

6. The Linguistics of Subtitling

6.0 Preliminary discussion

Subtitling is sometimes accused of being an impoverished language form because of the linguistic straightjacket imposed on it. Others say that creativity can overcome all obstacles, even in subtitling, because faithful translation is a relative or even useless concept.

- ① Discuss what the above-mentioned concepts might refer to: 'impoverished language', 'linguistic straightjacket', and the relativity of faithful translation.
- ② Then try to determine where you stand on these issues, and draw up a list of five items that you expect will be a challenge in subtitling, from a linguistic point of view.
- ③ What do you think of the following quote from Myers (1973:58)?

One can only come to the conclusion that sub-titling is adequate only for those who have mastered speed-reading or those who are only interested in looking at pretty shots.

6.1 Subtitling: translation as rewriting

Translation Studies has long moved away from the idea of any translation being a faithful rendering of its source text (ST). In the 1980s, the interest of translation scholars gradually moved away from a fixation on the ST as a determining factor in the transfer from one language and culture to another, to an interest in the target text (TT) and its function at the receiving end. That is, from the process to the product. As films and TV programmes are made, sold, re-edited, translated, remade, re-translated, and re-distributed in different formats for different media, and by many different people, both the notions of 'original text' and 'author' indeed seem to evaporate. Having said this, STs continue to be translated into TTs, and there is no denying that translation remains a linguistic act as well as a cultural one. However, as texts are translated or rewritten (Lefevere 1987) their links with previous texts, the functions they will fulfil in their new target environments, and how they will be received, can in no way be taken for granted, especially since texts are travelling further and further afield.

Besides, in today's globalized world, source and target texts become confused in yet another way: through fusions of cultures producing hybrid cultural artefacts. Originally, hybridity may have been a feature of postcolonial texts (Bhaba 1994; Mehrrez 1992), but today it is central to our global age.

European cinema, for instance, is characterized by co-productions and by films in which characters speak more than one language (§3.3.2), or in which they use hybrid, mixed or 'impure' language variants. In other words, the ST to be translated is physically present, of course, but is heterogeneous in form. To the problems of linguistic translation and that of rendering intralinguistic and extralinguistic cultural elements from one language and culture into another, the challenge of rendering hybrid forms or multilingualism is added (Delabastita and Grutman 2005).

This awareness of the complexity of the ST and its sometimes ambiguous nature has contributed to an increased focus on the creative component in any form of translation (Remael 2003). All texts are written within and bound by certain constraints that writers or translators somehow must overcome. AVT in general, and subtitling in particular, are no different, even though early scholars in the field (Tirford 1982) defined subtitling in terms of spatial and temporal 'constraints' that supposedly did not apply to other forms of translation. Even today, the technicalities of space and time (§4) with which the subtitler must indeed reckon, are often referred to in order to point out the limitations of this particular form of AVT. And yet, many of the constraints subtitlers work within are not typical of subtitling only: translated poetry must deal with issues of layout and rhythm, and translated theatre with performance-bound constraints (Zabalbeascoa 2001). Limitations of space and time, the particularity of rendering speech in writing, the presence of the image and the presence of the ST are some of the challenges that subtitlers must face, but all forms of translation pose challenges and all translated texts are the result of reading, interpretation and choice. Mayoral Asensio, Kelly and Gallardo (1988) offer a detailed analysis of the impact that the existence of more than one communication channel has on the translation process. Whether a translation solution is a 'good' or 'bad' one always depends on a host of factors, and cannot be judged out of context. The apparent simplicity of subtitles does not make them ineffective as a translation.

6.2 Text reduction

The written version of speech in subtitles is nearly always a reduced form of the oral ST. Indeed, subtitling can never be a complete and detailed rendering. And neither should it, for that matter. Since the verbal subtitle sign interacts with the visual and oral signs and codes of the film, a complete translation is, in fact, not required. This does not mean, however, that the viewers do not have a right to a qualitatively high-standard translation that will fill in the foreign language gaps for them. Quantity and quality are hardly the same. The concrete causes of the inevitable quantitative reduction in text and content are given below.

Why text reduction?

- 1) Viewers/listeners can absorb speech more quickly than they can read, so subtitles must give them enough time to register and understand what is written at the bottom of the screen.
- 2) Viewers must also watch the action on screen and listen to the soundtrack, so they must be given sufficient time to combine reading with watching and listening.
- 3) Subtitles are limited to a maximum of two lines. How much text they contain depends on the time available, the subtitling reading speed applied, and the speed at which the ST is actually pronounced.

There are two types of text reduction: partial and total reduction. Partial reduction is achieved through condensation and a more concise rendering of the ST. Total reduction is achieved through deletion or omission of lexical items. Very often both processes are combined, leading to the rewriting that is so typical of subtitling. In other words, having assessed how much time and space are available for a given translation, and having ascertained that some form of text reduction is required, the subtitler then proceeds to:

- eliminate what is not relevant for the comprehension of the message, and/or
- reformulate what is relevant in as concise a form as is possible or required.

Very often both processes are at work, as in the example below. A man and a woman who have contacted each other through the personals meet for the first time. This is part of their conversation.

Example 6.1

Man : Quoi? Vous avez déjà fait ça ? Rencontrer des hommes par annonce pour... ? [What? You've done this before? Meet men through an ad to...?]	→	What? You've done this before? You've met men through ads to...
Woman: Non, non - je voulais dire: j'ai déjà rencontré des hommes, qui me plaisaient, enfin, je croyais qu'ils me plaisaient, puis, après, je voyais que non, en fait, je m'étais trompée, ils me plaisaient pas... pas du tout, vous comprenez ?		No, I mean I've met men I liked... Well, I thought I did then realised I didn't I didn't like them at all.

[No, no... I mean, I have met men before
that I liked, well, I thought I liked them,
but then, later on, I realised that I didn't,
in fact, I was wrong, I didn't like them...
not at all, you see?]

In the first subtitle nothing has been deleted or abbreviated. The translation is rather literal. It is good to keep in mind that this happens regularly and that the subtitler therefore should not abbreviate the original unless this is absolutely necessary. In fact, something has been added to this subtitle: a repetition of the personal pronoun plus the short form of the auxiliary verb 'have' for *vous avez*.

The subsequent subtitles cover the woman's reply. She speaks too quickly and says too much for her reply to be contained in just one subtitle. Her intervention has therefore been segmented, and in each subtitle something has been either deleted, or reformulated more concisely, or both. And yet, the woman's description of her experience comes across perfectly.

In the second subtitle one *non* has been deleted and the adverb *déjà* [before] has also been eliminated. The third subtitle resorts to a typical feature of English grammar with its use of 'I thought I did', reinforcing internal cohesion by referring back to the previous subtitle 'I've met men I liked'. In other words, the subtitler uses the form and content of the preceding subtitle to build on in the present one, and to reformulate without actually omitting much. The adverbs *puis* [then] and *après* [later on] have been joined in the single 'then', which is the obvious solution since this is a ST repetition if not in form, at least in content. The most far-reaching instance of condensation occurs in the second line of the third subtitle. First of all, the personal pronoun 'I' is not repeated. Since repetition is not required in this case in English, that is fine. Secondly 'realised I didn't' is a reformulation and condensation of *je voyais que non, en fait, je m'étais trompée* [I realized that I didn't, in fact, I was wrong]; whereas *en fait* [in fact], used for emphasis only in the original, has been omitted in the translation.

The last subtitle again omits and reformulates while condensing. The sentence *ils me plaisaient pas... pas du tout, vous comprenez* [I didn't like them... not at all, you see] is rendered as 'I didn't like them at all'. When choosing between the negative *pas* [not] versus *pas du tout* [not at all], the stronger expression is the obvious choice, since the character corrects herself while speaking and it is the corrected version that is rendered. To conclude, *vous comprenez* [you see] does not add anything to the propositional content of the sentence – even if it does contribute to interpersonal interaction – and so, it can be omitted.

The above self-contained scene is rather straightforward and it is therefore

relatively easy to determine what must be included, what must be rewritten, and what must be omitted, given pre-established space limitations. However, this may not always be the case, and foolproof reduction or omission rules do not exist.

In general terms, one could say that the subtitler must act on the principle of relevance. What is relevant is "connected or appropriate to the matter at hand" (NOED 1998), but there is more to this concept. It was Gutt (1991) who first applied the theory of relevance, itself largely the work of Sperber and Wilson (1986), to the theory of translation. Kovačič (1994) later tested its value for the study of subtitling. We cannot possibly go into relevance theory here, not even into its application to AVT, but it basically claims that communication works on a principle which operates in terms of a balance between processing effort and pay off. This is known as the 'mini-max effect', i.e. achieving a maximum effect with a minimum effort. Kovačič found the approach was quite useful for analyzing and explaining the logic of subtitling omissions, which cannot simply be put down to linguistic factors. It is the balance between the effort required by the viewer to process an item, and its relevance for the understanding of the film narrative that determines whether or not it is to be included in the translation. This means that subtitlers should view a film in its entirety before embarking on a subtitling assignment, even if professionals rarely have the time or opportunity to do this: what may appear to be a simple detail no doubt has a function in the larger scheme of the script (§3.1). Even an inconsequential greeting like 'good morning', cannot automatically be rendered as the much shorter 'hi' or 'hello'. Disregarding matters of style, the ST expression also contains a time reference, whereas neither 'hi' nor 'hello' do. Having seen the entire film gives the subtitler a better outlook on what is and is not redundant. Within the context of one particular scene, the question to be asked in case of doubt is: what requires more effort on the part of the viewer? A shorter subtitle with less information (quicker reading, more thinking)? Or a slightly longer subtitle with more information (slower reading, less thinking)?

The question of how much has to be deleted or otherwise reduced also needs to be looked at in context because it will vary from film to film, and from scene to scene. When people argue, for instance, they not only tend to speak louder, but also more quickly. Díaz Cintas (2003:202) counts a reduction of 40% in the Spanish subtitles of Woody Allen's *Manhattan Murder Mystery* but points out that even that percentage is rather high. Woody Allen's films are notoriously talkative and the speed of delivery is no doubt a determining factor. Lomheim (1995:203) did the count for three episodes of quite different TV series – thriller, comedy, and sci-fi – and came up with 22%, 24% and 37% respectively. The most important thing to remember from this, rather than the percentages in themselves, is that some cutting is usually required even though

this may be quite frustrating, and that the amount of cutting/reformulating will vary with genre, context, speed of delivery, etc. (Georgakopoulou 2003). A positive way of looking at this subtitling feature is to regard it as a way of freeing oneself from the ST and achieving a translation that is tuned to the needs of the target audience. The practical details of judicious reduction are discussed below.

Whether rephrasing or omission, or a combination of the two, is the best solution, must be ascertained in each instance. One factor that may be decisive is the combination of genre and rhetorical function. In a scene depicting a lovers' quarrel – for instance, an emotionally rather than referentially significant scene – leaving out details and following the rhythm of speech may be better than rephrasing and thereby losing the parallelism with the ST. When subtitling off-screen commentators in a documentary film, rendering all they say may be more important, and therefore a reformulation that allows the subtitler to condense without losing information may be a better option. The subtitles below are from a scene of a feature film in which the characters are having an argument. Rendering some of the rhetorical features of their interventions is therefore important. The first subtitle combines omission and condensation, while maintaining the rhetorical build-up of the dialogue. Even the repetition of the affirmative 'OK' has not been omitted, although it could easily have been left out. The second subtitle translates the entire turn.

Example 6.2

Woman: Ok, on n'habitait pas dans un palace, ok, je bossais beaucoup, mais on s'en sortait ! On était heureux ! [Ok, we did not live in a palace, ok I worked a lot, but we did manage! We were happy!]	→	OK, the place was small. OK, I worked a lot, but we were happy.
Man: Qu'est-ce que t'en sais qu'elle était heureuse ? Elle te l'avait dit ? [How do you know she was happy? Did she tell you?]		How do you know she was happy? Did she tell you?

No rules can be given as to when to condense and reformulate, or when to omit. Studying existing subtitles is the best way to learn from professionals, though not much research has been conducted in this area in a systematic way. Some of their choices may be more appropriate than others, but nobody is perfect. In addition to the technical constraints of time and space, both the co-text and

the larger context in which a scene occurs are decisive, its connections with what went before and what is still to come, its formal linguistic and rhetorical-stylistic features, its informative significance, its interaction with visually and orally rendered information, etc. Details may be lost, since subtitles tend to go for what is essential, focusing on the propositional dimension – i.e. the content – of an utterance and making sure the build-up of the programme or narrative comes across. But then again, most of the losses tend to be compensated by the information conveyed through the other filmic channels. Subtitlers must also bear in mind that they are translating for a target audience that can be more (children's programmes) or less (a talk show) defined. In fact, subtitling makes watching a programme just that bit more of an active undertaking. Some more concentration may be required and viewers can be expected to appeal to their general knowledge to fill in some of the gaps. A good knowledge of the source and target cultures, as well as information (or a very educated guess) about the target audience, should allow the subtitler to judge how familiar the audience might be with the producing culture. Long subtitles under a speaker who says very little, and short subtitles under a speaker who just keeps rattling on, will both have a disturbing effect. In the first case the viewers have too much reading to do, and in the other they may feel cheated out of information.

6.2.1 Condensation and reformulation

How one should condense and rephrase depends on what 'can' be done as much as on what really 'needs' to be done. Besides, some changes are due to linguistic differences between the language pairs involved. In any case, subtitlers must use the target language's intrinsic possibilities to the full, which is why a native or at least near-native command of the target language is absolutely essential. It is of the utmost importance that all reformulations are idiomatic, i.e. that they sound natural and do not contain calques. An English phrase like 'What do you think?' could be replaced by various alternatives in French, depending on the scene. It does not have to be the fairly literal *Qu'est-ce que t'en penses ?*, an alternative might be *Ça vous va ?*

The examples below illustrate some of the strategies subtitlers use, but should not be read as instructions. They are no more than suggestions of ways to go about reducing text without losing too much content, and they are in no way exhaustive. Moreover, some of the examples will fit under several headings, because different subtitling 'tricks' are often used in combination. Discussing them one by one is therefore a bit artificial. In fact, subtitling 'tricks' do not really exist: subtitlers come up with solutions whenever they are confronted with a challenging dialogue or scene and some of the challenges appear to recur. That is as far as the generalization goes.

6.2.1.1 Condensation and reformulation at word level

- **Simplifying verbal periphrases.** Colloquial language, especially English, often uses verbal periphrases that can be lengthy and therefore use up valuable space. That is why subtitlers tend to replace them with much shorter verb forms, if the target language allows:

Example 6.3

I'm gonna have this place fixed up...then I'm gonna sell it.	→	Reformaré este local y lo venderé. [I'll fix this place and I'll sell it.]
I should really be going actually.	→	Je dois partir. [I have to leave.]
He is gonna be just the same.	→	Il ne changera pas. [He won't change.]

- **Generalizing enumerations.** Occasionally, generalizations will replace enumerations, and although they modify the style of the speaker, they can help to save space, as in the following example:

Example 6.4

You lied to us, son. Your own mother and father.	→	Tu nous as menti, à nous, tes parents. [You lied to us, to us, your parents.]
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- **Using a shorter near-synonym or equivalent expression.** One obvious strategy to reduce subtitle length would seem to use shorter synonyms, and this is sometimes done. Why not write 'I feel' rather than 'I have the feeling', or 'we need to talk' rather than 'I have to tell you something'? However, one must keep in mind that:

- a) Synonyms are almost always near-synonyms rather than exact equivalents.
- b) Synonyms can belong to different registers and can therefore be less appropriate in a particular context.
- c) Function words make for slower reading than content words – i.e. 'his' as opposed to 'the butcher's' – because they require more cognitive processing on the part of the viewer.

In the examples below, the trick seems to work, even though 'be good to' in the first subtitle is not a literal translation of the French *ST être correct avec*.

However, the scene as a whole makes clear what is meant. The translational shift becomes less striking, and textual cohesion is maintained when the dialogue is heard, and read, in context. The second example is quite unproblematic.

Example 6.5

QUOI ! J'ai toujours été correct avec elle ! [WHAT! I've always treated her right!]	→	What? I was good to her.
He's got lots of money.	→	Il est riche. [He is rich.]

- **Using simple rather than compound tenses.** The next example is almost a classic because in certain contexts a simple past can easily replace a past perfect, that is, if there is no need to state explicitly that one past action occurred before another. Simple tenses obviously take up less space than compound forms.

Example 6.6

Son père l'avait foutue à la porte ! [Her father had thrown her out!]	→	Her father threw her out.
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Sometimes, a change in tense is inevitable, like in the example below, where English takes a simple past tense and French requires a *passé composé*, a complex tense. A more literal verbal tense, 'I have stopped', would not be grammatically correct in the sentence.

Example 6.7

J'ai arrêté de fumer il y a exactement 134 jours... [I have stopped smoking exactly 134 days ago...]	→	I stopped smoking exactly 134 days ago...
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In other cases, the subtitler may have a choice, but tenses can only be adapted when the target language is sufficiently flexible and the change does not lead to grammatically incorrect sentences or calques.

- **Changing word classes.** Very often a change in word class can offer shorter alternatives, for instance, turning a verb into a noun, an adjective into a verb, a verb into an adverb, an adjective into a noun or vice versa.

Example 6.8

Verb into noun	Je me suis mis à travailler ! [I started working!]	→	I found a job.
Verb into noun	When General Pinochet was arrested in London...	→	Na de arrestatie van Pinochet... [After the arrest of Pinochet...]
Adjective into verb	That's an expensive weapon!	→	Ça coûte cher ! [That costs a lot!]
Adjective into adverb	I was in a deep sleep.	→	Je dormais profondément. [I slept soundly.]
Adjective into noun	I don't want it to be too transparent.	→	Je ne veux pas de transparence. [I don't want transparency.]

- **Short forms and contractions.** Most languages will allow some kind of abbreviation and/or contraction in set words. When translating into English, short verb forms like 'it'll' or 'I'd' will come in handy, and in Dutch pronouns like *hij* [he], *haar* [her], and *het* [it] can occasionally be replaced by *ie*, *'r*, and *'t* respectively. French and Spanish, for instance, make use of pronominal enclitic forms, but these can entail a change in register, as polite requests might sometimes be turned into more direct forms of address when using the imperative tense. The subtitle below offers an example.

Example 6.9

Would you like to share it with me?	→	Compartámoslo. [Let's share it.]
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Still, an accumulation of such contracted forms may hinder comprehension, whereas in other instances the style of a formal-sounding speaker may require a formal subtitling style, in which case short forms should not be used. The two subtitles below are fine, since they recreate informal exchanges. Note that in the first one, the auxiliary 'will' has been omitted altogether, which means the subtitle adopts a feature of spoken language.

Example 6.10

Je dois y aller, je te rappellerai. [I must go. I will call you back.]	→	I've got to go, call you later.
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Quoi, il y a quelque chose qui ne va pas? →
[What, is there something that is a problem?]

What's up? What's the problem?

6.2.1.2 Condensation and reformulation at clause/sentence level

- *Changing negations or questions into affirmative sentences or assertions, indirect questions into direct questions, etc.* Sometimes changing the mode of a sentence can have the added benefit of reducing its length. The negative sentence below has become an affirmative one: a phrase with 'not', such as 'not large', would obviously have been longer than the present one with 'small', but another change has occurred as well. It is clear from the context that the speaker is discussing the house he used to live in with his wife. The subtitle can therefore use 'place' rather than 'palace' without causing confusion.

Example 6.11

Ok, on n'habitait pas dans un → Ok, the place was small...
palace...
[Ok, we did not live in a palace...]

In the next example, the more or less rhetorical question, which was meant to be informative in any case, has become a statement. This allows for the introductory verb, the one formulating the question, to be deleted and the compound sentence to become a simple one.

Example 6.12

Did I tell you there's a party Friday? → Er is 'n feesje vrijdag.
[There's a party Friday.]

Below, the first question, which actually doubles as an admonishment, has become an imperative, and the second question is also turned into an imperative.

Example 6.13

What are you making a face for?	→	No ponga esa cara. [Don't pull that face]
Can't you hear the difference?	→	Ecoutez donc ! [Listen!]

- *Simplifying indicators of modality.* Modal auxiliaries and other markers of modality indicate degrees of uncertainty, possibility, probability etc. and are very common in formulaic forms of address or polite requests. Omitting or simplifying clauses that contain them can save space, but must be undertaken with care since the omission may result in a translation shift. It can make a character come across as more abrupt, more decisive, or less polite.

In the first example, the modal auxiliary 'could' in the subtitle, combines the 'if you like' and 'can' from the ST.

Example 6.14

Wij zijn ook zo klaar. Als u wilt, dan kunnen wij u thuis afzetten. [We'll be ready in a minute too. If you like, we can drop you off at home.]	→	We'll be ready in a minute. We could give you a lift.
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In the second example the modal auxiliary 'may' has been left out altogether, which does modify the statement, especially since the cautious introductory clause 'I understand' has also been deleted.

Example 6.15

I understand that it may be the best result, politically, that can be delivered just at the moment. [That is the best political solution right now.]	→	Dat is de beste politieke oplossing op dit moment. [That is the best political solution right now.]
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By contrast, in the example below the omission of 'can' does not matter, it simply saves space. The speaker is not really asking a question about the other character's 'ability' to see the light in the window.

Example 6.16

Can you see the light up there in the window?	→	Vous voyez cette lumière, là-haut ? [You see the light, up there?]
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Finally, in the last example, the omission of modal 'would' breaks no bones either. The hierarchy between nurse and doctor is well established and the nurses' tone is very submissive.

Example 6.17

You wouldn't have time for a cup of tea, → Een kopje thee, dokter?
[A cup of tea, doctor?]

- **Turning direct speech into indirect speech.** This 'trick' also allows subtitlers to get rid of the presentative verb that normally introduces the words of a speaker, but appears to be less common. Below, the verb phrase *souvent*, *je me dis* has been reduced to 'sometimes'. Note that the personal pronoun has been moved back. *Je* [I], originally the subject of *me dis* [tell myself] in the first clause, is now the subject of 'am glad'.

Example 6.18

Souvent, je me dis: "Tant mieux qu'elle → Sometimes I'm glad she went.
soit partie, comme ça, on est soulagés". It makes things easier.
[I often tell myself: "Good thing she went,
we're more at ease like this'"]

- **Changing the subject of a sentence or phrase.** This operation of necessity goes hand in hand with a change in sentence structure, but does not necessarily involve major translation shifts. In the first example below 'anyone' has now become the subject instead of *ça* [that]. 'Anyone can get' is obviously much shorter than 'that can happen to anyone'. As it happens, the shorter version in the translation is also the most idiomatic one. The reformulations that are so typical of subtitling need not be for the worst.

Example 6.19

L'eczéma, ça. Ça peut arriver à n'importe qui. → Eczema, anyone can get eczema.
[Eczema, well. That can happen to anyone.]

The change in subject in the first of the two following examples is the natural result of the change in verb, whereas in the second subtitle it is the result of a change from passive to active voice.

Example 6.20

Well, I think I know what you → Je crois vous avoir compris, Travis.
mean Travis. [I think I've understood you, Travis.]

At the end of six months, you → Dans six mois, je vous emmène
shall be taken to Buckingham Palace. à Buckingham Palace.
[In six months, I will take you
to Buckingham Palace.]

En voiture et avec une belle robe.
[In a carriage and with a beautiful dress.]

- **Manipulation of theme and rheme.** Speech tends to manipulate the order of theme (known information) and rheme (new information) much more than writing does. Speakers normally place the rheme at the beginning of their sentence when they want to draw special attention to a particular issue or emphasize something. This may be because the issue is important to them, or because they want to bring more variation into their style. The result is a change in the neutral word order of the sentence, and the occurrence in the very beginning of lexical units that would normally be used at the end of the sentence.

In the example below, the speaker wants to stress that the grandmother took care of quite a few chores. These are therefore placed in initial position, even though the explanation of why he mentions *le linge*, *le repassage* [the laundry, the ironing] follows afterwards. The enumeration is meant to signify 'many things'. In the subtitle, the word order has been changed and, in addition, the enumeration has been replaced by a generalization.

Example 6.21

Le linge, le repassage, ta grand-mère → Your grandmother did all the chores.
s'en chargeait. [The laundry, the ironing, your grand-
mother did all that!]

The reversal to standard word order and grammar in the subtitles does imply an impoverishment or at least a neutralization of the ST style and a reduction of its oral features, although intonation and gestures may provide some compensation. Subtitles resort to these changes in word order to facilitate reading, as the standard theme-rheme order gives priority to known over unknown information. Theme-rheme treatment in subtitling demonstrates, as Lambert (1990:233) has pointed out, that "most subtitles follow the conventional set-up of the short well-formed sentence, in which subject, verb and predicate or object follow in a stereotypical order" (our translation). Other examples of theme-rheme shifts are:

Example 6.22

And conquer it, you will!	→	Et vous serez la victorieuse. [And you'll be the winner.]
Your father isn't Mr Cohen.	→	M. Cohen n'est pas ton père. [Mr Cohen isn't your father.]

- **Turn long and/or compound sentences into simple sentences.** Another strategy to facilitate reading is simplifying and cutting up complex sentences that may have to be distributed over several subtitles. Shorter, simple sentences require less of a reading effort on the part of the viewers, since they do not have to rely on their memories to tie up the end and the beginning of a sentence that does not appear on screen all at once.

Note also that the second subtitle in the first example does not equal one sentence, and it has been broken off in a logical place, at the end of the clause. Besides the risk of ending up with too telegraphic a subtitle style, the other down side of reducing long sentences to a series of shorter ones is that the connexions between the ideas expressed in coordinated and subordinated clauses may become less explicit. In the example at hand, the connective *mais* [but] expresses contrast in the ST. The woman had a beautiful body, 'but the body of a woman who had been pregnant'. This indicator of contrast has disappeared from the subtitle. Sacrificing linking words is not recommended, even though it happens in two out of the three examples cited below.

Example 6.23

Elle avait un corps – un très beau corps – mais un corps de femme qui avait été enceinte, enfin aurait pu. [She had a body – a very beautiful body – but the body of a woman who had been pregnant, or at least, might have been.]	→	Her body was still very beautiful. The body of a woman who had been pregnant, or who could have been.
I didn't tell you just 'cause I thought you'd get pissed off.	→	Ik heb niets gezegd. Ik dacht dat je woest zou zijn. [I didn't say anything. I thought you'd be pissed off.]

Here, I've got an idea. Suppose you agree that he can't actually have babies, not having a womb, which is nobody's fault, not even the Romans', but that he can have the right to have babies.	→	J'ai une idée. Admettons qu'il ne puisse pas faire d'enfant. [I have an idea. Let's agree that he can't have a child.] Il n'a pas d'utérus. Ce n'est la faute de personne, pas même des Romains... [He doesn't have a womb. It's not his fault, nobody's, not even the Romans'] mais il a le droit d'en faire. [but he has the right to make them.]
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- **Active sentences into passive or vice versa.** The choice of the active versus the passive mode is not a neutral one, since the focus of the attention is on the performer in one case and on the action in the other, and yet, a switch from one to the other can achieve reduction without producing major shifts.

In the first example, the switch from active to passive goes hand in hand with the use of a slightly shorter synonym that may seem stronger than the ST word, but is corroborated by the images. It is also a verb that fits better in an active sentence.

Example 6.24

Wij weten dat u al jaren door uw echtgenoot mishandeld wordt. [We know that for years you have been maltreated by your husband.]	→	We know your husband has been battering you for years.
---	---	--

In the second example, it is understood that 'the government' is responsible for having arrested 'our heroes' and the agent is not mentioned.

Example 6.25

We knew that was where our heroes were kept.	→	We wisten dat onze helden daar zaten. [We knew that our heroes were there.]
--	---	--

And finally, in the last example, the protagonist is no longer blaming himself, but the translation fits the context:

Example 6.26

Ecoutez. Vous avez un casier judiciaire vierge. Vous n'avez pas grand chose à vous reprocher. [Listen. You have a virginal judicial record. You do not have much to reproach yourself.]	→	Listen, you have a clean record, you can't be blamed for much.
--	---	--

- **Use of pronouns (demonstrative, personal, possessive) and other deictics to replace nouns, or noun phrases.** Deictics are words such as pronouns and adverbs, or expressions whose meaning is dependent on the context in which they are used (e.g. here, you, that one there, him, etc.). They provide short translation solutions, as they build on a situation or on visual information that has already been established. However, beware of over-using them. The subtitle in the first example below is still understandable in the context, as the pronoun 'it' refers to the profession of 'hairstresser' mentioned in line one. The word or concept to which an adverb or pronoun refers should not be too far away in the subtitle sequence.

Example 6.27

Je suis coiffeur moi. Tout ce que je sais faire, c'est coiffer. [I am a hairstresser. The only thing I know is how to do hair.]	→	I'm a hairstresser. It's all I know.
--	---	---

In the examples below, the pronoun or adverb refers to a person/object on screen, as the subtitle makes use of intersemiotic cohesion between word and image.

Example 6.28

The murderer must have- like- hidden in this closet, right?	→	Le meurtrier a dû se cacher ici. [The murderer had to hide here.]
It's been a long time since we've done this. (hug)	→	Dat is lang geleden. [That is a long time ago.]
I didn't kidnap my brother (points at his brother, who's in the same room).	→	Je ne l'ai pas enlevé. [I didn't kidnap him.]
There is no food in this high mountain.	→	Il n'y a rien à manger ici. [There's nothing to eat here.]

- **Merge of two or more phrases/sentences into one.** Whereas long compound sentences tend to be rendered in much shorter single or coordinated ones, a series of short sentences in the source dialogue may also be joined, as demonstrated below. Joining sentences in this way can render the connections between actions more explicit and helps the viewer see or understand them at a glance. These apparently opposing tendencies are dictated by the same concern: improving clarity by cutting up lengthy interventions in one case, and linking up bits and pieces in the other. The ellipsis in example one ('that day' has been omitted) is filled by the context of this conversation, and the translator here gives priority to the first question over the second: whatever the interviewee remembers will include what he actually 'did' on that day.

Example 6.29

What are your memories of that day?	→	Wat herinnert u zich nog?
What did you do on that day?		[What do you still remember?]

In the next example, clauses that are separated by a pause in the soundtrack are joined together: the subtitle is guided by the logic of the content of the utterance, rather than the delivery.

Example 6.30

Tout simplement: j'ai envoyé une lettre.	→	Very simply.
Avec ma photo. Elle m'a répondu. On s'est fixé un rendez-vous.		I sent a letter with a photo.
[Very simply: I sent a letter. With a photo. She replied. We arranged to meet.]		She answered and we arranged to meet

The two following examples speak for themselves:

Example 6.31

I want to know what I may take away with me. I don't wanna be accused of stealing.	→	Je veux savoir ce que je peux emporter sans être accusée de vol. [I want to know what I may take with me without being accused of stealing.]
Where did you find this woman?	→	Où tu as trouvé ce génie ? [Where did you find this genius?]

6.2.2 Omissions

Omissions or deletions are unavoidable in subtitling, as many of the examples involving mostly reformulation have shown. Indeed, omission and reformulation go hand in hand, and sometimes reformulations may be more effective than downright omissions, but foolproof guidelines do not exist. Usually, the redundancy rule will come to the subtitler's rescue. On some occasions, a word, phrase, or its content may be repeated elsewhere in the same or the previous/following subtitle, or it may do no more than expand on an idea, rendering it more explicit. In other instances, the images may fill in a gap. However, in most cases the decision amounts to opting for the lesser loss.

Before deciding to omit, subtitlers must ask themselves: will the viewers still be able to understand the message or scene without too much of an effort, and will they not misunderstand it? Subtitlers must become experts in distinguishing what is essential from what is ancillary. The omission of some of the characters' entire turns in the example from *Secrets and Lies* below is unacceptable because it affects the interaction between the characters and possibly their characterization.

Example 6.32

A: Well, I always... thought she'd 'ad a boy...	→	Ik dacht dat ze een jongen had. [I thought she had a boy.]
B: She's a slag.		Ze is een snol. [She's a slag.]
A: No, she's not.		NO SUBTITLE
B: She fucking is.		NO SUBTITLE
A: She loves yer. We all love yer.		Ze houdt van je. Wij allemaal. [She loves you. All of us do.]
B: You comin' back?		Kom je terug? [You coming back?]
A: No.		NO SUBTITLE
B: You got to.		Je moet. [You have to.]
A: Why should I?		NO SUBTITLING
B: You gotta face up to it!		Je moet 't onder ogen zien. [You have to face up to it.]
A: Face up to what?		NO SUBTITLING

6.2.2.1 Omissions at word level

The decision to omit words in the examples below is always dictated by issues of redundancy or relevance. Besides, some omissions are language-bound. When translating from English, for instance, it may not always be necessary or possible to translate question-tags. The target language will probably not have them. If the tag has a function, it can be rendered through a linguistic feature of the target language in question. If the tag is superfluous, or does little more than imitate speech, it may have to be omitted. One idiomatic translation into Dutch of 'close the door, will you?' would be *wil je de deur sluiten alsjeblieft*? [Will you close the door please?].

Modifiers, mostly adjectives and adverbs, are also obvious candidates for deletion precisely because they do no more than modify the information carried by the verb or noun. The question is: how important is the modification? In the first of the two following subtitles, the context will fill in the missing

'hot' in the Spanish subtitle, and in the second it is not important that the fish are 'brightly-coloured'. What is more, they actually appear on screen.

Example 6.33

Tell me if I put too much hot fudge.	→	¿He echado demasiado chocolate? [Have I added too much chocolate?]
No. No. I get nervous when brightly-coloured fish are staring at me face-to-face, you know.	→	No, me pongo nervioso cuando se me quedan mirando los peces. [No, I get nervous when the fish keep staring at me.]

Below, the ongoing conversation signals that the character wants to know if the other is going to make the phone call immediately, even if 'now' is deleted in the Spanish subtitle.

Example 6.34

You're gonna ring Mr House, now?	→	¿Vas a llamar al Sr. House? [Are you going to ring Mr House?]
----------------------------------	---	--

In example 6.35 the subtitle still signifies that one character knows the other merely from seeing her around, even without the qualification 'sometimes'.

Example 6.35

I, uh, I see her at the gym some-times.	→	La he visto en el gimnasio. [I have seen her at the gym.]
---	---	--

To conclude, in this last subtitle, all that matters is that the character is woken up, not whether he was sleeping soundly or not.

Example 6.36

You woke me out of a deep sleep.	→	Me has despertado. [You woke me up.]
----------------------------------	---	---

Phatic words also tend to disappear from subtitles because they do not – strictly speaking – advance the action. In mainstream cinema 'action' refers to the causal events or the actions undertaken/words spoken by characters in order to reach their goal or convey an important point of view. In documentary film the action may refer to informative content, or the argument the filmmaker wishes to present. In the first example below the emphatic *mais enfin* and *comme ça*

have been deleted, and in the second, a conversation about make-up, the words 'anyway' and 'you know' do not make it to the subtitle.

Example 6.37

Mais enfin, Norah, on n'abandonne pas un bébé, comme ça, pendant des heures ! [In heaven's name, Norah, one does not abandon a baby, just like that, for hours!]	→	You don't abandon a baby for hours.
Anyway, whatever the fuck it is, she uses a lot of it you know.	→	Appelle ça comme tu veux. Elle s'en met un paquet. [Call it what you like. She puts on a load.]

Interpersonal elements that may signal power relations between interlocutors and thereby establish character tend to bite the dust too. Examples are: greetings, interjections, vocatives, formulas of courtesy, etc. Even some repetitions can be seen to fall under this heading, mainly when they express hesitation. Not only do such interpersonal features contribute little to propositional content in the strict sense, formally they also occupy a somewhat isolated position, at the beginning of the sentence, for instance, or between commas. The omission of formulaic expressions of politeness, like the request below, does not matter much, nor does the omission of 'you know', in the second example.

Example 6.38

A cup of coffee, please.	→	Un café. [A coffee.]
You know, why don't you get some plates?	→	Traiga unos platos. [Get some plates.]

As for the string of hesitations and false starters in the following example, a much briefer repetition will do in the subtitle.

Example 6.39

No, no, no, no. I'm-I'm-I'm-I'm j- I'm-I'm ju-...um... I'm a detective. They- They- They- We-We- lowered the height requirements, so I-	→	No, no. Yo... soy inspector. Han aumentado la talla mínima. [No, no. I... am a detective. They've lowered the height requirements.]
		y yo... [and I...]

Whether omitting such interpersonal elements is always the best choice is another issue. In the passage below, the protagonist is talking on the phone to the woman he has fallen in love with, but she refuses to see him. He is trying to re-establish contact, not really knowing how to go about it. The subtitle therefore suggests his false starts, rendering his awkwardness, which is actually what the film wants to convey in this scene.

Example 6.40

I'll come by the headquarters or something and we could em...	→	Je passe vous prendre à la permanence, je sais pas, moi, je pourrais...
		[I'll come and fetch you from headquarters, I don't know, I, I could...]

6.2.2.2 Omissions at clause/sentence level

Even though it is certainly not advisable to omit entire turns, sentences or even clauses, it can sometimes be unavoidable. In some cases the intervention of a particular character may actually have a very low information load. In a noisy crowded scene, for instance one that is meant to create an atmosphere rather than anything else, some interventions may not have to be subtitled. In other instances, the music may be too loud for a dialogue turn to be audible, or several people may be talking at the same time. In such cases one could say that the dialogue is part of the setting. The last turn spoken by Carolyn in the scene below from *American Beauty* does not really require subtitling beyond her house at this point. It is the end of the scene and the music gradually takes over. By the time she pronounces the word 'heart' her voice has become virtually inaudible. The soundtrack and the scene as a whole convey sufficiently that Carolyn is a nervous, fast talker, and self-righteous woman. Anyhow, subtitlers working without a script would simply not be able to translate the entire last sentence.

Example 6.41

Their sycamore? C'mon! A substantial portion of the root structure was on our property. You know that. How can you call it their sycamore? I wouldn't have the heart to just cut down something that wasn't partially mine, which of course it was.

Unfortunately, though, not all scenes are that straightforward. In the example below, protagonist Eliza from the musical *My Fair Lady* is seen dancing and singing in the living-room, but she is gradually taken to the bathroom by the servants who want to get her ready for bed. While Eliza keeps on singing that

she 'could dance all night', the servants are undressing her, and they sing along, saying that she needs to sleep. Their interventions are so short and quick that the subtitler could not fit them in between Eliza's lines. In other words, the subtitling gives priority to the protagonist and the viewer has to rely on the *mise-en-scène* to understand what exactly is going on.

Example 6.42

Eliza:	I could have danced all night.	→	J'aurais voulu danser sans fin.
Servants:	You're tired out.		[I would have danced forever.]
Servants:	You must be dead.		
Eliza:	I could have danced all night.		Danser jusqu'à l'aurore.
Servants:	Your face is worn.		[Danced until dawn.]
Servants:	Your eyes are red.		
Eliza:	And still have begged.		Danser jusqu'au matin.
Servants:	Now say good night, please.		[Danced until morning.]
Servants:	Turn out the light, please.		
Eliza:	For more.		
Servants:	It's really time for you to be in bed.		

The following example is an extract from a group scene from *Manhattan Murder Mystery* with four interlocutors who sometimes speak simultaneously. The subtitler has omitted turns that contain information another character rephrases differently, as well as conversational, oral features that have little more than an interactional function. The subtitler has taken care not to delete the turns spoken by the same character more than once.

Example 6.43

Ted:	Uh, you really saw his face? You saw, you saw what he looked like? No question. You know exactly who it is.	→	Vous avez vu son visage ? Vous savez qui c'est ? [You saw his face? You know who it is?]
Carol:	Yes. Oh, yes, I'm here to tell you...		C'était bien M. House. [It was Mr House all right.]
Larry:	Oh, no question about it. It was- It was Mr House. There was no... Not a, not a question. I mean, you could see him because, uh, you know, there was- there was just no way that you could avoid it. He was right there.		On l'a forcément vu. Il était devant nous. [We had to see him. He was in front of us.]
Marcia:	To me, it's obvious.		Pour moi, c'est évident.
Larry:	Wh... How do you see it?		- Comment ça ?
Ted:	How obvious? What do you mean?		[To me, it's obvious. - What do you mean?]
Marcia:	Obvious he's committed the perfect murder.		Il a commis un crime parfait. [He's committed a perfect murder.]
Larry:	What do you mean?		C'est-à-dire ?
Ted:	What? How? What do you mean?		[That is to say?]
Marcia:	Okay, look. You have to start off with another woman who bears some ballpark resemblance to Mrs House.		Commençons par une femme grosso modo genre Mme House. [Let's start with a woman style Mrs House.]

Relevance is the key in such cases and the subtitler must give priority to the person who is conveying crucial information. In the following, shorter examples, repetitions and conversational features are again exploited in order to render four turns in two.

Example 6.44

A:	Isn't that your door?	→	Is dat jouw deur niet?
B:	What?		- Ja.
A:	Isn't that your door knocking?		[Isn't that your door?
B:	Yes.		- Yes.]

Occasionally, the topic of a question is incorporated in the reply of the next speaker. That is why in the excerpt below, the question has been deleted to solve problems of space.

Example 6.45

A:	Why aren't you coming tomorrow?	→	Ik kom niet naar het feestje, omdat ik andere plannen heb.
B:	I'm not coming to the party because I've got other plans.		[I am not coming to the party because I have other plans.]

Luckily, most fiction films make sure that dialogue that is really important is understood by the audience; the result being that it can also be subtitled because time constraints will not be so strict. Granted that the pace of older films is slower than that of today's productions, even group scenes are often orchestrated to such an extent that some dialogue exchanges will stand out more clearly than others. These are then obvious candidates for subtitling, even if they do not contribute to the story strictly speaking, because not subtitling such conversations would leave the viewers wondering needlessly.

In some cases, sentences or clauses have to be omitted even though they do fulfil a function. Making use of the sequentiality of dialogue (§3.4) – i.e. using information from a previous or subsequent subtitle – may be a subtitling solution. In the following example the conditional clause *Si elle était partie* [If she left] has been omitted in the English subtitle, but the deletion is compensated by the question in the English line. The conditional clause that follows the question (to which the speaker herself replies) is a repetition of that question and subsumes the question in the answer.

Example 6.46

Pourquoi elle est partie ? Si elle était partie, c'est qu'elle avait des raisons !	→	Why did she leave?
[Why did she leave? If she left, it's because she had some reasons!]		She must have had a reason.

From the perspective of dialogue studies one could say that the first part of the utterance, *Si elle était partie* [If she left], is the part of the turn that is context confirming. It takes care of cohesion, but does not contain new information, hence its deletion.

In the next example *mais on s'en sortait* [but we did manage] has been deleted. This clause is redundant because the following sentence, *On était heureux* [We were happy], supersedes it semantically. If people are 'happy' they are obviously doing more than 'managing'. On the other hand, 'the place was

small' and 'I worked a lot' do signal that the couple was far from rich and that the extent of their supposed happiness may have been a matter of opinion.

Example 6.47

Ok, on n'habitait pas dans un palace, ok, je bossais beaucoup, mais on s'en sortait ! On était heureux ! [Ok, we did not live in a palace, ok I worked a lot, but we did manage! We were happy!]	→	OK, the place was small. OK, I worked a lot, but we were happy.
--	---	--

Clauses or phrases that carry less propositional content are often those that express a point of view or introduce an argument, i.e. have a presentational function. They introduce the clause that is the main focus semantically speaking. If deletion is required, these introductions are the clauses that tend to go first.

Example 6.48

I was struck during the apartheid years that you always managed to keep your sense of humour.	→	Tijdens de apartheidsjaren bewaarde u uw gevoel voor humour. [Throughout the apartheid years you kept your sense of humour.]
---	---	---

In some cases, even such deletions do have an effect. In the next instances, the character's uncertainty has disappeared from the subtitle. In the first example, the speaker is not sure he has done the right thing by moving in a day ahead of time, in the second, he (a child) knows he has literally 'killed a duck', if unintentionally, and his 'Mmmm, I think' only brings across the fact that he is a bit afraid to break the news.

Example 6.49

I thought I'd move in a day early.	→	Ik ben wat vroeger gekomen. [I moved in a bit earlier.]
Mmmm, I think I killed a duck.	→	J'ai tué un canard. [I killed a duck.]

Finally, in the following two subtitles it is the interaction between the characters that suffers. In the first example, the speaker is not only telling the others 'we don't know this is all true', he is also warning them not to get carried away. In the second, the interlocutor of the ST is being admonished and asked to pay attention, whereas the subtitle merely insists on the value of the 'theory' under discussion.

Example 6.50

Hold, hold on, for a second. We don't know this is all true. This is just a theory.	→	No sabemos si todo es cierto, sólo es una teoría. [We don't know if all this is true, it is just a theory.]
Yeah, but it's a great theory. Have you been paying attention? This is a great theory.	→	Sí, pero es una teoría genial. [Yeah, but it's a great theory.]

6.3 Linguistic cohesion and coherence in subtitling

Coherence is a property of texts that are well written, and helps the message come across, whereas the term cohesion refers to the techniques writers have at their disposal to promote such coherence. Intersemiotic cohesion in subtitling refers to the way it connects language directly to the soundtrack and to images on screen, making use of the information they supply to create a coherent linguistic-visual whole (§3.2 and §3.3).

In the above-mentioned scene from *American Beauty*, Carolyn Burnham refers to the movers carrying furniture into the neighbouring house. Both film dialogue and subtitle rely on visually conveyed information to make sense of her first sentence. What is more, the 'it' in the third subtitle refers to 'that house' in the character's second sentence. The subtitler makes use of the visuals once again and thanks to this intersemiotic cohesion between words and image the viewers will have no problems connecting the pronoun 'it' with the neighbouring house.

Example 6.51

So, we've finally got new neighbours. You know, if the Lomans had let me represent them, instead of 'The Real Estate King', that house would never have sat on the market for six months.	→	Eindelijk, nieuwe buren. [Finally, new neighbours.] Als de Lomans mij als makelaar hadden genomen [If the Lomans had hired me as estate agent] was het veel eerder verkocht. [it would have been sold much earlier.]
---	---	---

All the same, the condensation and reduction that is so typical of subtitling, as well as the disruption created by the layout or distribution of a sentence over more than one subtitle, can lead to coherence breakdowns. So even if the visual and aural channels contribute their bit, it does no harm to avoid low

cohesion, and thereby possible coherence problems in the subtitles themselves. Such lack of coherence can be due to fuzzy references or jumpy transitions, a kind of 'telegram-style', ill-structured sentences, clauses without verbs, or illogical segmentation.

Earlier on in this chapter we pointed out how omission often goes hand in hand with reformulation; as subtitlers delete they must also make sure that the logic of the ST is maintained within and across the subtitles. They must continually look back at what they have already translated and anticipate what is still to come. It may very well be that it is difficult to keep track of this while translating, but having finished a scene, it is good to do some editing, taking extra care to check transitions and cross-references, or typical examples of anaphoric and cataphoric references. Short circuits in the information flow must be avoided. This is why many subtitling software programs, including WinCAPS, have a function that allows subtitlers to check the list of subtitles they have created.

6.4 Segmentation and line breaks

A careful segmentation of the information can help reinforce coherence and cohesion in subtitling. Translators are responsible for creating subtitles that can be easily understood in the little time they appear on screen, and considering their relative isolation – physical, though not logical – from previous and following subtitles. To attain this objective, one of the golden rules in the profession is to structure subtitles in such a way that they are semantically and syntactically self-contained. Ideally, any subtitle ought to have a clear structure, avoid any undue ambiguities, and be a complete sentence. However, this is not always possible, and it is then that segmentation becomes crucial (§4.7.1).

To segment means to divide something into separate parts or sections. In subtitling, segmentation is the division of the ST dialogue, narration etc. into sections or segments – subtitles – that the viewers can understand at a glance. Segmenting is done on two levels. A sentence may have to be distributed over the two available lines of a subtitle – line breaks – or it may run on, into two or more subtitles. The segmentation rules are basically the same within and across subtitles, but when dividing text over more than one subtitle, one should keep in mind that the memory span of viewers of any age group is limited. Complex sentences are difficult to keep track of and should be split into smaller ones.

When making use of the two lines of a subtitle, the segmentation of the text should follow syntactic and grammatical considerations rather than aesthetic rules, e.g. having lines with a symmetrical layout. Neither should the translator wait to fill the top line before venturing to the bottom one. The

second line can be shorter than the first one or vice-versa.

Karamitroglou (1998) sees subtitling segmentation as follows:

Subtitled text should appear segmented at the highest syntactic nodes possible. This means that each subtitle flash should ideally contain one complete sentence. In cases where the sentence cannot fit in a single-line subtitle and has to continue over a second line or even over a new subtitle flash, the segmentation on each of the lines should be arranged to coincide with the highest syntactic node possible.

His tree diagram (ibid.) of the sentence 'The destruction of the city was inevitable' is developed as displayed in figure 6.1.

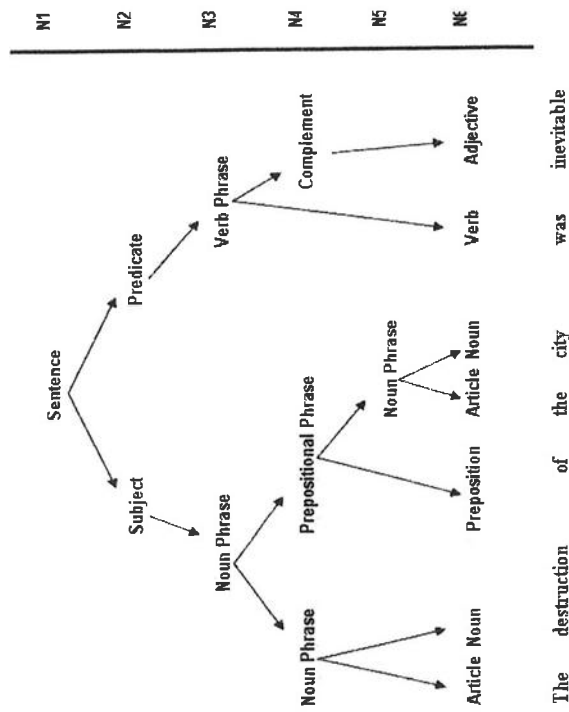


Figure 6.1

Out of the two line breaks, it is the second that flows as more readable. This occurs because the higher the node, the greater the grouping of the semantic load and the more complete the piece of information presented to the brain. When we segment a sentence, we force the brain to pause its linguistic processing for a while, until the eyes trace the next piece of linguistic information. Cases where line breaks are inevitable, therefore, we should try to force a pause on the brain at a point where the semantic load has already managed to convey a satisfactorily complete piece of information.

A segmentation on the fifth node (N5) would create the two-line subtitle:

The destruction of the
city was inevitable.

A segmentation on the second node (N2) would create the two-line subtitle:

The destruction of the city
was inevitable.

In our next example, one subtitle equals one sentence, and the distribution of text over the two available lines follows the above logic.

Example 6.52

How do you go about answering an ad?

Very simply,
I sent a letter with a photo.

She answered
and we arranged to meet.

In practice, however, it is not always feasible to match a sentence with a subtitle, so it is important to keep in mind that each subtitle should make sense in itself, while somehow indicating or suggesting that the sentence continues in the next subtitle. Segmentation always benefits from a division into parts that can function independently, and this is achieved more easily with coordinated than with subordinated clauses. Consider the example below.

Example 6.53

Either God exists, and there are things
he alone understands,
or he doesn't exist
and there's nothing to understand.

The ST sentence in the next example just rambles on, so some form of intervention is inevitable: it must be subdivided into short sentences.

Example 6.54

...and he was standing on the other
side from me...we were shouting at
one another and there were other
people, other prisoners and their
families, and it was such a lot of
noise...sometimes I couldn't even
hear what he was saying.

Hij stond daar, ik hier,
en we schreeuwden naar mekaar.
[He was there, I here,
and we shouted at each other.]

Er stonden nog andere gevangenen
en hun verwanten.
[There were other prisoners
and their relatives.]

Er was zoveel lawaai dat
we mekaar soms niet verstonden.
[There was so much noise that
we didn't always understand each other.]

Long sentences occur in different genres, both in fiction and non-fiction films, especially when someone is reporting, telling a story, explaining a problem, or giving instructions. The example above is from a woman describing to a journalist what happened when she went to see her husband in prison for the first time. Part of the message is no doubt the confusion at the prison, but the subtitler should not render the confusion in the woman's description and must segment the ST logically. Not only has her sentence been segmented into three subtitles, in the third one the connection between the two clauses that compose it has become more explicit.

Besides syntactic-semantic segmentation, rhetorical and visual segmentation may also have a role to play. According to Reid (1996:100):

The translator will determine the segments which later become one subtitle grammatically (on the basis of semantic units), rhetorically (on the basis of speech rhythms), or visually (on the basis of what happens on the screen in the way of cuts, camera angle changes etc.).

In our view, 'visual segmentation' as defined by Reid, belongs to the domain of spatial considerations, rather than linguistic ones. It refers to the technique of cueing or spotting and its relation to the visual narration of film (§4.7). In what follows we therefore offer more concrete examples of syntactic-semantic and rhetorical segmentation only.

6.4.1 Line breaks within subtitles: syntactic-semantic considerations

In the following examples the version preceded with the symbol ✓ is the preferred one by the authors.

- ① Do not hyphenate words under any circumstances.

Example 6.55

✱	It's really hard when you have sacrificed everything.	✓	It's really hard when you've sacrificed everything.
---	---	---	---

- ② If a subtitle consists of two, or more, sentences, put one sentence on each line.

Example 6.56

✱	That's his second wife. She killed herself.	✓	That's his second wife. She killed herself.
---	---	---	---

- ③ If a subtitle consists of a sentence with two subordinated or coordinated clauses, and inserting one after the other is impossible because the maximum number of characters per line would be exceeded or would result in an extremely long subtitle, use one line for each clause.

Example 6.57

✱	I don't need him here because I can manage perfectly.	✓	I don't need him here because I can manage perfectly.
✱	We can't take him along and we can't leave him here.	✓	We can't take him along and we can't leave him here.

Sometimes it will be impossible to make such clean-cut divisions. Bear in mind that it is not necessary to fill the first line completely before going to the second. Some subtitlers feel that a degree of equilibrium in line length is more pleasing aesthetically, sometimes the customer will dictate the layout rules, in other cases a close-up may call for a shorter top line, but generally speaking which line is the longest is first determined by word groups that must be kept together (§4.6.3). More examples are given below.

- ④ Any disruption of a sense-unit will slow down reading. It is therefore ill advised to separate adjective from noun or adverb, adverb from verb, article from noun, preposition from prepositional clause and the like.

Example 6.58

✱	You're right, you're absolutely right.	✓	You're right, you're absolutely right.
---	--	---	--

✱	My mum will drive the car when we go to the beach.	✓	My mum will drive the car when we go to the beach.
✱	Could you lock up this place before leaving?	✓	Could you lock up this place before leaving?

- ⑤ If the sentence contains a to-infinitive, a phrasal verb, or collocation, try not to split them up.

Example 6.59

✱	Is someone who refuses to help a victim guilty of a crime?	✓	Is someone who refuses to help a victim guilty of a crime?
✱	I have no idea what got into him this morning.	✓	I have no idea what got into him this morning.
✱	The suspect hasn't really committed murder.	✓	The suspect hasn't really committed murder.

- ⑥ If the sentence contains a compound verbal form, do not separate auxiliary from lexical verb (past participle or infinitive).

Example 6.60

✱	Now listen, I'm going to give him a last chance.	✓	Now listen, I'm going to give him a last chance.
✱	I have never seen the girl in my life.	✓	I have never seen the girl in my life.

- ⑦ Avoid separating a verb from its direct or indirect object. If a simple sentence has to be distributed over two lines, the subject should ideally go on line one and the verb plus predicate on the second.

Example 6.61

✱	And I just can't give you the address either.	✓	And I just can't give you the address either.
✱	The nurse can get the doctor for you now.	✓	The nurse can get the doctor for you now.

- ⑧ If a particular sentence is the reply to a question, or a reaction to a statement, the reply/reaction is best placed on the second line, rather than in the next subtitle, unless this would give away information too soon.

Example 6.62

✱	Give me those damn keys. Enough! Stop!	✓	Give me those damn keys. - Enough! Stop!
✱	Am I a dog who deserves to die? Take the keys and let me go.	✓	Am I a dog who deserves to die? - Take the keys and let me go.

6.4.2 Line breaks across subtitles: syntactic-semantic considerations

Sometimes it is impossible to make sure sentence and subtitle coincide, because the information load is too great, or because the sentence structure does not lend itself to a division into closed off units. In that case a sentence will have to run over two or more subtitles, and the same rules regarding syntactic-semantic segmentation have to be applied when deciding where to break off. The clause or word group that constitutes it must make sense and anticipate the ending that is still to come.

Example 6.63

✱	You said you didn't know her, that you had never met her, but that was obviously a lie.	✓	You said you didn't know her, that you had never met her, but that was obviously a lie.
---	---	---	---

Still, it is not advisable to continue a sentence over too many subtitles. In that case, dividing it up will avoid stretching the viewer's memory, as in the following example taken from Ivarsson and Carroll (1998:91):

Example 6.64

✱	Welcome to the first of four programmes in this series that every four weeks will show how big money governs England, and how your money can be used to change society. We'll see a commercial, soon to be shown in our cinemas.	✓	Welcome to the first of four programmes in this series. Every four weeks we will show how big money governs England and how your money can be used to change society. We'll see a commercial, soon to be shown in our cinemas.
---	--	---	---

6.4.3 Rhetorical segmentation

Subtitling renders speech in writing. Rhetorical segmentation tries to take some of the meaningful features of spoken language into account: hesitations and pauses, or the playfulness of quick repartees, for instance. Indeed, the way subtitles are segmented and distributed must reflect some of the dialogue's dynamics. Good rhetorical segmentation helps convey surprise, suspense, irony, hesitation, etc. These prosodic features of spoken language serve a purpose in supporting and qualifying the speaker's message. Actually, syntactic-semantic and rhetorical segmentation overlap to some extent since the linguistic and paralinguistic features of speech usually collaborate. Chances are that respecting syntactic and semantic units as well as punctuation will automatically take care of rhetorical segmentation. In some cases, however, the subtitler has to make a decision. Should the reply to a question or an ironic comment be rendered in the same subtitle? What is the best break-off point? Consider the following examples:

Example 6.65

Remind me to go to the baker's in the morning... and to kill him.	→	Herinner me eraan naar de bakker te gaan... [Remind me to go to the baker's...] en hem te vermoorden. [and kill him.]
You are looking really good for... a twenty-one-year-old.	→	You are looking really good for... a twenty-one-year-old.

Another question is whether or not a short pause or a hesitant oral delivery should be reflected somehow in the subtitle. Breaking off a sentence and continuing with it in the next subtitle may render a character's hesitation, but it may also disrupt the syntactic unity of the subtitle. Is the rhetorical impact of the disruption more relevant than the semantics of the utterance? Sometimes this is a matter of personal preference. Compare the following versions of the same subtitle. The one on the left renders the simple sentence in one subtitle; the one on the right respects the pause after 'to':

Example 6.66

I'm scared. I would like to get out of here.	↔	I'm scared. I would like to... get out of here.
---	---	--

A related issue is the preference for more short one-line subtitles rather than fewer two-line ones. The latter group information and facilitate reading, but do not follow the rhythm of the speaker that closely.

In the following example, the character has just witnessed a car accident. He is addressing the girl who has been hit as she is lying in the road. His voice sounds worried and urgent, his sentences are short and repetitive: he appears to be prodding her with his words, trying to make her respond. In the version on the left, his sentences have been joined, which is quite all right technically speaking, in terms of space-time constraints, but not from a dramatic-prosodic perspective. In the version on the right, the subtitler has opted for almost as many short subtitles as there are sentences, following the rhythm of the speaker and retaining most of his hesitations, brief pauses and repetitions.

Example 6.67

✱ Miss, you have to stay awake. Answer me.	✓ Miss, you have to stay awake. Answer me.
Count with me. Miss, answer me. Count out loud.	Count with me. Miss, answer me.
Stay with me. Stay with me.	Count out loud. Stay with me. Stay with me.

To conclude, in the last example, the subtitles on the right are not very efficient in terms of the space they use, versus the information load they carry. In another type of film (but possibly also another type of scene), it might have been better not to render any of the speaker's hesitations or false starts at all and concentrate on the message. The golden rule is: if the speaker's hesitations do not contribute to the message, do not convey them.

6.5 Discussion points

6.5.1 Reconsider each of the examples under the suggestions for condensation and reformulation at clause or sentence level (§6.2.1.2).

- What kind of translation shifts do they involve if one does not consider the context that might be provided by visual information?
- Is there a system in the shifts that you have detected?

6.5.2 The example from *Secrets and Lies* in §6.2.2 (example 6.32) shows that Dutch subtitlers tend to omit a great deal when the SL is English.

- Is this trend discernible in your country too?
- What do you think of this increasingly 'ancillary' form of subtitling, i.e. subtitles that tend to relay only the gist of the original?
- Are you in favour of applying this approach in the subtitling of all programmes? Or only in particular cases? Which ones?

6.5.3 Accepting that most people know some English and that they will be able to understand words from the original soundtrack, to which one of the two following opinions do you subscribe? Why?

- Given the need for reduction in subtitling, I prefer not to translate the English words that I know most people will hear and understand directly from the soundtrack. That way, I can use the space available to relay other details from the dialogue.
- My strategy, on the contrary, is to relay in my subtitles those English words that I know my audience is going to hear and understand. It is true that I have less space left for other information, but by translating those words in my subtitles I know my audience is not going to feel cheated.

6.5.4 Basing yourself on what you have read so far, and on your own opinion about subtitling, propose three strategies that would help to reinforce intersemiotic coherence between subtitles and the rest of audio and visual systems that operate in any audiovisual production.
[Pathway to suggestions: DVD > Chapter 6 > Discussion points > Discussion point 6.5.4]

6.6 Exercises

Translation as rewriting

6.6.1 Read the following excerpt (with back translation) and the English subtitles from *J'ai toujours voulu être une sainte*. Identify exactly what has been rewritten and what has been deleted. Explain the subtitler's choices.

C'était la voisine qui avait prévenu les flics. Elle avait entendu le bébé hurler pendant des heures. Elle était venue frapper, mais personne n'avait répondu...
[It was the neighbour who had informed the police. She had heard the baby cry for hours on end. She had knocked on the door, but no one had come...]

The neighbour had rung the police.
The baby was crying but nobody was in.