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Investigating the relation between the subtitling of sensitive audiovisual material and subtitlers' performance: an empirical study

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings of a survey designed to investigate the emotions experienced by subtitlers who work on sensitive audiovisual material and whether these emotions affect their subtitling performance. For the purposes of this paper, the term *sensitive audiovisual material* concerns audiovisual texts which deal with controversial and emotive topics, such as the abuse of people and/or animals, war, torture, and death, among others. The concept of *performance* is taken to broadly refer to the subtitling process and does not cover metrics of quality assurance. The paper focuses on two aspects of the study: (1) the emotions that were most commonly reported to be experienced by the subtitlers, along with the aspects of the audiovisual text that seem to trigger them, and (2) the ways in which this emotional impact affects the subtitlers' performance. Discussion of the latter aspect draws on examples provided by the subtitlers that illustrate how their subtitling process changes due to the experienced emotional impact. The paper concludes by putting forward training suggestions for more effective handling of emotional impact, which may provide the platform for further research on this topic.

KEYWORDS

Subtitling, emotions, sensitive audiovisual material, subtitling performance.

1. Introduction

The ever-evolving landscape of audiovisual productions results in a vast array of programmes which vary in terms of content and genre and are made to suit all tastes. Modern-day audiences are accustomed to consuming these programmes usually in large quantities and in quick succession. This fast-paced consumption, which characterises today's media culture, is enabled, among others, by the expansion of video streaming services and video-on-demand platforms. In turn, the abundance of audiovisual products and the necessity to make them accessible to all audiences increases the demand for audiovisual translation (AVT) which needs to be prompt, while maintaining all other quality requirements.

In this environment, AVT professionals need to develop a skill-set which goes beyond the acquisition of technological literacy and linguistic aptitude to embrace adaptability, which may be hard to achieve when the audiovisual programme deals with sensitive and/or controversial topics because of the emotional impact inflicted upon the translator. An examination of the translators' emotions and any effects these may have on their performance is therefore paramount.

The role played by emotional impact in translation performance has been studied in other areas of translation practice, such as literary translation

and interpreting (Section 2), but less so in AVT. This paper focuses on the emotional impact that may be experienced by subtitlers working with sensitive audiovisual material and on whether this impact has any repercussions for their subtitling performance.

To look into this issue, we designed an online questionnaire which was completed by 170 professional and amateur subtitlers. The paper reports on the findings of the questionnaire in regard to the emotions that were experienced by the participants and the relation between these emotions and their subtitling performance. The following section contextualises the theoretical foundation on which the study was developed. Section 3 presents the aims of the study, the survey participants, and the study's methodology. The main findings are presented in section 4, and section 5 delves into the links between emotional impact and subtitling performance. Finally, section 6 concludes the paper and makes recommendations for future research into subtitling training.

2. Emotional impact and translation practices

The characterisation of an audiovisual text as *sensitive* is an intricate task in itself because of the slippery nature of the concept of sensitivity. Simms (1997) argues that the sensitivity of a text depends on the context in which it is situated and the context of the receptor. He further remarks that all texts are potentially sensitive and notes that the perception of a text as sensitive as well as the nature of its sensitivity can change according to time and place. Therefore, a text that is considered sensitive in a specific era or area may not be so in different ones, or it may still be perceived as sensitive but for different reasons. Schäffner (1997) examines sensitive texts from the perspective of the reaction they prompt in a reader (or viewer, in the case of audiovisual texts) and argues that any text causing irritation or confusion can be considered sensitive. Hence, sensitivity is a rather broad concept. In reference to the potential cases that a professional may encounter, the guidelines on interpreting and translation issued by Legal Aid New South Wales (2014) describe as sensitive those cases that involve domestic violence or sexual assault. For the purposes of this study, *sensitive audiovisual material* is defined as an audiovisual text that includes and/or refers to controversial and emotive issues, which could elicit a strong emotional response in the viewer, including the subtitler (see 3.2 for the topics included in the study).

A crucial concept that warrants further discussion is that of *emotions*, which have been defined as "internal mechanisms for a small set of reactions [...] that, once triggered, can be measured in a clear and objective fashion" (Feldman Barrett 2006: 20). These outcomes essentially constitute an emotional response to what typically is an external event and this is the definition adopted in these pages. As mentioned earlier, one of the questions explored in this study is which emotions are triggered by sensitive audiovisual material. In line with the above definition, the audiovisual text

would constitute the external event which prompts an emotional response on the subtitler's part. It should be noted that the study focuses on negative emotions, as these are assumed to have the most drastic impact on subtitling performance. However, as discussed in section 3.2, the participants had the option of adding any emotions they wished if they felt that the provided list was incomplete.

Debates around emotional impact and its relation to professional translation practice appear to have their roots in interpreting, given the various emotional circumstances in which interpreters often become involved. Recently, the topic has been gaining traction in literary translation, due to the inherently affective nature of the texts involved in this area of translation.

2.1 Laying the groundwork: From interpreting to literary translation

The issue of emotional impact has been extensively covered in interpreting literature. In areas such as public service interpreting (PSI), healthcare interpreting and, more specifically, mental health interpreting, professionals often face emotionally demanding situations and are affected when relaying traumatic experiences (Hsieh and Nicodemus 2015; Doherty *et al.* 2010). Similar observations can be made when it comes to emotionally-loaded cases involving interpreting, as in the Nuremberg trials, where simultaneous interpreting first appeared, and in the interpreting conducted in Nazi concentration camps during World War II (Tryuk 2016). The fact that interpreters experience distress and anxiety at some point in their careers has been affirmed in related studies (Loutan *et al.* 1999; Valero-Garcés 2005; Doherty *et al.* 2010). Interestingly, Doherty *et al.* (2010) found that the emotions experienced by the interpreter may be associated with a previous personal trauma and not necessarily with the client's difficult circumstances. Thus, the interpreters' own life experiences play an important role and, by extension, so does their resilience in coping with emotionally challenging situations.

Valero-Garcés (2005) stresses the need to establish some basic training that can help to identify potentially stressful factors and emphasises the importance of activating coping strategies in order to deal with the likely psychological impact on the interpreters' professional activity. The lack of training seems to lie in a deep-rooted reluctance to recognise that emotional impact is a reality in the interpreting profession (Baistow 1999). According to Hsieh and Nicodemus (2015), emotions need to be recognised as part and parcel of any communication, including that enabled by the interpreter's mediation. Acknowledging the fact that interpreters are emotionally affected during their professional activity can encourage them to discuss such challenges and to seek advice on how to deal with them. Drawing a parallel to the subtitling profession, the reluctance to accept the likelihood of emotional impact was also observed in our study (section 5).

The issue of emotional resilience links with a concept prominent in research on emotions and job performance, i.e. emotional intelligence (EI), which refers to “the extent to which a person attends to, processes, and acts upon information of an emotional nature intra-personally and inter-personally” (Kafetsios and Zampetakis 2008: 713). In translation, EI seems to be a quality commonly encountered in literary translators (Hubscher-Davidson 2017). This could be due to the link between EI and creativity (Sánchez-Ruiz *et al.* 2010; Bayer-Hohenwarter 2011), meaning that individuals with higher EI tend to be more creative. Admittedly, although it may also arise in other types of translation, creativity is particularly pertinent in the translation of literary texts.

According to Hubscher-Davidson (2017), another reason why EI is highly relevant to literary translators is the fact that they deal with texts with a salient affective factor. Similarly, Tabakowska (2016) highlights the multiple affective events that unfold in the process of translating a literary narrative. These events unravel essentially on two levels: the translator as reader of the source text (ST) and as writer of the target text (TT). The emotions elicited in the translator as reader may stem from many sources, including the narrator, who is distinct from the ST author, and the various fictitious characters populating the narrative (*ibid.*). As the writer of the TT, the translator channels possibly contradictory emotions expressed by different personas. This process requires “inferring emotions conceptualized by the original author as manifested or felt either by his characters or by the narrator, and rendering them into another language” (*ibid.*: 44). Therefore, the translator needs to deploy a degree of emotional adaptability in order to imbue the TT with similar emotional and narrative qualities as those encountered in the ST.

This quality is encapsulated in Koskinen’s (2012: 20) term *affectability*, i.e. the skill of evoking emotions in the readers of the translation. In the case of literary translation, it is often required that the emotions elicited by the TT should be similar to those evoked in the readers of the ST. According to Koskinen (*ibid.*: 26), the affective response towards a given text is dependent on many factors, such as the textual stimulus, the reading context, one’s personal and cultural background, and one’s disposition and state of mind. In a similar vein, the interpretation of the ST may be clouded by a negative predisposition towards the content of the text or its author, which, in some cases, can have an impact on the translation, as the translator may add or enhance (certain aspects of) the provided information; in this way, the TT may feature nuances not intended in the ST.

In other cases, the result of such a translation approach may be the mitigation or deletion of parts that the translator deems in some sense controversial. Koskinen (*ibid.*: 28) links translation strategies such as naturalisation and omission, as well as certain forms of (self-)censorship, with the translator’s attempt to protect the target readership from negative

affective reactions. It therefore seems important that translators first modulate their own affective responses to the ST before attempting to recreate the intended emotional impact in the target text. This is supported by a study by Rojo López and Ramos Caro (2016), who found that translators who were able to better monitor their affective responses handled their negative emotions more effectively.

2.2 The role of emotions in subtitling

Emotional challenges such as those described above can also arise in the context of subtitling, and, more broadly, AVT. The repercussions of such challenges can be placed somewhere inbetween those in interpreting and literary translation. Compared to interpreting, any emotional impact emerging in subtitling is admittedly much lessened because there is no direct contact with participants that may have experienced traumatic incidents. Furthermore, in cases where the audiovisual text is fictional (and not a documentary, for example), subtitlers would be better able to distance themselves from the events unfolding on screen, thus safeguarding themselves emotionally. However, audiovisual texts have a distinct synaesthetic nature, as they comprise of moving image, dialogue and background sounds and music, and by means of this nature they make an appeal to the viewers' emotions and empathy (Phillips 2000). Thus, the emotional potential of audiovisual texts is relatively greater than that of a literary text because of the different layers of information involved.

Subtitlers are foremost viewers of the audiovisual text they are required to translate and, as a result, they may give in to a surge of emotions elicited by the audiovisual material at hand. In addition, given the tight deadlines governing the subtitling industry (Georgakopoulou 2009), rarely is there the luxury of time to first watch the programme and then translate it. Therefore, subtitlers often need to switch between the different hats of viewer and translator while experiencing the text for the first time, which arguably allows them less time to crystallise the viewing experience and to follow a more clinical approach in subtitling.

Other aspects common in subtitling and literary translation are the process of evoking emotions similar to those in the ST and the requirement to emulate the style of the ST or, more specifically, the fictional characters' way of speaking, which also has to be in alignment with the story-world. Consequently, the issue of affectability and 'channelling' of fictional personas arises here as well. The latter is akin to the concept of *performativity* as discussed by Bermann (2014) in relation to literary translation. Performativity refers to the co-existence (or confluence) of the translator's voice and the ST author's voice. According to the author, literary translation entails the iterability, intertexts and conventions of literary writing, but it also juxtaposes the translator's voice against the ST author's voice. In other words, a translated literary text accommodates all the qualities of a literary work and is written in the translator's voice but also

features the ST author's voice as interpreted by the translator. In this way, the translation becomes "a verbal play in which both a 'me' and a 'not-me' take active roles" (*ibid.*: 285).

This particular issue, namely the subtitler's anxiety to give voice to the ST characters while at the same time coming to terms with their own pre-conceptions towards the ST, was also raised by our study participants, which links with the inner conflict experienced by literary translators. As mentioned in 2.1, literary translators may feel strongly about the ST or its author, which could result in the translation being manipulated accordingly (e.g. by softening or omitting certain parts). Subtitlers could also resort to such techniques when in discord with some aspect of the audiovisual text. Admittedly, although omission can be used inconspicuously to a much lesser extent in subtitling than in literary translation, certain offensive items, for example, could be systematically and intentionally deleted on the back of the spatio-temporal considerations. Therefore, the above observations can be extended to subtitlers, as they deal with texts of an emotional or sensitive nature and they need to reproduce the tone and affective result of the ST in their subtitles. For this reason, translators, including subtitlers, need to regulate their own emotions first before engaging in the translation activity. This concurs with Hubscher-Davidson's (2017) observations regarding emotional intelligence, in that EI-related training can help translation professionals detach themselves from their emotional experience as readers/viewers in order to proceed with the translation task.

This point relates to the conceptualisation of *subtitling performance* for this study. Broadly speaking, the notion of performance can be extended to cover various degrees of quality. However, given that the survey discussed here was based on the participants' self-reporting, emphasis has been placed on the subtitlers' perception of their own performance. Thus, for the purposes of this study, subtitling performance is assumed to refer to the subtitling process, whereby the subtitler is 'in action', watching (and cognitively processing) the audiovisual text and producing the subtitles for it. Following this definition, subtitling performance includes the subtitler's perception of the quality of their work. For example, some subtitlers reported that they had to compromise translation quality in cases where they were too emotionally distressed by the audiovisual text. Arguably, this may not be an accurate reflection of the quality of their subtitles. Nevertheless, in the context of this study, this would be considered as a consequence of the emotional impact on the subtitler's performance, because what would change here is the subtitler's treatment of the subtitling process.

3. Method

The purpose of the study was to investigate whether subtitlers working with sensitive material are affected emotionally. More specifically, one of the research aims was to identify the emotions that subtitlers experience and,

by extension, the aspects of the verbal and visual make-up of the audiovisual text that trigger these emotions. Another aim was to investigate whether the subtitlers' performance, as defined in section 2, is affected by their emotions.

The study was conducted via an online questionnaire created through Google Forms and in English, which was considered to be the lingua franca to reach participants with various mother tongues. The details of the study, together with the web link, were communicated through emails sent to the authors' professional contacts in subtitling companies and to translation and subtitling associations. The questionnaire remained open from 6 November 2017 to 31 January 2018, at which point the data were collected and processed.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. An introductory section asked the participants for demographic information in order to sketch out their profile; more specifically, they were asked about their age, gender, country of birth and residence, academic qualifications, working languages, years of experience, and freelance/in-house status. A concluding section invited the respondents to share their thoughts on training possibilities that could help cope with emotional impact. The central section of the questionnaire, which specifically targeted the types of emotional impact, the associated audiovisual materials, and the potential links with subtitling performance, is discussed in detail in 3.2.

3.1 Participants

The study involved a total of 170 professional and amateur subtitlers (Figure 1). We define amateur subtitlers as individuals who are involved in the process of subtitling without any monetary reimbursement. The participants were free to choose whether they would describe themselves as professional or amateur subtitlers and/or translators, and multiple responses were available to them. This question was answered by 164 respondents. It is assumed that the participants' self-description is also related to their main translational activity and emphasises how they view themselves. We recognise that the field of subtitling encompasses a plurality of agents who engage in multiple and varied translation-related activities. Therefore, the category 'Other' was provided to offer the respondents the freedom to assign to their professional status any description beyond the ones offered by the questionnaire. However, all participants have subtitling experience to a lesser or greater degree.

The participants were asked separately what other translation work they do and the vast majority of the sample (131 out of 170 participants) replied that they engage in several other language professions, in addition to subtitling, such as translation, interpreting, proofreading, teaching, copywriting, and project management. According to the data, the 21 participants who self-described as professional translators only, either have

no professional/educational training in subtitling or they have little subtitling experience (i.e. less than a year). This can in turn explain why they may not have felt confident enough to self-describe as professional subtitlers, especially since they engage in other translation activities as well.

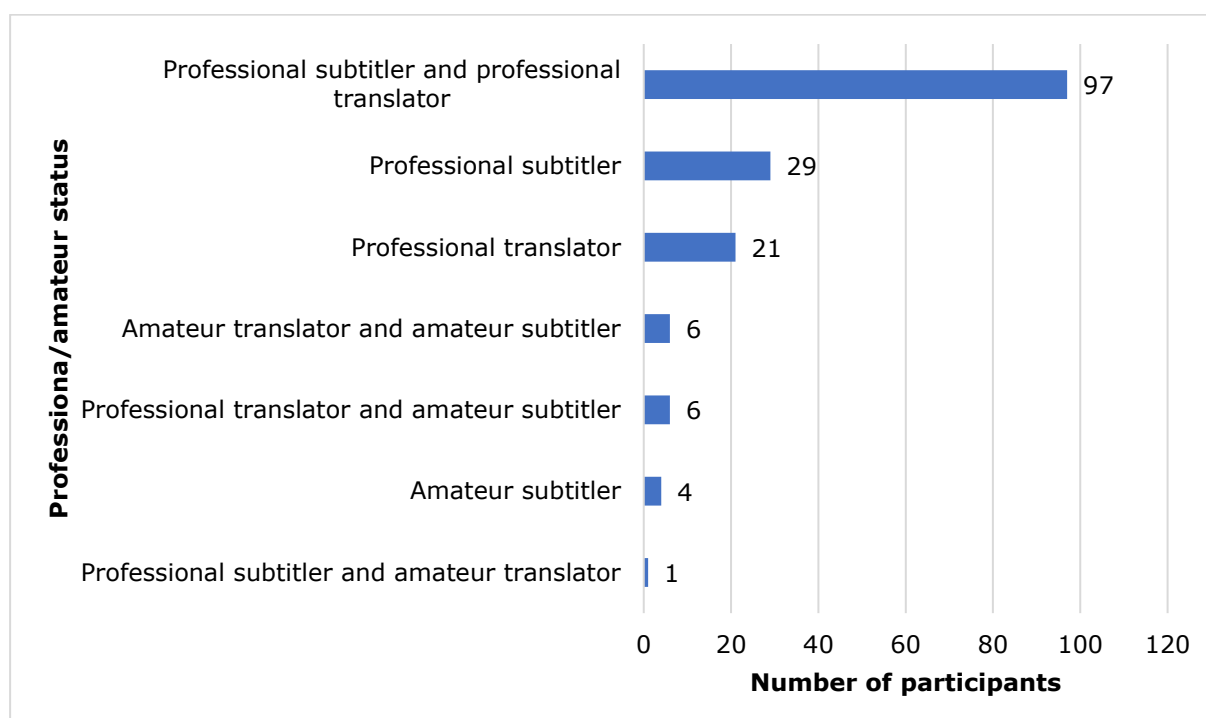


Figure 1. Self-description of participant status

The study targeted both professional and amateur subtitlers because it was assumed that their status might play a role in the extent of the emotional impact that they may experience. For example, amateur subtitlers are likely to have greater freedom in choosing the material they work with and, thus, perhaps, are more able to avoid being subject to emotional impact.

Among the participants, 127 were women and 41 men (2 participants preferred not to state their gender). As regards their age, they were asked to select the age range to which they belonged, as shown in Figure 2 below:

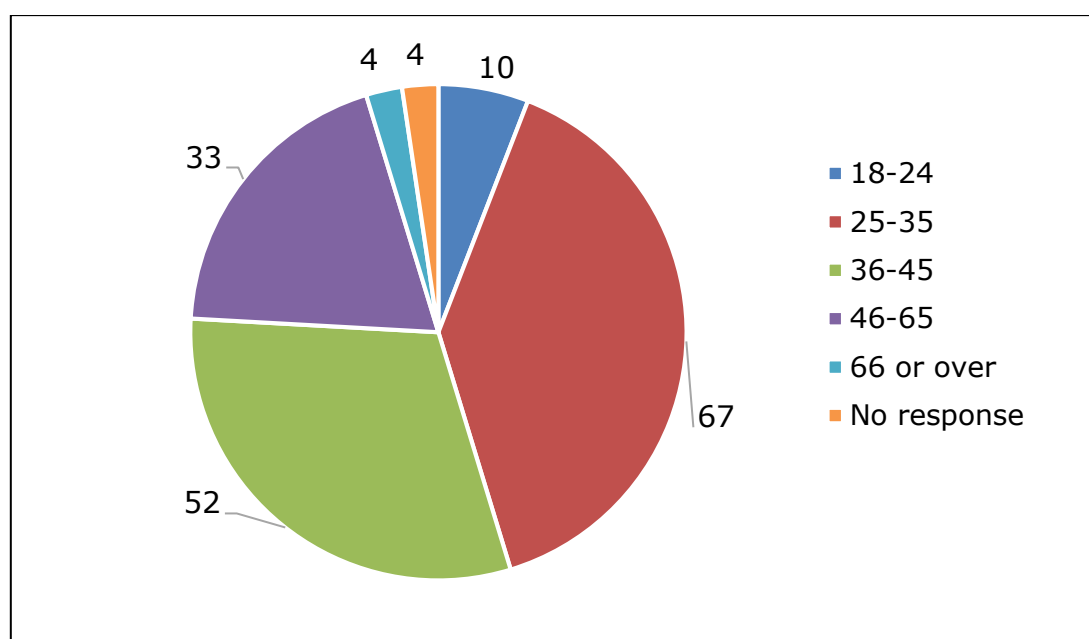


Figure 2. Age of participants

As for the respondents' mother tongues, they are illustrated in Figure 3. In the category 'Other', the 10 languages included are Brazilian Portuguese, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Norwegian, Polish, Russian, Slovak, Tamil, Turkish and Xhosa, with 1 participant each. In the category 'Bilingual' the following combinations are included: Danish/English, Dutch/English, English/Afrikaans (x2), English/Greek (x2), English/Filipino, English/Hindi, German/Turkish, Norwegian/English, European Portuguese/English, and Ukrainian/Russian:

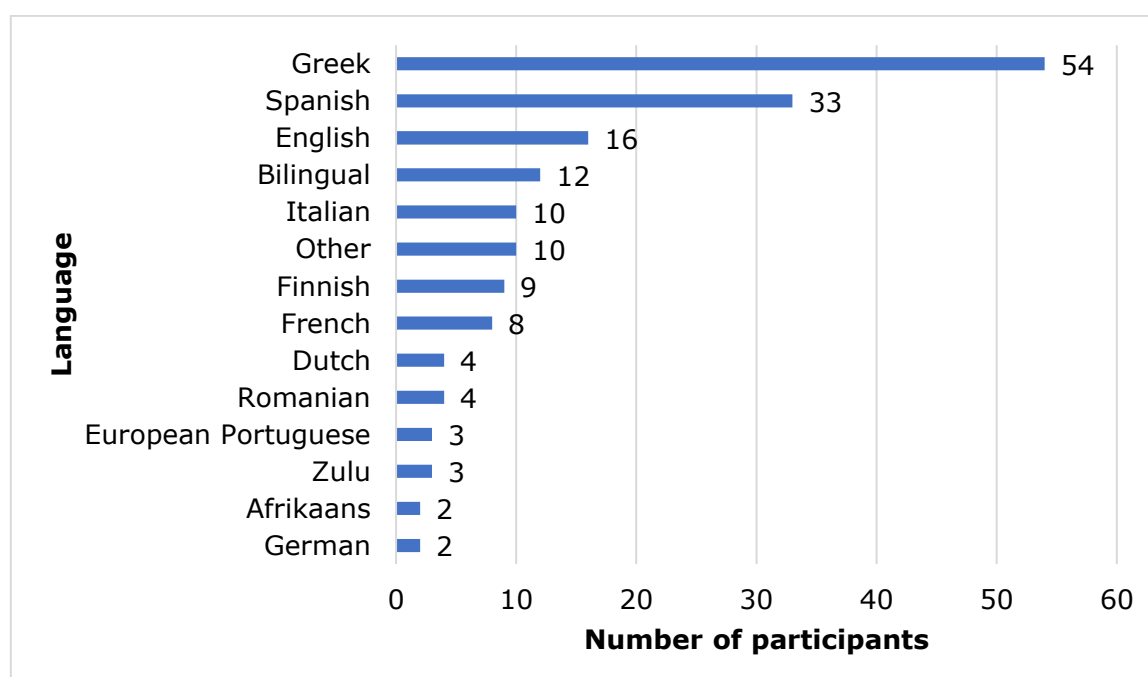


Figure 3. Mother tongue of participants

In regard to subtitling experience, the participants were asked to select among the year ranges shown in Figure 4. The sample included subtitlers with various levels of experience, as can be seen below:

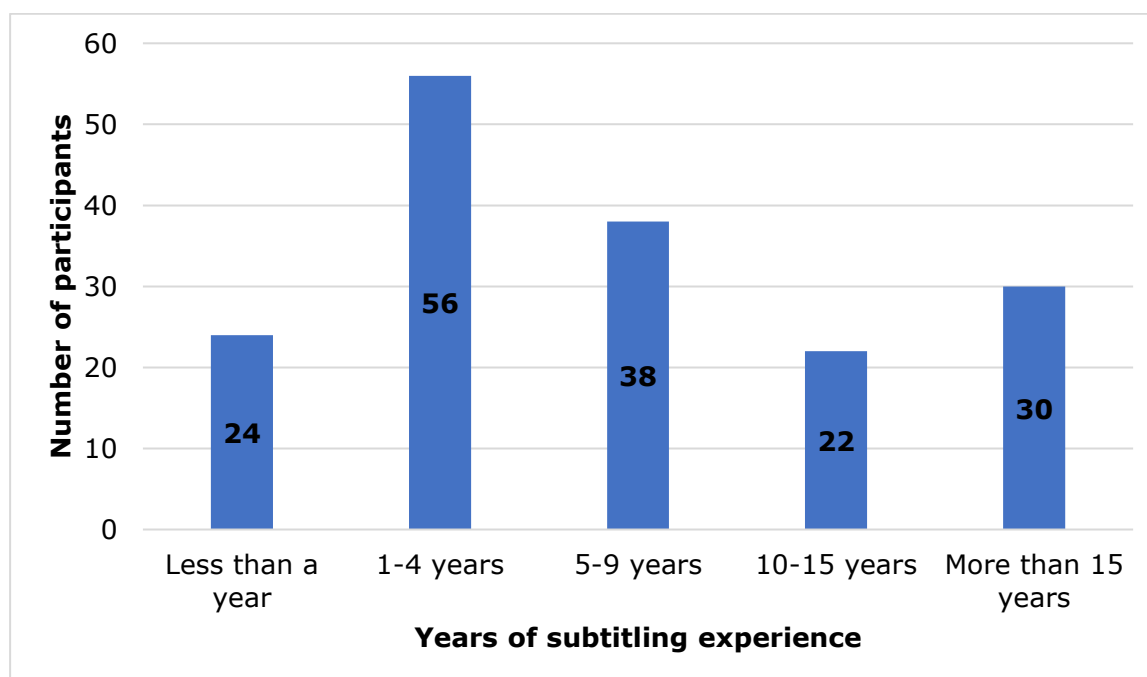


Figure 4. Subtitling experience of participants

Having responses from participants of different levels of experience allows for the exploration of whether the emotional impact of subtitling 'wears off' with the accumulation of experience, or whether it is independent of this variable.

Finally, as regards the participants' education, the sample is overall highly educated, with 13 participants having a PhD, 88 a master's degree, and 60 an undergraduate degree; 8 participants had a high school diploma and 1 participant did not answer this question. Additionally, 128 out of the 170 participants have an academic qualification in translation and/or subtitling.

3.2 Design and procedure

The central section of the questionnaire addressed the types of sensitive audiovisual material they encounter, the emotions they trigger, and any manifestation of emotional impact that can affect their subtitling performance. More specifically, the participants were asked about the audiovisual genres that they usually subtitle and those that they prefer subtitling. This distinction was made here in order to find out whether the emotional impact was aggravated when the respondents had to subtitle material that sharply contrasted with their preferences. The following genres were included:

- Action

- Biopics
- Comedy
- Crime and gangster
- Detective/mystery films
- Documentary
- Drama
- Epic/historical
- Horror
- Reality TV shows
- Romance
- Science fiction
- Sexual/erotic
- War
- Western

This was a multiple-choice question with pre-defined answers, but the participants were free to add further options under the 'Other' category. The list was adapted from the online film-review repository filmsite.org, which includes extensive categories of genres and sub-genres. Links to the descriptions of the various genres were also provided.

Next, the participants were asked whether they are affected emotionally when subtitling the above-mentioned genres and, if so, to select from a list the emotions that they have experienced (or add more emotions if not included in the list). The provided emotions were adapted from the items of the Job Affect Scale (Brief *et al.* 1988), which assesses experiences of positive and negative affect at work. In particular, the emotions were drawn from the negative affective states but were written in simpler language so that they could be easily accessible to the respondents. The following emotions were included in the questionnaire:

- Anger
- Disappointment
- Disgust
- Fear
- Hopelessness
- Sadness
- Shame
- Shock

Next, participants were asked three questions about the aspects of the audiovisual text that affect them emotionally, namely the subject matter, the language used and the imagery of the text. In semiotic terms, these aspects, bar the all-encompassing subject matter, refer to the audio-verbal and visual-nonverbal channels of audiovisual texts (Zabalbeascoa 2008). The visual-verbal channel (e.g. onscreen captions) and the audio-nonverbal channel (e.g. instrumental music and special effects) were not included. Visual-verbal elements may sometimes be left untranslated, given that

priority is given to the dialogue/narration, and audio-nonverbal elements are not rendered in interlingual subtitling, although they do play an important role in the viewing experience.

For the categories of subject matter, language, and imagery, the participants were provided with a list of options to select from, and were also free to add any others not included in the respective lists. The options under imagery were considered to exemplify the visual representation of the subject matter. For example, the topic of abuse was visually specified by reference to images of animal abuse, beating, and rape. In summary, the options for subject matter, language, and imagery were as follows:

Subject matter	Language	Imagery
Abuse	Humour: jokes, wordplay	Animal abuse
Clinical depictions of sex and/or the human body	Sarcastic use of language	Battle scenes
Conflict, war and/or genocide	Scatological comments	Beating
Disease	Slang	Bloody scenes
Gender stereotyping/inequalities	Swearwords	Bodily functions
Natural disasters		Bullying
Pornography		Dead bodies
Racial/ethnic discrimination		Harassment
Terrorism		Medical operations/treatment
		Mutilations
		Rape
		Rude gestures
		Scenes of destruction
		Sexual intercourse
		Torture

Table 1. Categories of subject matter, language and imagery used in the questionnaire

The topics under subject matter were mainly derived from the types of sensitive material as found in Simms (1997). Some topics (e.g. natural disasters) were included following informal discussions with fellow subtitlers who had reported being emotionally affected by such topics. The list provided under the category of language included linguistic instances that may come across as emotion-eliciting. Admittedly, the inclusion of humour seems to have confused the participants, as many assumed that it referred to linguistic (rather than emotional) challenges in subtitling.

The participants were then asked if they thought that their subtitling performance is affected by the above audiovisual material, and, if so, in what ways. This question was intentionally left open so that the participants

were not restricted by supplied interpretations of the said effect. The respondents were also asked to report an instance where they were affected emotionally while subtitling, and explain how they had dealt with it. These questions aimed at pinpointing examples of emotional intensity while on the job and at eliciting coping strategies that could be shared with the broader community of subtitlers.

4. Results

In the main part of the questionnaire, the participants were first asked about the genres that they usually subtitle and could choose multiple responses for this question. The category 'Other' included entries such as sports, children's programmes, culinary programmes, educational videos, and live TV. The three most common genres are documentaries (143 responses – 84%), drama TV series/films (113 responses – 67%), and comedies (109 responses – 64%). Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of responses to this question:

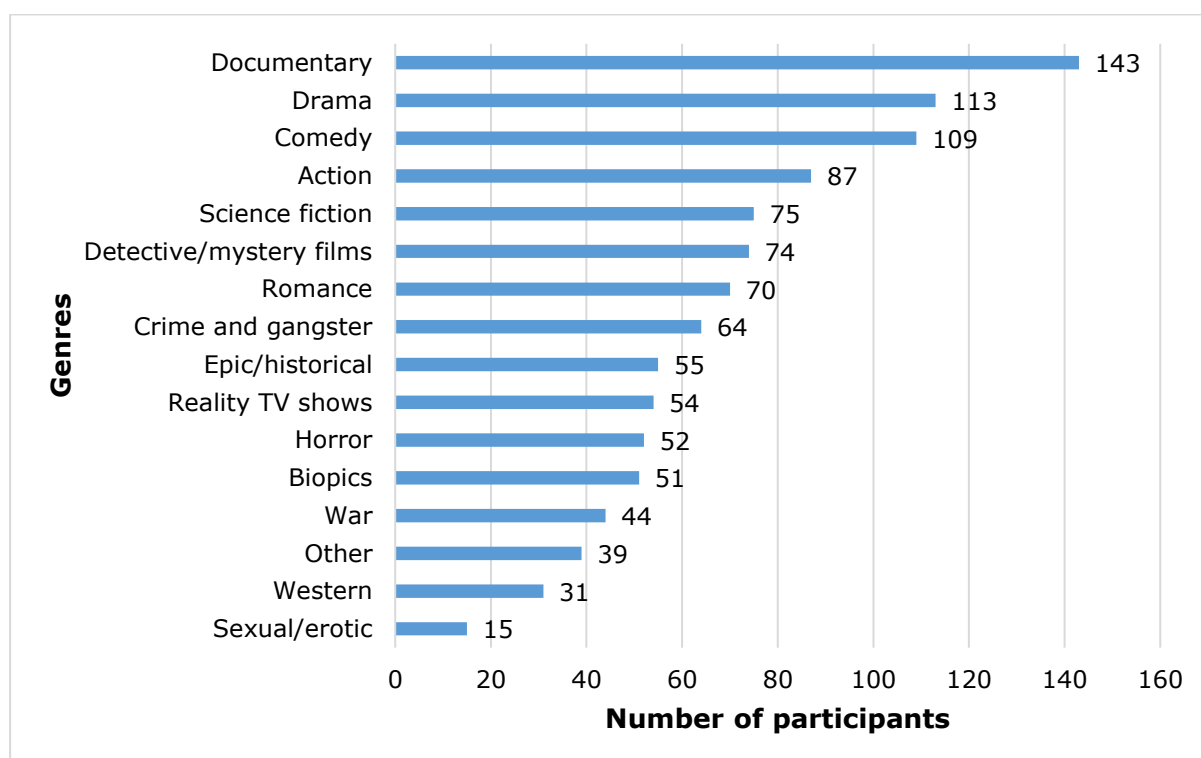


Figure 5. Commonly subtitled genres

Notably, the participants' preferred genres concur with the genres that they usually work with. The three most popular genres among the participants' preferences were also documentaries (108 responses – 63%), drama TV series/films (85 responses – 50%), and comedies (69 responses – 41%).

Subsequently, the participants were asked whether the genres mentioned previously affect them emotionally while subtitling. It is worth noting that 147 participants (86%) answered that they are indeed affected emotionally

when working on sensitive audiovisual material. The question offered a choice of emotions, and the participants were free to choose multiple responses as well as add others not included. The three most common emotions that the subtitlers appear to experience are sadness (112 responses – 66%), anger (85 responses – 50%), and disgust (72 responses – 42%), as shown in Figure 6. The category 'Other' included entries such as joy, frustration, embarrassment, boredom, curiosity, astonishment, and pride.

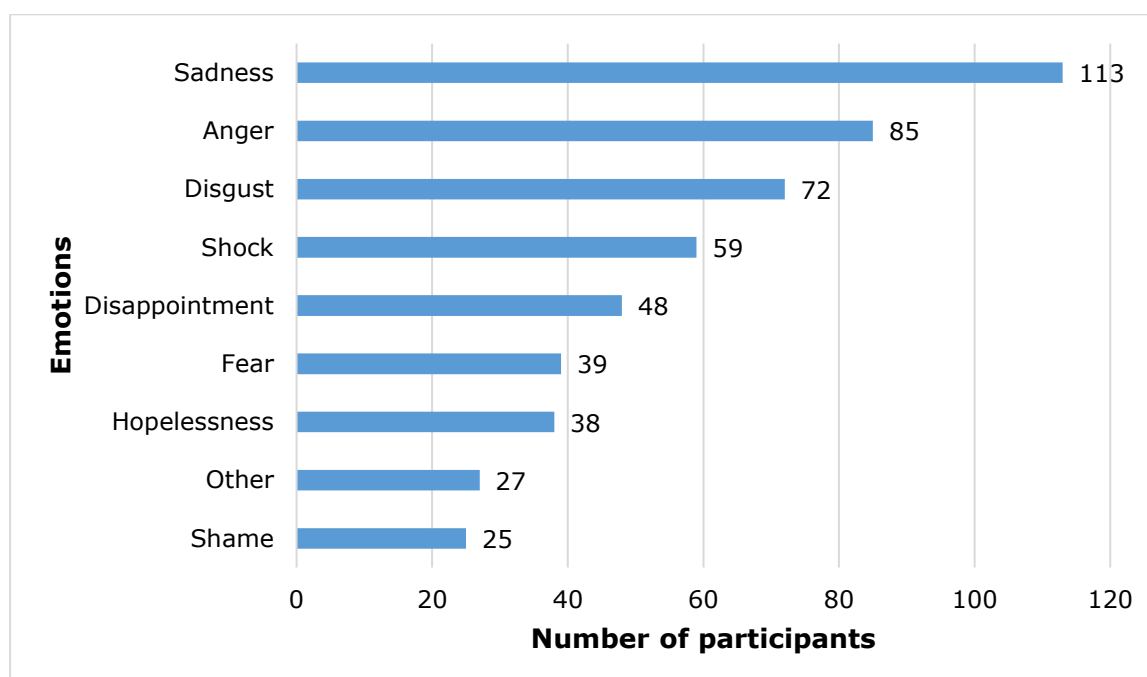


Figure 6. Emotions experienced while subtitling

The next three questions asked specifically what affects them emotionally, in terms of subject matter, language, and imagery of the audiovisual text. As far as subject matter is concerned (Figure 7), abuse, in all its manifestations, appears to be the topic that emotionally affects the majority of the participants, with 128 responses (75%). Closely behind follows material that includes or refers to racial/ethnic discrimination and conflict, war and/or genocide, with 106 (62%) and 104 (61%) responses respectively. The participants who chose 'Other' provided options such as abortion, fanaticism, and xenophobia.

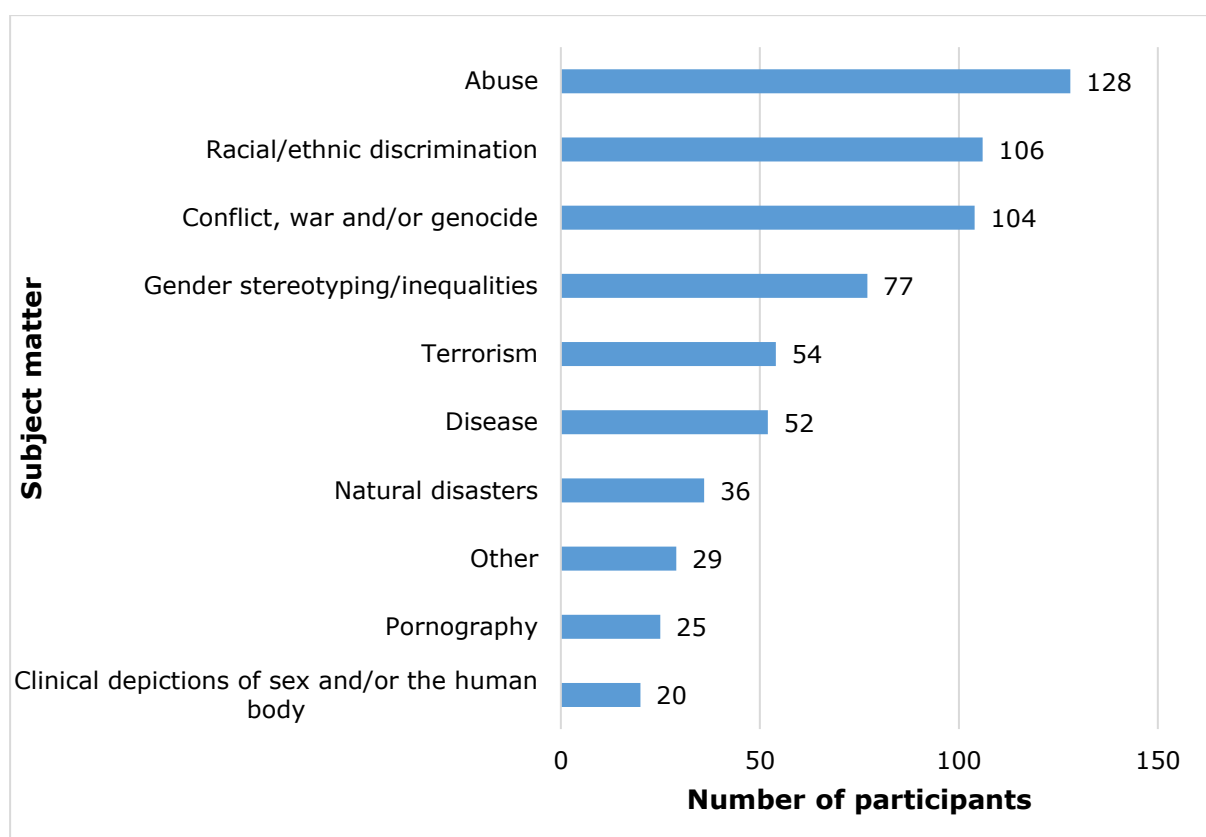


Figure 7. Subject matter affecting subtitlers

As regards the type of language which might affect the subtitlers, as illustrated in Figure 8 below, humour scored the most responses (80 responses – 47%), followed by sarcastic language use (55 responses – 32%). The category ‘Other’ included usage such as descriptions of brutality, violent use of language, and discriminating or hateful language. Interestingly, 36 participants (21%) chose not to answer this question, making it the question with the lowest response rate in the questionnaire. Furthermore, 14 (8%) added the option ‘None’ to the list. This could suggest certain implications for the emotional impact of language (or lack thereof), which will be further explored in section 5.

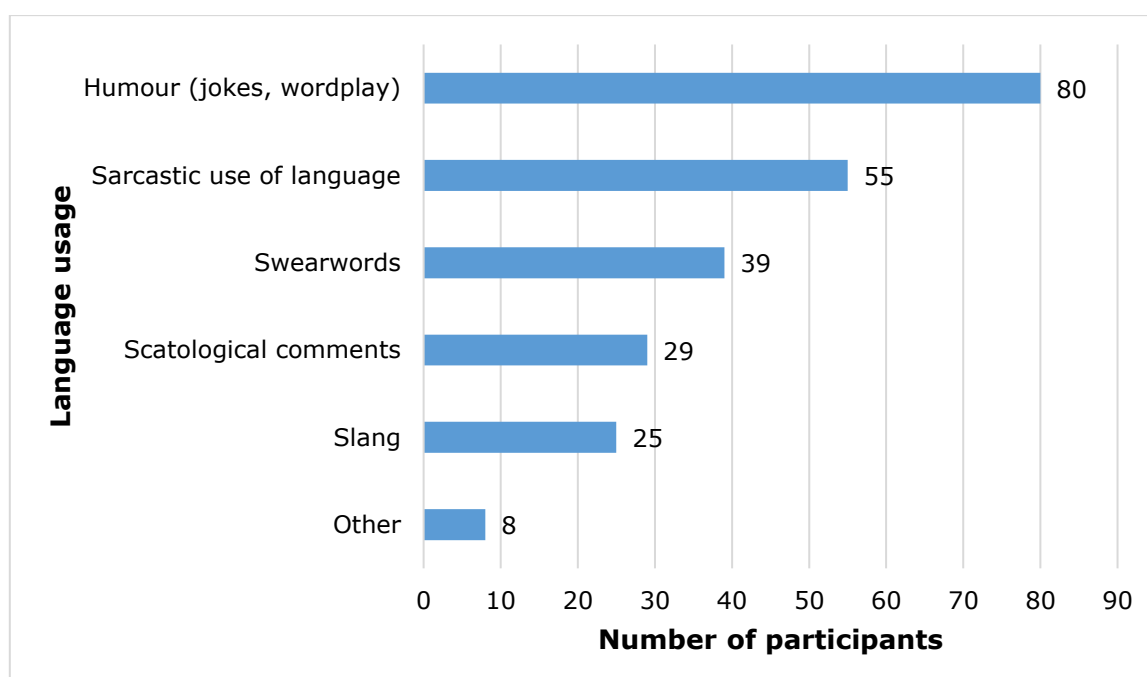


Figure 8. Language usage affecting subtitles

In terms of images that may affect the subtitles (Figure 9), rape (130 – 76%), torture (125 – 73%), and animal abuse (123 – 72%) appear to emotionally affect the vast majority of the participants. In a similar vein, depictions of beating, mutilations, and bullying also seem to affect many participants emotionally, with 96 (56%), 90 (53%), and 82 (48%) responses respectively.

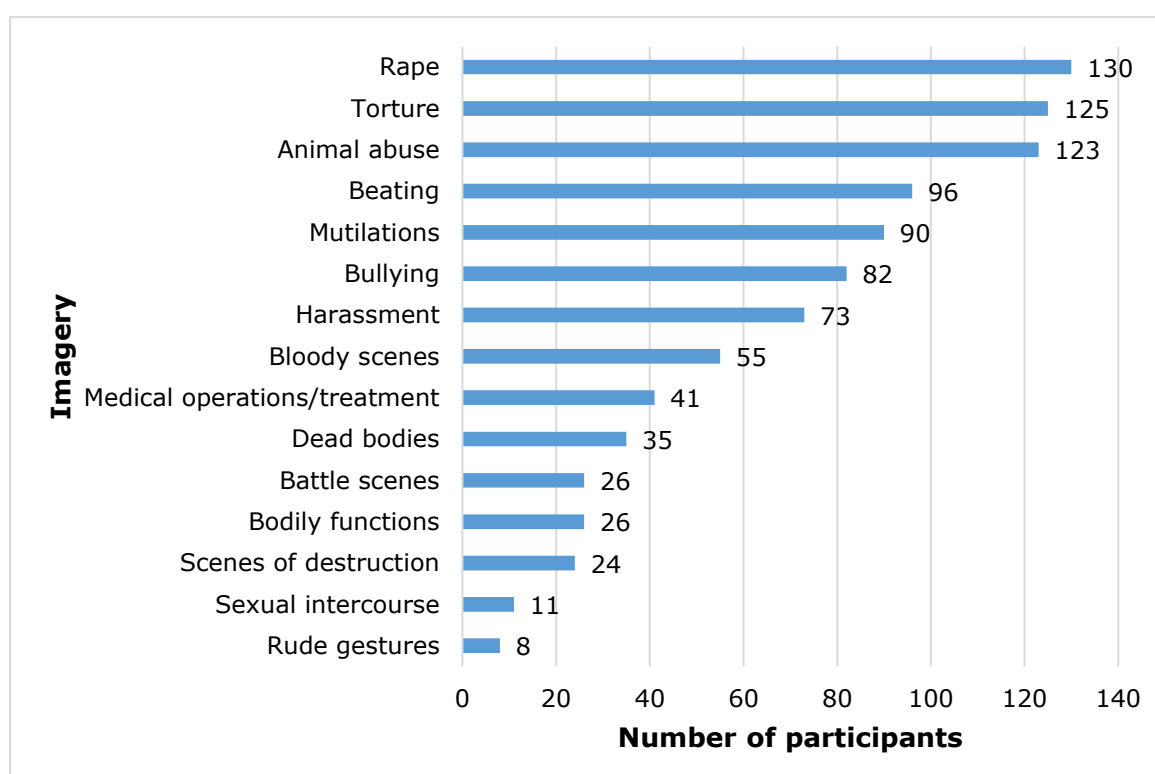


Figure 9. Images affecting subtitles

Although a high number (86%) of participants acknowledged being affected emotionally when working on sensitive audiovisual material, an equally high percentage (78% – 133 participants) did not think that their subtitling performance was affected by this emotional impact. Out of the 16 amateur subtitlers in the sample, only three answered that their performance is affected by their emotions.

5. Discussion

The study was conducted in order to investigate whether subtitlers working with sensitive audiovisual material are emotionally affected, and, if so, whether the emotional impact experienced influences their subtitling performance. Our initial hypothesis was that subtitlers are emotionally affected based on the fact that, as viewers, they are subjected to the above-mentioned synaesthetic nature of audiovisual texts and that they are also required, as translators, to delve deep into the specifics of the text, including its emotion-eliciting dynamics. Indeed, 147 participants (86%) reported that they are affected emotionally when working on sensitive audiovisual material. As explained in 2.2, this is to be expected given the capacity of audiovisual productions to vividly evoke emotions. As a participant aptly notes, when subtitling an emotive TV series, they are “affected in the way [they] would be if [they] watched a sad/emotional drama or a tense thriller on TV.”

Although certain types of subject matter and imagery clearly affect the participants, as evidenced in their responses presented in section 4, the findings are less clear when it comes to the emotional impact of language use. This seems to be so because of the confusion that, we assume, arose in relation to humour as one of the available options. It is possible that the participants misunderstood the option of humour as referring to a linguistic challenge in subtitling, and not to a potentially emotion-eliciting aspect of the audiovisual text. Taking this into account, the fact that humour was the option with the most responses (80 – 47%) can be interpreted in two ways: either humour is one of the most challenging elements to relay in subtitling, as has been confirmed in the relevant literature (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007; Chiaro 2010), or humour embedded in sensitive material, e.g. jokes that can be considered obscene, profane, racist or sexist, elicits a more intense emotional reaction.

However, the responses to this question give rise to an interesting and unexpected finding. As previously mentioned, 14 participants (8%) added the option ‘None’ to the list of language aspects that affect them. Although the number may be small compared to the overall sample, the fact that 14 individuals appear to concur unprompted that language does not affect them emotionally may be important. Notably, a participant points out that “[a]ll the options on [this] list have become somewhat ‘normal’”, alluding to the normalisation of verbal offensiveness, possibly as a result of its

ubiquity in modern-day audiovisual productions. This sentiment of desensitisation may also be evident in the fact that 36 participants (21%) chose not to answer this question, making it the question with the lowest response rate in the questionnaire. Another interpretation for the low response rate would be that the participants, as language professionals, are comfortable with such aspects of language and their non-responsiveness to sensitive language is a meditated stance they adopt to demonstrate their professionalism.

Furthermore, 36 participants (21%) reported that their performance is affected by their emotions, and 133 (78%) participants gave a negative response to this question (1 participant did not answer the question). An interesting contrast is worth pointing out here. Out of these 133 participants, 24 of them proceeded to report an example where their performance was shown to be affected in one way or another. More specifically, they acknowledged that they sometimes have physical reactions to the material (e.g. crying, feeling nauseated) and, thus, have to take frequent breaks while subtitling, or they avoid looking at the screen, focus solely on the audio, and work quickly through the material. Others defer part of the project to other subtitlers and refuse to take on similar projects in the future. In fact, these participants' narratives are similar to those that answered that their performance was affected by their emotions. Put differently, the subtitling performance of both groups seems to suffer similar consequences, and both groups appear to resort to similar coping strategies, such as taking breaks, covering the screen, and speeding up the subtitling process.

The fact that some participants answered that their performance is not affected by their emotions and yet showed evidence of such effect in their free-text responses suggests that some may initially misperceive the extent of the emotional impact experienced when subtitling sensitive material. Alternatively, as it was noted above, a reluctance to admit the impact of emotions on subtitling performance may be connected to the subtitlers' sense of professionalism and the attitude it entails. Notably, 10 out of the 133 participants that gave a negative response highlighted the subtitler's responsibility to remain impartial and persevere with the translation, thus demonstrating how norms of the field of translation are often internalised by its agents. This can be seen as parallel to a similar reluctance to recognise the existence of emotional impact in interpreting, as mentioned in 2.1.

According to the responses of the 36 participants (21%) that answered that their performance is indeed affected by their emotions, a noteworthy consequence seems to be that they tend to rush through the translation of emotive scenes or, at times, of the entire programme, when it has many such scenes. As a participant notes, "I don't linger much on the translation. I don't think how to render it best. I just want [...] to get it over with", and another one admits that they "hurry up and get it done as quickly as

possible, which affects the quality of the work.” Some participants point out that they resort to a hasty translation because they postpone working on material that has a strong emotional impact on them, thus exhausting the assigned deadline.

Overall, 16 participants (9%) remark that they tend to take frequent breaks in order to cope with the emotional impact, which results in their being less productive and needing more time to complete the job. This may also cause them to ask for an extension to the deadline, if circumstances allow it, or resort to a last-minute translation, as happens with the subtitlers that delay working on the sensitive material. Six participants (3%), all professional subtitlers, note that they refuse work that they know will have such a strong emotional impact on them. Admittedly, this presupposes an established presence in the subtitling industry and a good rapport with one’s clients, so that there is the professional, and financial, flexibility to turn down work. Indeed, the participants that made this point have more than 10 years of subtitling experience.

Another set of circumstances that may lead to problems in the subtitling process is closely related to the images shown on the screen. Fourteen participants (8%) reported that they tend to cover the screen in order to avoid gruesome or otherwise emotive images. Some do so while reducing the volume of the audio and at the same time relying solely on the written template, if provided, i.e. a subtitle file in English used as the basis for translation into all other languages (Georgakopoulou 2009). Given that the subtitles co-exist with, and heavily depend on, the visual channel, it is obvious that an obscured image may negatively impact the translation. Furthermore, templates usually contain an abbreviated version of the dialogue, and thus do not correspond to the full onscreen content. As a participant attests, when working through torture scenes, they “avoid watching, which makes [their] work prone to error.”

Another way in which emotional impact manifests itself in subtitling performance lies in the linguistic treatment of sensitive content. It should be noted that the following applies only to the 36 participants (21%) who responded that their subtitling performance is somehow affected when working on sensitive material. Twelve of these participants reported that they may consciously tone down language that they find too offensive, particularly in regard to racial discrimination and swearing. The participants’ responses indicate that this also occurs when the depicted images are especially emotive (e.g. images of slaughterhouses or active war zones). Therefore, although language in isolation seems to leave many participants emotionally unaffected, perhaps because translators are trained and expected to be able to handle abusive, offensive, and colourful language, coping with images is arguably more challenging. In addition, the impact of language may also carry a different weight when combined with appropriately selected imagery. What is more, in some cases, the language of the subtitles seems to carry the signs of the emotional impact as it

undergoes authorial interference on the subtitler's part. The reason behind this strategy of toning down can be paralleled to that of the naturalisation strategy, as identified by Koskinen (2012). In other words, subtitlers may mitigate content that they deem offensive in an effort to shield the target viewer from a negative affective response.

Interestingly, an intense emotional impact may have a positive effect on the subtitler's performance. Eleven participants (6%) highlighted that their performance improved because they felt an even greater responsibility to convey the intended message to the target viewers. As the participants noted, despite the intense emotional impact they experienced, they persevered in order to do justice to the ST, either to match its high cinematographic quality, in the case of fictional films/TV series, or to raise awareness of the issues involved, in the case of documentaries. One participant points out that they took extra care "to convey the speakers' message to the [target] audience" when subtitling a documentary about Ugandan child soldiers, in order to communicate their life stories as accurately as possible. Similarly, another participant notes that the emotions of sadness and helplessness they experienced when working on a documentary about cancer patients helped them produce more natural subtitles because they felt that they were the patients' voice for the target audience. The same participant highlights that in cases where they are overwhelmed with emotion, their empathy with the depicted characters is strengthened, which, in their opinion, ultimately has a positive effect on their subtitling performance. A similar point is made by another participant, who "felt [the] subtitles got better because of [their] sympathy for the events" when subtitling a documentary about young people struggling in their football career. Another participant adds the need to evoke in the target viewers emotions similar to those that they themselves experience, which echoes Koskinen's (2012) affectability.

As the above comments suggest, an intense emotional impact may arguably help the naturalness of the translation by enhancing the subtitler's empathy, and thus aiding their affectability and performativity, which, as defined by Bermann (2014) is the quality of a translated (literary) text to accommodate both the translator's voice and the ST author's voice. The participants' examples show that this amalgam can also include the voice of the depicted characters, who may be either fictional or real-life people. This increased empathy seems to be particularly prominent in cases which involve the latter, because the subtitler feels an intensified sense of duty to evoke similar emotions through their translation and raise awareness in the target audience.

6. Conclusions and avenues for further research

The findings of this study have shown that subtitlers are usually affected emotionally when working with sensitive audiovisual material. The emotions that the subtitlers in our study experience most commonly are sadness,

anger, and disgust, and the topic that emotionally affects them the most is abuse. In terms of imagery, scenes of rape, torture, and animal abuse appear to be particularly sensitive for most participants. In contrast, language usage (e.g. swearing) does not seem to have a significant emotional impact on the majority of the participants.

With respect to the relationship between emotional impact and subtitling performance, the participants' responses indicate that this connection can take various forms. In some cases, subtitlers produce a rushed translation, with potential quality implications, because they wish to finish the job as quickly as possible so as to avoid working on the sensitive material for too long. In addition, an intense emotional impact can lead to an unreliable translation, which stems from the subtitlers' self-restricted access to the visuals and/or the audio, or from the subtitlers' effort to tone down the content that they find too offensive. On other occasions, subtitlers need more time than usual to complete the assigned job, which can lead to requests for extended deadlines and ultimately has an impact on the subtitlers' productivity. Some participants, particularly those with a well-established track record of subtitling experience, report that they have refused work that involves sensitive audiovisual material.

On the other hand, emotional impact can prove beneficial to the subtitlers' performativity and affectability. Put differently, when subject to intense emotions, subtitlers often feel more 'in tune' with the characters portrayed in the audiovisual programme. As the participants' comments indicate, this is particularly relevant in the case of documentaries, when subtitlers sometimes feel that their translation can help sensitise the target viewers about the depicted real-life events and people. As a result, subtitlers strive to strike the right emotional tone in their subtitles, so that the target audience can experience similar emotions.

Given that an emotional impact can either hinder or enhance subtitling performance, as discussed above, it seems necessary that subtitlers learn how to process and cope with the elicited emotions first so that they can reap the potential benefits of emotional impact. This resonates with Hubscher-Davidson's (2017: 121) remark in relation to translators and their knowing how to handle emotion-eliciting texts, "in order to, on [sic] one hand, successfully communicate ST content to TT readers and, on the other hand, to survive the process with minimum damage." Related to this topic are certain coping strategies mentioned by the subtitlers such as taking breaks, discussing the emotional experience with colleagues and friends/family, and focusing on the end result. Of course, these may not work universally, since, as John and Gross (2007) note, individual personality variances give rise to different emotion regulation strategies. Conducting experimental studies on the subtitlers' emotional impact and looking into the role of personality traits in conjunction with the above-mentioned findings could be a possible next step to determine how the

subtitler can make the most of a potential emotional impact in a beneficial and productive manner.

Further research can also examine relevant training practices that could benefit subtitlers, either in an institutionalised academic context or in the professional environment. This process would require fluid communication channels between subtitling professionals, tutors, and employers, so that any potential training can be tailored to the needs of the contemporary subtitling industry. Gaining an insight into the emotional challenges that subtitlers face can also enable a dialogue amongst subtitlers themselves, thus encouraging a sense of solidarity and comradeship. Although this may seem less tenable when most subtitlers are freelancers, such communication could be fostered through subtitling associations. Combining this with training suggestions could help novice and experienced subtitlers to cope with the demands of the profession, which may well include emotional adaptability in addition to language proficiency, cultural sensitivity, and technical aptitude.

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Biography



Katerina Perdikaki is an Associate Teaching Fellow at the University of Surrey, where she teaches audiovisual translation, specialised translation from English into Greek, and the role of semiotics in advertising. In the past, she has also taught on interpreting and translation theory. She also works as a freelance subtitler and dubbing translator.

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Nadia Georgiou has a PhD from the Centre for Translation Studies, University of Surrey on the topic of translators as readers of (poetic) texts. Her research interests include literary translation, gender and translation, the sociology of translation, and the translation process.

Nadia has worked as a modern languages teacher, freelance translator and medical interpreter. She has translated Jules Verne's *Meridiana: The Adventures of Three Englishmen and Three Russians in South Africa* (2011) into Greek, as well as *Head over Heels in Paris* (2012).

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