Federico Spoletti, founder and managing director of Sub-ti Ltd. The subtitling company based in London provides both film translation services and a state-of-the-art digital softing system for international film festivals. Sub-ti operates on a global level – e.g. in the past year it has provided subtitles for many renowned film festivals and prestigious exhibitions such as the BFI in London, the Venice Film Festival, the Berlin Film Festival, MoMA in New York, the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC and the Doha Tribeca Film Festival in Qatar. It is now considered to be the leader of the niche market of film festival subtitling.

Federico was born and raised in Italy, but he moved to London as far back as 1997, to pursue a consulting career, after a stint as a university researcher in civil law. When in 2001 he met a subtitler and then a film festival programmer soon afterward, he combined these chance meetings with his strong passion for cinema and two months later Sub-ti was founded.

Tell us about Sub-ti. How did the company come about? What’s the staff size look like or the range of translators?
The company was set up in London in 2002 in order to provide subtitling services to film festivals; this is still a significant proportion of our business, though we have expanded to other media as well.

Our film subtitling service can be split into two very different components: on the one hand, a “creative” translation component, whereby we actually translate the dialogue in films; on the other hand, a “technical” component, whereby we segment dialogue and time code the captions before translation, and then we project (“soft”) electronic subtitles with our own state-of-the-art software.

The unique feature of our softing software is that it allows us to project subtitles independently from the film print, either over the image or on a mini-screen underneath the cinema screen. The benefit of this is that the print remains unaltered, hence not permanently spoiled by subtitles in a given language; the same print can still be sent to other festivals and be subtitled into as many other languages as needed. This is a market that has developed particularly in non-English speaking countries, where film festivals may have difficulty in obtaining film prints that are already subtitled in the country’s language, at a time when the film is not yet distributed, or if the standard practice for distribution in that country is dubbing instead of subtitling (in this case, a permanently subtitled print would not have any life after the festival).

Subtitling for film festivals used to be considered a second-rate service, usually managed by the festival organizations with untrained internal resources, or by small companies set up as festival spin-offs.

Sub-ti started to provide this service in a more structured and professional way; we also developed a system that allowed perfect sync of subtitles even without having the film print in advance.

We began working with small festivals and rather quickly gained a reputation for being professional and reliable; this led to more contracts with larger, well-known international film festivals (e.g. Mostra del Cinema di Venezia or Berlinale).

At the same time, we also developed relationships with national film archives in various countries, becoming the preferential subtitling supplier for a number of archives and independent cinemas that screen vintage films (e.g. the British Film Institute in London, MoMA in New York).

Digital (or electronic) subtitling still remains our core business, and we travel all over the world to provide this service. Wherever we are called for, we go.

However, we now provide any type of subtitling, not only into a different language (“interlingual”) but also in the same language (“intralingual”), like subtitling for the deaf and the hearing impaired (pre-recorded, live and semi-live captions for broadcasters).

We also provide access services for the sensory disabled, which mean we offer subtitling for the hearing impaired and audio description for the visually impaired – not only for broadcast media but also for film festivals.

We cover more than 30 languages; employ around 20 full-time project managers who coordinate our work at different film festivals or archives, about 60 technicians and operators, a core group of highly experienced film translators who revise all the translations, and a number of relationship managers responsible for different markets and countries. And we now rely on a pool of over 500 translators based all over around the world that cover the main European languages we usually work with, as well as American English, Brazilian Portuguese, Arabic and any less well-known languages that festivals occasionally need translation for.

Take us through the process when your services come into play. How do you get contacted? Who are the third parties you work closely with?

We are often the film festival’s official subtitling partner. We have a long-standing relationship with many festivals. The festival organization approaches us requesting our services, to make sure their films are well understood by their general public as well as their international industry guests (filmmakers, producers, journalists, industry representatives).

Usually, at international film festivals taking place in non-English speaking countries, subtitles must be in two languages: the host country’s language and English. So, for example, when you have a French film at an Italian Film Festival, e.g. the Venice FF, one string of subtitles will be engraved on the film print in Italian, and a second string of subtitles will be projected on a mini-screen below the main screen in English.

Festivals organizations are usually responsible for the provision of one set of subtitles (usually in the host country’s language), while the other set of subtitles must be engraved on the print by production companies. Therefore, we provide the festival with the electronic subtitles to be shown below the main screen for all the films; regarding the subtitles that must be engraved on the film print, in most cases the festival organizers inform production companies that we are the official subtitling provider, advising them to come to us for that service, too.

So, we often end up having 150-200 films to translate (some of them into 2 languages) in less than a month, since film festivals do not release their program before their press conference, even unofficially. That is by no means a small feat, but we always pull it off! Luckily, to make up for this mad rush, we do have a little bit more time and flexibility for retrospectives.

And, as I said, we also work for production companies providing laser engraved subtitles on film prints (or as is now becoming more common – DCP subtitles).
Sometimes the film director may ask for a revision, but this is not so common. Timing is always very tight, particularly at the larger festivals, when we may receive films only a few days before the screening. Sometimes the local distributor wants to revise the language, e.g. to delete swear words.

During the film subtitling process, a number of different conflicts can occur ranging from the translator who wants to respect the accuracy of their translation, the director who wants to remain loyal to the original dialogue of the film, the distributor who may want to revise the language itself and the subtitler who would like to reduce the text to ensure enough reading time on screen for the subtitles themselves.

When we work with film archives however, we do have a little more time, but there is often a problem of checking against the print that will be used for the screening. An old print might have had a number of cuts to it over the years, so to be sure that the version we use for subtitling purposes is identical to the one the archive is going to screen, we may need to use a telecinema. If this is not possible, we may realise that the prints are different only during the screening itself.

And what about the actual process of creating subtitles for a film (i.e. the amount of hours, the set-up, and so on)? Is there a methodology to it? Or does it vary by filmmaker/distributor preference?

There is definitely a methodology. In our case though, when working with festivals the procedure has to be very flexible.

We developed our methodology over a number of years, breaking up the process into a number of different steps that can also be carried out in a different order to allow work on the subtitles to continue at the same time.

We often use a “screener” (a DVD or a video in digital format which may not be identical to the print) and a dialogue list. The procedure includes a number of different steps:

- Prespotting (this is the definition of legibility times: you do not want to force the audience to read without having the time to see the images on screen, so this part of the process is similar to creating boxes to be filled in by the translators who then has a maximum amount of characters they are allowed to use for that piece of dialogue);
- Segmentation (this is when dialogue is adapted in a way that facilitates quick reading i.e. into syntactic units),
- Translation;
- Spotting (assign to each subtitles a time in and a time out);
- Revision of the translation by a senior translator who proofreads the translation and also checks for any references (a film, in particular the kind of films that go to festivals, may have many references to other films or to literature);
- Simulation (the operator watches the film before the screening and does a final check).

We then finally end up with a timecoded file, ready to be used for “softing” live subtitles at a festival.

Some of these procedures are carried out in-house; translation is often done remotely. We digitise the video into a low resolution format, we apply a watermark with the name of the translator over the image (for copyright security) and then we send a secure link to the translator who can do his job whilst viewing the film.

Some steps of this procedure are common to all film versions, but if we work with different languages, there is a language which is usually chosen as a pivotal one and then other versions start from that pivotal version. However, readability time may change from country to country.

For example, let’s take a film that needs to be subtitled in both English and Italian; the subtitling process might be different in the two languages for a variety of reasons: a) Italian is generally one third longer than English, b) an Italian audience is not used to reading subtitles as Italy is a country where films are usually dubbed, so they need more time. Furthermore, if you project the Italian captions onto a separate mini-screen, you have to allow even more time for the viewer’s gaze to move from the image down to the subtitles. For aesthetic reasons, however, it is best to have exactly the same spotting in the two languages. As you can see, there are always decisions to be made that are film-specific, so our work is always a sort of compromise.

Speech reduction is also an important aspect to consider. You cannot include all film dialogue into subtitles. Spoken dialogue is obviously faster than written language. You also cannot just read and then miss all the visual information on screen, particularly when viewing a film at a festival, where the image is paramount.

There isn’t a fixed amount of hours for the entire process. I would say that to have a screening-ready file for a film you would need a minimum of 3 days, but as I explained earlier it is more of a team effort now, at least in our company. Translation is only one step of the process.

Regarding the translation phase only, there are films which take more time than others to be translated, especially if they have a particularly complicated dialogue or if there is a difficult dialect used to identify particular characters.

There are now wonderful software packages that allow the subtitler to easily work frame by frame, and as a result working methods have improved a lot in the past few years.
Are there particular filmmakers whose films require heavier attention than others because of the dialect or dialogue being hard to follow?

I’d say that each film and each director have their own specific characteristics, so they all need careful attention. A particular dialect may require more ingenuity and creativity than usual to be translated correctly, but there are also other situations where the translation of all cultural components can be very challenging – for example, I am thinking of Chinese films with very little dialogue, where one has to work very hard at intercultural transposition, interpreting the meaning without relying solely on dialogue.

In American and European cinema, the directors that are most difficult to translate are those that use slang, or the language of a specific social group, or particularly surreal dialogue with local, non-international cultural references. Spike Lee, the Coen brothers and also Woody Allen’s particular brand of humour come to mind.

Also, films based on the details of a particular language or local dialect like for example “Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis” (Welcome to the Land of Shtis) present serious translation challenges.

Other films that can be challenging for translation are period pieces and certain genres, such as westerns, or American film noirs, but also musicals, as they all use a language that is very specific to their particular age and/or genre.

With regard to festivals, we see each film as a “special case” – there is no standard approach or recipe that can be applied in the same way to all situations.

It is more challenging to translate films where each character has his/her own markedly individual way of speaking. However, this is what film festival translation is all about: we not only deal with different languages, but also different cultures, habits and traditions.

I think actually that this may be one of the main reasons that so many translators enjoy working for us. In the space of two weeks, a translator can be working on five films – all very different from one another – and each one allows them to be immersed in a completely different world and culture. Undoubtedly, it is the very reason why I am particularly passionate about working for festivals – even if our deadlines are very tight and there always may be some unforeseen technical hitch to upset our previously well-laid plans… Working for the DVD industry is very different – it is less stressful, with more generous deadlines and a more standardized process for gathering material, the English language is almost invariably used as a pivotal language. On a personal note, I do find working in this particular industry a little less engaging when compared to festival work.

There have been instances of translators being a bit sloppy with their translations (I can only speak for French and Spanish examples)... why is this? Would you say this happens more often than not?

I think that the main reason is undoubtedly lack of time; we often work with impossibly tight deadlines – to translate a written novel, a translator might have 6 months, while for a film we only have three or four days. Also, sometimes mistakes are due to technical restrictions, e.g. the translator works off a very small, low-res video (2-3 inches), where certain details are not even visible. Many road signs or writings on boards or plaques are shown with no translation because they are not readable on the “screener” we got, and in many cases we don’t have the luxury of time to investigate.

And then, we have to bear in mind that film translation is carried out by fallible human beings – in this industry, computer assisted translation tools are never ever used, because they are not well suited for the type of language we work with. Indeed, we work with spoken dialogues – based on language that is rich, layered, alive, and constantly evolving. Therefore, our performance depends a great deal on the skill, cultural awareness, creativity, ingenuity, and interpretation ability of the individual translator.

Having said that, the subtitling world is not homogeneous – there are many different companies that provide this service, and each one of them might have a different approach. I know of some companies that have eliminated quality control to cut costs, or outsourced all the strictly technical non-translation aspects of subtitling (spotting, time coding, etc.) to companies based in India or Malaysia.

We continue to insist on high-quality translations and that is why we only employ professional translators with a sound background in cinema studies in order to understand all the intertextual references. Each film translation is always double-checked by our expert revisors; and then we also have a person responsible for checking the timing and proofread the translation one last time before the screening. And in spite of all this, when watching the film there is always something I would have changed.

I only seem to be able to relax when we are working in the Emirates. We provide subtitles to the Abu Dhabi Film Festival and the Doha Tribeca Film Festival – these are the only festivals where I can chill out and actually enjoy the screenings, and that’s simply because I am not very familiar with Arabic!

How has the subtitling industry changed over the years?

Well, there have been many changes.

First of all, there has been a marked increase in the use of technology. New, ever more sophisticated software is constantly introduced – I am thinking in particular of subtitle editing software, which allows translators to increase their daily output, without being bogged down by technical aspects.
I am also thinking of projection software. In our company, we use our own patented software system to pinpoint the perfect speed of subtitles (it allows us to make adjustments within only a few seconds after the start of the film, to guarantee flawless synching between spoken dialogue and subtitles) – once again, our own system has become much more precise and sophisticated over the years, as well.

At the same time, another new issue is the fierce price-slashing war brought about by unstable and unprofessional new companies that have mushroomed over the past few years.

Unfortunately in the film industry quality is not seen as a paramount requirement. The cost of subtitling a film is peanuts in comparison to the total production cost, yet only a few production companies realise that a bad translation of their film will jeopardize in terms of audience perception and compromise the film’s final success.

Having said that, while there is always this continuous pressure to cut prices, on the other hand the amount of media content that needs subtitling is constantly growing.

The wide diffusion of DVDs already increased our industry’s opportunities, but now that both satellite and digital TV is becoming commonplace in so many new international markets, there is even more material to translate.

The new formats and platforms for cinema distribution will also determine a significant increase in opportunities. The advent of Digital Cinema Initiative Package (DCP) will revolutionize the distribution system, removing the current entry barriers. It is likely that major distribution corporations will lose their monopoly over the distribution industry, and as a result the number of independent distributors will increase. Therefore, more independent films will gain access to new markets, which means that we will have more films to be translated.

Among industry changes, I must mention the new trend of “funsubbing”. A fansub (short for “fan-subtitled”) is a version of a film or TV program which has been translated and subtitled by fans. Fansubbers have developed a true parallel industry; though their work is in utter violation of international copyright law, somehow they still manage to be a force to be reckoned with. This trend is spreading like wild fire, above all in China, but I’d say it is present all over the globe by now.

Fansubs are a form of collaborative translation that to some extent goes in the same direction as market changes (e.g. TV series are now available to view online in many different languages only hours after they are broadcast in the US).

Most people in our industry are understandably sceptical about this trend, but I think that it is a reality that we must acknowledge. As far as I am concerned, I don’t want to pretend it didn’t exist or that it will go away – on the other hand, I would take into consideration opportunities for collaboration with funsubbers, which could be advantageous for our industry as well.

On their part, funsubbers look down on professional subtitling companies. But why should we not do whatever we can to try to have these people work with us, since they obviously show such passion for this type of work that they are willing to stay up all night to translate their favourite show?

As a career choice, it’s certainly a unique one. How many people that work in translating happen upon it versus those that seek it out?

I can’t quote a precise figure, but it is definitely a fascinating field that does attract a lot of interest.

Over the past few years, a number of universities have launched audiovisual translation departments, providing new specialization opportunities.

Some of our subtitlers are not translation graduates – their university training is in cinema studies or humanities, and they happen to have a translator-level knowledge of other languages apart from their own, which they combine with their interest in cinema.

There are also a number of new audiovisual translation services. These are all aimed towards offering increased accessibility to films for all those who are hearing and visually impaired. This is also a form of translation, i.e. subtitling for the hearing impaired is a type of translation of the spoken word into the written. Audio description for the blind and visually impaired is a form of translation of visual images into the written and then spoken word. There is currently a great interest among translation students for this kind of work. Within the translation industry today there are many areas of specialization; therefore there is ample space for a high the number of skilled professionals, who do find their own niche.

Also, thanks to new technologies, good translators are now able to dramatically increase their output per day in comparison with only a few years ago. Good translators have no problem finding work. There are many good young translators out there, armed with passion and skill. But in today’s world, competence is paramount. Sub-ti currently collaborates with a number of universities who offer audiovisual translation courses. These universities are an important resource for us, since they allow us to come across new skilled and enthusiastic translators. We also support international conferences such as Languages & The Media, Media For All and ARSAD (Advanced Research Seminar on Audio Description).

What would you say prospects are looking like these days for foreign films in terms of business and therefore by extension for people involved in subtitling?
As I explained earlier, changes in film distribution channels will also change prospects in the foreign film industry. Thanks to the growing popularity of DCP, many more film theatres will be equipped with digital projection systems, which mean lower costs to actually distribute films. This will also lead to an increase in foreign films becoming accessible to a wider audience. Barriers to entrance into the distribution world will disappear, there will be a higher number of independent producers, and therefore there will be more films to be translated for foreign markets.

Today the number of non-mainstream films in circulation has already increased a lot compared to just a few years ago; it is cheaper to make a movie, and thanks to the new methods of promotion, e.g. social networks, it will no longer be the case that just the films with the highest budgets are able to afford significant promotion campaign investments, and end up being the most successful films.

Whatever the changes in the film distribution and production industry, it is an undisputable fact that translation is here to stay, it cannot be done away with – there will always be a need for it.

What’s the best part of your job?

For me the best part of my job is actually going to festivals. Even if you go there for work and you actually work very hard there, it is always great fun.

Going to festivals is actually the reason why I do this job. Festivals make you love cinema even more, you meet other people who love cinema, who believe in it and make it all come to life.

Having to deal with different people in different countries on a daily basis is also something that I enjoy.

And being able to contribute to the final success of a film is again something I find really rewarding. Being at a film screening and realising that the audience are laughing at a joke made in a language that was not their own but has been translated successfully for them – that’s is a great feeling. Or else, we have had many experiences when we have had the opportunity of working for a new filmmaker at a festival, and they liked our work; then later on we are put in touch with the same artist again, at a different festival on the other side of the world, and when they find out that we are in charge of their film translation, they immediately tell us that they are glad (and relieved!) to be working with us again – that’s a very gratifying experience for us! It tells us that we are being recognized for being professional.

Also, the service we provide is complex and layered. I think that each one of our team members, depending on what their skills are, ends up finding the perfect match for them. For example, even the people who are in charge of the research work necessary for our film archive projects find this challenge very interesting and stimulating.

By the way, from this part of our job I had the idea of launching a research project, in collaboration with a number of European universities, to collect and analyse film translations done in the past. I hope this can lead to reconstructing the path of a film’s life. It could also provide an account of socio-cultural changes as these can be identified via the type of language used within the film as well as highlighting the changes in technology that have allowed the film to survive over time.

What’s the best film you’ve seen this year? What about of all time?

A very difficult question!

Most recently “El secreto de sus ojos” by Juan José Campanella (last year’s Oscar winner) and “Another Year” by Mike Leigh (in Cannes). “The Ice Storm” by Ang Lee is another particular favorite of mine as are all Ang Lee films in general. Of all time – maybe the classic “Guess Who Is Coming to Dinner,” by Stanley Kramer with Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn.

And since founding Sub-ti I have had the great opportunity to discover the entire production of certain directors. For example, we subtitled the complete retrospective of Claude Chabrol’s films into a number of different languages (starting with the Turin Film Festival a few years ago and then more recently at MoMA in New York).

Tags: Frederico Spoletti, Sub-ti Ltd., Subtitles

Category: Featured, Interviews

About the Author (Author Profile)

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