlights their behind-the-scenes work and demonstrates the inherently collaborative nature of subtitling. In particular, the findings reveal that subtitling is not just an isolated task but a complex, interconnected practice, where the processes are shaped by economic pressures, technological changes, and institutional management. These influences extend far beyond the individual subtitler's work, which is governed by external constraints. Consequently, subtitling is driven not only by creative or linguistic decisions but also by the operational and financial priorities of the production networks in which its practitioners are embedded.

While it has been acknowledged that translation is a collaborative endeavour (Alfer, 2017), particularly in AVT where subtitling production contexts can impact the product (Abdallah, 2011), the current study documents how subtitlers themselves experience and navigate these collaborative processes. In doing so, I have also been able to pinpoint clear distinctions between cinema and video production networks, highlighting how the distribution medium imposes variations in practices and stakeholder interactions, particularly with clients. These differences span multiple areas, including the information and materials provided to subtitlers, opportunities for content viewing, and the handling of quality control processes – facets that influence the final product yet are often overlooked in broader discussions of subtitling.

By spotlighting the diverse realities of translators and the nuanced impact of other agents on subtitling creation, the current study underscores an often-overlooked aspect in academia and public discourse. While viewers are often highly critical of the quality of subtitles, it is important to recognise the largely invisible dynamics at play: subtitlers do not bear sole responsibility for the final product, as their work depends on an entire network of agents and associated working conditions (Remael, 2010, p. 15), in which the degree of collaboration and communication

varies, and they do not always have the final word. To fully appreciate subtitlers' contributions to the movie industry, their role behind the screen must be acknowledged within this broader and interconnected framework. Future research on subtitling dynamics would benefit from a holistic approach, incorporating the perspectives of other stakeholders involved in the process – such as dubbers, reviewers, and clients – along with exploring working conditions and institutional factors.

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