



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH



Arts and
Humanities
Research Council

Ethical Translation Findings: Academic Reflections on Filmmaking and Translation 2023

Based on 'The Ethical Demands of Translating Gender-Based Violence', a research project led by Dr Charlotte Bosseaux

These academic reflections on filmmaking and translation have been compiled by Dr Charlotte Bosseaux as part of her [collaborative Ethical Translation project](#) involving a subtitling and voice-over company, [Screen Language](#) (Elena Zini, Mark Bradshaw), a charity ([Saheliya](#)) and a filmmaker ([Ling Lee](#)). They incorporate **feedback from filmmakers, language professionals** (interpreters and subtitlers) and **charity representatives** gathered during focus groups held at the start of the project, as well as feedback from the language professionals who subtitled the film (especially [Alexia Delesalle](#)).

The Ethical Translation project produced a **documentary** ([Surviving Translation](#), 2023) about interpreting and subtitling, Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and trauma. Translation was included from the start: all film footage was subtitled and **different subtitling and voice-over (VO) options were created**. Surveys using these options were shared with audiences to gauge their reactions to stepping away from traditional subtitling/VO techniques. These surveys acted as sounding boards from which **we gathered opinions regarding subtitling/VO**, reaching a varied audience beyond translation and interpreting scholars, translation practitioners, etc. Respondents' answers reassured us that reframing subtitling/VO norms in the context of documentaries dealing with challenging and emotional content was welcomed, and needed, to make sure translated voices come across as authentically and ethically as possible.

Our findings and reflections thus stem from practice-based research when filming, translating, and producing *Surviving Translation*. We first subtitled into English, and then in French and Chinese to see if our options could be applied to different languages, e.g. with different scripts and syntactical structures. We also produced a voice-over version.

These reflections and recommendations are aimed for the following context: **when filming individuals who have been or are in vulnerable situations, whose first language is not English and need to be translated during and after filming** (interpreting on film shoots, subtitling, voice-over translation). They are meant to be read in conjunction with three sets of guidelines around the translation process available on our [website](#) ('Experimental Guidelines for Translating Emotional Content in Documentaries', 'Guidelines on Remuneration and Working Conditions of Subtitlers' and 'Guidelines for Working Conditions for Public Service Interpreters on Film Shoots'). Outside the filming context, guidelines for Public Service Interpreters (PSI) dealing with GBV situations already exist ('Guide for Staff at Women's Aid on Working with Interpreters' and 'A Guide for Spoken Language Interpreters Working with Adult Survivors of Domestic Abuse'). They are also available from our website and we recommend reading them to understand better the roles of interpreters.

The reflections outlined in this document are particularly pertinent when **translating sensitive, traumatic or challenging material**, i.e. when portraying lived experiences (testimonies). They are **targeted at film directors and producers** and we also hope they can be useful to filmmaking students. Our findings and the suggestions or recommendations following from them are part of an ongoing development process. We thus welcome feedback on their applicability. Please send your comments to: llcet@exseed.ed.ac.uk

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General findings on interactions and meetings between all parties

Collaborative work

We use the terms agents throughout to refer to those participating in the filmmaking and translation processes: film directors, editors, producers, translation agencies, interpreters, subtitlers and film participants. The foundation of the working relationship we encourage is collaborative work that ensures **all agents have an equal say** in the film project with emphasis on **organising as many opportunities as possible to share different expertise**.

Given their different expertise, different agents will have different needs: e.g., interviewees may want their stories to be shared as truthfully as possible, directors might be more focused on film narrative and aesthetics, and subtitlers and interpreters might be more concerned with conveying specific meaning. We found it useful to have conversations between all agents to make sure everyone's intentions and expectations are clear and **recommend doing this as early as possible**.

In terms of the translation process, these conversations should make sure that **translation forms an integral part of the filmmaking process** and is not left as an afterthought. Whether it is with multilingual films (i.e. films with English as a main language and other languages) or subtitling for international audiences, it is crucial to think of subtitling as an integral part of the film process and to **start conversations with subtitlers/translation providers as early as possible** in the filmmaking process. Before work starts, conversations are needed between film directors/producers and the subtitling agency/subtitlers to understand the limitations of subtitling software. Directors/producers should also express what their vision of the film is, in terms of subtitling, explaining what they like and do not like, and what they do not want to have or do. We recommend **agreeing on a recording system** so that all agents can go back to crucial information throughout the project, in shared documents for instance.

Discussions about translation will include choosing subtitle font, placement, segmentation, colours, etc. (see 'Experimental Guidelines for Translating Emotional Content in Documentaries'). Collaborating at this level is important to understand the work behind each other's jobs, increase efficiency and improve the experience of the team working together. It is also important for everyone to understand the **technical possibilities and limitations of subtitling software** from the beginning to manage expectations and save time (i.e. avoid going back and forth and redoing work, as this will most likely incur a cost). Most importantly, discussions should focus on **confidentiality and safeguarding**, as emphasised throughout these findings.

Film participants/interviewees

One cannot assume that interviewees will be literate in any language, and/or have access to IT or any IT skills. Thus, if participants cannot read English or other languages, you will need to find somebody that they trust to read documents to them about their participation (e.g. info sheets and consent forms). This is why **we recommended collaborating with an association or a charity that will help you interact and speak with potential participants.**

When filming sensitive topics, working with a charity/organisation which can help support you in case there are issues is highly encouraged, e.g. if a participant does not show up for an interview, the charity can help check on this person's wellbeing and provide support if needed. **Charities/organisations can also provide specific training** (e.g. GBV, unconscious bias, issues surrounding clients). This will help give directors, interpreters and subtitlers more leverage to ask further questions if needed to understand an interviewee's situation.

We recommend always using professional/specialised support/consultants (e.g. a charity) when reaching out to participants to ensure processes are ethical and to protect yourself in case something goes wrong with participants, as well as **making sure film participants are involved at all stages of the filming/editing/translation process**, whenever possible, or at least when the translation is reviewed. Doing so will ensure that they have been given a chance to discuss final decisions made about their being filmed and the translation of their voices. Being consulted is also empowering for interviewees who can be active participants not only of the filming process but of the translation process as well.

Confidentiality, safeguarding, duty of care, and respect, are paramount. For example when working with women survivors, it is important to give them a choice of interpreters / subtitlers and to understand that it is ok for them to ask for women-only teams. Survivors should not have to come into contact with men if they do not feel comfortable with this. **Charities have emphasised that interviewees should always get to watch their contribution and veto anything to do with the way they are represented or portrayed.**

Working within GBV and trauma context

We recommend that **information regarding confidentiality and safeguarding is provided before filming starts and NDAs signed as soon as possible.**

At focus groups held at the start of the project in which we discussed all participants' expectations and experiences of working with translators, charities and filmmakers, charity representatives shared that filmmaking practices could be perceived as exploitative. It is thus important to remember that processes (e.g. editing choices, sudden changes of plans or creative direction, etc.) that are part of filmmaking practices may not always be perceived positively by participants who are not used to working in the film world. In the GBV and trauma context, it is crucial to bear in mind that **survivors might be triggered by certain situations and decisions made.** Our focus should therefore be on **efficient, compassionate communication** and understanding of the efforts everyone puts in when sharing their stories and contributing to a film production.

We thus recommend **explaining film practices and processes** (e.g. filming and editing processes etc.) **as early as possible, and before filming starts**, to make sure survivors and other participants are fully aware of what might be done with their contributions. It is inevitable that interviewees' screen time will be reduced during editing or cut out altogether and we encourage communicating this as early as possible and involving participants as much as possible in these decisions. Doing so will ensure participants feel that full consideration has been given for the time spent on set, for instance, and for the efforts of interviewees when disclosing private information and sharing difficult stories. You may also want to offer alternative solutions so that participants feel their time and contribution have always been valued, e.g. different use of footage if you could not integrate everything in your current work.

The **duty of care** mentioned throughout these academic findings should be thought of for all agents: interviewees and professionals alike. **Mental health support** should be put in place for all crew members (including interpreters and subtitlers) as early as possible. Collaborating with a charity will ensure that interviewees can be supported by mental health staff in case issues occur when filming, for instance if sharing their stories become too challenging. You may also ask the charity to provide similar support for you and your crew, to make sure you are fully supported during your project.

The following links might be useful starting points to organise support:

health-in-mind.org.uk

womensaid.org.uk

rapecrisisscotland.org.uk

victimsupport.scot

ithriveedinburgh.org.uk

isaheliya.co.uk

samh.org.uk

penumbra.org.uk

spititoutproject.com

Budget

Translation budget

Given the importance of translation to ensure interviewees' voices are ethically conveyed, **a budget must be allocated including interpreting for film shoots and subtitling**. This budget will depend on film length, number of interviews and languages used. Please refer to 'Guidelines on Remuneration and Working Conditions of Subtitlers' and 'Guidelines for Working Conditions for Public Service Interpreters on Film Shoots' for further details.

Mental Health budget

We also recommend having a **mental health support budget** for yourself and your team as well as for interviewees. The easiest way forward would be to collaborate with a charity and find out what they can offer, or to contact organisations listed above.

All in all, it is important that all agents involved have a clear understanding of the purpose, process, and support that is available. Given the importance of effective communication, we recommend **meeting with participants, interpreters, case workers from charities / organisations together before filming starts** to make sure everything is clear and expectations are explained. We also recommend **finding a recording system that can be used between all parties** so that important pieces of information are easily retrievable. All this should ensure that everybody's expectations are met and communication is as smooth and efficient as possible.

Working with subtitles

Software use and limitations

Subtitles are made using specific conventions. There are **constraints related to their length and the amount of time they can be on screen**. There are different pieces of software available, some for free (like Aegisub, Amara and Subtitle Workshop) and others which have paid licences, such as EZTitles and WinCaps. **Some editing software now also offers embedded subtitling systems.**

Our 'Experimental Guidelines for Translating Emotional Content in Documentaries' present different options for subtitles departing from traditional norms, for instance using different segmentation and colours. In the end, **the choice of subtitles will depend on the film content and on what directors/producers want to achieve in their film**. Whatever is decided, we recommend thinking about the film as a whole, e.g., it may not be worth having only a couple of animated or customised subtitles if this strategy will not be used consistently. Do bear in mind that **commonly used subtitling software, such as EZTitles or Aegisub, do not offer the possibility to create animated subtitles**, so our experimental guidelines for subtitlers advise to keep the subtitles to formats, etc. that can be edited by subtitlers using their own subtitling technology, rather than visual effects, to facilitate the smooth flow and correct rendering of subtitles among the different parties involved.

Finally, in case you want to have a complex animation or customisation, it is worth keeping in mind that if there are different subtitled versions of a film, e.g. English, Subtitled for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (SDH), Chinese or French, **animations will need to be applied and burned into the various films - one for each of the languages plus SDH** - and thus multiple versions of the film itself, and subsequently various DCPs where needed, will need to be created.

Working with subtitlers and interpreters

Hiring professionals and non-professionals interpreters and subtitlers

Safety of all agents is crucial: it is important to find translators/interpreters/agencies that are trustworthy and **ensure the translation process is done ethically**. In the GVB/trauma context, it is for instance crucial to **make sure that all professionals are DBS checked**.

Anyone translating should be able to understand the specific language spoken and the nuances of each culture. For instance, if the person interviewed speaks Bajuni (a Swahili variety), precedence should be given to finding a linguist who speaks this specific variety over any Swahili speaker from a different region. This is to **ensure that linguistic and cultural aspects are fully understood.**

We recommend **working with reputable professional agencies** that will help with employing professionals who have the correct/required qualifications (e.g. university degrees or diplomas) and have a thorough understanding of confidentiality. **Interpreters and subtitlers should be registered with a translation/interpreting body** to practice interpreting and have an excellent command of the languages that are translating or interpreting (e.g. have required qualifications/training).

We also recommend working with professional interpreters and subtitlers, but if this is not possible because of language combinations, for instance, **ensuring that the people recruited have the necessary background knowledge:** not only of the language but also of the themes of your documentary.

Whether working with professionals or non-professionals, we recommend **checking that all subtitlers and interpreters have done necessary training** (unconscious bias, trauma, GBV, etc.), and that this **training has been provided to all people involved in the filming process**, not just language professionals, with emphasis on the importance of **using correct terminologies in different languages** and **understanding the cultural differences.**

To ensure confidentiality, **interpreters should not have any relationship with the film interviewees.** Hence, it is important to ensure that interpreters do not know the people they are translating for, and that they understand confidentiality and have signed an NDA, to prevent what is being discussed in the interviews from going back to their communities. **The same goes for subtitlers** - there should be no personal connection between them and the people they are translating for. On the Ethical translation project, we used the NDA provided by Screen Language since we hired language professionals through them. You would be expected to use your own NDA if hiring language professionals directly.

We recommend **working with a subtitling and interpreting provider/agency** and **appoint a producer who has experience of navigating the interpreting and subtitling processes.** If working with **fixers, we recommend making sure they have the required knowledge of your topic** and of the challenges of working with sensitive topics, individuals in vulnerable situations and translation. If you want to find translators directly, make sure they have the required knowledge as well (linguistic, cultural, technical and training for working with vulnerable people and on sensitive topics).

Finding suitable interpreters/subtitlers can be time-consuming, and frustrating if any participants unexpectedly withdraw from the project. It is a fine balancing act between not contacting interpreters and subtitlers too early (in case plans change) and not too late (as you want them to be involved from the start).

Working with topics dealing with sensitive topics such as trauma and GBV

Charity staff have emphasised the **importance of an ongoing discussion process** that makes survivors feel safe enough to be able to actually assert their needs. Any standard consent form will indicate that they can withdraw at any time, but an environment must also be created that genuinely promotes trust and respect.

The following points are recommended to ensure safety and confidentiality:

- **Asking interviewees if they prefer to be translated by a male or female translator.** Giving this choice is important so that interviewees feel they are active participants in the project.
- **Hiring interpreters and subtitlers who already have experience of translating GBV material and/or trauma**, i.e. first-hand knowledge of GBV/trauma through training. If this is not possible, **providing training and support** (e.g. GBV, unconscious bias, etc.). Ideally, these trainings should not be just an online click-through type training, but an engaging in-person or online interactive session.

All interpreters and subtitlers work in specific fields or specialise in specific areas. We recommend, where possible, **choosing interpreters/subtitlers with an interest in the topic of the documentary**, e.g. if about GBV, an interest in gender issues and willingness to engage with the issues raised in the material.

If subtitlers with the language combination needed cannot be found, then you will need to choose translators with no audiovisual experience. In this case, they could work in a team with a subtitler. They will be asked to translate verbatim, i.e. all that is being said, without taking into consideration the constraints of subtitling. Then the target language subtitler will be able to finalise the subtitles whilst working with subtitling conventions and be able to contact the original source language translator for any questions or doubts. Our 'Guidelines on Remuneration and Working Conditions of Subtitlers' and 'Experimental Guidelines for Subtitling Emotional Content in Documentaries' will be valid support instruments in this process.

Public Service Interpreting

There are different types of interpreting. Public Service Interpreters (PSI) or community interpreters are trained and experienced in interactions with clients in public settings.

For any questions about PSI, we recommend consulting the Institute of Translation and Interpreting (<https://www.iti.org.uk/> and their Scottish counterpart <https://itiscotland.org.uk/>) as well as the Interpreting Academy (<https://www.facebook.com/interpretingacademy>, email: info@interpretingacademy.org)

In Scotland, a register of interpreters is available on this page:

<https://www.slab.org.uk/solicitors/other-resources/translation-and-interpretation/>

Nationally, this resource might also be useful: <https://www.nrpsi.org.uk/>

PSIs working on film sets must be briefed about the specific context of the film. It is recommended to **meet with them before filming starts** to explain what the film is about and detail expectations of the service they will provide. Their expectations will also need to be considered to make sure there are no misunderstandings. Ideally, interpreters chosen to work on a film set should have an understanding of the filmmaking process. If they do not, this will need to be covered before filming starts.

During the filming process, translations can be a summary of what the participants have said, to allow the director to keep on filming. However, for subtitling, all conversations will need to be translated fully to convey accurate meaning.

If working with non-professional interpreters, we recommend that these work alongside professionally accredited interpreters who can act as mentors. The **emphasis is on working ethically: collaborating and cross checking that all translations meet their purpose and accuracy and safety is maintained.** Our Guidelines for 'Working Conditions for Public Service Interpreters on Film Shoots' will also be a valid support instrument in the processes highlighted in this section.

Subtitling

We worked with Screen Language (<https://screenlanguage.co.uk/>) who has comprehensive expertise in subtitling and years of experience in this specialisation. We recommend approaching a **professional agency with good credentials in audiovisual translation** to make sure you can recruit highly skilled individuals.

Subtitlers have different skills compared to interpreters present during shoots. It is important to work with **experienced, trained subtitlers** who will engage with the film and ask questions to ensure the subtitles are as correct as possible. **Subtitlers should always be a native speaker of the language they translate into**, so for subtitling into English a native English speaker will be required. However, depending on the language pairs, it might be difficult to find native speakers in the right language combination. For instance, it will be easy to find a subtitler working with French (from France) into English, or Spanish (from Spain) into English, but it might be more challenging to find a trained subtitler with French from Cameroon or Spanish from El Salvador able to work into English at a native-speaker level. In these cases, **two subtitlers might be required: one who is a native speaker of the source language and may not have training in subtitling, and an English subtitler/proofreader** who will be able to finalise the subtitles according to current standards and proofread the English.

In such cases, you would have:

1. **a native speaker of the source language** (e.g. Kurdish) **with a very good level of English** who will subtitle into English, even if it is not their mother tongue. If a subtitler cannot be found, then it will have to be a translator who will need to be trained to use a subtitling software or asked to translate verbatim, i.e. all that is being said without considering subtitling constraints. Then the English subtitler/proofreader will work with subtitling conventions.
2. **a native English subtitler, who ideally also understands the source language, to review the subs.** If the film is multilingual, it would be unlikely to find someone who speaks all the source languages. In this case, the focus would be on finding an experienced subtitler whose mother tongue is English and encouraging collaboration between them and the native-language subtitlers.

In our project, native speakers and English subtitles worked using an Excel sheet, in which the native speakers explained their choices and what other options could have been chosen. Then the English subtitler could make an informed decision based on this, and also check with the native speaker if anything is unclear. This allowed them to capture nuances of the native language and to obtain a fluent rendering in English. **If working with non-professional subtitlers, as with PSI, we recommend that they work alongside a professionally accredited subtitler** who can act as mentor to make sure all translations meet their purpose and accuracy and safety is maintained.

We recommend that **this process is overseen by the project manager from a subtitling agency**. Otherwise, if a producer within the film has had experience of working with translation at this level, they could also oversee this process.

It is recommended to **have all footage subtitled in one go**, not one section or interview at a time, so that subtitling is done using the whole material: **meaning is context-dependent and it will be easier for subtitlers to translate everything in one go**. Ensure you familiarise yourself with the editing software's subtitles import and export function before you begin the edit, and that the subtitles can be then correctly exported after the edit is completed in order to be reviewed and finalised by the subtitler.

Since different agents are involved in the filming and subtitling process, a **generous amount of time should be allowed for the subtitling to be carried out**, taking into consideration the fact that subtitling freelancers will have other commitments. Delays or changes should be communicated as early as possible to avoid loss of income for your subtitlers.

At the heart of our findings and reflections is the fact that **subtitles are an integral part of the film process and success**. Subtitlers are language, culture and technical experts. Discussing subtitles with them before they start the work (e.g. colours, placement, etc.) will benefit the film as a whole and communication is paramount at all stages of the subtitling process.

Once the film is locked, it is worth keeping in mind that any subsequent changes to the soundtrack/dialogues are likely to incur a subtitling/proofreading cost.

Voice-Over

It is a good idea to **provide a voice-over version for accessibility purposes**, particularly if you want audiences who are not confident readers to have access to your film.

A voice-over can be created using the English language subtitles. Specialist voiceover agencies, or some audiovisual translation agencies, can help find voice-artists and record their performances. Our 'Experimental Guidelines for Subtitling Emotional Content in Documentaries' contain a short section on choosing voices (p6)).

Conclusion

These academic reflections based on our work on the Ethical Translation project have emphasised the **importance of collaborative work**, of **understanding each agent's role and their method of working**, and the **importance of reaching a common ground** that lays a workable road map for a positive relationship between directors, interviewees, language professionals and producers.

One of their main aims is making the situation of individuals who have been in vulnerable situations, such as interviewees – but also interpreters and subtitlers – safer, with a **focus on reassurance, deep understanding and mutual respect between all parties** involved.

Whether working with professionals or non-professionals, **training is crucial**, with emphasis on the importance of **using the correct terminologies** in different languages and **understanding cultural differences**. There should also be training that emphasises the **importance of confidentiality and safeguarding**, as well as **specific training** related to issues surrounding clients. This would give interpreters, subtitlers and directors more leverage to ask further questions, if needed, to better understand interviewees' situations or to clarify if anything is unclear.

We have emphasised throughout **collaboration, confidentiality, safeguarding, duty of care, and respect**. As part of this, it is essential to reiterate the importance of **establishing suitable communication channels with all agents** and to focus on **collaborative and respectful decision-making**.