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## **THE VISUAL VERSUS THE AURAL IN SUBTITLING FOR THE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING**

Emília Perez – Simona Klimková – Andrej Zahorák

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the decision-making process and selection of formal strategies in transferring sounds in subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH). It presents the results of a focus group discussion conducted with a sample of subtitlers, revealing professionals' perspectives on what should be transferred in subtitles, as well as when, how and why. The research was conducted within the Slovak context where SDH standards for pre-recorded programmes have been defined for TV broadcasting by national legislation since 2016. The authors attempted to identify compliance strategies in terms of the legislation as well as verify their validity. The results show that the participants tend to follow the principal legislatively defined standards; however the participants imply that the selection of strategies might be rather restricted due to the specific

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technical limitations of transfer as well as some of the ambiguous recommendations given by the legislation. The results also initiate a discussion on the need for (re-) evaluation of some of the national SDH rules, which would allow fewer omissions and less meaning loss.

Key words: SDH; focus group discussion; standardisation; transferability of sounds; formal parameters.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

According to the latest 2015 Report of the European Federation of Hard of Hearing People on the State of Subtitling Access in EU, the number of audiovisual works provided with subtitles for a deaf and hard of hearing audience has been increasing, and in TV broadcasting most EU states have significantly improved their SDH provision in comparison with previously collected data from the years 2011 and 2013. The positive trend can be observed in several countries, mainly, according to the report (p. 10), in the UK, Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium (Flanders) and France, but also in countries showing significant improvement, such as the Czech Republic, Austria, Slovenia, Finland,

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Denmark and Spain. The rising tendency in terms of SDH provision can be observed in relation to existing European and national legislation binding broadcasters to providing accessible modes, as well as the result of initiatives observing compliance. Providing access for deaf and hard of hearing viewers, however, is not only related to availability, and we believe that quality of SDH should be subject to equal attention. In subtitling practice, the SDH quality requirements are reflected in subtitling guidelines, standards and norms – in some countries adopted at a national level (e.g. Spain, France, Slovakia), but in the majority of countries provided via the individual or joint style guides of particular broadcasters (e.g. Germany, Denmark, Italy).

SDH quality in Europe is undergoing continuous academic analysis and evaluation, which was recently – in probably its most complex iteration to date – reflected in *The Reception of Subtitles for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Europe* edited by Pablo Romero-Fresco (2015). Research on SDH quality also raises the question of the evaluation (or re-evaluation) of existing norms in order to ensure that subtitling practice doesn't become bogged down within the limits of standardisation, as was already implied by Josélia Neves in 2008 (2008, p. 134). This tendency can lately be observed in several research initiatives which attempt to reveal possible formal as well as linguistic and reception enhancement in SDH (see Szarkowska et. al 2016; Szarkowska 2018). These

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approaches inspired us when researching the standards and conventions in case of pre-recorded programmes employed by subtitlers in Slovakia.

Our motivation stems mainly from rather frequently expressed viewers' reactions implying certain criticism towards some of the standards applied in the country (see Želonka 2015, Perez et al. 2016) which were adopted at the national level in December 2015 and came into force in January 2016. Despite the date of adoption, the strategies described in the material indicate links to much older recommendations of Czech provenance (see Koplík – Strnadová, 2008) and seem not to reflect current technical, linguistic or reception encounters (subtitle presentation rates, text reduction and meaning loss, potential of technical possibilities). The aim of our paper is to approach the selected strategies from the perspective of subtitlers and thus provide a professional perspective on the recommended standards and their possible limitations. The methodology of our research is described in a separate chapter, after which theoretical foundations and essential insight into the area of subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing in the Slovak context are provided. The paper afterwards presents views from a focus group discussion with professionals – at first revealing their overall approach to SDH standardisation and consequently confronting it with the individual solutions and decisions of participants, reflected via SDH analysis of selected audiovisual material. The results are

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finally discussed with regard to prior findings on observance of subtitling standards as well as potential implications for practice.

## **2. METHODOLOGY AND MATERIAL**

In order to verify the general observance of national SDH standards and to identify whether, when, how and why they are intentionally infringed, the authors of the paper used the method of a single focus group discussion with a sample of Slovak subtitlers. The selected subtitlers belong to the experienced subtitling elite in the country and their responses might help to reveal notable and credible findings. The method was chosen in order to obtain subtitlers' perspectives – their professional perceptions of SDH and views on standardisation rather than statistical data.<sup>1</sup> Such results in further comparison with our prior research on overall compliance with Slovak SDH standards (see Perez et al., 2016) might help understanding of the decision-making process as well as to verify the validity of some of the recommended standards.

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<sup>1</sup> The complex evaluation of compliance with Slovak national SDH standards in both public and private broadcasting is presented in: Perez, E. et al. (2016). Audiovizuálny preklad a nepočujúci divák. Nitra: UKF.

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The structured discussion conducted among a clearly identified group provided us with appropriate conditions to examine selected aspects of the SDH process and obtain in-depth answers to questions around the pragmatic aspects of subtitling. In order to fulfil the methodological purpose of focus group discussion according to Hennink's recommendations (2014), a sample of Slovak subtitlers was addressed. The selected interviewees were subtitlers for TV and DVD, since these are the two main mediums for the transmission of the film under analysis. The interviewees were approached as potential members of a group sharing common professional features such as occupation, country of occupation and common professional interest, and in their practice all of them focus predominantly on subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (DHOH). The constitution of the group (see Hennink, 2014) then enabled us to lead the discussion towards specific topical issues and to enhance the interactive debate bringing together and confronting opinions of professionals in the field. The paper provides results from 6 interviewees<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These were also part of the more complex research project The Decision-making Process in Subtitling for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (Nitra, 2016). Its partial results are published in: Perez, E. (2017). "The Power of Preconceptions: Exploring the Expressive Value of Subtitles for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing". In Di Giovanni, E. & Raffi, F. (eds.), *Languaging Diversity Volume 3: Language(s) and Power* (pp. 188-204). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

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who attended a discussion on selected aspects of strategies used in subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing. Four of the interviewees had been in practice for 10-14 years, one of them more than 14 years and one of them for 1-4 years. The difference in the length of professional experience is factored into the interpretation of the results. The size of the focus group followed the general recommendations (Hennink, 2014; Liamputtong, 2011) and enabled lively immediate interaction between the moderator and interviewees, as well as among the interviewees themselves.

The discussion was led by an experienced moderator well oriented in the field, initially collecting general information about the interviewees via a questionnaire (information on occupation, basic training, further training). This type of information was collected in order to provide a tool helping to interpret the overall results. In the second stage, the main focus moved on to usually applied SDH strategies (depending on affiliation and type of channel and medium). This stage was conducted in two steps: firstly by filling out a short questionnaire designed to detect the overall approach of subtitlers towards SDH standardisation via marking preferences for commonly used SDH strategies, and secondly by discussing the advantages and disadvantages of subtitling strategies in particular contexts. In this way encounters related to the spatial, temporal and linguistic

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characteristics of subtitles, identification of characters, sound information, music and timbre were covered. This helped the authors to verify whether the subtitlers (or the organisations they work for) follow national standards as well as to identify in which areas divergences can be found.

The last part of the discussion was designed to verify the standpoints of the interviewees reflected via analysis and proposed subtitling strategies for the documentary film *November + 20 (1989)*. The film was released in 2012 on a DVD featuring nine short documentary films accompanying the Slovak Nation's Memory Institute publication entitled *The Power of Witnessing*. The language of the films is Slovak, with occasional use of Czech in some of the historical passages. The films were originally released without subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing, and besides DVD, they were intended to be distributed via TV broadcast.

The whole project seeks to highlight some of the primary events of (Czecho-)Slovak history after 1938, targeting primarily younger audiences that did not experience undemocratic or totalitarian regimes. The films are based on the oral testimonies of eyewitnesses to specific historical events, ranging from the Holocaust and the era of collectivization to the Normalisation period and the Velvet Revolution. The seven-minute film *November + 20 (1989)* depicts the dramatic events leading to the



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Velvet Revolution and the revolutionary days themselves – focusing predominantly on the massive public demonstrations demanding the resignation of the Communist Party and the democratisation of society. Combining authentic footage of the protests in squares around the country with the oral testimonies of political activists such as the actor Milan Kňažko and the dissident Ján Čarnogurský, who both look back at the events of 1989, the documentary presents a powerful montage of pictorial material and emotionally charged oral commentary concerning the fall of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. In order to introduce the structure of the film, the visual layer of the film contains original shots from the events themselves interspersed with audial elements, such as the highly symbolic jingling of the keys (the emblematic gesture capturing the spirit of the Velvet Revolution) or chants, often shown and heard at the same time as the testimony of the eyewitness presented on the screen. Moreover, these are also accompanied by textual commentaries providing other useful contextual information, which often appear on the screen simultaneously with the scenes of the events.

The choice of the film *November +20 (1989)* was made because of its characteristics relevant to the topic of our paper as well as suitable parameters regarding our methodology. The length of the film allowed the group to work with a self-contained audiovisual work of adequate duration; the film provides creative – and for SDH rather

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challenging – elaboration at the level of sound; and the multi-layered storytelling method used in the film, interweaving visual material with audial and textual elements, had the potential to initiate a vivid discussion on what, how and why should be included in subtitles for a deaf and hard of hearing audience. Details of the discussion were noted on the spot, as well as recorded and later transcribed. Their interpretation helps reveal perspectives on some of the challenging aspects of meaning transfer in SDH as well as both the positives and limitations of existing standards and procedures.

### **3. OBLIGATIONS, RESPONSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS IN SDH TRANSFER**

Jorge Díaz Cintas (2010) describes subtitling in general as a meaning transfer activity resulting in a programme “made up of three main components: the original spoken/written word, the original image and the added subtitles” (2010, p. 244). His definition implies one of the crucial challenges in subtitling as such: the quest to balance the intention to transfer the crucial meanings of the original audiovisual work with subtitles that are receivable by the target audience. In both subtitling for hearing as well as subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing, a subtitler might (and most probably will) face several challenges arising from spatial or temporal

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limitations given by the character of subtitles, looking for solutions on what and how to keep or what to omit. Heidi Zojer states that such moments turn a subtitler into an editor (2011, p. 400) whilst his or her task is then to make omissions and changes very carefully, since “even the slightest omissions can cause a significant change in meaning” (2011, p. 401).

This problematic aspect has been encountered in subtitling for both hearing and deaf and hard of hearing audiences and we can find approaches advocating or rejecting verbatim subtitles, and advocating or rejecting the editing of the contained text. We believe that the extent of a subtitler’s editing in general relates to the array of possibilities a subtitler is given regarding the anticipated target audience, channel and medium of transfer (TV broadcast, cinema, DVD, VOD) and the characteristics of the audiovisual work itself. All of these aspects influence the choice of subtitling strategies related to technical, formal, linguistic and reception specifics. Furthermore, we cannot forget the guidelines or standards defining the essential framework of subtitling options which play the role of quality assurance tools and are used mainly to “guarantee the repetition of patterns which are accepted as “good practice” (Neves, 2008, p. 134).

In Slovakia, mandatory SDH regulations and requirements are defined by Act no. 278/2015 Coll.

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Section 18aa, a generally binding regulation issued by the Ministry of Culture. This material sets out the requirements that must be met in subtitles for people with hearing impairment accompanying audiovisual works, television programme services and on-demand audiovisual media services. The particular formal standards are given by the Decree of the Ministry of Culture 12/2016 of the Slovak Republic of 15 December 2015 on Subtitles for Persons with Hearing Disabilities, a document that explicitly defines the basic requirements of SDH for the Slovak DHOH audience. The decree formulates the basic parameters of SDH – justified text of subtitles, maximum two lines of subtitles, and the display of subtitles on a dark background. It sets the maximum number of characters in a line to 36 characters including spaces and defines the colour of subtitles – a colour in contrast with the colour of the black background while the colour of the subtitles must not be red, violet or grey. It inclines towards text editing when needed. The criteria related to the readability of subtitles are rather vague – stating only that the display time of the subtitles should be adequate to ensure readability, without any more precise information related to recommended time and reading speed rates.

More specific strategies are described in further sections of the decree (see sections 2 and 3) and refer to meaning transfer procedures, especially in relation to the identification of speakers, expressivity and transfer of

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meanings from the level of sound. Slovak SDH legislation (2016) specifies the identification of speakers via the use of a dash in the case of a dialogue, combined with colour distinction of speakers, using a maximum of 5 colours in an audiovisual work. It also suggests the labelling of an utterance with a speaker's name if it is made off-screen. Another important aspect is the identification of expressions of emotion in the subtitle if they are not clear at the visual level and have an influence on the plot. According to the decree, the expression of emotion is to be represented in lowercase characters in brackets before the subtitle in which the utterance of the speaker expressing the emotion is transferred. Such a strategy helps to transfer the expressivity of an utterance linking it to a particular speaker or situation.

In an audiovisual work, the layer of sound provides several groups of meanings, some of which are essential for the development of the plot and some of which bear essential expressive value. Sonnenschein (2002) speaks about a “sonic coloring”, pointing out that “within every character, object, and action on screen there can be generated a potential sound that may give further dramatic impact to the scene and story” (p. 4). This can strongly influence the whole perception of the audiovisual work; however, the possibilities to transfer meanings are often defined by the spatial and temporal constraints on subtitles or parameters of the audiovisual

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work as such. Formally speaking, the Slovak decree (2016) covers two possible scenarios – when the audiovisual work contains sounds that are relevant to the plot and sounds that last longer than 15 seconds and are not accompanied by any speech and cannot be deduced from visual perception. Such a sound shall be indicated by a subtitle written in uppercase.

The presented directions from the Slovak Decree on Subtitles for Persons with Hearing Disabilities (2016) cover most of the aspects included in SDH guidelines in other European countries. However, unlike in the association standards in Germany, or OFCOM and BBC guidelines in the UK, subtitle presentation rates or estimated/recommended reading speeds remain vague. The decree also does not include any recommendation on minimum/maximum duration of a subtitle onscreen and the overall information related to the temporal aspect provides only ambiguous information that “a subtitle should appear on the screen for a time sufficient for its reading” (2016, section 1). The rates applied in practice will be presented via the results of our focus group discussion. However, as the decree presently serves also as a tool for assessment of the quality of provided SDH in Slovakia, we believe that this aspect might be lacking in the complex evaluation process.

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#### **4. OBSERVANCE OF SLOVAK SDH STANDARDS AND CONVENTIONS**

The following chapter summarizes the general views of subtitlers on standardised subtitling strategies and comments on the ambiguous, unclear or missing definitions of approaches which might be encountered in SDH. Concerning the basic formal strategies, we can report that all of the participants follow the recommendations of the decree, providing two lined subtitles in the bottom part of the screen. Only one of the interviewees (the subtitler for DVD) does not always comply with the rule of maximum characters per line as stated in the decree (36 characters) since DVD subtitling practice in the country enables (and requires) longer extent – up to 42 characters per line.

Another observed area involved strategies related to the transfer of sounds in SDH in order to enable adequate reception by a DHOH audience. In this aspect, the Slovak decree (2016) specifies mandatory formal procedures in transferring the meanings from the level of sound, which are followed by all members of the focus group discussion. The moderator attempted to obtain more information related to the transfer of music in SDH, which has not been discussed significantly in the Slovak milieu. According to the participants, they try to include

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information about music when necessary to the understanding of the narrative of the audiovisual work, and if possible also when it contributes to the overall atmosphere of the film, by commenting on the type of music, its timbre, type of musical instrument etc.

The options available to subtitlers might be constrained by the characteristics of the audiovisual work as well as its genre. As stated from the experience of two of the participants, even background music in e.g. art documentaries is used to evoke a certain aesthetic experience and they believe omitting it decreases the artistic value of the film. In such cases the subtitlers attempt to provide information about the music's character, timbre, rhythm or expressiveness, if possible. Regarding song lyrics, two participants who closely cooperate in the SDH process with DHOH supervision and who supply subtitles for TV broadcast stated they are often advised that the target audience might be interested in information about song lyrics. This is, however, not generally a common practice in the country and it is quite rare to spot such a solution. According to the statements of the participants applying the strategy, the rule they apply is that if the lyrics of a song are audible and comprehensible for a hearing viewer – and there are no spatial and temporal restrictions – the lyrics should be transferred also in SDH. Otherwise the subtitle only provides more general information, e.g. SINGING IN ENGLISH, FAST PACE SINGING etc., depending on



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the situation and importance of the presented aspect. The same strategy is also applied by the subtitler working in the DVD format.

In terms of music, formal strategies were discussed as well, revealing certain differences in comparison with the strategies recommended in the Slovak decree. While the Slovak legislation as well as conventions refers to verbal expression of musical information, some of the practices in the country refer to use of icons in order to provide general information about certain sounds – especially used in the case of music, e.g. “♪”. The strategy can be today spotted on several SDH on DVDs in Slovakia and three of the participants claimed to use it in different than TV broadcasting setting (festivals, artistic film screenings). In our discussion, all of the participants claimed they would welcome such an option. As they suggested, it would enable them to provide more information to the target audience due to its spatial economy and the gaining of extra space for other information. However, also because of the technical constraints in TV broadcasting in the country it is for now used only by subtitlers providing SDH for DVDs and special film screenings.

The results of the focus group discussion demonstrate conventions in those aspects of subtitling that the national legislation defines only vaguely. The valuable information obtained reveals approaches to the

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presentation rates and estimated reading speeds in SDH which otherwise cannot be found in any other officially published material in the country. In terms of the minimum appearance time of a subtitle onscreen, all of the subtitlers commented on the shortcomings of the decree, which does not directly specify a minimum recommended duration or reading speeds as such, and which might lead to a lower quality of SDH and inadequate reading speeds the Slovak DHOH audience often refers to in their complaints (see Želonka, 2015, pp. 12-14; Perez at al. 2016). The focus group discussion results suggest that the minimum duration in SDH does not fall under two seconds per subtitle (3 subtitlers stated they work with a minimum of 2.12 seconds, 1 subtitler with 2 seconds, 2 subtitlers even with a minimum of 3 seconds if the situation requires).

According to the participants, providing adequate time for reception is one of the main criteria in the creation of SDH. A further aspect related to time limitations in SDH is also the recommendation of a maximum duration of the subtitle appearing on screen, where the subtitlers said they do not work with an exact limitation but adapt the maximum duration to the characteristics of the situation, exceptionally prolonging the maximum duration up to 7-8 seconds. In terms of the estimated reading speed, all of the participants claimed to work with estimated reading speed of 10-12 characters per second which is a

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presentation rate parallel to the one in TV broadcasting e.g. in Netherlands (see Szarkowska, 2016) or Denmark (see Gottlieb, 2015).

The conclusion of the first part of the focus group discussion dealt with strategies in specific problematic cases brought up by the participants. It referred to the anticipation of the target audience and its needs and the desirability of feedback from the DHOH community. Two of the participants stated that deaf consultants are part of their creative team and provide useful feedback regularly; otherwise, cooperation with hard of hearing persons is not so common. The remaining participants decide based on their experience, without DHOH supervision; however in their working environment special annual sessions on issues of reception are offered in cooperation with members of the DHOH community.

##### **5. LOST AND FOUND IN *NOVEMBER* +20 (1989)**

The importance of the overall structure of an audiovisual text is apparent and very well described by Frederic Chaume (2004), who perceives an audiovisual text as a “semiotic construct comprising several signifying codes that operate simultaneously in the production of meaning” (2004, p. 14). Chaume points out the importance and role of levels other than the linguistic one and argues for the need for thorough consideration of

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how particular signifying codes of an audiovisual work can affect translation transfer. In the film *November + 20 (1989)* several communication strategies at both visual and aural levels are combined, and Chaume's paradigm (2004) enables us to approach them more complexly. Besides information communicated by the speakers appearing in the film, there are other information-bearing sounds: slogans, chants, songs – symbolic sounds important in the reception of the film as such. However, the visual layer of the film is rather saturated at the same time, since it contains a lot of archival material, pictures, slogans, posters and the graphics of the full text explaining the historical context of the portrayed events.

Furthermore, one of the very characteristic features of the selected film is the interesting elaboration in terms of what Chaume (2004) classifies as the sound arrangement code. Besides the rather transparent use of linguistic and paralinguistic codes which are mostly in image-sound congruence, the aural level operates with several sounds, often produced off-screen without any primary connection to the visual representation (e.g. the jingling of keys – a symbol of the 1989 revolution used at random places; emblematic revolutionary songs with lyrics completing/contrasting the ongoing narrative; rhymes and chants reflecting the revolutionary moods used as a background in order to communicate general disapproval). For a viewer, they are supposed to evoke atmosphere, shape meanings, complete their

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interpretation, express the attitudes of the speakers and serve as a foreshadowing or standpoint-creating strategy. However, while such elements are eligible to hearing recipients in the country, their transfer in SDH might be rather challenging since the placement and arrangement of these sounds does not grant a subtitler many options. Even though there are several subtitling strategies that can be used to refer to what is happening off- or onscreen and why, this strategy is mostly combined with a sequence of linguistic and paralinguistic codes, or even graphic codes, as in the case of using a black box covering more than half of the image with text providing contextual information (see Picture No.1). This again might raise considerations related to spatial and temporal possibilities, as well as the question of possible impact on the fluency and dynamics of the presentation of linguistic codes in subtitles.

The described scenario indeed prompts several questions when contemplating meaning transfer in SDH. In making it the subject of the last part of the focus group discussion, the attempt of the authors was to reveal the potential array of choices and to clarify the criteria in the SDH decision-making process within the conventions and technical possibilities in Slovakia. The discussion was dedicated to a joint analysis and discussion on possible SDH meaning-transfer strategies in the film, allowing the participants to illustrate their views on authentic material and the challenges it contained. The

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moderator led the discussion in order to establish the criteria and considerations of subtitlers in selected aspects of this audiovisual work, focusing especially on the tension arising from simultaneous meaning saturation at the level of speech, image and sound.

Regarding the strategies related to the transfer of symbolic and emblematic sounds not represented at the visual level, participants stated a general inclination towards their expression in subtitles. The responses also showed that none of the subtitlers would include information related to sounds created by people seen on the screen if not necessary (jingling of the keys, applause, clatter), since the action is visible and its emphasis in subtitles would duplicate the meaning, and they would also be inclined towards preserving linguistic code in subtitles. Their strategies in terms of chanting and applauding would follow the general strategies described before, comparing and equalising the conditions of reception between hearing and DHOH viewers, so if the utterance is intelligible to the hearing viewer, information about the type of utterance and its content is included (e.g. CHANTING: Freedom! Freedom!); if it is not intelligible, then information regarding the type of utterance and its emotional/expressive load is provided (e.g. CHANTING APPROVINGLY or CROWD CHANTING APPROVINGLY if not on screen).

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In relation to songs, the final scenes of the film contain the song *The Most Beautiful Place in the Whole World*, performed by Slovak singer Peter Dvorský. The song bears significant expressive and emotional load and is closely related to the Velvet Revolution portrayed in the film. It is present in the background without any visual representation. If it were possible, the participants would be inclined towards providing information about the performer, name of the song and at least some of the lyrics, since the song and its content are linked to the theme of the film rather closely and the Velvet Revolution songs are well known to the Slovak DHOH audience (see Perez, 2017). However, they were concerned that in this case such information would interfere with the visual elements of the film, since a black frame filled with text providing contextual information about the historical events covers more than a half of the whole image at the same time (see Picture no.1) and later is followed by the final credits. All of the participants consequently agreed that the written text originally included in the audiovisual work should take precedence and the image should not be saturated even more by adding a subtitle, since the viewer will be focused on the text field and the addition of a subtitle not primary related to the content would be disturbing. Formally speaking, there could be the option of shifting the subtitle downwards or upwards on the screen in order to avoid the proximity to the text of the original graphic code. However, in the Slovak context such an option

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would not be possible in TV broadcasting due to technical restrictions. The DVD format would enable the subtitler to adjust the position of the subtitle – although all of the participants agreed that such a solution could still have a negative impact on the reception and in their practice they would decide on the precedence of the original (already rather saturated) original graphic code.

Picture No.1: Graphics providing contextual information





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## **6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The results of the focus group discussion presented in this paper provide a valuable insight into the challenges faced by Slovak creators of subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing. They reveal a range of conventions and strategies in the observed cases, which might open up further discussion on presently applied national subtitling standards.

Notable findings relate to the temporal features of subtitles which are presently not covered in Slovak legislation and information about these is so far not available in any officially published material. In this respect, the focus group described an adherence to relatively long minimum (min. 2 seconds) and maximum (up to 8-9 seconds) onscreen duration conventions, which seems to be related to estimated reading speeds. While for instance in Polish TV the usual SDH reading speed is 12 characters per second (see Szarkowska et al, 2016, p. 186), most of our participants claimed to work with the lower rate of 10 characters per second. As we found out, the rates used by our participants are: given by the client – 1 subtitler; included in internal standards of a company – 4 subtitlers; or stem from experience and communication with a sample target audience – 2 subtitlers. For now, no in-depth research on Slovak SDH reading speeds has been conducted and the national legislation only vaguely addresses this aspect by

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recommending the provision of ‘sufficient’ time for reading, which was stated to be problematic by all of the participants of the discussions. In addition, reading speeds in SDH in Slovakia appear to be a rather torrid issue. Our previous research (see Perez et al. 2016) mapping SDH quality in Slovak TV broadcasting via analysis of 675 minutes of subtitled programmes showed certain discrepancies in how broadcasters approach the aspect of subtitle presentation rates which might be related to the absence of the aspect in the existing legislation. For illustration, in an analysed fragment of a Slovak reality court show containing 69 subtitles, 33 subtitles were presented for a period shorter than 2 seconds (the minimum duration time stated by the interviewees of our focus group discussion). This might in certain situations still be acceptable; however out of these 33 subtitles, 19 subtitles were presented on the screen for less than 1 second. Considering the verbal saturation of the programme, the presentation rates were viewed very critically, not only in the case of this particular episode, but also several other programmes, as reflected also in the audience responses on Slovak DHOH forums (see Želonka, 2015; Perez et al., 2016).

Another area we approached was the tension between the visual and aural elements of an audiovisual work. In this matter the analysed focus group approaches SDH transfer as equal communication. Comparing the reception of hearing and DHOH viewers, the subtitlers try to transfer

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all vital meanings in a form comparable to the one presented to the hearing viewer. Even though the national standards do not specifically refer to additional sounds or background music, the subtitlers say they are inclined towards transferring even the expressive and emotional load of the sounds if possible within the overall characteristics of an audiovisual work.

As our analyses confirmed, the decision-making process of a subtitler is also bound to the technical possibilities afforded by the particular medium. Few differences can be observed within our context however. While TV broadcast, due to technical limitations, presently allows only verbal representation of music or additional sounds via subtitles in uppercase, some of the subtitlers providing SDH for DVD formats and occasionally also for festival screenings are already using icons in their work. The most commonly used icon is “♪”, referring to the presence of music, often combined with lyrics or information on the timbre, rhythm or melody. All of the participants of the focus group claimed they would welcome such a possibility in future, especially in cases of simultaneous meaning saturation at the aural and visual level. Reactions to the use of music icons were also established by Ferusová (2018) via a sample of DHOH audience (sample of 30 viewers) which showed major inclinations towards the use of emoticons and symbol of note (92.3%). One viewer stated a preference

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for verbal expression of emotions instead of the emoticon used.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS**

The present paper provides an insight into the area of subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing in Slovakia, and via the method of a focus group discussion conducted with Slovak subtitlers it provides professionals' perspectives on selected issues in SDH transfer. Furthermore, it points out topical issues in Slovak practice, contrasting them with existing research and practice in Europe. The presented results indicate a need for specification of timing characteristics of SDH in the country and reveal an inclination towards strategies which are not enabled in Slovak TV broadcasting due to technical broadcast restrictions (the use of symbols in the case of music; a possible longer extent of characters per line).

While this paper mainly focuses on subtitlers' perspectives, further research could reveal more on the specifics of SDH reception and preferences of the Slovak audience. A study of reading speeds in subtitling for a DHOH audience and its later reflection in national standards would also have the potential to increase the overall quality of subtitling. A future combination of research methods to measure sensory activities (such as eye-tracking) and a qualitative approach might help to

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increase awareness of modern communicational and technical SDH opportunities in the Slovak environment.

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Preservation of Audiovisual Works, Multimedia Works and Sound Recordings of Artistic Performances including Amendments and Supplements to some other Laws (Audiovisual Act)

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