

Are Templates Killing the Subtitling Principles? Subtitlers' Views on the Impact of Templates on the Media Localisation Industry

 Aleksandra Skwarek 

University of Warsaw

 Agnieszka Szarkowska 

University of Warsaw

 Sonia Szkriba 

University of Warsaw

Abstract

The subtitling industry has witnessed remarkable growth in recent years, driven by the upsurge in streaming content. To streamline the subtitling process, international streaming companies turned to using subtitling templates in their multilingual workflows. However, the introduction of templates has brought about a new set of challenges, affecting the skills required of subtitlers and the quality of the resulting translations. In this study, we use semi-structured interviews with professional subtitlers to gauge their perspective on working with contemporary template-based workflows and assess the impact of templates on the translation process and the quality of the final product. We were particularly interested in how templates influence translation, aligning with our central research question, whether templates kill fundamental subtitling principles. The findings reveal that subtitlers do not inherently oppose templates but emphasise the necessity for high-quality templates and annotations, especially for pivot workflows. Key concerns include issues with quality, tight deadlines, and inadequate compensation, along with the way in which template-based workflows are implemented. The study shows the importance of a collective commitment from all industry stakeholders

Citation: Skwarek, A., Szarkowska, A., & Szkriba, S. (2024) Are Templates Killing the Subtitling Principles? Subtitlers' Views on the Impact of Templates on the Media Localisation Industry. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, 7(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.47476/jat.v7i2.2024.288>

Editor(s): N. Reviere, J. Neves & G. Vercauteren.

Received: November 13, 2023

Accepted: April 11, 2024

Published: December 19, 2024

Copyright: ©2024 Author(s). This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). This allows for unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

 am.skwarek2@student.uw.edu.pl, <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5204-1004>

 a.szarkowska@uw.edu.pl, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0048-993X>

 s.szkriba@uw.edu.pl, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4229-592X>

to ensure high-quality outcomes and to position templates as valuable tools in the subtitling industry. The insights gained from the study are relevant to enhancing the visibility of subtitlers within the industry, as well as for evaluating the current state of the industry and establishing the foundation for identifying best practices.

Key words: subtitling templates, subtitlers, media localisation industry, subtitling workflows.

Introduction

To enhance the efficiency of the subtitling process, international streaming companies offering translations for their audiovisual content in numerous languages and language service providers (LSPs) responsible for creating these translations have incorporated subtitling templates into their workflows (Netflix, 2022). Instead of individually translating and timing subtitles for each language, a subtitling template – containing a time-coded transcription of the dialogues and on-screen text – is created and subsequently translated into multiple languages. A template may also include annotations with additional information on elements that may pose a difficulty, such as cultural references, songs, wordplay, or allusions (Oziemblewska & Szarkowska, 2022).

The widespread use of templates in the subtitling industry has led to the development of different types of templates. In terms of linguistic composition, two types of template files may be distinguished: original language templates and pivot language templates (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2021; Szarkowska & Jankowska, forthcoming). Original language templates include a *transcription*, usually verbatim, of the dialogues in the source language. For example, for an English-language show, an original English language template is created, which is subsequently employed for translation. In contrast, pivot language templates contain a *translation* from the source language into an intermediary language, which is then translated into various target languages. For example, for a Polish-language show, an English pivot template is created, and it is from English – and not directly from Polish – that other translators work into their respective languages.

Another way to classify templates is based on the subtitler's ability to adjust the timecodes. If the translator has to adhere to the timecodes in the template and cannot change them, the template is considered locked. Conversely, if the subtitler has the flexibility to adjust the timecodes, merge, split, or cut entire subtitles in order to meet the requirements of the target language, the template is referred to as unlocked (Oziemblewska & Szarkowska, 2022). In some cases, subtitlers can change the timecodes, but the changes need to be implemented by a technician, thereby prolonging the subtitling process.

A workflow based on templates was first introduced in Scandinavian countries, which have a strong subtitling tradition and share similar national norms (Georgakopoulou, 2010). Later, this approach was adopted on a larger scale by international companies, initially for DVDs and later for streaming and cloud-based workflows (Georgakopoulou, 2006, 2019). In recent years, subtitling templates have become a vital component in media localisation industry workflows. The use of templates has enabled LSPs to reduce the cost and turnaround times of subtitling production while streamlining quality control, version tracking, and file management processes. While the advantages of templates for companies have been extensively discussed (Georgakopoulou, 2019; Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2021), the viewpoint of other crucial industry stakeholders, that is subtitlers, warrants a more precise evaluation, particularly in the context of this special issue on human agency in the age of technology.

This study aims to examine the perspective of subtitlers regarding the impact of templates on the subtitling process. With this goal in mind, we conducted individual semi-structured, in-depth interviews with subtitlers from different countries representing a range of various languages and language combinations.

1. The Impact of Templates on Subtitle Translation

According to Georgakopoulou (2019), when viewed from the perspective of an LSP, a template should serve the purpose of enabling translators to meet tight deadlines while focusing exclusively on linguistic transfer, unburdened by technical tasks. Díaz Cintas and Remael (2021) add that the template should also ensure accurate spellings of proper names to mitigate the risk of mishearing dialogue. However, while templates have undeniably enhanced productivity and efficiency in subtitling, they've also introduced challenges concerning core subtitling principles.

The use of templates may inadvertently lead to an undesired unification of all target language versions. One instance of this phenomenon can be observed in text segmentation, where subtitlers adhere to the division of dialogue into subtitle events pre-established by the template creator for the original language, rather than adjusting it to fit the structure of the target language optimally. Thus, templates – particularly those which are locked – place restrictions on a translator's freedom (Ivarsson & Carroll, 1998) because the translators are bound by predetermined subtitle events with set durations, which may not be suitable for their target languages due to grammatical, phraseological, and pragmatic differences (Oziemblewska & Szarkowska, 2022; Nikolić, 2015). This can result in unnatural line breaks, incomplete subtitles, unnecessary additions, excessively fast reading speeds or semantic and stylistic calques (Nikolić, 2015; Artegiani & Kapsaskis, 2014). Furthermore, in contrast to translations created from scratch by the subtitler responsible for both spotting and target text creation, template-based translations often contain subtitles that might typically be considered redundant as they include elements of spoken language that are usually edited out in subtitling, such as false starts, repetitions, or hesitations. This, especially in workflows with locked templates, can result in more literal and less idiomatic translations (Oziemblewska & Szarkowska, 2022).

Concerns have also been raised regarding the quality of templates. Since templates often contain errors, inconsistencies, or poorly segmented subtitles, these issues tend to propagate across all subsequent translations downstream (Nikolić, 2015). Another controversial issue is the use of pivot language templates, which can lead to loss of adequacy, filtering cultural nuances through English, and potential errors that are repeated across all language versions (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2021). Translators who lack familiarity with the original language and culture may struggle to capture the essence of the content and accurately convey cultural references (Oziemblewska & Szarkowska, 2022).

2. Subtitlers vs. Companies: Controversies in the Media Localisation Industry

The evolving subtitling landscape has led to shifts in roles and competencies within the profession. Subtitlers are now expected to be proficient in post-editing the output of machine translation (MT) and automatic speech recognition (ASR) technologies; adaptability and familiarity with new technical solutions are increasingly important (Stasimioti, 2022). These changes may result in further fragmentation within the profession, creating distinctions not only between subtitlers, template creators, and template translators, but also giving rise to specialized positions emerging for subtitle post-editors, ASR & MT engineers, and MT consultants for subtitling (Tardel et al., 2021).

Naturally, these changes in the subtitling landscape have raised concerns among subtitlers. One notable concern is that the removal of timing responsibilities has contributed to lowering translator rates and hiring individuals without specific subtitling expertise (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2021; Kapsaskis, 2011). Over the last two decades, audiovisual translator rates have stagnated or declined, negatively impacting working conditions and undermining the professional status of subtitlers (AVTE, 2021; Künzli, 2022).

During and immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic, as an increasing number of people were watching streaming shows, concerns about the quality of subtitles started to emerge. A notable example is the discussion surrounding English subtitles in the Netflix series *Squid Game* (Statista, 2023; BBC, 2021). Such controversies prompted debates within the audiovisual translation (AVT) industry, with some stakeholders attributing issues to a supposed shortage of qualified translators, referred to as “the talent crunch” (iYuno-SDI Group, 2022). A white paper by iYuno-SDI group published in June 2022 linked unsatisfactory subtitle quality to staff shortages and a lack of qualified professionals. It sparked reactions from subtitlers' associations, which countered these claims by stating that skilled subtitlers are available but unwilling to work for exceedingly low rates (Tuominen, 2022; AVTE, 2022; AVÜ, 2022).

The white paper also stirred controversy in relation to the use of MT and post-editing MT output. While iYuno-SDI Group presented MT as a tool to enhance creativity and efficiency, subtitlers disagreed (iYuno-SDI Group, 2022). They argued that post-editing often leads to further rate cuts without necessarily reducing the workload or facilitating the translation process (AVÜ, 2022). In response to these challenges, translators created the *AVTE Machine Translation Manifesto*, articulating their perspectives on improving MT and other automation tools (Deryagin et al., 2021). The manifesto emphasizes the importance of involving subtitlers in the development of MT and other AVT technologies, fair remuneration for translation and post-editing, and recognition of authors' rights for audiovisual translators. It also advocates for quality assessment methods (Deryagin et al., 2021).

Overall, the subtitling industry faces ongoing controversies related to rates, the use of MT and AI, and the evolving roles and competencies required in the profession. Striking a balance between the

interests of different stakeholders while ensuring fair remuneration and upholding translation quality remains a significant challenge.

3. Study

Previous research into templates by Nikolić (2015), Artegiani and Kapsaskis (2014), Cordeiro Campos and de Assis Azevedo (2020), Szarkowska, Díaz Cintas, and Gerber-Morón (2021), Künzli (2022), and Oziemblewska and Szarkowska (2022) has explored various dimensions of templates, subtitle quality, working conditions, and critical issues in the media localisation industry. This study builds upon and broadens the scope of these prior investigations, aiming to gain a deeper insight into the perspectives of subtitlers. Our primary objective in this study was to assess subtitlers' viewpoints on different aspects of template-based workflows. We were particularly interested in the extent to which templates influence the translation process and the resulting end product, aligning with the question posed in the title of this paper, whether templates are indeed killing core subtitling principles.

3.1. Participants

A total of 25 subtitlers (7 males and 18 females) were interviewed for this study. We define a subtitler as a translator whose professional, remunerated activity includes, but may not be limited to, translating audiovisual programmes in the form of subtitles. Additionally, to participate in the study, a subtitler needed to have at least minimal experience working with subtitling templates.

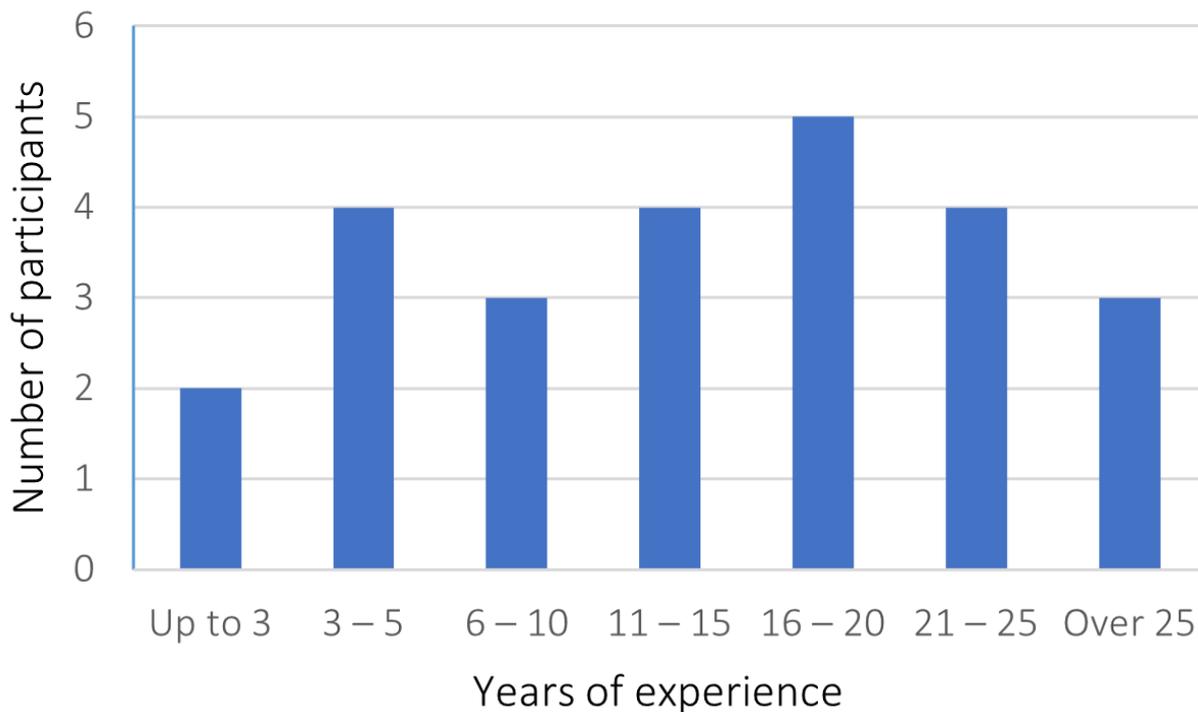
Participants were recruited through personal communication channels and social media (LinkedIn). Subtitlers' associations were also approached to disseminate information about the study. This led to recruiting a sample comprised of subtitlers from different countries and with varying experience in the profession, allowing us to gauge various perspectives on the topic. Reaching people from different countries was especially important in the context of the globalization of the industry in recent years. However, the sampling method used for the study may also have led to self-selection bias, as subtitlers who feel more engaged in their profession, which is often expressed by some form of activism, were more likely to volunteer for the study. That is why the data collected in this study are more likely to represent the point of view of professionals whose awareness of subtitling and the industry is above average.

The working languages of the interviewees included Catalan, Czech, English, French, German, Greek, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish. In many cases, participants did not live in their country of origin. The countries in which respondents resided at the time of conducting the interviews were Bulgaria, Czechia, France, Greece, Mexico, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

All participants were asked about their subtitling experience. They worked in the profession from two to 29 years, with the mean of 14.48 years ($SD = 8.54$). Figure 1 presents a break-out of participants by years of experience.

Figure 1

Number of Participants by Years of Experience



Nine participants had some prior experience in the media localisation industry, for example as film translators for other modalities (two in dubbing, two in voice-over, and seven in SDH). Five participants mentioned having obtained university training in AVT (at least one dedicated course). Moreover, 17 interviewees reported having experience in different roles in the subtitle production chain (five as project managers or owners of an agency, eleven as QC-ers, and five as template creators). Seven participants stated that they were also subtitler trainers.

3.2. Procedure

Interviews were conducted between December 2022 and March 2023, in 24 out of 25 cases via Zoom. One interview was conducted over the phone. The interview duration varied, depending on the speaker, ranging from 20 to 53 minutes, with the mean of 36 minutes ($SD = 9.15$).

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Warsaw. Participants were provided with an information sheet and consent forms before the interviews. Upon prior consent of the participants, the audio from the interviews was recorded, transcribed using speech-to-text software, corrected for accuracy and anonymized. The interviews followed a semi-structured format: core questions (see Supplementary Materials) were prepared in advance, but additional questions emerged during the interviews. A thematic analysis was conducted on the interview data, and coding was used to identify recurring themes (Saldanha & O'Brien, 2013).

4. Results

4.1. Types of Templates Used on the Market

The majority of participants in the study reported working with unlocked templates, which aligns with the findings of Oziemblewska and Szarkowska (2022), who also observed the prevalence of unlocked templates over their locked counterparts. Our participants emphasized the importance of having the option to adjust templates, particularly changing the time codes. For instance, one translator said: "I would probably change the timing on between 95 and 98% of the subtitles".

Seventeen participants mentioned having worked with locked templates, with a few stating that such projects were more common in the past or due to faster turnaround times. However, eight participants had never used locked templates, and three of them expressed strong reluctance or refusal to work with such templates in the future, citing difficulties in ensuring quality and effectiveness. The choice of template type was influenced by factors like client requirements, the subtitler's experience with spotting, and the type of programme being translated.

Several participants raised the point that the clear-cut categorization of templates into locked and unlocked was overly simplistic. They highlighted the existence of various sub-types of templates that allowed adjustment only in specific elements. To illustrate this, one participant shared their experience working with different companies and the varying degrees of template editability permitted by each:

I've worked with different clients. Some of them, especially the bigger companies in subtitling, have their own cloud-based subtitling platform online where they ask you to translate. And some of them provide you with a locked template you can't do anything with other than translate the content. Other companies allow you to change time codes, merge or split subtitles if you want. Other companies have specific instructions on what you are allowed to do and what you're not. So, for example, they will say: "you can merge two subtitles into one, but you can't really adjust the in cues and out cues too much". Also, I work for a smaller company (...), and they don't have any web-based software of their own. They give you a file, the template in SRT format. You work locally with whatever software you want to use. They generally ask all translators: "please follow the template, don't merge, don't split, do not

adjust anything". But I've been working closely with them for a long time, so they trust me, and basically, they let me do whatever I want. And I do, because many times you just have to.

Nineteen participants had experience with pivot language templates. Among them, fifteen made a distinction based on whether they understood the original language of the programme or not. Thirteen interviewees had translated from an unfamiliar language using a pivot language template, but two subtitlers stated they hadn't done so and wouldn't consider it in the future. Some interviewees viewed this experience negatively and would avoid it if possible:

I really don't like working from a pivot. If I know even a bit of the original language, then I'm fine. But for languages like Korean or Japanese that I know nothing about, I really hate it. I avoid it at all costs.

I tend to avoid that. I don't feel comfortable using a pivot language template with audio in a language I don't understand. I understand others might have a different approach, and sometimes you don't have a choice.

A few participants mentioned a new, promising tendency to provide two templates by LSPs: an English one and a template in the original language of the programme, but it has not yet been accepted as a common practice. In general, subtitlers reacted positively to such a solution, as it enabled more informed research:

Even for those cases when you don't actually know the original language, having an original language template, I think, is so useful, because you can consult it, perhaps copy the text and ask another colleague about it, or to try machine translation to see what sort of effects it produces, or to look at some dictionaries, or whatever.

Overall, the interview responses showed that pivot language templates were very common, whereas translating a non-English programme with a template in the original language was rare. Unlocked templates were more prevalent than locked ones, and clients increasingly preferred using unlocked templates, which subtitlers found to yield better results. However, some companies still did not allow modifications to unlocked templates.

4.2. Assessment of Templates and Their Quality

In our study, we wanted to know what participants thought about using templates and about their quality. The majority of participants found templates to be beneficial for subtitlers, and none of them outright rejected the idea of using templates, deeming them completely unhelpful or disruptive. This perspective, as voiced by subtitlers, contrasts with the more common focus on the benefits for LSPs, as noted in prior research (Georgakopoulou, 2019; Nikolić, 2015). In our study, participants highlighted their preference for working with templates as opposed to having no materials provided. A substantial number of participants concurred that templates were both practical and indispensable

for the distribution of global content in the present context, thus advocating for their incorporation into multilingual workflows (Georgakopoulou, 2019):

They [templates] definitely help, but I also understand the reason why they exist, and I agree with the reason why they exist. And I agree that the industry wouldn't be what it is if we didn't have templates of some kind. I don't think the big streaming companies would be able to penetrate so many markets without templates.

While participants acknowledged the convenience and time-saving benefits of templates, the majority of them made adjustments to the spotting originally made by the template creator to align with their own preferences and language-specific needs. This aligns with the findings of Oziemblewska and Szarkowska's survey (2022), where more than 50% of participants frequently modified timecodes.

Five interviewees argued that templates were of particular value to subtitlers with limited experience, especially for those who were not adept at spotting, while they were not as significant for experienced practitioners. This is in line with Nikolić's (2015) view that LSPs benefit from the use of templates by eliminating the necessity to train their subtitlers in spotting. Some participants were critical of subtitlers who did not know how to time, expressing the belief that if all subtitlers were skilled spotters, templates could be made in a way favouring more independent translators, able to produce a better end product.

The assessment of template quality varied among participants. Some found templates to be of high quality, while others pointed out issues such as poor timing (7 respondents), mistakes in transcription and spelling (7), too fast reading speed (6), or lack of compliance with guidelines (5), which confirms the results of earlier studies (Oziemblewska & Szarkowska, 2022).

The quality of templates can be very different. But even if I get the best template in the world, I never leave it untouched. This is impossible. Even if it's a fantastic template, you need to adjust the timing. And usually templates are poorly made.

Very often the template is not well synced, but it's more or less fine when it comes to timing to sound. Timing to shot change is not okay, but the client really doesn't expect this to be well-done, because they might not know themselves what the rules are. I'm also not sure how often translators deliver ideal subtitles when a client gives them a really bad template.

Some participants mentioned the difference between the reading speed in a template and the reading speed permitted in interlingual subtitling guidelines. This is related to the topic of verbatim and condensed templates, which some participants also raised. It became apparent that most templates used by big streaming companies are verbatim or almost verbatim, which was appreciated by a few respondents, who said they preferred to decide how to condense on their own, for example:

I think templates shouldn't have a reading speed limit. I would prefer them to be almost verbatim. But I'm not sure if it is actually possible in these globalized conditions, because the main advantage of templates is for mediocre or bad translators, bad subtitlers who actually

will achieve a passable result thanks to those templates, because otherwise they would be making a bigger mess of it.

However, another slightly smaller, group of interviewees was not appreciative of unabridged templates, stating that they were conducive to creating a translation with a fast reading speed. These opinions overlap with the ones presented by Oziemblewska and Szarkowska (2022), where two-thirds of participants preferred verbatim templates to condensed ones. It also shows that templates do indeed have an impact on translation, with more literal translations entering the market compared to the times before templates were used.

Other factors influencing template quality mentioned by participants included the end-client, the vendor, the software used, and the type of content to be translated (high-profile productions were usually accompanied by templates of satisfactory quality, unlike programmes with expected low viewership). On the whole, the interviewees stressed that the quality of templates largely affects both the translation process and the product. As pointed out by one participant: “good templates are useful and bad templates are a headache”.

Six participants in the study expressed strong dissatisfaction with the use of automatically prepared (ASR) templates, citing numerous mistakes in text formatting, line breaks, and timing subtitles to shot changes, which they found frustrating. This view aligns with the negative assessment of automatically generated templates in a study by Bolaños-García-Escribano (2023). Additionally, participants raised concerns about the lack of official information regarding whether a template was created automatically or by a human spotter, suggesting that companies might be using automated templates to save costs without disclosing it, which raises ethical concerns.

The use of pivot language templates was a controversial topic, with some translators appreciating their usefulness, while others showing their reservations. Five participants expressed concerns about using pivot language templates, stating that they force subtitlers to rely heavily on the template, which often leads to translation losses. Some subtitlers showed wariness towards template creators, especially if there were indications of careless or automated template creation. Consequently, some subtitlers chose not to work with pivot language templates. It was emphasized that the quality of pivot language templates was crucial in preventing translation errors and providing a good end-product. These views align with the majority of survey takers in a 2022 study by Oziemblewska and Szarkowska and with the findings presented in Künzli's (2022) paper. Participants highlighted that when translating from pivot language templates, elements beyond the text were crucial to understanding the meaning:

You have to rely less on the template itself, unless it's annotated very well, and more on the audiovisual material. So, you try to understand the meaning of what's said based on the body language, the logic of what's going on, the general context of the scene and the film, what it's trying to say, and also on the cinematic language.

Many participants considered annotations valuable, as they enhanced the experience of working with templates. Some participants even insisted that a template had to be well annotated in order to be useful, a belief that was shared by 73% of the participants of Oziemblewska and Szarkowska's study (2022).

I find that knowing the good that comes from good annotations, I really miss them when I don't have them. Not having annotations changes the way I approach the work, and I completely change my workflow if I have them or if I don't.

Various respondents said that annotations have recently become more common, and some companies have made them a required template element. This is illustrated by Netflix's style guide for the creation of templates, which states that "annotations are expected in all templates and are a necessary part of context provision" (Netflix, 2022). As evidenced in the change log section, this item was only added to the style guide in July 2021. However, a few participants said that template makers often provided comments subtitlers found unnecessary, as they could be considered common knowledge, instead of explaining really unclear terms, which was also noted by some of the subtitlers who participated in Oziemblewska and Szarkowska's research (2022):

If I had to do a Japanese anime, there I could find it useful because I'm really not that familiar with the Japanese culture. But if they're gonna translate an English pun by English people and they're gonna explain what it means, I'm like: "yeah, I know that. That's really pointless, you're making me lose my time by making me read this".

Other participants appreciated even the presence of notes that seemed obvious to them, emphasizing that templates had to serve for translating content on a global scale:

If you live in Africa or in parts of Asia, you might not know what the Lord's Prayer is, because it's not part of your culture, it's not part of your everyday life, and you wouldn't necessarily have that information at hand straight away. So, I think even though it might seem unnecessary for me, it might be necessary for somebody else.

Overall, the quality of templates varied significantly, leading to diverse assessments among subtitle translators. Despite this, subtitlers generally found the use of templates practical and mostly effective, acknowledging their benefits in expediting the subtitling process. However, there was a sense that improvements in template quality and use were necessary for better results in global content localisation.

4.3. The Impact of Templates on the Translation Process

Several researchers (Kapsaskis, 2011; Artegiani & Kapsaskis, 2014; Szarkowska et al., 2021) have asserted that subtitling templates affect the translation process, decision-making, and quality. To investigate these claims, participants were asked to share their experiences and opinions on whether – and if so, how – working with subtitling templates influenced the process of creating subtitles.

Eight respondents mentioned that they believed their work was affected by using templates, while an equal number of people asserted that they did not perceive any impact of templates on their working methods or the final text. Subtitlers who discussed how templates influenced them emphasized the significance of the strategies and choices made by template creators in shaping their own decision-making processes:

Yes, I am affected by it, and sometimes I question the choice and change it. But sometimes I think: “OK, the template is otherwise good, so maybe this interpretation is a good one”. So I decide to trust the template author.

I would say they might influence you in a sense that sometimes in fast-paced dialogue some of the dialogue has to be omitted. (...) So when looking at the template, you would naturally assume that what is there, what the template creator chose, is actually more important”.

Respondents who did not feel affected by templates often underlined that it was important not to forget that translating an audiovisual programme entailed more than following the textual layer, additionally filtered by the template creator:

I look at the template, but I don't translate from it only. I also follow the audio. I follow the context on the screen and I can hear that there's something shortened here, something thrown out there. I judge if these decisions were correct. And this is, in essence, our job. We can't trust templates.

Eleven participants stated that working with templates made their work more intentional, as they were paying close attention not to follow the template blindly. This included checking if segmentation was correct, avoiding linguistic calques and ensuring the translation sounded natural when it came to syntax and idiomaticity:

I think that's part of our role as subtitlers, to take that step back and to think: right, how would this work better in my language?

Some subtitlers remarked that only specific types of templates influenced the way they worked. In particular, eight interviewees underlined they felt more affected when working with a locked template. This belief was also expressed by some of the participants in Oziemblewska and Szarkowska's survey (2022):

If I'm not allowed to change the timings, I have two equally bad options: leaving a terrible subtitle break or moving a word up or down. But then the timing wouldn't technically match. So, it's a very terrible situation to be in, because sometimes you are not happy with either.

Somehow it hurts that you are not able to influence the final result as much as you would want to.

In turn, two practitioners revealed they only felt an impact of templates on the translation process in the case of pivot language templates due to the fact that translators are, by default, subject to certain choices made by the template makers:

I imagine that even if you know the original language, then just seeing the English translation can influence, inspire you into how you will translate that into your language.

Contrary to what was expected, only four people commented on the fact that their creativity was stifled by templates. Such a low number of respondents sharing this view may come as a surprise, as it is not in line with claims presented by some scholars and practitioners (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2021; Oziemblewska & Szarkowska, 2022; Tuominen, 2022), as well as the results of a study by Szarkowska et al. (2021), which indicate that templates limit subtitlers' creative freedom by suggesting some ready-made solutions.

In summary, the current study partially supports the findings of Artegiani and Kapsaskis (2014) regarding the influence of templates on various subtitling aspects, including segmentation and reading speeds. However, a significant number of interviewees reported not sensing any impact of templates on their translations. This could indicate two possibilities: either these subtitlers are highly conscious of their translation processes and make informed decisions, or they may not perceive any difference between working with a template and starting from scratch. Further process-oriented studies are recommended to gain more insight into this matter.

4.4. Are Templates Killing the Subtitling Principles?

To obtain a better understanding of the perception of the impact of templates on the industry, respondents were asked whether templates were “killing the subtitling principles”, specifically relating to textual condensation, the ability to reformulate utterances, and maintaining a comfortable reading speed. The answers were varied, with eight participants agreeing with the statement, twelve disagreeing, and five providing ambiguous or uncertain responses. It also became evident that the interpretation of the question components played a significant role in the respondents' answers. Depending on how the participants understood the “killing” of subtitling principles and which principles exactly they had in mind led them to respond differently. Therefore, despite serving as an effective promotional slogan for the study, we acknowledge that the question posed challenges in operationalizing its components.

Some interviewees highlighted issues with templates causing excessively fast, unreadable, or uncondensed subtitles. They felt that the main focus of the subtitling job, that is, creating succinct and compact sentences for easy reading while watching, was sometimes lost. This observation was echoed in previous studies by Szarkowska et al. (2021) and Nikolić (2015). In some interviews, it was emphasized that negligence of the principles could only happen because quality was no longer important, reiterating the concerns of Artegiani and Kapsaskis (2014):

I suppose that these principles are overshadowed because of low expectations regarding quality. (...) If a template violated ten rules of creating subtitles, the end-product will do the same. So now it's the template that dictates which rules exist and which don't.

Other participants said that templates enforced changes in the rules applied in the countries with long-standing subtitling traditions, for example, in Scandinavia. The issue of the uniformization of guidelines was also touched upon by Künzli (2022) and Pedersen (2018). One interviewee from Norway shared their frustration with the way big players in the industry approached the question of national subtitling guidelines and styles:

We've had subtitles, and we have an idea of how to do it that the Americans don't. And yet the Americans are the ones with all the power and all the money. And so they come here and say: "Just shut up. We know how to do this. So just do what you're told". And, of course, if you're going to have clients, if you are going to make money, you have to do what you're told. So, we have to do it their way.

The respondents who spoke in defence of templates also presented diverse motivations for their opinions. Some subtitlers stated that templates themselves were not responsible for the detrimental changes in the industry. According to them, the use of templates as such was not the problem; it was how and by whom they were employed that was problematic. Several participants blamed insufficient subtitler training for the perceived losses in the subtitling principles:

They [templates] are a form of help for an intelligent, qualified subtitler. If somebody becomes a slave to the template, the effect is going to be really bad.

I think it's an issue that we have a lot of new subtitlers who don't learn to timecode. Because if you don't learn to timecode, how are you going to be able to change the template to fit your subtitles?

Two respondents explained that, according to them, templates were not killing the subtitling principles, but at the same time, they did not have a positive influence on them:

"Killing" is a very strong word. I wouldn't say they're killing, but they complicate things, and for sure, they make you hustle more. (...) In spite of the limitations imposed by locked templates, we should bend over backwards for the viewer not to see these limitations.

I don't think it's killing it necessarily, but it's got a long way to go before it actually makes a beneficial impact.

One subtitler admitted that even though templates might play a role when it came to the departure from old subtitling principles, they were not the sole culprit:

All forms of unprofessional conduct and greediness harm the product and the good practices. But this is nothing new. Malpractice has always existed.

In summary, a total of twelve participants expressed the belief that traditional subtitling principles were gradually dying out. However, only eight of them attributed this situation to the use of templates. The subtitlers who perceived templates as detrimental to subtitling principles tended to have less experience (with an average of 9.83 years of experience in the field), while those who did not share this view were more experienced (with an average of 16.58 years). This suggests that more

experienced subtitlers show adaptability to changing working conditions and do not vilify templates, even if they might not be entirely content with the state of the industry. Overall, the responses from the interviewees do not provide a definitive answer to the question posed in the title.

4.5. Industry Problems

The participants identified a wide array of pressing issues in their answers to the question, “What main problems in the industry can you identify?”. The problem indicated by the largest number of participants (19) was the rates. This result was expected, given that professionals have widely discussed this issue in recent years (AVTE, 2021; Tuominen, 2022). A few interviewees admitted that they were considering leaving the profession because of the low pay:

For now, I’m doing OK. But I’m always thinking, well, maybe I just have to gradually stop translating in audiovisual translation.

Thirteen participants highlighted the issue of lack of value placed on good translation quality. In numerous instances, it was observed that quality suffered due to a combination of factors, including tight deadlines or inadequately qualified personnel. The responses indicate that the disregard for quality was prevalent across various groups, including LSPs, translators, and viewers:

I think the main problem with the industry is that nobody cares. Nobody cares about subtitling. The end client doesn’t care. The people who make the movies don’t give it a second thought. The broadcasters or the streaming services – I don’t think they care. When I raised my concerns with them, saying that “your reading speeds are too fast, your translations are often not that good, there are other problematic bits”, they said: “Nobody complains. So as long as nobody is complaining, it’s good enough for us”.

A significant group of issues listed by the interviewees is related to flawed workflows, most notoriously ones based on machine translation and post-editing. Several participants claimed that they found post-editing jobs frustrating. This stands in line with the results of the study by Bywood et al. (2017). The main concern of some participants was purely financial, given that post-editing jobs usually had a lower rate than translating jobs:

If you’re doing machine translation post-editing, sometimes it’s more work than actually just doing it from scratch. (...) You might gain 30% of your time, but it’s not going to be a lot more than that. And the rate often doesn’t reflect that amount of work that you have to do.

To recap, based on the interviewees’ perspectives, numerous malfunctioning processes within the industry require attention. Although the most commonly mentioned issue was low rates, it is evident that the problem of low quality underlies many other challenges. The industry seems to be stuck in a cycle of poor quality, resulting from various factors like work distribution, tight deadlines, unqualified subtitlers, stakeholders’ approaches, low payments, and lack of training. Even though viewer complaints sometimes appear, they do not prompt procedural change. Instead, translators are often blamed, further intensifying conflicts of interest between subtitlers and decision-makers.

4.6. Future of Subtitling

Participants' predictions for the future of subtitling revolved around several key themes. Firstly, they generally agree that human involvement will persist in the subtitling process, although the specific nature of the job might change. Some foresee subtitlers continuing to be necessary, but with potentially reduced tasks, while others emphasize the irreplaceable role of human subtitlers in handling the complexities of film translation, which machines may struggle to capture effectively:

No computer in the world, today or ever in the future, will be able to provide context.

Secondly, there is a recognition that machine translation will play a larger role in subtitling in the future. However, attitudes towards this development vary. Some interviewees accept MT's inevitability, while others express concerns about its impact on translation quality. Some subtitlers feel resigned to the increased use of MT, while others are apprehensive about the potential threat to their jobs:

The viewers seem to be very happy. So maybe if the viewers are happy and it can save everyone money, then maybe that's the way the future will go.

Thirdly, interviewees predict further advancements in subtitling technology, including the integration of more advanced tools and AI. While some view AI as a threat, others express excitement about its potential to assist and alleviate their workload. The use of AI and translation is met with cautious optimism, recognizing the need to learn how to coexist with these technologies effectively:

I would love artificial intelligence to be a bit more intelligent and actually help us more in our task.

Fourthly, the subtitling industry is expected to continue growing, driven by an increasing demand for subtitled content. However, not all participants view this growth as positive. Accessibility in subtitling is seen as an area of potential growth, along with an increase in corporate subtitling needs.

Finally, a significant number of interviewees hold a pessimistic outlook on the future of subtitling, expressing concerns about working conditions, low rates, and the dominance of large companies. They worry that the subtitling profession may become oversaturated with unskilled subtitlers, resulting in decreased quality. The prevalence of automatically generated subtitles on social media platforms is also a cause for concern.

Before moving to conclusions, we need to acknowledge the limitations of this study, in particular the open-ended nature of interview questions, leading to diverse responses and potential underrepresentation of certain topics. In the future, process-oriented studies on the influence of templates and interviews with less experienced subtitlers could provide valuable insights.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to enhance our understanding of the perspectives of professional subtitlers regarding templates, with a specific focus on their impact on the subtitling process and the challenges faced by subtitlers. Despite our expectations based on previous studies that subtitlers would generally have an overall negative attitude towards working with templates, our findings revealed that subtitlers do not oppose the use of templates per se. In fact, they accept templates as an integral component of contemporary multilingual localisation projects. What they stress is the importance of templates being of high quality. To achieve high quality, it is advocated that templates should be unlocked. Having annotations and an original language template alongside the pivot version is considered highly beneficial when dealing with pivot templates. Overall, it is not the templates themselves that subtitlers primarily complain about; instead, their main concerns revolve around quality issues, often associated with tight deadlines and low remuneration, as well as the manner in which template-based workflows are implemented.

As for the question posed in the title – whether templates are killing subtitling principles – we are unable to provide a definitive answer. Our respondents did not necessarily identify templates as the primary culprit in the erosion of subtitling principles. Whereas many of them did say that templates – especially those that are locked – may contribute to more literal translations containing unnecessary elements of spoken language, they also admitted to being more aware of those issues and striving to achieve the highest quality possible by adjusting the template to their target languages whenever possible. The overall sentiment from our findings points towards a conclusion that if all stakeholders in the process, from template creators and subtitlers to LSPs and their clients, are committed to delivering a high-quality product, templates can indeed serve as a valuable tool in the subtitling industry.

References

- Artegiani, I., & Kapsaskis, D. (2014). Template files: Asset or anathema? A qualitative analysis of the subtitles of *The Sopranos*. *Perspectives*, 22(3), 419–436.
- AVTE. (2021, November 30). "Not enough translators"? AVTE knows why. AVT Europe. <https://avteurope.eu/2021/11/30/not-enough-translators-avte-knows-why/>
- AVTE. (2022, June 27). *Reaction to Iyuno-SDI's white paper on subtitling*. AVT Europe. <https://avteurope.eu/2022/06/27/reaction-to-iyuno-sdis-white-paper-on-subtitling/>
- AVÜ. (2022, July 8). *AVÜ's reaction to Iyuno's white paper on the subtitle production process*. <https://filmuebersetzen.de/aktuelles.html>
- BBC. (2021, October 4). Squid Game subtitles "change meaning" of Netflix show. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58787264>
- Bolaños-García-Escribano, A. (2023). Editing machine-generated subtitle templates: A situated subtitler training experience. *Cadernos de Tradução*, 43(1), 1–30.
- Bywood, L., Georgakopoulou, P., & Etchegoyhen, T. (2017). Embracing the threat: machine translation as a solution for subtitling. *Perspectives*, 25(3), 492–508.
- Cordeiro Campos, G., & de Assis Azevedo, T. (2020). Subtitling for streaming platforms: New technologies, old issues. *Cadernos de tradução*, 40(3), 222–243.
- Deryagin, M., Pošta, M., & Landes, D. (2021). *AVTE machine translation manifesto*. Audiovisual Translators Europe. <https://avteurope.eu/avte-machine-translation-manifesto/>
- Díaz Cintas, J., & Remael, A. (2021). *Subtitling: Concepts and practices*. Routledge.
- Georgakopoulou, P. (2006). Subtitling and globalisation. *Journal of Specialised Translation*, 6, 115–120.
- Georgakopoulou, P. (2010). *Reduction levels in subtitling: DVD subtitling, a convergence of trends*. Lambert Academic Publishers.
- Georgakopoulou, P. (2019). Template files: The Holy Grail of subtitling. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, 2(2), 137–160.
- Ivarsson, J., & Carroll, M. (1998). *Subtitling*. TransEdit HB.
- Iyuno-SDI Group. (2022). *A simplified look at the subtitling production process* [White paper]. <https://iyuno.com/news/white-papers/a-simplified-look-at-the-subtitling-production-process>
- Kapsaskis, D. (2011). Professional identity and training of translators in the context of globalisation: The example of subtitling. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 16, 162–184.
- Künzli, A. (2022). How subtitling professionals perceive changes in working conditions: An interview study in German-speaking countries. *Translation and Interpreting Studies*, 18(1), 91–112. <https://doi.org/10.1075/tis.20107.kun>
- Netflix. (2022, December 22). *Timed text style guide: Subtitle templates*. Retrieved June 5, 2023, <https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com/hc/en-us/articles/219375728-Timed-Text-Style-Guide-Subtitle-Templates>
- Nikolić, K. (2015). The pros and cons of using templates in subtitling. In R. B. Piñero, & J. Díaz Cintas (Eds.), *Audiovisual translation in a global context: Mapping an ever-changing landscape* (pp. 192–202). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Oziemblewska, M., & Szarkowska, A. (2022). The quality of templates in subtitling: A survey on current market practices and changing subtitler competences. *Perspectives*, 30(3), 432–453.
- Pedersen, J. (2018). From old tricks to Netflix: How local are interlingual subtitling norms for streamed television? *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, 1(1), 81–100.
- Saldanha, G., & O'Brien, S. (2013). *Research methodologies in translation studies*. Routledge.

- Stasimioti, M. (2022, April 11). *Machine translation in subtitling: New job profiles, new skills, new era*. Slator. <https://slator.com/machine-translation-in-subtitling-new-job-profiles-new-skills-new-era/>
- Statista. (2023, April). *Number of users of OTT video worldwide from 2018 to 2027*. Retrieved June 5, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1207843/ott-video-users-worldwide>
- Szarkowska, A., Díaz Cintas, J., & Gerber-Morón, O. (2021). Quality is in the eye of the stakeholders: What do professional subtitlers and viewers think about subtitling? *Universal Access in the Information Society*, 20, 661–675. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10209-020-00739-2>
- Szarkowska, A., & Jankowska, A. (2025). *Introducing audiovisual translation*. Routledge.
- Tardel, A., Hansen-Schirra, S., & Nitzke, J. (2021). Post-editing job profiles for subtitlers. In M. Turchi & C. Fantinuoli (Eds.), *Proceedings of machine translation summit XVIII: 1st workshop on automatic spoken language translation in real-world settings*, (pp. 13–22). Association for Machine Translation in the Americas. <https://aclanthology.org/2021.mtsummit-asltrw>
- Tuominen, T. (2022, September 16). *Quality, creativity, expertise: Some thoughts on the Iyuno-SDI White Paper on subtitling* [White paper]. SubComm. <https://subcomm.co.uk/working-conditions/quality-creativity-expertise-some-thoughts-on-the-iyuno-sdi-white-paper-on-subtitling/>