

Subtitling and Dubbing for Film and Television

A guide to foreign-language adaptation in France

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Why this guide?

This guide was written by translators specializing in audiovisual adaptation to help film and TV professionals:

- better understand the foreign-language adaptation process;
- get the big picture on audiovisual adaptation;
- make a lasting contribution by improving the quality of dubbed or subtitled feature and documentary films, and TV series.

Translation and adaptation are part of the creative process

What is a film?

First and foremost, a film is work. A lot of work.

The screenwriter writes a story, the director creates and directs the overall vision, the actors bring the characters to life and the editor adds rhythm. This process requires months, even years of hard work and it represents **a huge and potentially decisive investment** both for producers and distributors.

The end result of this collective creative effort is entrusted to an audiovisual translator who has the responsibility of **passing on the very substance of the final cut to foreign audiences**. As the author of the foreign-language version, the translator is a major creative asset. Making sure you get the best is therefore an essential precaution.

Foreign-language adaptation for TV and film: The basics

Foreign-language adaptation is the process of translating, by subtitling or dubbing, films and TV series for release on international markets.

Get your work to the widest possible audience

Foreign-language adaptation opens the door to opportunities like international film festivals, multilingual DVD and VOD markets and the international distribution of popular TV series. And that's just the tip of the iceberg in terms of market potential.

Without the prospect of international distribution, many high-quality films and programs, particularly European coproductions, would never enter production.

But make sure you get it right

Are you sure that your foreign-language adaptations are as good as your original works? If they are not, you may be shooting yourself in the foot.

Adapting cultural references, jokes and nuances to produce the desired effect—whether you want to make the audience laugh or cry—is extremely difficult, especially considering the specific constraints of subtitling and dubbing. It is a job for professionals.

Adaptation 101

Subtitling

Subtitles are a written adaptation of the spoken dialogue in films, TV series, documentaries and other works. Subtitles appear at the bottom of the screen and must follow the rhythm of editing and the flow of dialogue. They must be short but not cryptic, concise but clear, and easy to read at a glance. Like any other form of literary translation, they should render the style and tone of the original in addition to being lexically accurate.

Steps in subtitling

1. Spotting: Laying the technical groundwork

Working from an image file and a dialogue list, a spotting technician uses specialized software to break down the dialogue (and on-screen text that might need subtitling) into segments, and locate where each subtitle should begin and end. These time-coded segments give the reading time for each subtitle, expressed in the number of allowed characters.

2. Adaptation: The creative work

The audiovisual translator is provided with a file generated in Step 1—containing time codes and readability per subtitle—along with an image file and the dialogue list broken down into segments, then proceeds to rewrite, i.e. adapt, the dialogue into subtitles.

3. Simulation: A crucial check

The translator and the client's technical department director go to the subtitling lab and work with a simulation technician to review the subtitles on screen. This step, which allows the work to be seen and modified by the client, is essential to ensuring a professional result.

Dubbing

Whereas in subtitling the adaptation exists alongside the original language, which remains audible, in dubbing the spoken foreign language replaces the original language. The audiovisual translator must align the adaptation closely with the style, tone and register of the original, while keeping it perfectly synchronized to the actors' lips, expressions and body language.

Steps in dubbing

1. Detection: Laying the technical groundwork

A detection technician records the information the audiovisual translator will need on a master rythmo band or in digital file format. This information includes the original script, shot changes and detection signals such as actors' lip movements and breathing.

2. Adaptation: The creative work

The audiovisual translator writes the new script, working either at a dubbing console, on a computer with dubbing software or at their own desk using the master rythmo band and video.

3. Verification: A crucial check

The translator goes to the dubbing studio to present the foreign-language script to the client's technical director and the dubbing director who will direct the French actors. The translator reads the adapted script aloud as the original video is played (muted). The dubbing director, who will ultimately oversee the recording of the foreign-language voices, listens carefully to the new script and watches the muted video. Both the client and the dubbing director ask for any adjustment they deem necessary to obtain the best possible French dialogue.

Voice-over

Voice-over is used in many different types of films and television programs, like documentaries, docudramas, news reports and even reality TV shows. Translators working on voice-over scripts must thoroughly research the topic being discussed, translate subject-specific terminology faithfully and accurately, and write natural-sounding, coherent and effective speech.

Voice-over narration is usually employed to convey the filmmaker's analysis and viewpoint and may be interspersed with interviews, which are typically rendered using voice-over translation (where you can still hear the original speaker's voice in the background). In this case, the translator must use a colloquial, idiomatic tone that replicates natural speech while ensuring overall coherence—even if the initial speaker uses broken or hesitant speech.

Getting the most out of your foreign-language adaptation

The effective foreign-language adaptation of your film or TV show can help ensure it is well-received by foreign audiences and can open the door to new markets. This requires working with proven professionals and giving them the time and resources they need. Follow these simple tips to get the most out of your adaptation.

Provide quality raw materials

Your translator will need a high-quality video to work from, with good sound. Digital files should undergo as little compression as possible.

Your translator will also need an accurate transcript of the original-language dialogue or narration. If you first need to have the film or program transcribed, make sure the person doing the transcription is a native speaker of the original language of the work being adapted. For example, use a native German speaker to transcribe the script of a German film; if a native French speaker tries to transcribe the script of a German film, they may run into comprehension problems, making the transcription of limited use.

Allow adequate time

Below are general guidelines for how long it takes to produce a quality foreign-language adaptation of a feature film or TV series. The actual time required will depend on how dense the dialogue is, the quality of the materials provided and how much subject-specific research is needed. The times indicated below are for the adaptation step alone and do not include any preparatory work, like spotting, or post-translation work like simulations and verifications.

Subtitling

Documentary or hour-long episode of a TV series (52 min.): 1 week
Feature-length film (100 min.): 2–3 weeks

Dubbing

Hour-long episode (52 min.): 1 week
Feature-length film (100 min.): 2–3 weeks

Voice-over

26-min. program: 3–4 days
52-min. program: 1 week

Most professional translators are able to handle rush jobs, as long as the deadlines remain realistic. Deadlines such as four days to subtitle a feature-length film or two days to dub an hour-long episode of a TV series do not fall into this category.

Don't skimp on price

Pricing a knowledge-based service is never straightforward, especially if it has an important creative aspect. In the case of foreign-language adaptation of films and TV series, your translator should be compensated not only for the time spent, but also for the experience, creativity, and culture-specific knowledge they bring to your production—just like any other member of the creative team. We suggest you speak with your translator directly to agree on a price that is fair to everyone.

Beware of per-film or per-episode rates

Cut-rate middlemen providing dubbing and subtitling services occasionally try to impose a flat rate per film, per TV episode or even per minute on translators. The problem with this is that the amount of dialogue in a film, episode of a TV series, or minute of video footage can vary widely; a feature film can have anywhere between 500 and 1,800 subtitles, for instance, and a documentary can be either image-based or heavy on narration. So per-film, per-episode, and per-minute rates rarely remunerate translators fairly.

Why you should work with a professional

The foreign-language adaptation of a film or TV series is challenging work that requires a specific set of skills honed through hands-on professional experience. Here are the basic competencies that you should look for in a translator.

Excellent knowledge of the original language and culture

Your translator should be able to fully grasp all the cultural references and nuances in the original-language script—including any slang or regional accents and expressions. They must be familiar with the original country's history, cultures, values and way of life in order to catch subtleties, jokes, allusions and abbreviations, and to accurately assess tone and register.

Native speaker of the foreign language

Any translation professional will tell you that the golden rule of translation is to work only into your mother tongue. Only in that language does someone possess the intuitive grammar skills, idiomatic knowledge and eloquence to write a natural-sounding text; any attempt to translate into a second language—no matter how long it's been studied—will fail. Therefore, to avoid potentially embarrassing blunders, you should work exclusively with translators translating into their native language.

Capacity to work on many types of productions

Whether your production is a nature documentary, a Japanese gangster movie, a science-fiction series, a horror film or a reality TV show, your translator should be able to adapt their style accordingly and use the right terminology, tone and register for both the genre and your target audience.

Advanced research skills

Screenwriter spend months doing research before writing their script. Clearly this is an important step—and one that should not be skipped by your translator. A foreign-language adaptation professional will take the time needed to learn the concepts and vocabulary relevant to your production.

Ability to write sharp dialogue

Not everyone who speaks English can be a screenwriter; it also requires imagination, impeccable writing skills and mastery of the elements of plot and dialogue. The same holds true for adaptation—simply being able to speak two languages is not enough. Your translator should have the talent and skills to create a script that will resonate with its audience just as well as the original does.

Common pitfalls

Translating via a bridge language

Translating a production into a third language from subtitles in a second language (e.g. translating a Korean film into German based on English subtitles) does both your work and your translator a huge disservice. Such corner-cutting practices open the door to misinterpretation, overly simplified dialogue and general inaccuracy. Cultural references and jokes are often lost, and concepts are dumbed down. For example, Japanese Anime typically have very long dialogue that is shortened drastically in English versions; to use this shortened English version as a basis for other adaptations is to undermine the translators tasked with capturing and adapting the subtleties that give the original work its full resonance.

To do a proper job, your audiovisual translator needs to work from the original and into their mother tongue only. To avoid the use of bridge languages, one option is to have two translators working together: one a native speaker of the original language; and the other a native speaker of the foreign language.

Not using a professional

Just as simply being able to speak a language does not give the skills needed to be a screenwriter, simply being able to speak a second language does not give all the skills needed to be a translator. A successful foreign-language adaptation also requires a thorough understanding of the original country's cultures, including regional differences, sharp writing skills in the foreign language, and a significant amount of training and experience. That's why you should insist on working with professionals only. Leave the home movies to the amateurs.

Asking an intern to do it

Asking an intern to adapt your production may be tempting from a cost perspective, but from a quality perspective it's a sure way to disaster. Even the hardest-working intern does not yet have the necessary professional skills or experience to do the job effectively. In the TV and film industry, interns are typically limited to assisting or observing the editing, production or post-production work. You wouldn't think of appointing an intern as the scriptwriter in the original language, so why do it for the adaptation into a foreign language?

Five keys to success

Work directly with your translator

Because each production is unique—and therefore each adaptation is unique—you should be in direct contact with the person who will subtitle or dub your production. We suggest you begin by scheduling a kick-off meeting with your translator to discuss the appropriate tone and style for the foreign script, the degree of adaptation you would like, and any other factors that should be taken into account.

Be there for the simulation

Someone who knows the production inside and out should be there for the simulation. This is vital for making sure that no subtleties have been lost in the adaptation, that the foreign-language script uses the desired tone and style, and that it is suited to the target audience. Without making sure that a second pair of eyes is there to review and fine-tune the adaptation, you won't be getting all the value you could out of the simulation.

If a film or series has already been released in a foreign country, find out who did the subtitling or dubbing

If the audiovisual production you want to distribute has already been subtitled or dubbed, get in touch with the professional who did the adaptation. This person can explain their approach and the terms under which you could use the existing subtitles or dubbing script. If you can't find out who did the adaptation, contact that country's audiovisual industry association (Sacem in France) for help.

Steer clear of pirated subtitles

One cost-cutting trick offered by some service providers is to use existing subtitles and simply "clean them up." This dubious practice raises several questions: Where did the subtitles come from? If they were found online, were they pirated from a DVD or obtained without appropriate authorization? If so, you could be opening yourself up to a lawsuit. Under some countries' intellectual property laws, including France's, subtitles cannot be modified without the translator's approval—has this been obtained?

From a creativity perspective, asking your translator to work from an existing translation, even with approval, is just as counterproductive as asking an author to work from a manuscript written by someone else. It makes little creative sense.

And finally, when were the subtitles made? Adaptation standards and practices have changed a lot over the past 30 years—not to mention languages themselves, which evolve constantly. For instance, simulation has only been possible since the mid-1980s, so subtitles dating from before then are unlikely to be up to today's quality standards.

Avoid using spotting lists as templates

Large multinational localization agencies, in order to save money on subtitling projects, often generate a single spotting list, which is then used to create all foreign-language versions. In a spotting list the original dialogue is presented in subtitle form according to time codes which do not take readability into account. In addition to not offering the complete and unabridged dialogue to the translator, this practice fails to take into account the broad range of rhythms and structures that make each of the world's many languages unique—you can't squeeze them all into a one-size-fits-all template.

Another problem involves the use of a spotting list as a template to create subtitles for the DVD of a film already adapted for the big screen. This process spoils the original subtitles, making them much more difficult to read and ruining the adaptation work that's already been done and paid for.

What you need to know about copyright

Because translators are considered authors, they retain the moral rights to their work indefinitely. However, the exploitation rights are transferred along with their work to the buyer of the adaptation. This transfer of rights must be set forth in a binding agreement, just as with any business transaction.

So, who is the author?

The author is someone who takes your program seriously and who is passionate about understanding it—because there are no "easy" films. The author is someone who will give the film the time it deserves. It's someone who doesn't just translate the words. It's someone who translates the underlying meaning, someone who constantly asks themselves, "What's the intention here?"

The author is someone who will have the talent to pass on, from one language to another, the meaning, the tone, the irony, the violence, the regionalisms, the references, the humor... Everything that makes the richness of a work and everything that the original creators put into it.

The author is someone whose talent can make the audience think it understands the language of the film—in the case of subtitles—or someone who can make the audience think that the actors are speaking in the target language—in the case of dubbing.

The author is someone who respects the film and doesn't see it simply as a product.

The author is one of the guarantors for your investment. You entrust them with your program and they work for you. Don't let anyone choose your translator for you.

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