Subtitling Without Context: How Does the Lack of Pictures and Sounds Affect the Translation of an Audiovisual Text?

🆔 Tuuli Ahonen ✉
University of Eastern Finland

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Abstract

In this article, subtitling without context refers to situations in which subtitlers do not have access to the image and sound of an audiovisual text, which they need to carry out their translation processes efficiently and successfully. Audiovisual texts, such as movies, need to be seen and heard to be understood and their meaning translated. What happens if the video material is not available or incomplete? This is the question that this study strives to answer. The key concepts discussed in this article are the multimodality of audiovisual texts, context, relevance, and cognitive load. An empirical subtitling test was conducted with translation students at a Finnish university to examine these concepts and their impact on translation processes and products. Two sets of translations were analyzed with a multilayered contrastive analysis. In addition, the participants wrote short translation diaries that were analyzed using content analysis. The students' translation diaries indicated that it is impossible to time subtitles, make line breaks, and understand references to places and characters, to name but a few difficulties reported by the participants in the test. In addition, the analysis of the diary entries revealed that translating without context reportedly increased the participants' cognitive load, which in turn made translation processes less efficient and more time-consuming.

Key words: subtitling, audiovisual translation, translation process, multimodality, context, relevance theory, cognitive load, translation strategy

✉ tuuliaho@uef.fi, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2177-1595

Introduction

In this article, I present the results of an empirical subtitling test carried out with translation students at a Finnish university in 2021. The test included four main stages. First, information and instructions were given to the participants, and their questions regarding the test were answered. Next, the participants translated a stand-alone, written dialog list from English into Finnish without access to the video material. The dialog list comprised 33 lines from a British comedy series, *Absolutely Fabulous* (Saunders et al., 1995). In the third stage, the participants subtitled the same dialog with access to the video material. At this stage, the participants timed their subtitles and were able to revise their translations. The last stage involved writing a short translation diary entry of the participants' experiences.

The aim of this subtitling test is to examine how students can and do use the multimodal nature of audiovisual texts in the subtitling processes, as well as how the lack of context – resulting from the denied access to the verbal and non-verbal modes and their interaction – affects subtitling processes and their end results. Consequently, the research question of this study is how the lack of context affects the subtitling process and its outcomes when Finnish subtitling students translate. As Díaz Cintas and Remael (2021, p. 74) have pointed out: "a printout of subtitles, just like a dialog list without scene descriptions, only very rarely makes any sense at all." Therefore, subtitlers need to have access to all modes of audiovisual text when they are translating. However, this is not always the case due to a lack of trust, resources, and knowledge of translation commissioners (Ahonen, 2021).

Access to the verbal and non-verbal modes or audiovisual modes creates the context in which the translation is created and in which it takes place. Therefore, knowledge of the context is crucial when translating. As a case in point, Koskinen (2008, p. 72) has noted that "it has become a truism to say that translations do not take place in a vacuum, that they need to be interpreted and evaluated in their relevant context." The same also applies to translation processes[1] as they do not take place in a vacuum either. In the case of subtitles, the relevant context consists of all visual and audio components of the texts as well as the interaction between them. It includes the setting in which the actions are set along with the characters, their actions, and relationships. One example from the research material of a subtitling test reported in this article illustrates this. A short greeting such as "hello" can be translated in many ways depending on the situation. One study participant translated "hello" as "päivää" which is a general greeting in the Finnish language and is particularly used during the day. However, the translator did not know that the situation in which this greeting was uttered actually took place at night. After they had access to the whole audiovisual text i.e., they watched the episode from which the line originated, they changed the greeting into "iltaa" which is a similar Finnish greeting used in the evening. This is only one short example, yet it sheds some light on cases

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[1] Creation of subtitles is a translation process in which the source text (spoken dialogue) is translated from the source language to target language but also from spoken mode to written mode (written subtitles on visible on screen).

in which increased contextual knowledge of the situation taking place in the audiovisual text does, in fact, affect its translation.

The structure of this article is as follows: first, the key concepts of this study, namely multimodality, context, relevance, and cognitive load are defined and discussed. Next, the materials and methods used in this study are introduced. Then, key findings from the analysis of the research materials are presented, and the results related to the theoretical concepts used in this study are discussed. Lastly, this article ends with some suggestions for further research.

1. Key Concepts and Theories

In this chapter, key concepts of this study, namely multimodality, context, and relevance, are examined and discussed in relation to audiovisual translation, particularly subtitling. However, it is important to remember that these concepts are, to some extent, overlapping and closely related to each other. This is, nonetheless, one of the reasons why these concepts are at the centre of this study. They are what characterize audiovisual texts as well as their separate parts. Moreover, they describe what subtitlers need to take into consideration in their translation processes and how these decisions are reflected in the final product. During the analysis phase of the materials, one additional concept, i.e., cognitive load, proved to be central to this study, and it was added to this chapter.

Audiovisual texts are *multimodal.* They convey meaning through multiple modes of communication that are received via multiple senses. Information is transmitted to the audience "simultaneously through the acoustic and visual channels and conveyed through a wide range of signifying codes, articulated according to specific filmic rules and conventions" (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 4). The interaction and simultaneity of the modes create the filmic messages. This is also what Pedersen (2007) refers to as the polysemiotic context of the subtitled text. Subtitlers need to receive and understand the original message to translate it into the target language and culture within the time and space restrictions of subtitling. These restrictions refer to the limit of time the subtitles are seen on the screen and the space that they have on the screen. Subtitle duration determines how much of the available space can be utilized, i.e., how many (of the maximum) characters subtitlers have at their disposal. The subtitles are added to the pictorial mode of the audiovisual text as seamlessly as possible since the norm in the subtitling industry is that they should not draw attention to themselves (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 93).

The modes of audiovisual texts can be divided into two main modes (audio mode and visual mode) and their submodes[2] (Ahonen, 2021, p. 11). They can also be classified based on their interaction with the verbal or non-verbal elements of audiovisual texts followingly: the aural-verbal mode, aural nonverbal mode, visual-verbal mode, and visual-nonverbal mode (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 65).

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[2] Submodes of audio mode: mode of music, mode of sound-effects, mode of speech. Submodes of visual mode: pictoral mode, written mode.

These two classifications summarize the external and material context in which subtitlers operate: they encompass moving pictures and sounds. The whole audiovisual text comprises these modes, and it is incomplete if one or more are missing. The subtitlers' task and goal is to convey the original message from the original context to the new one. Both the visual and audio modes can include important non-verbal information impacting the translation. These non-verbal components can be categorized into the following four categories: paralanguage, kinesics, proxemics and cultural signs[3] (Ortega, 2011, p. 20–22). All of these give further information about the situational and cultural context of the communicative situation.

Bogucki (2004, p. 78) has noted that "restrictions of concision and omission are standard operating practice in subtitling." Dialog is often fast-paced, and not everything can be placed on the fleeting subtitling lines. Therefore, parts of the dialog need to be condensed and, in some cases, omitted partially or completely. This is, in fact, where the multimodal nature of audiovisual texts can help the subtitler to make necessary condensation and/or omissions without losing relevant information. This, of course, requires access to the complete original audiovisual text. Unfortunately, subtitlers cannot always access the original audiovisual texts for multiple reasons, such as the commissioners' lack of trust, knowledge, and resources (Ahonen, 2021, p. 21). Many condensation and reduction strategies are based on the multimodality of audiovisual texts. One such strategy is called deletion (Gottlieb, 1992) or omission (Ivarsson & Carroll, 1998); two terms that refer to basically the same subtitling strategy in which something said in a dialog is left out partially or completely from the subtitles. These kinds of omissions can be justified, for example, by relevance theory. Things that are not relevant for the plot can be left untranslated. Another justification for omissions is based on the multimodal nature of audiovisual texts in which similar or supporting information can be perceived and received from other modes.

The context of a word, utterance, or sentence essentially determines how it should be understood. It creates the surroundings in which the communication is situated and inside which it is received and processed. Context can include both external (situational and cultural) factors and/or internal, cognitive factors that guide and affect the understanding of a message (House, 2005, p. 342). Situational context includes variables such as the participants and settings. An audiovisual text encompasses the characters, their relationships, actions, and the diverse surroundings in the cinematic world, which are conveyed via pictures, sounds, and combinations. Moreover, situational context should also be taken into consideration when discussing intercultural communication "for findings from one type of situational context cannot be extrapolated to other dissimilar ones" (FitzGerald, 2003, p. 206). Thus, external situational context cannot be changed dramatically during intercultural communication, such as subtitling, without consequences affecting the message.

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[3] Paralanguage includes various non-verbal qualities of voice, such as tone and intonation. Kinesics refer to gestures and body movement, proxemics to the use of physical space and express relationships and intimacy between them and finally, cultural signs deal with colors, places to name but a few. (Ortega, 2011, p. 20–22).

Context is also a focal concept in *Relevance Theory*, which was introduced to translation studies first by Gutt (1991) and later applied to the field of subtitling by Kovačič (1994). In Relevance Theory, the context of an utterance is seen as a psychological construct; a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world or reality (Gutt, 2000, p. 26–27). It is a cognitive environment. It includes everything that is going on inside the head; what can be seen, heard or sensed, reasoned and remembered. The main idea behind Relevance Theory can be summed up in the mini-max effect by Jiří Levý (1967/2000), or we want to achieve maximum benefit with minimum cost (Kovačič, 1994, p. 246). It is between an interplay of costs and benefits that people use to create the meaning of utterances in different situations. We weigh the contextual assumptions and effects made in each situation and select the ones that are most accessible and that result in the most benefits. This is particularly important in subtitling as the message must be understood with one reading. It must include all relevant information that is needed to understand the message quickly and efficiently.

Context is particularly useful in the analysis of audiovisual texts and their translations because "in translating, stretches of language are not only given a new shape in a new language, but are also taken out of their earlier, original context and placed in a new context." (House, 2005, p. 343). Even though this shift or change in the context occurs, it does not mean that the original context is completely forgotten or useless. On the contrary, it is precisely the original context on which the new context is based and on which subtitlers rely during the translation process. Without the original context – which includes all the visual and audio modes and their submodes – a subtitler is left in the dark with detached pieces of dialog. Furthermore, it is important that the visual-verbal link is maintained and that subtitles are synchronous with the audio and images to ensure intersemiotic cohesion (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 72). If interaction between the modes is not taken into consideration, parts of the message can be misrepresented, misunderstood, or lost completely in the new context. Consequently, this hinders the processing of the subtitles, which in turn hinders the viewers' ability to "be transported into the story of a film" (Kruger et al., 2018, p. 274).

The Cognitive Load Theory examines the processing limitations of the human cognitive system and assumes that a human's working memory has limited capacity (Kalyuga, 2012, p. 146; Bannert, 2002, p. 139). As capacity is limited, the issues that need to be processed must be limited and prioritized. This is also what occurs in subtitling. Translation is a cognitive task that requires making difficult decisions between many possible alternative solutions (Hubscher-Davidson, 2018, p. 78). Indeed, subtitlers need to weigh different solutions in a given context and strive to convey the meaning of the original audiovisual text similarly in the subtitled version. This process can be strenuous particularly if the original context is inadequate or incomplete. Several factors, such as task complexity, use of multimedia, time pressure, and expertise level, affect the cognitive load of completing a task, such as translation (Paas et al., 2003, p. 64). Viewing and understanding audiovisual texts require cognitive efficiency (i.e., the ability to use mental resources for problem-solving and learning) as they convey messages through multiple channels and modes. In addition, viewers must "interpret various cinematic codes that require both deductive and inductive reasoning due to the succession of shots and scenes" (Kruger et al., 2018, p. 267).

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2. Materials and Methods

I conducted a subtitling test with 13 translation students at a Finnish university in 2021. Students participated in the test voluntarily and anonymously during an advanced subtitling course. All translations were done from English into Finnish, and translation diary entries were written in Finnish, which was the native language of all participants.

Figure 1

Structure and Stages of the Subtitling Test
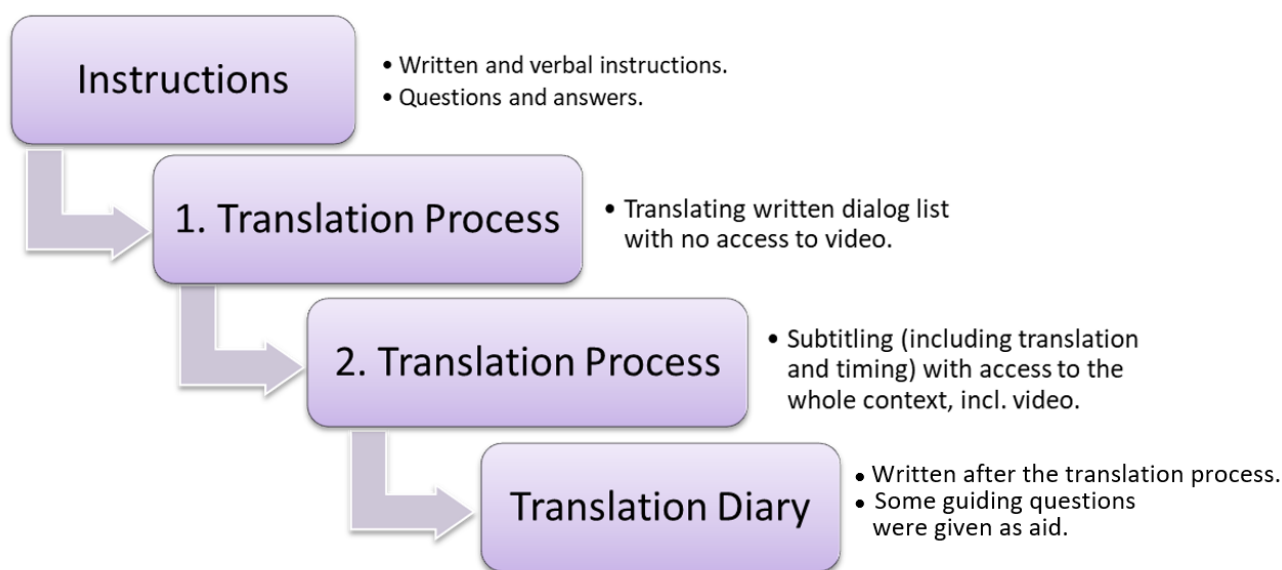
The test that is reported here included four stages that are illustrated in Figure 1. First, the participants received written and oral instructions that explained the test. The participants were instructed to follow the national conventions and quality guidelines[4]. Questions and comments about the test were answered and discussed at this point. After this, the participants started working on their translations at their own pace. The task was to translate a dialog list including 33 lines from the British television series *Absolutely Fabulous*. The scene the students translated was taken from the beginning of an episode. At this stage, the participants only had a written, stand-alone dialog list with the names of the characters speaking at their disposal.

When the first translation process was completed, the participants moved to the third stage of the test, which consisted of subtitling the same dialog they had translated in stage two. Now, the participants had access to all modes of the audiovisual text; they were able to view a video clip, including the dialog seen only in a written form in Stage 2, and adjust their translations accordingly. With the added context from seeing and hearing all modes of the audiovisual text, students subtitled and timed their subtitles to the short video clip.

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[4] Finnish national quality standards to subtitles were published in 2020 by Vitikainen et al.

In the fourth and last stage of the test, the participants were asked to write a short translation diary entry and to reflect shortly on their experiences, translation processes and strategies. Translation diaries or translation journals, integrated problem and decision reports or written protocols as they have been called in other research refer to similar reflection and reporting processes (Eraković, 2013, p. 149). They all require translators to stop and ponder their translation decisions and document how they justify them. In this study, a translation diary is defined as a written account of the reflections made by a translator about their translation processes and experiences. A short list of questions was provided to aid and guide the reflections of the test participants. The questions are as follows:

> How did translating without a video affect the translation process?
> Did something change when you had access to the video?
> How did the sounds/picture affect translations and the translation process?

The subtitling test was designed to produce specific data for contrastive analysis. Access to the modes of the audiovisual text was manipulated to examine their effects on the translation processes and results. Additionally, the students wrote about their experiences in a translation diary. This was selected as a method as it gives inside knowledge about the students' cognitive processes.

A total of 13 participants took part in the test. Data from one participant were omitted from the analysis due to a misunderstanding of the translation processes that rendered the material incomparable. Consequently, the analysis reported here is based on materials produced by 12 participants. The participants were all university students at a Finnish university. They had all participated in their first subtitling course and had a general knowledge of subtitling practices, theory, and national conventions. The test was conducted at the end of an advanced subtitling course during which the participants had practised subtitling using the SubtitleWorkshop software. The same subtitling program was used in the subtitling test since it was familiar to all participants.

The research material consists of three separate sets of data (Figure 2). The first set includes 12 translations of a dialog excerpt from English into Finnish. The second data set comprises 12 Finnish subtitle files created with the SubtitleWorkshop software. Finally, the third data set consists of 12 diary entries written by the participants after the translation process. The length of the translation diaries varied between a third of a page to a whole page.

Figure 2

Research Materials
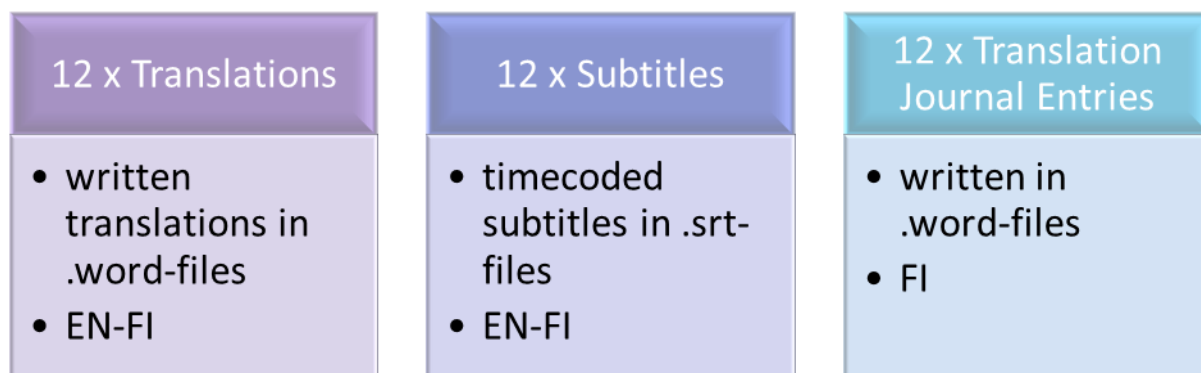
A multi-layered contrastive analysis was used to examine the translations and subtitles produced by the participants. Contrastive analysis examines differences and similarities between pairs of languages "against the background of similarities and with the purpose of providing input to applied disciplines such as foreign language teaching and translation studies" (Gast, 2012, p. 153). In this study, the languages compared are Finnish and English. The common ground is the meaning and message of the audiovisual text conveyed from one language into another. In other words, translations should strive to convey the original content and its effects on the target language.

The analysis includes a comparison of the content of the translations, subtitles, and the dialog list. They were also compared to the visual and audio modes of the audiovisual text, making the analysis multi-layered. A picture of the layers can be found below (Figure 3). Instances in which the two sets of translations differed from each other were analyzed in more detail. The closest attention was paid to cases where a link between the translations and the audio or visual mode was observed.

Figure 3

Layers of the Multilayered Contrastive Analysis
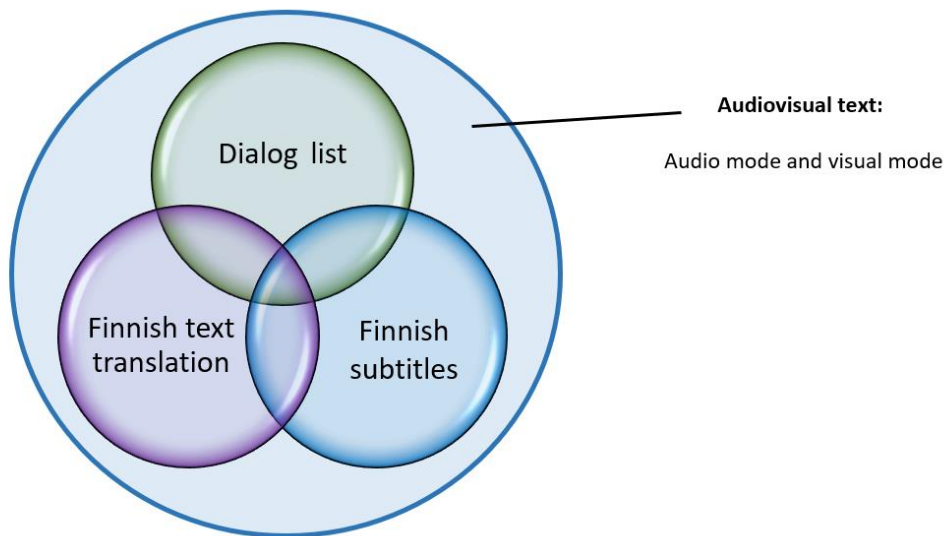
Translation diary entries were analyzed with a qualitative content analysis (see for example, Tuominen & Sarajärvi, 2018; Prior, 2014), which is an umbrella term for several approaches used to analyze textual research data. These approaches can be based, for instance, on content or theory and how much these aspects guide the analysis (Tuominen & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 121–122). This study mainly used theory-guided content analysis, and the key concepts that guided the analysis were multimodality, context, and relevance. However, during the preliminary analysis of the translation diary entries, one more key concept emerged from the data as this issue was discussed by the participants in most of the diary entries. This concept – cognitive load – was added to the analysis, making it partially content-based, as the participants brought forward this key concept through the data. All the diary entries were closely read, and instances that were connected to the key concepts of the study were categorized accordingly. The results of this analysis and the analysis of the translations are reported in the next chapters.

3. Results

Two sets of translations – translations of the written dialog list and finalized subtitles – were analyzed with multilayered contrastive analysis. The translations were compared to each other, to the original English dialog list, as well as the audio and visual modes of the audiovisual text. Some examples from this analysis are given and scrutinized more closely in Chapter 3.1. Lastly, translation diary entries were examined with content analysis, and the main points were organized into thematic categories based on the theoretical framework of this study. Moreover, one category emerged from the

materials, making the content analysis partially content-oriented. These themes and examples from the translation diaries are presented in Chapter 3.2.

3.1. Translations

To understand what happened between the two translation processes and the modes of audiovisual texts, some examples from the material are examined more closely. Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 below first introduce the context in which the scenes are taking place by giving information about the visual and audio modes. The tables also include the original English dialog with the speaker in italics as well as the Finnish translations of the dialog list and Finnish subtitles by two or three students marked with alphabets. The Finnish translations are back-translated into English by the author and placed in brackets below the original Finnish ones.

Table 1

Example 1. "Flash Camera Situation"

Visual and audio modes	Original dialog	Written dialog translated into Finnish	Finnish subtitles
Patsy is talking to Eddie. Eddie and Patsy are sitting at a table with Naomi Campbell at a reward gala. A photographer is taking pictures of them.	*Patsy:* Darling. This is the flash camera situation.	Student A translation: Kultaseni, tämä on kuin se tapaus salamavalon kanssa. *[Darling, this is just like the incident with the flashlight.]*	Student A subtitles: Tämähän on oikein salamavalotilaisuus. *[This is a real flashlight opportunity.]*
		Student B translation: Kultaseni, tämä on salamavalotilanne. *[Darling, this is flashlight situation.]*	Student A subtitles: Tämähän on oikein salamavalotilaisuus. *[This is a real flashlight opportunity.]*
		Student C translation: Kultaseni. Tämä on salamakameratilanne. *[Darling. This is flash camera situation.]*	Student A subtitles: Todellinen edustushetki! *[True moment to represent!]*

In Example 1, the two main characters of the show, Edina/Eddie and Patsy, are shown at a black-tie event. They are seated at the same table as model Naomi Campbell. Photographers circle their tables, taking pictures of all three characters, as Patsy comments on the situation. Example 1 includes translations by three test participants. It seems that there is a misunderstanding in the translation of Example 1A, which was corrected after the episode was viewed. The character does not refer to any incident that has happened with a flashlight in the past but rather to the situation they are currently

in. Patsy is excited about the flashing lights as photographers take pictures of Naomi Campbell. She delivers the line in question enthusiastically to Eddie. In addition, in all three cases, the vocative and endearment "darling" has been omitted from the subtitles as vocatives often are (Bruti & Perego, 2007). One reason for this might be that the endearment is very common in the series (and in British culture as a whole). Finnish audiences can easily hear and recognize it, so it does not need to be translated. If the same information is offered via the audio mode, there is no need to translate it and show it through the written mode. Another explanation for this omission might be the time and space restrictions of subtitles.

Table 2

Example 2. "Naomi"

Visual and audio modes	Original dialog	Written dialog translated into Finnish	Finnish subtitles
Patsy and Eddie discuss the people who are at the gala. Patsy confirms Eddie's line that their table is the best as they have Naomi Campbell sitting with them. She puts emphasis on the word "it" and gestures towards Naomi.	*Patsy:* Yeah, this one. Naomi is it.	Student A translation: Kyllä, juuri tässä. Onko se Naomi. *[Yes, right here. Is it Naomi.]* Student B translation: Juuri niin, tämä. Naomissa on sitä jotain. *[Exactly, this one. There is something about Naomi.]*	Student A subtitles: Naomi on huomion keskipiste. *[Naomi is the centre of attention.]* Student B subtitles: Niin, meillä on Naomi. *[Yes, we have Naomi.]*

Without context, an utterance such as "Naomi is it" can have various meanings. The preceding discussion of that utterance is about who is at the gala and which table is the best one. This discussion gives a few hints about the context of the scene. However, the line does not make much sense without seeing that Naomi Campbell is sitting at the same table as the characters. The resulting confusion can be observed in both dialog translations presented in Example 2. In Example 2A, the participant translated the line about Naomi into the form of a question. However, there is no question mark after the line. This might indicate that the participant was not sure about their decision. In Example 2B, another participant chose to go with a translation as vague as the original utterance; there is something about Naomi. In both cases, changes were made to the translations during the second translation process. Example 2A now reads, "Naomi is the centre of attention", which she surely is in the scene. There is no confusion about that. Example 2B now states that Patsy and Eddie "have Naomi," which refers to the fact that they have Naomi at their table, which makes it the best one. In both cases, the first part of the line was also condensed or omitted altogether, most likely due to repetition. It is also clear that Patsy agrees with Eddie because she nods and continues her idea of their table being the best one.

In the next example, the main characters are still seated at the same table, and they discuss Eddie's secretary, Bubble.

Table 3

Example 3. "Bubble"

Visual and audio modes	Original dialog	Written dialog translated into Finnish	Finnish subtitles
Eddie and Patsy are sitting at a table in the reward gala. Eddie is looking around the room. Eddie's secretary, Bubble is behind them with a writing pad in her hand.	*Eddie:* I sent Bubble out with her ear to the ground and a pad.	Student A translation: Lähetin Bubblen tarkistamaan ja tekemään listaa. *[I sent Bubble to check it out and make a list.]* Student B translation: Lähetin Bubblen nuuskimaan lehtiön kanssa. *[I sent Bubble to snoop with a pad.]* Student C translation: Lähetin Bubblen tiedustelemaan vihon kanssa. *[I sent Bubble to investigate with a pad.]*	Student A subtitles: Lähetin Bubblen muistion kanssa tiedustelemaan. *[I sent Bubble to investigate with a notebook.]* Student B subtitles: Lähetin Bubblen ottamaan selvää. *[I sent Bubble to find out.]* Student C subtitles: Lähetin Bubblen tiedustelemaan. *[I sent Bubble to investigate.]*

In Example 3, Eddie and Patsy are talking about Eddie's secretary, Bubble, who can be seen standing behind them. Eddie comments on how she sent Bubble to look around the room and list all the celebrities she finds on her notepad. In Example 3A, the participant did not translate the word "pad" in the translation of the written dialog but included it in the subtitles. The other two participants in Examples 3B and 3C did the exact opposite. They first included the notepad in their translations and then left it out in the subtitles. As the notepad can be seen on the screen, it likely affected the translations as the two channels carry the same semiotic information. This creates an overlap that Gottlieb (1997, p. 101) calls intersemiotic redundancy. The effect of this visual information – the notepad held by the character, Bubble – and its link to the translation of the character's line, including a reference to the notepad, differs in the examples discussed here. In some cases, the participant added the translation of the notepad to the subtitles during the second translation round, but in others, it was omitted. Both decisions are justifiable. However, it should be noted that the subtitles in which the notepad was omitted are the shortest ones. No information loss has occurred, as the notepad can be seen on the screen.

Table 4

Example 4. "Edina Monsoon"

Visual and audio modes	Original dialog	Written dialog translated into Finnish	Finnish subtitles
A photographer is taking pictures of Naomi, and Patsy introduces herself to a journalist who then turns to Edina for her information. She mutters the last part of her line and shoos the journalist away with a hand gesture that also signals that she does not have anything more to say.	*Eddie:* Yes. It's Edina Monsoon. Nah, that's enough	Student A translation: Kyllä. Nimi on Edina Monsoon. Ei, tämä riittää. *[Yes. The name is Edina Monsoon. No, this is enough.]* Student B translation: Kyllä, olen Edina Monsoon. Eiköhän tämä riitä. *[Yes, I am Edina Monsoon. This is enough.]*	Student A subtitles: Nimi on Edina Monsoon. *[The name is Edina Monsoon.]* Student B subtitles: Edina Monsoon. Antaa olla. *[Edina Monsoon. Leave it/Forget it.]*

In the "Edina Monsoon" example, Eddie gives her information to a journalist, as Patsy did just before her. She only states her name and comments that it is enough information for them, and at the same time, she gestures to the journalist to go away. In both examples in Table 4 the first part of the line was translated in the first translation round and omitted in the second. That is the part where Eddie confirms Patsy's outrageous introduction of herself and nods her head in approval. Another part that has been either condensed or completely omitted from the dialog between the translations is the end of the line. During this line, Eddie makes a hand gesture that signals for the journalist to go away and that she has given all the information she wants to. These hand gestures can be easily seen in the visual mode, and this might have led to the use of condensation and omission strategies. As subtitles have limited space and time in which they are presented, it is important that they are short, simple, and easy to read and understand in one reading. It is, therefore, the subtitlers' task to make the subtitles as easily digestible and understandable as possible. Relying on the other modes and the information they provide is one possible strategy for this. On one hand, the last part of Eddie's line is also muttered quite quickly, silently, and incomprehensibly. If it was subtitled, it might draw more attention to the utterance than is necessary. Consequently, the visual-verbal link might be severed, leading to a lack of intersemiotic cohesion[5]. On the other hand, this omission might lead to underplaying the character's rudeness and flamboyance. Therefore, it is important for the subtitler

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[5] "Intersemiotic cohesion in subtitling refers to the way it connects language directly to the soundtrack and to images on screen, making use of the information they supply to create a coherent linguistic-visual whole" (Díaz Cintas &Remael, 2007, p. 171).

to listen and decode how and what the characters are speaking and make subtitling decisions according to these visual and aural clues.

3.2. Translation Diaries

The most frequently commented topics in the translation diaries were categorized according to the main key concepts of this study: multimodality, context, relevance, and cognitive load. All these issues are discussed in the following paragraphs, and examples from the translation diaries are given. The original comments were in Finnish, and they were translated into English by the author.

Without access to the whole audiovisual text and to all the modes, translators do their work with inadequate information and without context. Most participants commented on the importance of access to the whole audiovisual text. They reported that the written dialog list did not give enough information to understand what was going on in the scene.

Example 5

"The source text seemed very confusing, and I could not understand what was going on based on it."

In addition, it was reportedly impossible to time the subtitles or make necessary line breaks between subtitles without access to the whole audiovisual text. Formatting the subtitles with necessary punctuation, such as dashes, was also deemed impossible. Several participants thought, for example, that a phone call occurred during the scene. They spent time wondering whether some parts of the dialog should be italicized as italics can be used to indicate speech in which the source of the sound is different from the other characters or if the speaker is not visible on screen when they speak, for example, if someone is talking on the phone.

There are time and space limitations for subtitles as they are only seen on screen for a short period of time in limited space. Participants were instructed to comply with the national subtitling conventions by following the national quality standards in their translation processes. The dialog in *Absolutely Fabulous* is rather fast, and not everything can fit into the subtitle lines. This is where the most used translation strategies in subtitling, namely, various condensation and reduction strategies, are needed. Often condensed and omitted aspects of the dialog included repetition, terms of endearment and parts of dialog that are not particularly audible from the audio track. One example is presented below.

Example 6

"In the scene where Patsy introduces herself to the photographer, I did not translate the sentence 'Thank you, thank you' because there was overlapping discussion over it, and it was difficult to hear."

The way in which things are said can be as important as what was said (Laplante & Ambady, 2003, p. 434). This is particularly true in instances where, for example, irony or humour is used, or parts of the message are emphasized, questioned, or doubted. These issues are often conveyed with non-verbal components of communication, such as intonation and gestures. Non-verbal communication can be conveyed through visual or audio modes and they accompany the verbal messages. They create the context in which the verbal messages are to be understood. As Example 9 indicates, one participant changed their translation based on the reaction of Naomi after they viewed the whole audiovisual text.

Example 7

"I changed the translation based on the reaction of Naomi."

One participant also commented that they only understood one joke in the episode after watching it and hearing the laugh track. The laugh track was commented in the diaries as it also covered parts of the dialog several times. In these cases, most participants decided to omit the parts of the dialog because they could not be heard in the audio track and therefore deemed it irrelevant.

The most commented aspect of the subtitling test was the lack of context during the first translation process. The lack of context here refers to the material context that was deficient during the first stage of the subtitling test, in which the participants did not have access to all modes of audiovisual text. Consequently, other contexts, such as situational, communicative, and cultural, were also absent or lacking. The students could not receive information about the situation in which the dialogue took place, which character interacted with whom, and in what kind of cultural surroundings this interaction took place. This made the translation process much harder as the students needed to make decisions without the help of the other modes or submodes supporting the linguistic one. Participants reported, for example, difficulties in understanding the function of certain utterances and to whom or what the characters were referring to. In addition, there was very little information about the setting of the scene, the characters' movements in the space as well as their relationships to one another (Example 8).

Example 8

"References to other characters were challenging without pictures and sounds for it is difficult to estimate the relationships between the characters and their distances to one another."

Surprisingly, there were not too many translation errors in the first translations made by the participants, even though they had to translate the written dialog without context and access to the whole audiovisual text. The errors that did occur were minor and were related mostly to references of characters and settings. Some misunderstandings resulted in minor errors due to the lack of access to the modes. For instance, as seen in Table 3, the students did not know who or where the character Naomi was, resulting in various translation decisions.

Example 9

> "All of this can lead to translation errors that can distract the reader, making them focus their attention on the subtitles too much."

Even though I do not completely agree with the prevailing norm in the subtitling industry that subtitles should not attract attention to themselves, the participant quoted in Example 9 makes a good point. The availability of context and access to the whole audiovisual text is crucial to avoiding mistakes in subtitles. Even though there were only minor mistakes in the participants' translations, they could have most likely been avoided with access to the modes of the audiovisual text and its entire context since such mistakes were corrected during the second translation round of the test. When the participants viewed the whole audiovisual text, they had "moments of revelation", as these issues were easily deductible from the increased context and modes.

According to the participants, the translation process without video was filled with guessing, second-guessing and misunderstandings. The participants had to make assumptions about the context and try to imagine what was happening in the scenes. This reportedly took up a lot of time[6] and was extremely strenuous cognitively as well as emotionally. The cognitive load of any challenging cognitive task, such as translation, can be tiresome. These reports seem to indicate that subtitling without context and access to all modes seems to increase the level of the cognitive load, and performing such tasks becomes strenuous. Participants of this subtitling study described the first translation process as "incredibly difficult", "rather painful", and "frustrating", to name but a few examples from their reflections.

Example 10

> "Subtitling is much more efficient if I can look at the picture and the risk of misunderstandings decreases significantly."

When the participants had access to all modes and the resulting contexts, their subtitling processes became more efficient and fewer errors were made, as noted in Example 10. It also reportedly decreased students' cognitive load and the need to withstand ambiguity during translation processes.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Subtitlers must take time and space restrictions into consideration as they make choices about what to translate and what to leave out. Moreover, they need to consider how these choices affect the

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[6] Student reported in their translation diaries that the task took them longer than they anticipated, ranging from a few hours to several hours. In addition, they returned to the task more often than in other similar tasks.

understanding of the audiovisual text as a whole. Fortunately, subtitlers have many sources from which they get support for these decisions. Relevance theory guides subtitlers towards leaving out parts of the dialog that are not needed to understand the main idea or message. For example, vocatives or adjectives can, in some cases, be heard, or the described object can be seen on the screen, making it possible to leave references to them untranslated. This is how the multimodal nature of audiovisual text can help the subtitler make necessary decisions. However, they do not always have access to all modes of audiovisual texts.

This study aimed to examine how the lack of context resulting from denied access to verbal and non-verbal modes of an audiovisual text affects the students' translation. These issues were investigated with an empirical subtitling test that was carried out with translation students at a Finnish university. The results indicate that subtitling without the full audiovisual context creates various problems for the participants. Firstly, the students reported numerous issues with understanding the events, environments, characters, and their relationships. Secondly, erroneous assumptions and misunderstandings led to some translation errors – although there were not too many of them, nor were they too serious – and more importantly, subtitling without context was reportedly time-consuming and created an increased cognitive load. Díaz Cintas and Remael (2021, p. 72) have stated that without narrative context and the visual images supporting dialog, some exchanges make absolutely no sense, and it would take guessing to interpret what is happening on screen. This is likewise what the participants have reported.

The participants' reports of time use and the increased cognitive load were spontaneous, as the participants were not explicitly asked about these issues during the test. These aspects were not measured in any quantitative manner such as timing the translation tasks. Most of the participants mentioned the reported increase in time use and experienced cognitive load.

The participants in this study were students still learning to subtitle. The selection of students taking part in this study arose mostly from the practicalities of carrying out this research. However, they had practised subtitling during the course and were familiar with the national norms and instructions as well as the software used in the test. Therefore, the results from this study do not apply to the entirety of the varied field of subtitling in Finland. Nevertheless, they do indicate some shared issues that might arise from situations in which one or all modes of audiovisual texts cannot be accessed. Participation in this study increased the students' awareness of the subtitling process and how the interplay between the audiovisual modes and the sub-modes affects and assists comprehension and, thus, decision-making.

Subtitlers work with various materials and genres. In this study, a comedy television series was used as research material. Speech in comedy series is often fast-paced, and humour is created with body language, intonation, or other non-verbal components. All these issues can create difficulties for subtitlers working without access to the audiovisual modes. However, this might not be the case in other genres and forms of audiovisual texts. The field of audiovisual translation is diverse, including

videogames and mobile applications and their translations. More research is needed to truly understand the importance of their multimodal nature in relation to their translation.

There are several different forms of audiovisual translation, subtitling is merely one example. According to Matkivska (2014, p. 39), scholars have identified approximately ten different kinds of audiovisual translation. These include different types of revoicing, such as dubbing and voice-over as well as inter- and intralingual subtitling. In addition, there are various types of audiovisual texts. They vary in their content as well as emphasis on their modes. Some tell the story with emphasis on the visual and some on the audio aspects of the piece. Consequently, the interplay between these aspects also varies and affects their translation processes. It could be fruitful to conduct similar tests to other types of audiovisual texts and translation forms in the future.

Hubscher-Davidson (2018) discusses whether translation professionals need to tolerate ambiguity to be successful, and the results of their study suggest that this might indeed be the case. However, there are multiple ways to decrease this ambiguity in subtitle translation processes: with the most prevalent being the access to the whole audiovisual text and context. This will also lead to more efficient subtitling processes and higher-quality subtitles, especially in cases where subtitlers do not have access to all modes of audiovisual texts.

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