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Arts and
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Research Council

Experimental Guidelines for Translating Emotional Content in Documentaries 2023

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

These experimental guidelines have been compiled by **Dr Charlotte Bosseaux** as part of her Ethical Translation project (ethicaltranslation.llc.ed.ac.uk) in collaboration with a subtitling and voice-over company ([Screen Language](#)), a charity ([Saheliya](#)) and a filmmaker ([Ling Lee](#)), with invaluable input from [Alexia Delesalle](#), **Mark Bradshaw**, **Raquel Dou** and **Elena Zini**.

The Ethical Translation project produced a documentary about translation, Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and trauma, called [Surviving Translation](#), which included translation from the start: all footage of the film were subtitled and different subtitling and voice-over (VO) options were created to convey the emotions of the original. Surveys using these options were shared with audiences in order to gauge their reactions to stepping away from traditional subtitling and VO techniques.

These surveys acted as focus groups or sounding boards from which we gathered opinions regarding subtitling and VO, reaching a varied audience beyond translation and interpreting scholars, translators and subtitlers. Respondents' answers generally reassured us that reframing subtitling and VO norms in the context of documentaries dealing with challenging and emotional content was welcomed, and needed, to make sure the voices of the original come across as authentically and ethically as possible in translation.

Our experimental guidelines stem from our practice-based research when filming, translating, and producing the *Surviving Translation* documentary.

We first subtitled into English, and then in French and Chinese to see if our suggestions could be applied to different languages, e.g. languages with different scripts and syntactical structures.

Our guidelines are particularly relevant in the **context of translating sensitive, traumatic or challenging material in the documentary context**, i.e. when portraying lived experiences (testimonies). They are part of an ongoing development process and as such, they are not finite. We are thus seeking feedback from practitioners on their applicability, usefulness and areas of improvement. Please send your comments to: charlotte.bosseaux@ed.ac.uk

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General guidelines for interactions and meetings between all parties

We recommend **conversations between subtitlers, subtitling companies and directors as early as possible in the filmmaking process** to make sure translation is not left as an afterthought and forms an **integral part of the filmmaking process**. 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).

Beyond the translating and filming teams, **film participants should be 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 translating their voices. For instance, a perceived emotional mistake might not be what it appears to be or have the same meaning for the person who was interviewed. 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.

General comments about our material

The topic of *Surviving Translation* was emotional in nature. The following aspects were deemed important to make sure the voices (figurative and literal) of the film participants were not covered or distorted. We considered the following to convey the voices of the original as ethically or authentically as possible:

- 1 **Placement:** so that subtitles do not obstruct the visual and oral message of the film, or that they do so as little as possible.
- 2 **Segmentation:** to accurately capture the participants' voices (e.g. their rhythm, pace of speech, orality), following pace of speech as much as possible so that audiences can hear or feel the participants' voices more organically.
- 3 **Mistakes:** participants may make mistakes when telling their story. For instance, they may use a wrong word and correct themselves.
- 4 They may also **hesitate** (e.g. **false starts, repetitions**) and **add pauses**,
- 5 and **emphasise words or change intonation/volume:** as signs of emotions these need to be considered in translation, to fully capture the orality of the original delivery and the fact that speakers are struggling with their words or varying their delivery.

General comments about languages

Surviving Translation is a multilingual documentary which includes Kurdish Sorani, French from Cameroon, Spanish from El Salvador, and English. It was first subtitled into English for hearing audiences, and then into Chinese and French to see if different strategies were needed.

Specific strategies for **Chinese** have been added when needed. We found that for French the guidelines did not need alternative solutions.

However, it is important to emphasise the following, which should apply to any language that assigns gender by default. In **French**, for instance, the masculine is normally used as a default when translating plural pronouns like *they*. This means that even if *they* in English refers to people of all genders, French normally prefer a masculine plural pronoun (e.g. *ils*).

When working with material focusing on GBV and on women's experiences, we suggest **using inclusive writing**, for instance 'les voisin.es', denoting that one has male and female neighbours. Even if this attracts more attention to the subtitles, as it is not yet commonly used, it is important to take the subject matter of the film into consideration and use translation strategies which reflect the subtleties of the originals. By doing so, audiences will get used to inclusive subtitling, i.e. subtitling that does not limit the life experience of film participants and film viewers.

This option is increasingly encouraged and many translators want to see a world where inclusive writing is the norm, but it is not always popular and it will be up to each team to decide whether it is the right choice for their project on an individual basis.

General comments about the SDH version

We also adapted the English subtitles into subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH). The scope of this adaptation falls more or less into the normal conventions for SDH, so no new ground was broken in that process.

While these guidelines are fully applicable to SDH, it is important to note that in the case of *Surviving Translation*, the **coloured and side-aligned English subtitles were embedded into the film** in all versions. As a result, the **SDH version worked around the onscreen subtitles, adding speaker tags and sound tags where possible between the onscreen embedded subtitles**.

If an SDH version was made to be played on a "clean" version of the film without embedded subtitles, we would have followed the below guidelines exactly as we did for the normal English subtitles.

General comments about the VO version

When choosing voices consider the following:

- 1 Go for voices that are **close in tone and accent** to those of the original speakers, e.g. if a speaker is from Italy, choose a voice with an Italian accent. If the speaker has a low voice, choose a low local voice.
- 2 **Refrain from using one voice for all participants.** Instead, **assign one voice to each participant** to ensure all speakers have their own individual translated voice.

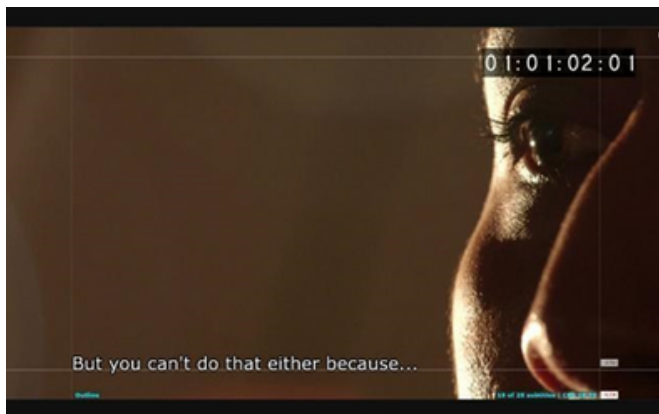
Pertinent feature 1: Placement

Guideline 1

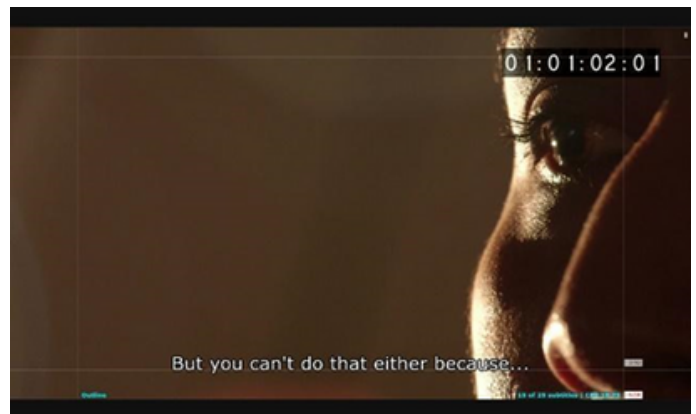
Consider using **side-aligned subtitles** when there is a **close-up or extreme close-up** (e.g. eyes or mouth) **and there is an empty space on the side of the screen**. The **lighting and background colour also need to be taken into consideration** and side-aligned subtitles might be preferred if it is difficult to read a subtitle that is placed in the middle.

This is so that subtitles do not cover the face (e.g. eyes or mouth), or cover them as little as possible and are aligned with the speaker, as if words were coming out of their mouth. This could also help establish a more intimate dialogue between film subjects and viewers.

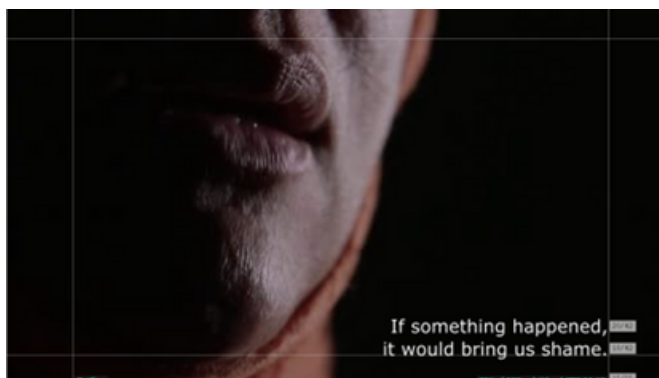
Examples:



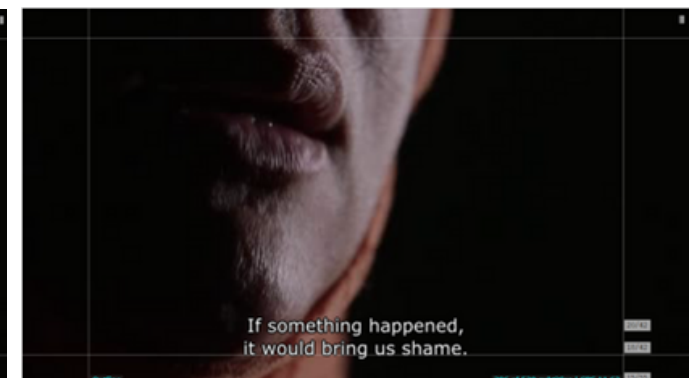
Advised



Not advised



Advised



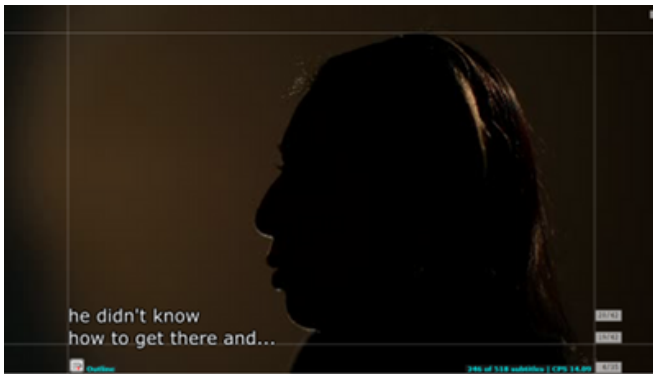
Not advised

Guideline 2

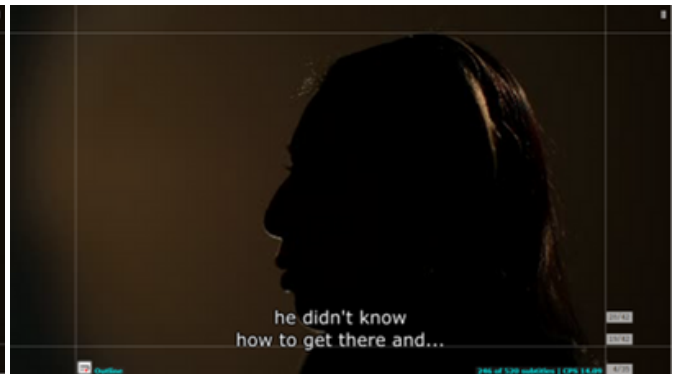
Use **side-aligned subtitles** when there is a **Medium Close-Up [MCU]** and there is an empty space on one -side of the screen. However a **central position** might be preferred if the **subtitles do not cover or obstruct the mouth or face**.

This way, the subtitles will not cover the face or mouth, or cover them as little as possible and will be aligned with the speaker's face, as if words were coming out of their mouth. This could also help establish a more intimate dialogue between film subjects and viewers. It may also reflect better the ownership of the comment to the subject.

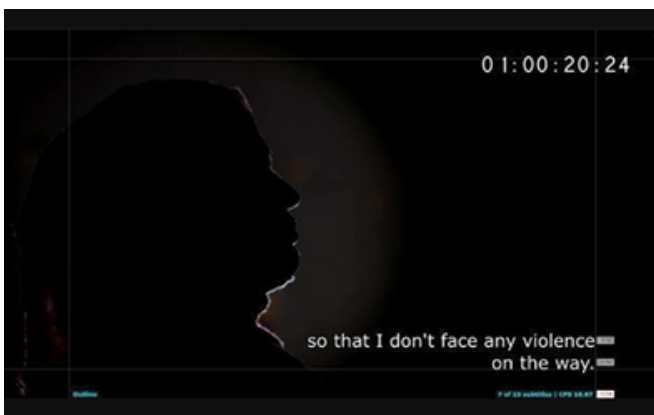
Examples:



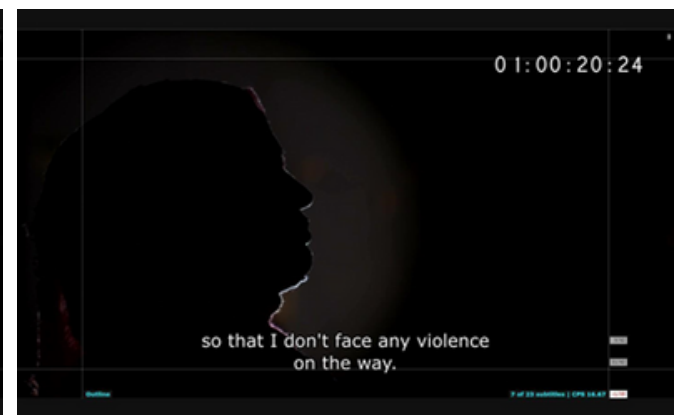
Advised



Not advised



Advised



Not advised

Elements to take into consideration before choice:

Subtitles need to work with the film and not just be added after filming/editing is finished. Here, the emphasis is on covering the face/speaker as little as possible and also considering lighting and background colour/contrast when placing the subtitles so that they are easy to read.

Placement is paramount when rendering emotion so position might also depend on the sentence: e.g., centre-aligned (declarative nature of the remark).

Consider the film overall: changing positions too often might be tiresome / confusing / distracting for viewers.

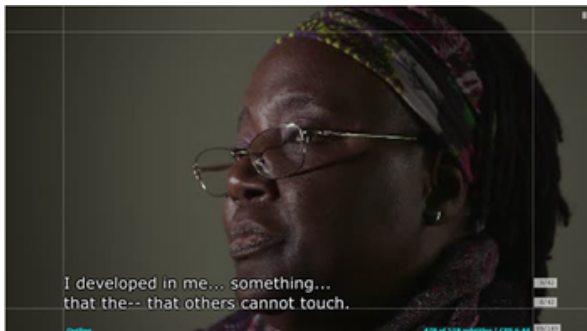
You may consider increasing the time for subtitling on screen if changing from the expected centre to left or right-aligned.

Segmentation into shorter sentences can be used to ensure the subtitles do not spill over the part of the image (faces and mouths) we do not want to cover.

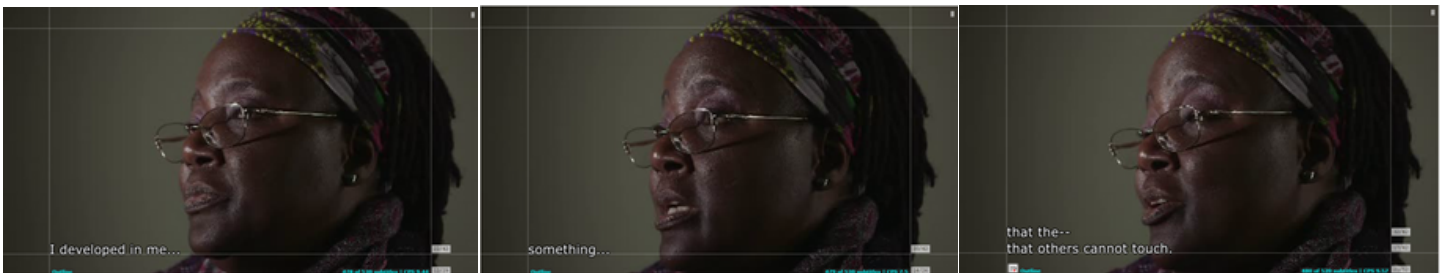
Pertinent feature 2: Segmentation

Guideline 1

Consider **breaking long sentences into shorter phrases** so that they follow the rhythm of the original, the pace of speech and match the speaker's delivery.



Not advised



Advised

Doing so, the subtitles will not give away what is ultimately said, keeping a sense of suspense and respecting pauses. This segmentation better respects the film content, creating better harmony between the audio and visual aspects. It also takes less space on screen. However, as the subtitles are shown for a shorter time on screen, there is a chance this would impact negatively on character per second (CPS) rates. Carefully balancing greater segmentation with CPS constraints is thus recommended.

For simplified **Chinese**, sometimes, the order is such that the subtitler might feel they have to reveal what is being said and lose the suspense. In this case, since the language is very dense, one has the option of stalling - saying a few words in one screen, and repeating what is said again with the correct order in the next.

Elements to take into consideration before choice:

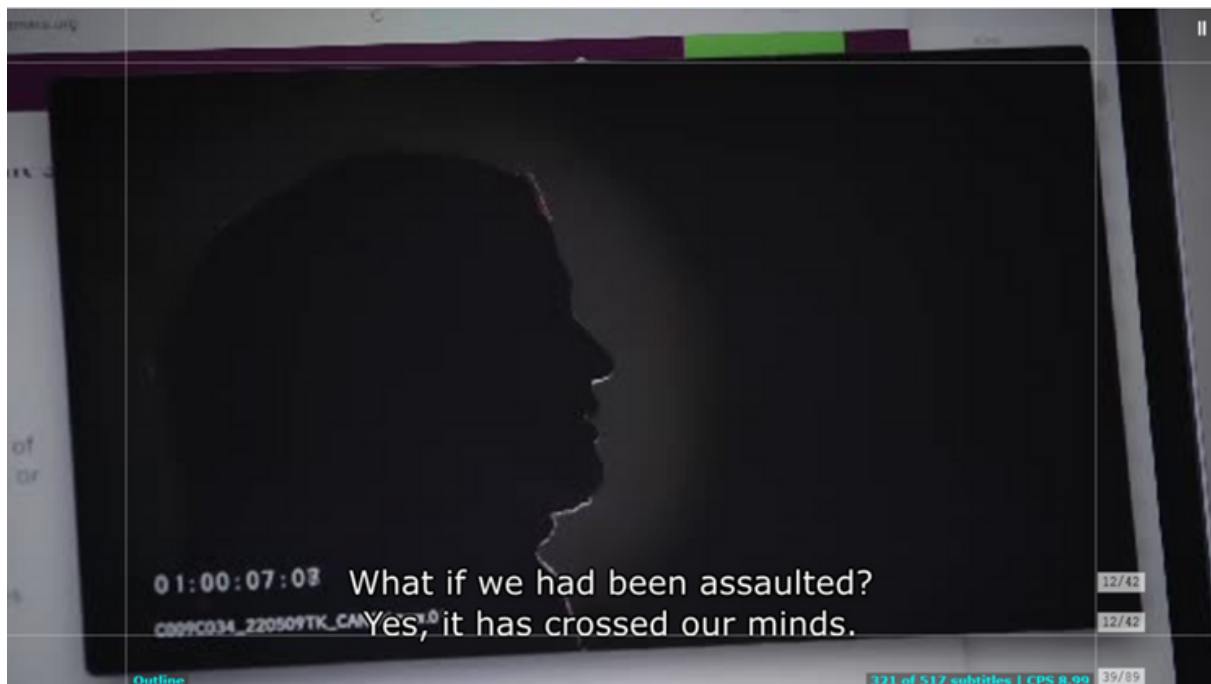
Overall, Guideline 1 has been the most used in our documentary.

Alternatives to traditional segmentation could be distracting or hard to process if syntactic chunks/phrases are broken up in unusual or unexpected ways.

Pertinent feature 3: Mistakes

Guideline 1

Consider reproducing mistakes made in the original by either finding a similar mistake in the Target Language [TL] or **find another mistake in the TL that matches the lip movement** [if the speaker's lips are in the shot].



Mixed tenses

*This is because mirroring mistakes which are part of a speaker's emotional dialogues might help **support conveying their humanity and vulnerability**. Overall, we wanted to bring subtitles towards a better reproduction of the orality of the original speech. As a native listener could hear a mistake, we thought the English audience should hear it as well.*

Simplified Chinese as a TL typically has a large distance in terms of language similarities to most Indo-European languages. For this reason, it can be incredibly difficult to replicate "mistakes". Most of the mistakes one replicates might be more readily perceived as typos which can be jarring. Therefore, it might be better to be generous with repetitions to signal hesitations, but be cautious with introducing "typos".

Elements to take into consideration before choice:

Conveying mistakes might attract attention to the subtitles as those who speak the original language will be able to compare your strategy to what was originally said. You therefore need to be careful with your choices.

Choosing ways of translating mistakes is challenging, as there is usually not an easy 'one-to-one' equivalent to a mistake in another language. In our context, it might be better to **think not so much about the exact same mistake but of what this mistake conveys**, i.e. vulnerability, struggle, anger, sadness.

It is important **not to force a particular meaning and try to be as 'neutral' as possible**. Possible options are for instance to try to match the lip movements as much as possible if the face/mouth of the speakers is visible, or choose an expression/word that does not have negative connotations for the speaker, if these are not present in the original.

Always **keep in mind the purpose of the translation**: if a mistake is made in dialogues that are very factual and informative, reproducing them might not be needed. Reproducing mistakes might be however needed if the purpose of the translation is to convey the usually invisible or vulnerable voices of the speakers.

Reproducing too many errors might stigmatise speakers: be cautious when using this technique, as we do not want our viewers to have a negative perception of the speaker, if this is not the intention of the original. There are **two main issues with replicating mistakes: perceived unprofessionalism and being seen as condescending/mocking**. Replicating mistakes might work well in a comedy for instance when an accent or pronunciation is relevant for the humour or specific joke, but translating grammatical errors are generally seen as disrespectful. Even when replicated well, it may not be clear to viewers why the mistake was kept.

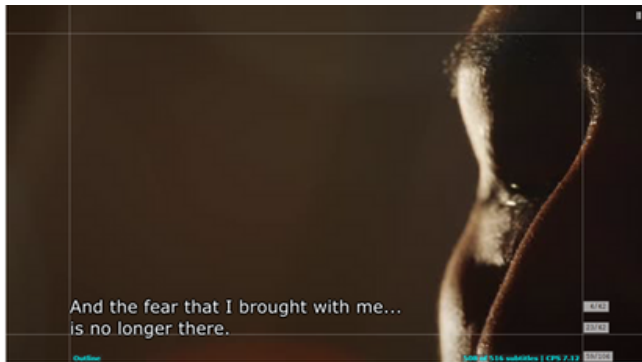
Always check with the proofreader and, if applicable, **project manager** to make an informed decision not only based on one individual's ideas. Moreover, when possible, involving the interviewees themselves and the original translators should also help understand some of the mistakes.

Readability is again an important factor: reproducing mistakes should be done as succinctly as possible so as not to distract viewers too much.

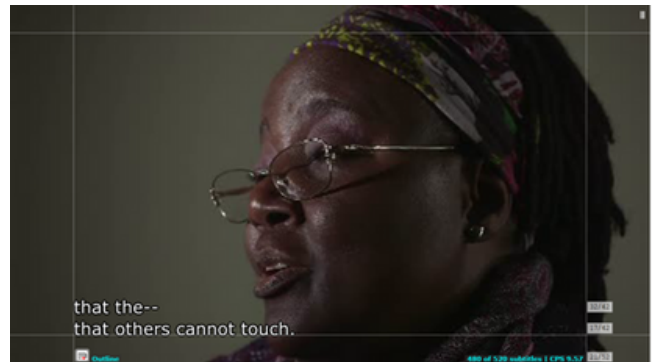
Pertinent feature 4: Pauses, hesitations (including false starts) and repetitions

Guideline 1

Consider **using punctuation** (e.g. ellipsis), **discourse markers** (e.g. “right”, “okay”, “as I said”, etc.) and **‘--’ to convey the pauses and hesitations of the speakers**. Doing so might help fully **convey their vulnerability and emotions**. Without pauses, speakers may sound more assertive. It is also suggested **not to erase repeated words** (e.g. ‘for for’). Specifically, we suggest using ellipsis for trailing thoughts and long pauses and -- for false starts, quick rephrasing etc.



Use of...



Use of...

*This is because **we want to make sure the voices of the original and the emotions that are attached to them are present in translation.***

*Allowing for some reproduction of pauses and hesitations might have this effect. **Doing so might also help viewers process the emotions** more as they can follow or feel the pace more. As there is a fuller spectrum of meaning available to viewers, we think this respects film participants more.*

*However, **subtitles might get too busy and/or become unclear.** This means that choices need to be made to avoid disrespecting speakers and confusing viewers. However, as with errors, this must be done with **moderation** to avoid any disrespect and so that it does not affect readability.*

Guideline 2

For false starts (e.g. where a speaker fumbles with the beginning of a word or switches to another word), we recommend repeating the first letter of a word, e.g. 'it w-was'.

This conveys hesitations and false starts, showing the emotions of the speakers. Doing so might also allow more time to process the emotions. However, as with errors, this must be done sparingly and discerningly to avoid any disrespect and so that it does not affect readability.

For **Simplified Chinese**, “...” is typically used for both hesitation, interruption and trailing off. It is not common to use “--” as it is not a punctuation that is known to the TL.

Elements to take into consideration before choice:

Strong emotions, pauses, repetitions and hesitations can often be heard in the voice, although it is not always the case, for instance if you do not speak a language and it is far from your own language and culture.

Those who can understand the SL will be able to compare (e.g. see that it is not marked exactly at the same time or in the same way). However, this specific audience does not need subtitling and is not our main target audience: our main audience needs subtitling to understand the complexity of the film and its language.

Readability is important again: **make sure your subtitles are not too demanding on viewers**. The type of subtitles we advocate draws attention to themselves – this is not an issue as more visible subtitles are what we argue for - but we need to make sure that subtitles look coherent overall and are not too busy.

You do not need to reproduce all hesitations, repetitions or pauses if the subtitles are too busy/detract from the picture but do keep some to convey the orality of the original.

“...” is normally used for hesitations or abrupt changes in an utterance in traditional subtitling, whereas “--” is used when the speaker is interrupted by someone else, but in some cases both hesitations and false starts are marked by either of those punctuations, leading to a bit of a grey area. We feel differentiating them like this is best to most effectively capture the difference between false starts and hesitations.

Vocabulary/tone/formality choice: this needs to match the speaker and not reflect any of the translator's bias etc., specifically when dealing with religious and cultural jargon etc.

Overall, try and **find typical equivalents in the target language for non-lexical sounds** in the SL (e.g. 'mhm' or 'ummm').

Pertinent feature 5: intonations (e.g. speaking softly, emphasising words)

Guideline 1

Considering playing with **segmentation and reading speed**, e.g. having shorter and faster subtitles, which would appear synchronously with the speaker's words.

This is because we want to make sure the voices of the original and the emotions attached to them are present in translation. Playing with segmentation/reading speed might help indicating a change in tone even if the emphasis can be heard too. Segmentation following the speakers' speech is very important as it follows the exact flow of their speech specifically if they are retelling a story or talking about something emotional. Powerful sentences need to be short and prioritise full stops (there are a few good examples of this in the film).

Guideline 2

Consider using **italics sparingly** for words that the speaker emphasises.

Italics are clear in conveying a change, making sure the voices of the original and the emotions attached to them are present in translation. Italics are commonly used in subtitles. Using italics might help indicate the change in tone even if the emphasis can be heard too.

Guideline 3

Consider **using bold** for emphasis, software allowing.

Using bold might help indicate the change in tone even if the emphasis might be heard too.

Guideline 4

Consider using sparingly larger texts for emphasised words with the rest of the sentence at normal size.

Using larger texts might help indicate the change in tone even if the emphasis can be heard too. It is not currently possible to increase the size of one word in a subtitle across most available software. If subtitlers find this option desirable, we could make recommendations for future updates and software.

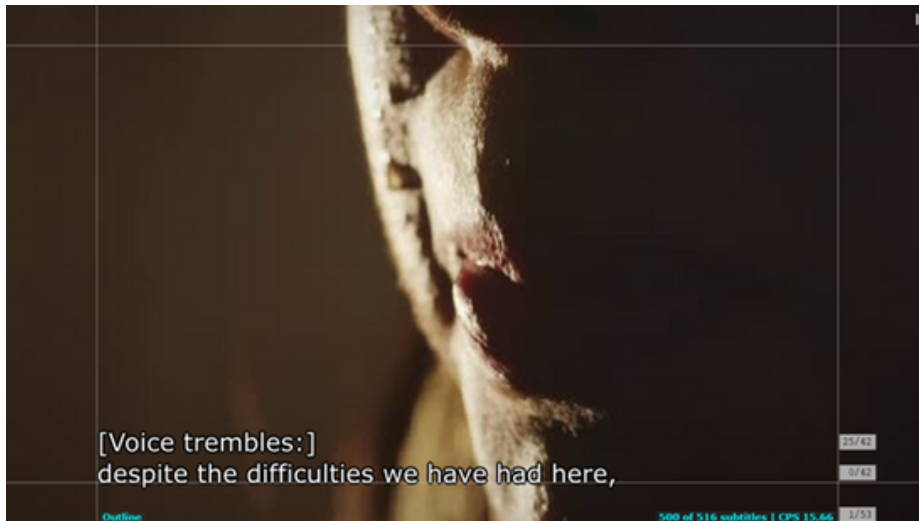
Guideline 5

Consider using a **smaller font** for the words that are said e.g. more softly.

Lowering the font reproduces well visually the sound getting lower, even if it might be heard too. It could be for one word or two words, or if your subtitling software allows it, you could start at normal size and shrink across the screen. However doing this might add a 'cartoonish' tone to the film and go against the endeavour to present voices respectfully so this technique needs to be used carefully.

Guideline 6

Consider using Subtitles for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (SDH) captions, e.g. [SOFTLY]. *o*.



SDH captions are clear in conveying changes, making sure the voices of the original and the emotions attached to them are present in translation. Using SDH captions might help indicate the change in volume even if it might be heard too. However, as hearing viewers can perceive these changes, this is listed as our last recommendation.

In **Simplified Chinese**, italics is not commonly associated with emphasis. If the software allows, bold fonts will be preferred. Otherwise, using quotations "" is an alternative.

Elements to take into consideration before choice:

Always consider the power of the message and readability.

Readability is paramount: the type of subtitles we advocate will attract attention to themselves. Subtitlers in conversation with directors must decide what is best for the film.

Bear in mind that **smaller texts might be difficult to read** and **could be perceived as a mistake**. However, if used sparingly, this could come across well and its purpose would be clear. Then viewers would get used to it across a whole film, especially if these effects were used more than sporadically.

Again, as with pauses, repetitions and hesitations, audiences might be able to hear the change in tone/volume. However, even for a hearing audience, **if people are watching at low volume, using SDH conventions might make things clearer**.

When using alternatives to SDH tags, if going for 'bold' for instance, **you need to make sure that what you choose fits with the voice of the speaker**, e.g. if somebody speaks softly, 'bold' could be too loud even if the speaker is emphasising something.

Bear in mind that italics are normally used in more traditional subtitling when somebody speaks off screen and are therefore not specifically associated with volume. However, **when individual words are italicised among non-italicised ones, that would generally indicate stress or emphasis** – as it is also done in written material. This guideline is preferred to Guideline 3 (using bold for emphasis) as italics are also subtler.

Finally, **bold might be perceived as too strong or interruptive** and viewers could be confused because it might be associated with volume (e.g. loud or shouting). For instance, if someone is speaking softly and emphasising words, bold will not work. It could also be perceived as a mistake, e.g. a glitch with the software. However, viewers might get used to this across a whole film, especially if this is used more than sporadically.

Subtitlers' personal/subjective intervention must also be taken into consideration. Picking up on cues and deciding what is most important might be considered a subjective endeavour so special care should be taken when electing a particular technique. Working in a team, with subtitlers and proofreaders who understand the languages in the film will help decrease the subjective element.

Choices also need to be made **taking the whole context into consideration:** e.g. if there is already a repetition, you may not need to show the emphasis again.

Pertinent feature 6: Extra-linguistic guidelines

Guideline 1

Repeat quotation marks at the start of each subtitle might be used when a speaker is quoting someone else over several subtitles.

To increase readability.

Guideline 2

Subtitles which carry powerful messages could **be on screen slightly longer** to show their importance.

To give the subtitles the screen time needed to make an impact on viewers.

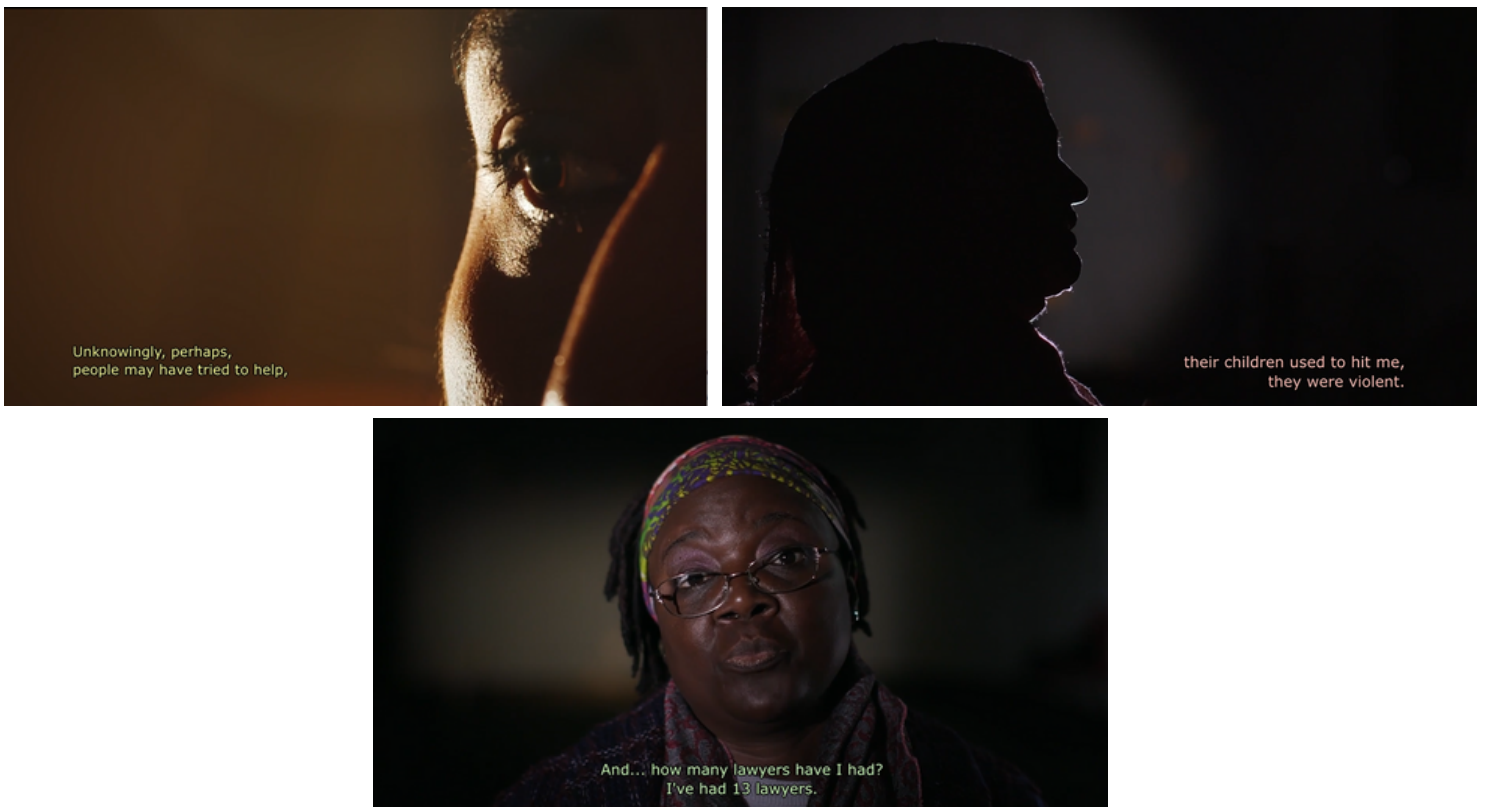
In this section, **COLOURS** and **FONT** choices are considered. These are unlikely to fall under the remit of subtitlers, as they ultimately come under the directors' purview and usually producers only look for an SRT or similar format for the subtitles, in which colour and font would not be encoded. However, even if it is the filmmaker's job to convey visual meaning, and not that of the subtitler, colours and fonts are included in our guidelines as **we advocate collaborative work during which subtitlers, directors and producers consider the subtitling process as early as possible in the filming process, and decisions are made jointly.**

Pertinent feature 7: Colours

In order to differentiate between the languages spoken in the documentary and to give each speaker a distinctive voice, we chose **different colours for each speaker**.

Guideline 1

Consider **choosing colours according to the tone of the film** but also **taking into consideration what speakers are wearing or any other contextual element** that helps identify them. When choosing colours, you need to think about their significance and make sure that they are really needed, i.e. do they add something to the film/testimonies or are they superfluous? Otherwise, colours might be distracting. Always identify a colour with a participant the first time they speak, this way viewers will get used to them as the film unfolds.



The colour of the subtitles should not clash with the film tone, background colours and speakers' clothes. However, some colours could be seen as too colourful/intense and there are also connotations to take into consideration. See 'Elements to take into consideration before choice' section for examples.

Guideline 2

Colours can have different connotations in different cultures, we therefore also suggest considering these before making a choice.

We do not want to offend viewers and film participants. See examples below.

Elements to take into consideration before choice:

When choosing colours, you need to think in terms of **accessibility** (dyslexia, visual impairments, e.g. pink could be hard to read).

Use **colour blindness palettes** or instead of coloured fonts, **different coloured blocks**. However, these would take up more space on screen, so you need to consider this limitation too.

Different cultures/languages have different connotations. We have highlighted a few for your consideration:

- Yellow: hesitations (e.g. traffic lights) or racial slur.
- Red: indicates that something is wrong (e.g. traffic lights).
- Pink/magenta: feminine.
- Green: positive (again, think of traffic light systems).
- White as a default colour for white people could be seen as racist and colourful colours for people of colour could be problematic too.

Pertinent feature 8: Font

We considered different fonts to reflect the sensitive nature of the documentary and convey its poetry.

Guideline 1

Consider using **verdana/arial/helvetica/Atkinson Hyperlegible**, as they are considered some of the most accessible and legible among the more commonly available fonts.

Sans Serif fonts are considered best for accessibility (e.g. dyslexia, visual impairments). Verdana specifically can be perceived as neutral (e.g. conveying the seriousness of a topic), easy to read, and not taking away from the film experience. These fonts attract less attention to the subtitles, so viewers can focus on the images.

For **Simplified Chinese**, 宋体/明体 are considered as the most common fonts and are typically the most readable ones as well. It is generally not advisable to use very rare fonts for the language, as the users can encounter encoding and compatibility issues.

Concluding remarks

These experimental guidelines present different solutions to create the impact needed when translating emotions in the documentary context. As such, they challenge traditional and professional norms we are used to, as well as viewers' habits. This is why we have offered a variety of options, from subtle strategies to more radical changes and have emphasised the importance of discussions between filmmakers and subtitlers before making choices.

Our guidelines are part of an ongoing development process and we invite further practice with other languages and in different contexts. These guidelines were developed within the testimony context and the research behind them sought to understand how we might depart from traditional subtitling norms in the particular context of emotionally charged personal narratives.

Our aim was not to change subtitling for all material but to emphasise more the relationship between subjects and viewers, and establish good balance between visual and audio elements. Conveying someone's truth as authentically as possible was our main goal, and reflecting on alternative subtitles and VO versions, especially in contexts where ethical issues and dilemmas are at stake, was our priority.

We considered it important to challenge norms when dealing with testimonies as opposed to fiction, since real people are at stake when translating real experiences.

However, these guidelines could also be used in fiction films dealing with challenging topics. Additionally, with new technological developments in subtitling, other strategies and techniques might be explored to make subtitles more engaging. More experimentation could be done with e.g. dynamic subtitles and different placements or layouts, or bigger font sizes (in shots where the space allows it). Radical alternatives would however require burning in subtitles within the image as well as moving subtitles around more on the screen, which will not work for all films or budgets.

We also call for software developers to make certain options more accessible to achieve best practice. For instance, most software do not currently allow altering fonts for one word only, which will limit choice even if this is considered the best option. We are also keen to know if some of our guidelines could become norms if they are used over time.

Each section concludes with 'Elements to take into consideration before choice' with a few points needing emphasis:

- The **film genre needs to be carefully considered** when choosing options in order to convey the subtleties of speech without disrupting the narrative flow.
- Conventional subtitles do not normally draw attention to themselves, but change and innovation are worthwhile if they enhance viewers' experience. Subtitles that break the norm serve a purpose and emphasise certain aspects (e.g. not distorting what is shared or silencing speakers). However, **readability is paramount**. Reading subtitles can be demanding and it is crucial to try to minimise as much as possible the attention required when reading them. All our recommendations for experimentation thus come with the caveat of maintaining as much as possible normal reading speeds and characters per second counts.
- Finally, the type of subtitling advocated here is more visible than subtitling that follows traditional placement, segmentation, and so on. This requires more work for subtitlers who are an integral part in the decision-making process. **Subtitlers' pay should therefore be considered carefully**. This is covered in our second set of guidelines: 'Guidelines on Remuneration and Working Conditions of Subtitlers'.