Professional Realities of the Subtitling Industry: The Subtitlers' Perspective

Kuo, Arista Szu-Yu

2015

Kuo, A. S. -Y. (2015). Professional Realities of the Subtitling Industry: The Subtitlers' Perspective. Banos Pinero, R., & Diaz Cintas, J. (eds), Audiovisual Translation in a Global Context, 163-191.

https://hdl.handle.net/10356/84414

https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137552891_10

Professional Realities of the Subtitling Industry: The Subtitlers' Perspective

Szu-Yu Arista Kuo

Abstract
The aim of this study is to present the findings of a survey on the working conditions of subtitlers in an attempt to shed light on the professional environment in different countries. The discussion will focus on key aspects such as subtitling rates, negotiation power, royalties, acknowledgement credits, deadlines, contracts and materialisation of jobs, use of software, and the provision and quality of supporting material. In addition, attention will be paid to the changes experienced as regards these aspects since the economic downturn. It is hoped that this paper will not only offer an overview of the subtitling industry but it will also help draw attention to the need to ensure decent working conditions. In addition, findings may serve as a viable starting point for further research on the profession and education of subtitlers as well as contribute to the understanding of the potential factors influencing subtitling quality in a professional environment.

1. Introduction

In the past, the working conditions of audiovisual translators in general, and subtitlers in particular, have tended to be veiled in mystery, with very few works written on the topic. In the case of subtitling, this is mainly because the majority of subtitlers tend to work on a freelance basis. Since contractors work alone, independently and very frequently in isolation, it is difficult for outsiders to gain an understanding of their profession and working conditions. This has also restricted the circulation of information among the professionals themselves. In order to present a clearer picture of the working environment in which subtitlers operate, as well as an overview of the realities defining the interlingual subtitling industry, an online survey was distributed among subtitlers across the world.

During the revision of the questionnaire structure and question, the survey received significant support from members of the European Association for Studies in Screen Translation (ESIST, www.esist.org/) and the Subtitlers' Association (Subtle, www.subtitlers.org.uk/) in the UK. A significant number of translators' and subtitlers' associations joined in later and provided substantial assistance by recommending the survey and distributing the questionnaire to other professionals in the industry. These associations include the Spanish Asociación de Traducción y Adaptación Audiovisual de España (ATRAE, www.atrae.org), the Italian Associazione Italiana Dialoghisti Adattatori Cinetelevisivi (AIDAC, www.aidac.it), the French Association des Traducteurs et Adaptateurs de l'Audiovisuel (ATAA, www.traducteurs-av.org), the Danish Union of Journalists, the Dutch association of subtitlers Beroepsvereniging van Zelfstandige Ondertitelaars (BZO, http://bzo-ondertitelaars.nl), the Forum for Finnish Subtitlers (www.av-kaantajat.fi), and the Polish association of audiovisual translators Stowarzyszenie Tłumaczy Audiowizualnych (STAW, www.staw.org.pl).

The methodology of this study will be discussed in the following section, followed by an overview of the background information supplied by the participants with, finally, a presentation of survey findings.

2. Research methodology

In an attempt to explore the professional realities of the interlingual subtitling industry, as well as the working environment of subtitlers, an online survey was used as the main research instrument in this study. Questionnaire surveys tend to be popular research tools because they constitute a relatively objective and efficient means of collecting information concerning people's knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours (Oppenheim 1992; Sapsford 1999). With the advancement of telecommunications technology and the prevalence of the Internet, online surveys have gradually replaced traditional data-gathering methods such as paper-and-pencil interviewing, mail surveys, telephone surveys and so on. According to Wright (2005), there are three main advantages to online survey research – access, time, and cost – which will be further elaborated below.

The Internet can provide access to unique populations, particularly those who would be difficult to reach through other channels, which is the case of subtitlers, who usually work independently with no fixed working hours or permanent places of work. Online surveys can also shorten the time needed by researchers for data collection. Even if it were possible to find an equivalent number of subtitlers in one location, the process would still be very time consuming. In addition, this method also makes it possible for researchers to collect and monitor data while working on other tasks, thus saving time (Andrews *et al*. 2003). Using an electronic tool can save money not only on paper, but also on other costs that might be incurred through travel, printing, postage, and so on (Ilieva *et al.* 2002).

The design of the questionnaire survey was based on a number of relevant survey reports on the translation industry, such as the *Comparative Income of Literary Translators in Europe* published in 2008 by the Conseil Européen des Associations de Traducteurs Littéraires (Fock *et al*. 2008), and the unpublished MA dissertation entitled *A Quantitative Study on Subtitling Rates*, written by Reyntjens in 2005.

The survey started to gather basic information from respondents and the broad questions asked at the beginning became increasingly narrow in scope, in keeping with the "funnel approach" suggested by Oppenheim (1992: 110). Open-ended questions and comment boxes were used in moderation in order to elicit more specific answers. As Frazer and Lawley (2000) state, open-ended questions allow respondents to express themselves freely without limiting their responses. This method seemed to suit the respondents, who prefered to answer in their own words. The survey underwent various pre-tests, with the questions being revisited, developed and further enhanced through meetings and correspondence with a dozen scholars and experienced subtitlers from ESIST and Subtle, ensuring the effectiveness and efficiency of the questionnaire. A pilot test was later conducted on a small sample of five freelance subtitlers to ensure applicability. as recommended by Ballinger and Davey (1998: 549),this phrase was included to test whether the questionnaire was easy to complete, verify that the questions could be understood and that the required time frame for completion was realistic. The survey was then launched on SurveyGizmo, an online survey site, in May 2010.

3. Survey respondents' background information

The survey was open to all subtitlers, irrespective of their country of operation or language combination(s). The final population of respondents comprised 429 professionals located in the following 39 countries by the end of October 2010: Argentina (1.9%), Australia (0.9%), Austria (1.2%), Belgium (2.6%), Brazil (2.6%), Canada (2.3%), Chile (0.2%), China (including Hong Kong) (0.9%), Croatia (0.7%), Czech Republic (1.2%), Denmark (6.3%), Estonia (0.2%), Finland (9.8%), France (6.5%), Germany (5.8%), Greece (2.8%), Hungary (0.2%), Iran (0.5%), Israel (0.2%), Italy (4.0%), Netherlands (12.3%), New Zealand (0.2%), Norway (5.6%), Poland (1.4%), Portugal (1.6%), Republic of Ireland (0.2%), Romania (1.4%), Serbia (0.5%), Slovakia (1.9%), Slovenia (0.5%), Spain (6.3%), Sweden (1.9%), Switzerland (0.2%), Taiwan (0.5%), Thailand (0.2%), Turkey (0.9%), United Kingdom (11.9%), United States (1.4%) and Venezuela (0.5%). The overwhelming majority of subtitlers (87.7%) were from European and the rest were distributed all over the world with the exception of Africa.

The clients, i.e. translation agencies, subtitling studios or direct clients, identified by the respondents also came from numerous geographical areas reflective of the sample distribution for subtitlers. The results also revealed that the main clients and commissioners of 17.5% of the respondents were based in more than one country, in line with globalisation trends found in many other professions nowadays.

The respondents translated from 20 source languages (SLs); 83% mainly translated from English, foregrounding the predominant position of this language in the audiovisual industry. A total of 36 respondents worked from more than one main SL, that is, they usually translated from a couple of languages giving a total count is 465 instead of 429. Details concerning the SLs are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Respondents SLs

Language	Count	Language	Count
English	357	Chinese	2
French	31	Finnish	2
German	22	Portuguese	2
Spanish	13	Russian	2
Italian	9	Czech	1
Dutch	6	Frisian	1
Swedish	5	Hindi	1
Danish	3	Japanese	1
Norwegian	3	Persian	1
Arabic	2	Turkish	1

As for target languages (TLs), respondents translated into 30 languages in total. Eight respondents used two main working languages so that the total count is 437. Details concerning the TLs are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Respondents TLs

Language	Count	Language	Count
Dutch	66	Czech	5
English	57	Chinese	4
Finnish	41	Catalan	3
French	35	Croatian	3
Spanish	35	Turkish	3
Danish	28	Arabic	2
German	27	Persian	2
Norwegian	25	Serbian	2
Italian	21	Slovenian	2
Portuguese	20	Estonian	1
Swedish	15	Flemish	1
Greek	14	Galician	1
Romanian	8	Hebrew	1
Slovak	7	Hungarian	1
Polish	6	Russian	1

Translation into the subtitlers' mother tongues or main languages seemed to be the norm, with 418 (97.4%) of the 429 respondents subtitling routinely in this direction. This supports the traditional view that translators should translate only into their mother tongue, as the essence and flavour of the target language is more likely to be attained by native speakers. As Newmark (1988: 3) argues, translating into one's language of habitual use is "the only way [one can] translate naturally, accurately and with maximum effectiveness", a mantra that has been traditionally embraced by numerous scholars and professionals.

Translation into a non-mother tongues is in fact frowned upon and considered to be doomed to failure by many scholars (Dickins *et al*. 2002; Duff 1981). However, according to the survey results, the situation may be changing in the audiovisual industry, as a substantive 37.8% of the respondents highlighted the fact that they were asked to work outside of their mother tongues or main languages to a varying degree (from 'sometimes' to 'always'), as shown in Figure 1.

The gender ratio of the respondents was close to 25% male and 75% female. Among participants, 55.7% were aged 25-40, 34.5% were aged 41-55 and the remaining were either younger than 25 (2.6%) or older than 55 (7.2%) years old. Over 50% of respondents held a university degree, 35.4% had a postgraduate degree, and 5.8% a high school degree. Only one participant's level of study was lower than high school, and the remaining 5.3% mostly either held a diploma or had studied, but not to degree level. Regarding qualifications and specialisation, 72.3% of the respondents indicated that they possessed a qualification in translation and only 32.9% stated that they had achieved a specialised qualification in subtitling, tallying with the fact that audiovisual translation (AVT) training is a relatively new area in most educational institutions throughout the world.

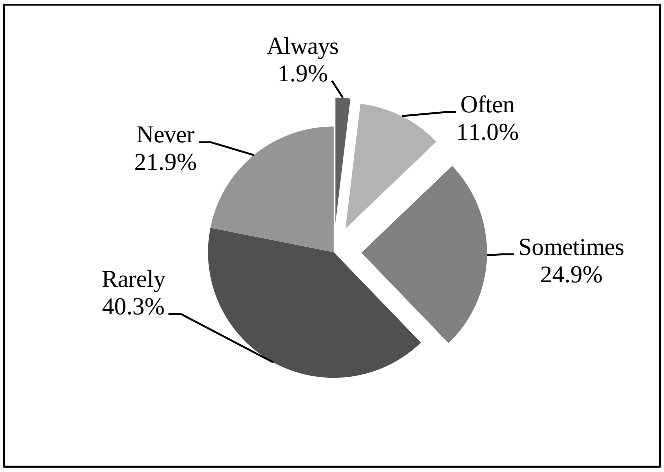

Fig. 1 Frequency of working into languages other than mother tongue

In terms of subtitling experience, 85.1% of the respondents had been working in subtitling for at least two years, of whom 27.7% had done so for 2-5 years, 25.2% for 6-10 years, 18.4% for 11-15 years, and 13.8% for more than 15 years. A low 22.4% of the participants specialised and worked exclusively in subtitling, while

77.6% did it as part of their portfolio and also accepted other forms of translation assignments. With regard to the respondents' main fields of work in subtitling, the top three were, in decreasing order, 'TV series and sitcoms', 'films', and 'documentaries'.

4. Survey findings

Now that the background information behind the survey respondents has been outlined, the key findings of the survey will be discussed. The discussion will begin with the results with regard to rates and will be followed by an analysis of a wide range of issues, including: negotiation power, royalties, acknowledgement credits, notices and deadlines, contracts and materialisation of jobs, the use of software, the provision and quality of supporting materials and the changes experienced since the economic downturn.

4.1 Subtitling rates

Pay rate is a fundamental criterion behind accepting or declining a job offer and is, therefore, a crucial component of translators working conditions. Questions concerning remuneration were included in the survey, with results indicating that rates not only varied greatly from country to country, but also from person to person. The respondents were paid in 24 currencies in total, the main forms of legal tender being Euros (EUR: 54%), US Dollars (USD: 14%), and Pound Sterling (GBP: 9%). The Euro was the currency in which more than half of the respondents were regularly paid and displayed the widest range of rates. The following analysis will, therefore, be mainly based on the data reported with respect to the Euro.

According to the various types of task performed, respondents were asked to provide their average rates where relevant, based on one of the per unit prices normally applied in the industry, that is, per programme minute, per working hour, per subtitle, per 1,000 SL words, and per 1,000 TL words. Other variables have also been taken into account to reflect the complexity this field in the industry, such as whether the script is provided by the commissioner, whether the subtitles are originated and the subtitler is responsible for time-cueing or whether a template with the master subtitles is provided by the client and the technical dimension is therefore not required.

A summary of the average subtitling rate ranges elicited in the survey is shown in the following tables. The results are displayed according to the type of task in the following order: (1) only translating from a template, (Table 3); (2) only time-cueing (Table 4); and (3) time-cueing and translating (Table 5).

Table 3 Ranges of average subtitling rates – only translating from a template

Unit	Highest	Lowest
Per programme minute (PPM)	€15	€0.12
Per working hour	€100	€15
Per subtitle	€3	€0.02
Per 1,000 SL words	€120	€15
Per 1,000 TL words	€280	€50

Table 3 shows the ranges of average subtitling rates received by respondents when they translated subtitles from a template into their main languages; that is, the task did not include time-cueing or spotting and they focused solely on linguistic transfer.

If attention is paid to the range of per-programme-minute (ppm) rates, it can be seen, for example, that the highest average rate reported was 15 euros and that 12 cents was the lowest. The respondent, who was paid the highest average rate (known hereafter as respondent F) in the above example and her typical client were both located in France, while the respondent who received the lowest average rate (known hereafter as respondent P) was based in Portugal, the same country as her client. Both respondents fell into the same age category, i.e. 25-40 years, and TV series and sitcoms was the main genre in which they had been working. We will now look at the main differences regarding their background to find out potential reasons for this striking discrepancy in rates offered.

Firstly, in terms of their level of education, respondent F had achieved a doctoral degree in subtitling while respondent P held a qualification in subtitling at degree level. Secondly, regarding work experience, respondent F had more than 10 years' work experience in subtitling, while respondent P reported less than two. Thirdly, when looking at the ratio of subtitling to other translation work, the questionnaires show that respondent F worked exclusively in subtitling, while the percentage of respondent P's total output in subtitling was in the 21-40 percent range, with a tendency to increase. Fourthly, in terms of the typical deadlines set by the clients, for a subtitling assignment requiring translation from template, a typical client usually allowed respondent F five days for a 60-minute programme; but respondent P usually worked with very tight deadlines and was given only 12 hours to complete the subtitling of a 40-minute programme.

Considering the level of acquired qualification in subtitling, the number of years of subtitling experience, as well as the ratio of subtitling work to total translation output of both respondents, a higher level of pay would naturally be expected for respondent F. In addition, the level of income in France is generally higher than in Portugal.[1] Although the survey results confirm this logical deduction, in this case the average rate regularly received by respondent F is some 125 times higher than the typical rate paid to respondent P. The difference is staggering, even if we take into account not only their work experience and qualifications, but also the economic status of the two countries where the respondents and their usual clients were based. From the perspective of economic status, France has the world's 5th largest national economy by nominal GDP as of 2010.[2] Portugal, on the other hand, occupied thirty-seventh place. As of the same year, the French GDP per capita was 39,186 U.S. dollars, whereas in Portugal was 21,382 U.S. dollars.[3] Despite the fact that France has 1.8 times the GDP of Portugal, both countries are still categorised by the World Bank as high-income economies.[4]

Among the respondents located in France and paid in Euros, average ppm rates fell in a range between 2.3 to 15 euros. As to the responses from Portuguese subtitlers regarding their remuneration in Euros, the range was between 12 cents to 2.8 euros ppm; one aspect of note is that the second lowest average rate in Portugal was 1.2 euros, ten times higher than the lowest of 12 cents. These ranges covering the maximal and minimal rates imply the existence of extreme swings in terms of rates, potentially symptomatic of a somewhat dysfunctional business, even though some of these discrepancies might represent rare cases.

The reason for including the responses from respondents F and P in the discussion is that they serve not only to highlight some of the most pertinent issues in this industry, but also because the case of respondent P is not isolated. There were other respondents from Portugal being paid at a similar rate for other types of assignment. The extreme discrepancies shown by comparing the answers provided by respondent F and respondent P represent just some of the many an revealed in the survey results. It is undeniable face that the country in which the subtitler works and where the typical client is located, together with the work experience and qualifications of the subtitler, the type of genre being subtitled, the level of difficulty of the task at hand and the urgency of the delivery, among other variables, all contribute to the level of pay. However, the enormous discrepancy observed, not only among, but also within countries, still indicates that the turmoil in terms of the rates being offered in the subtitling industry is a prevalent global phenomenon.

The case of respondent P and respondent F may also suggest a potential connection between levels of pay and the support of unions and/or related professional bodies. In France, subtitlers are supported by the Association des Traducteurs et Adaptateurs de l'Audiovisuel (www.traducteurs-av.org), a rather active and visible AVT association, whilst in Portugal no such support exists for subtitlers. This might also explain the fact that the range of rates paid in France is narrower than in Portugal.

The rates displayed in Table 4 are for the task of time-cueing only, as subtitlers are sometimes asked to work only on this technical aspect without being involved in the translation. Time-cueing, also known as cueing, originating or spotting, consists of "determining the in and out times of subtitles, i.e. the exact moment when a subtitle should appear on screen and when it should disappear" (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 88).

Table 4 Ranges of average subtitling rates – only time-cueing

Unit	Highest	Lowest
With script, per programme minute (PPM)	€12	€0.3
With script, per working hour	€30	€19.5
With script, per subtitle	€2	€0.05
Without script, per programme minute (PPM)	€16	€ 0.27
Without script, per working hour	€30	€15
Without script, per subtitle	€3	€0.05

Subtitlers are occasionally asked to do both, i.e. time-cueing and translation, and charge accordingly. The average subtitling rates reported by respondents for these tasks are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Ranges of average subtitling rates – time-cueing and translation

Unit	Highest	Lowest
With script, per programme minute (PPM)	€28.5	€1
With script, per working hour	€35	€20
With script, per subtitle	€2	€0.2

With script, per 1,000 SL words	€130	n/a
With script, per 1,000 TL words	€130	n/a
Without script, per programme minute (PPM)	€28.5	€0.18
Without script, per working hour	€28.6	n/a
Without script, per subtitle	€1.9	€0.21
Without script, per 1,000 SL words	€130	€15
Without script, per 1,000 TL words	€130	€50

In addition to translating and time-cueing, revision and proofreading are also part of the subtitling process. According to Gouadec (2007: 24), proofreading "consists in correcting any kind of blatant defects (spelling or grammar mistakes, missing bits, faulty formatting) and pointing out any apparent defects, discrepancies or translation errors". Although for some professional revision involves making appropriate amendments to improve translation quality and proofreading is limited to making only necessary corrections, both terms are often used interchangeably. The rates for revision and proofreading are usually much lower than for translating subtitles, as illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6 Ranges of average revision and proofreading rates

Unit	Highest	Lowest
Per Programme Minute (PPM)	€4	€0.03
Per Working Hour	€56	€10
Per Subtitle	€0.3	€0.15
Per 1,000 SL words	€40	€10
Per 1,000 TL words	€40	n/a

Tables 3-6 refer to the activities most frequently carried out by subtitlers, although not all respondents were involved in some of them (revision and proofreading, for example). It should also be noted that these tasks would well change in the near future due to developments under way in this field. For example, as a result of the increasing interest in the application of machine translation to subtitling, reduced rates for the post-editing of machine-translated output may very soon become a reality, posing a further challenge to subtitlers.

In addition to the type of assignment, there are various potential reasons for the differences in rates. As indicated in the previous discussion, since the education level and qualifications of the subtitlers may, to some extent, influence their level of pay, an examination of the information provided by the respondents in this respect may be of interest. Participants who were paid the highest average rates in each category were analysed further in order to ascertain any possible correlations in the information provided and to establish whether there were any similarities in their background characteristics. The results, however, indicate a lack of homogeneous features in education and qualification levels, as well as work experience among the respondents. This also points to a worrying state of affairs in the subtitling industry in terms of market pay rates and the recognition of the backgrounds and expertise of professionals.

Apart from qualifications and work experience, the type of product subtitled is another factor that may contribute to differences in rates. 50.1% of the respondents indicated that they were paid different rates according to the programme genre, and 11.2% declared that they were always paid differently; however, there were still 38.7% whose pay never differed according to the type of programme. Among those whose rates differed depending on the product subtitled, the highest paid genre was 'documentaries', followed in descending order by 'films', 'corporate videos', 'TV series and sitcoms' and 'DVD bonus material'.

It would seem logical to assume that, in general, tasks with a more urgent deadline are better paid than those with generous time allowances. And yet, according to the information provided by subtitlers, no correlation was identified between the urgency of delivery of a task and the level of pay awarded, although some respondents did acknowledge that they received a bonus for working with urgent deadlines. In a rather ironic twist, many respondents who often worked with tight deadlines were paid a relatively low rate when compared to those who were usually given more generous deadlines.

In addition to the level of remuneration paid, the terms and conditions regulating payment also play a crucial role in terms of cash flow and are very important to subtitlers, particularly to those working as freelancers. Among the respondents, 46.2% received payment within 30 days of submitting work, 45.2% within 60 days, 6.5% within 90 days and the remaining 2.1% usually received payments only after 90 days. Payments, however, could be further delayed. Only 43.1% of the respondents 'always' received punctual payments; 40.6% 'often' received payments on time, whilst 11.4% stated they 'sometimes' received payments on time. 3.5% of the participants commented that their clients ‘rarely’ made timely payments, and 1.4% claimed that their clients ‘never’ paid on time.

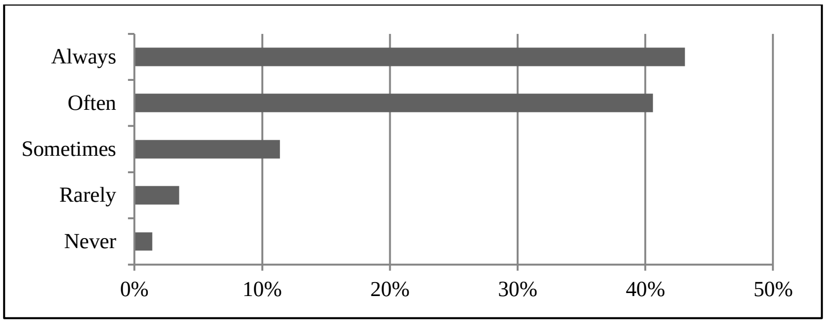

Fig.2 Frequency of timely payments from clients

4.2 Negotiation power

Following from the above discussion on rates, this section will analyse the survey results regarding who sets the rates as well as payment terms and conditions. Only 4.9% of the respondents set their own rates, 8.9% mentioned that their unions negotiated on their behalf, 17.3% negotiated the rates with their clients, and 69% usually accepted the rates offered by their clients without further negotiation.[5]

In some countries, notably those where the (audiovisual) translation sector is more mature, subtitlers were be able to ask their unions to negotiate rates on their behalf. This was the case for respondents from Canada, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Venezuela. The results regarding terms and conditions of payment echo the findings from rate negotiation: 69.5% of the respondents accepted the conditions of payment set by their clients, 15.2% negotiated with clients, 8.6% asked their unions to negotiate on their behalf, and only 6.8% set conditions of payment themselves.

The relationship between negotiation power and the respondents’ age, level of education, qualifications and subtitling experience have been examined in further detail, with the results showing that there is no apparent correlations among the variables studied. However, information provided by respondents did highlight a trend among those who negotiated with their clients, shown in Figure 3; the ratio did increase exponentially with subtitling experience. Meanwhile, the ratio for those whose clients set the rates also decreased as subtitling experience increased. This tendency suggests that more experienced subtitlers are more likely to negotiate with their clients. Nevertheless, this might only reveal an inclination to negotiate and not necessarily an increase in negotiation power.

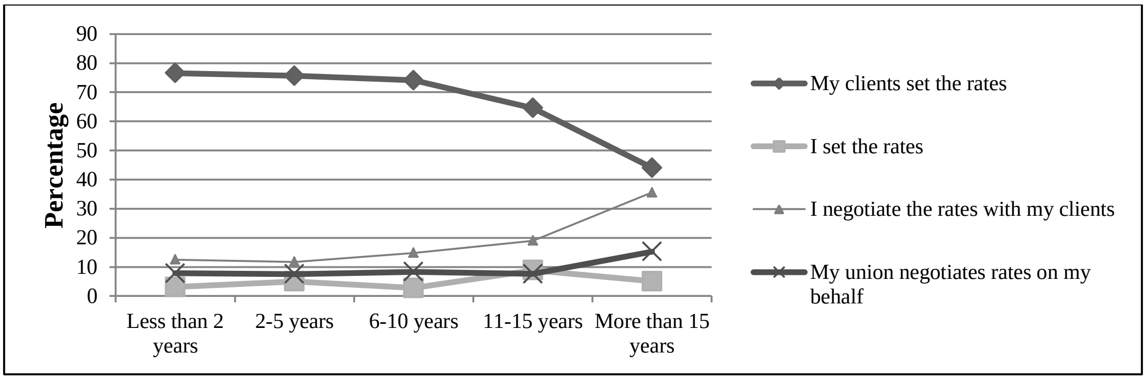

Fig. 3 Negotiation power vs. subtitling experience rates

The different ways in which the respondents engage professionally with their clients may shed some light on the reasons behind the weak negotiation power shown, particularly when it comes to setting rates and conditions of payment. Firstly, working through translation agencies might decrease the possibilities for negotiation. According to the survey results, a meagre 20% of the respondents only worked directly with clients, while more than double that figure (43.6%) took assignments solely through translation agencies. Some of these agencies tended to operate globally and had fixed policies in place for determining rates and terms of payment, thus leaving no room for negotiation for the translators, who could only accept or decline. Even if the companies were willing to negotiate with translators who were more experienced and competent, the margin for manoeuvre was normally very limited as the intermediaries also needed to retain profits.

Secondly, ‘client concentration’ might also act as a contributive factor in terms of the decrease in the negotiating power experienced by some translators, as they relied heavily on a limited source for their work assignments and might have risked losing clients if they were perceived to be belligerent. In this respect, the survey results indicate that 30.8% of the respondents only worked with a single client on a regular basis, 47.3% with two/three clients, 10.3% with four/five clients, 5.1% with more than five clients, and a final 6.5% stated that they did not work with any clients on a regular basis. Although working with only a couple of clients did not necessarily lead to an unstable source of income, depending of course on the volume of work commissioned, the nature of such an attachment could contribute to an increase in the respondent vulnerability in terms of negotiating power. Thus, translators sometimes have no choice but to accept unsatisfactory rates and payment terms if they want to continue working with their clients. Of course, this dependency can also be observed in the case of novice subtitlers without sufficient market experiences or who are prepared to work for any rate in the hope that they can gain experience and their income will increase in the future.

Factors such as working habits also tended to influence subtitlers’ negotiation powers. In this regard, 92.3% of the respondents claimed that they ‘always’ (72.5%) or ‘mostly’ (19.8%) worked for their typical clients from home. The results are summarised in Figure 4 .

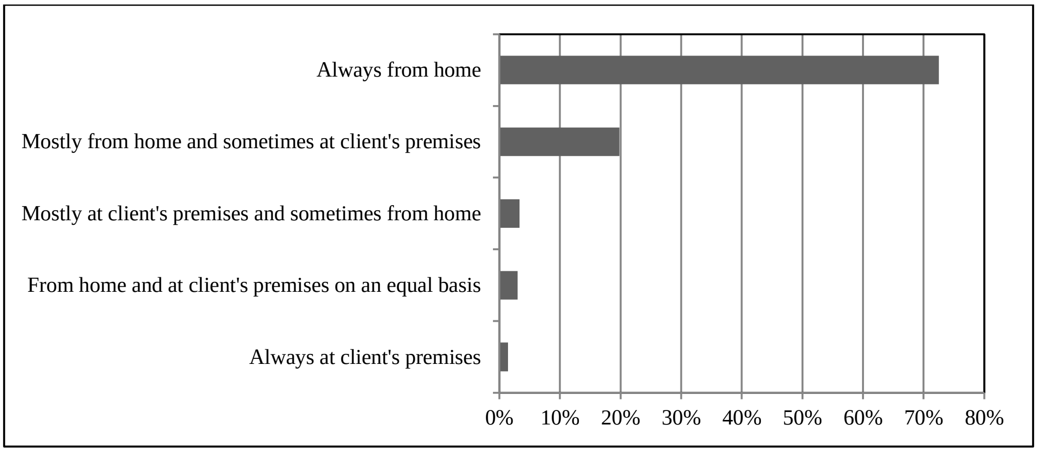

Fig. 4 Work premises

Working from home, and in isolation, can be seen as the third factor influencing subtitlers’ negotiation power, as it is thus more difficult for them to remain informed or to be aware of the rates charged by other colleagues, due to the market’s deliberate opacity regarding these issues. This can be particularly problematic in the case of inexperienced translators, who may not know the parameters of a reasonable price range and therefore risk undercutting the market. Additionally, it is also highly unlikely that they would turn down assignments paid at lower than average rates when they do not receive other, better-paid job offers.

4.3 Royalties

As Downey (2008: 119) states, “cinematic subtitling is often performed after the fact on a piece [by piece] basis by subcontracted firms or individuals not connected with the initial production process and who do not reap royalties from subsequent distribution”. It is, indeed, uncommon for subtitlers to share the royalties generated from the programmes they have subtitled or to possess the copyright for their work. The situation seems to be different in the case of literary translators, who are more likely to sign contracts in which their right to receive royalties is acknowledged. However, even in Europe, where the translation industry is in general more mature, the practice does not seem to be commonplace and only exists “in the major countries where publishers sell large numbers of books (10,000 copies and over)” (Fock *et al.* 2008: 30).

Returning to the field of subtitling, when asked about receiving royalties, only 2.8% of the respondents stated that this was ‘normal’, and their typical clients/commissioners were from countries such as Australia, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Thailand, and the United States. An additional 2.6% of respondents claimed to have received royalties ‘often’, and their typical clients/commissioners were based in countries such as Denmark, France, Finland, Norway, Slovenia, and the United States. The majority (84.2%) of the respondents indicated that they had ‘never’ received royalties from the re-sale of a programme they had subtitled from one client to another. The results concerning the practice of royalty payments are summarised in Figure 5.

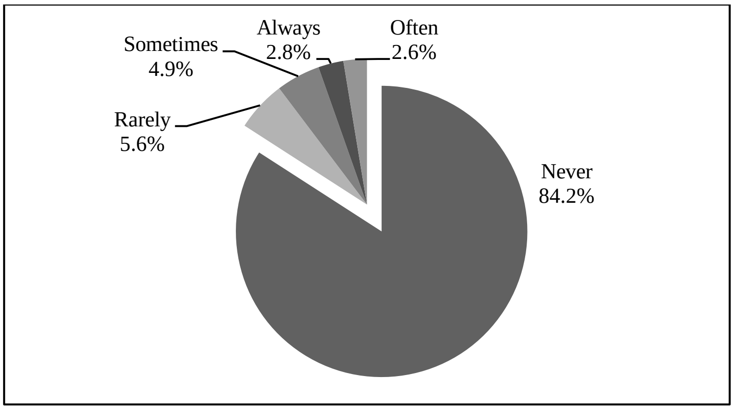

Fig. 5 Practice of royalty payments

Among those who stated that they had received royalties at different levels, 15% admitted to receiving a 50% royalty rate,[6] and the countries in which their typical clients/commissioners were based were Denmark, Finland, Germany, and Sweden; however, one respondent received a 30% royalty rate from typical clients/commissioners from Greece. The situation facing the remaining respondents varied greatly, with royalty rates being mostly under 15%. Some participants stated that they received rates on a negotiation basis, others mentioned that different rates were applied depending on the type of programme, while others said they were not sure, as they rarely received royalties or were unaware of the rates because they had always received lump-sum payments.

Only 6.5% of the sample indicated that they had 'always' received royalties from secondary use through joint collective societies such as Copydan, Copyswede, and Norwaco; 3.7% claimed that they had done so 'often', 7% 'sometimes', 3.5% 'rarely', and the remaining 79.3% confirmed that they had never had such an experience. Among those who had received royalties through societies, most rates ranged from 5%-or-below to 11-15%. Some, however, did not know the amount or the rates they had received (16.9%), while others had received a lump-sum payment on an annual basis, which varied according to the different societies.

Based on the survey results, the royalty rights of subtitlers seem to depend more on the willingness shown by some companies operating from certain countries (e.g. Finland, Norway, Denmark, France, etc.) than on any legislation safeguard.

4.4 Acknowledgement credits

Despite the campaign led by some translators and subtitling associations to raise the visibility of professional subtitlers, the fact remains that, for many companies and viewers, the best subtitles are those that are not noticed. In this respect, the reality is that subtitlers are more often perceived when they make mistakes than when they produce successful translations. On the part of the professionals themselves, the survey results reveal, as demonstrated in Figure 6, that there was a strong desire among the respondents to raise their visibility both socially and professionally. This was attested by 74.4% of respondents who claimed that they 'always' preferred to have their names appear on the credits of subtitled programmes.

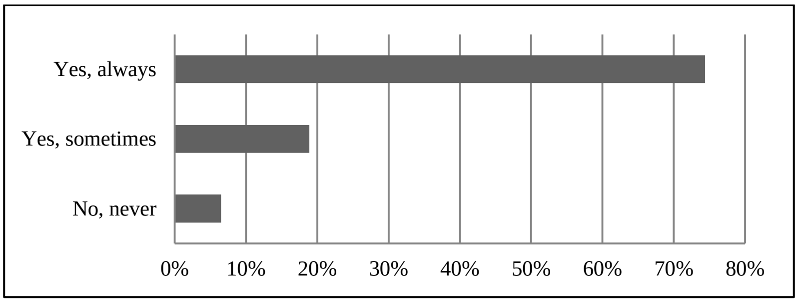

Fig. 6 Preference for being acknowledged

However, professional practice seems to point in a different direction. As demonstrated in Figure 7, the survey results show that only 24.7% had 'always' been credited for their work, whereas 14.7% had 'never' been given credit for their contributions and 5.1% did not know if they had been credited. The remaining 55.5% had been credited at different frequency levels from 'rarely' to 'often'. It should be noted that the percentage of respondents who had 'always' been credited for their work in Scandinavian countries such as Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden was much higher than the rest of the countries under analysis (either close to or above 50%).

This might be because 'subtitlers' credit' is either required by law, or because subtitlers are supported by strong unions in these countries.

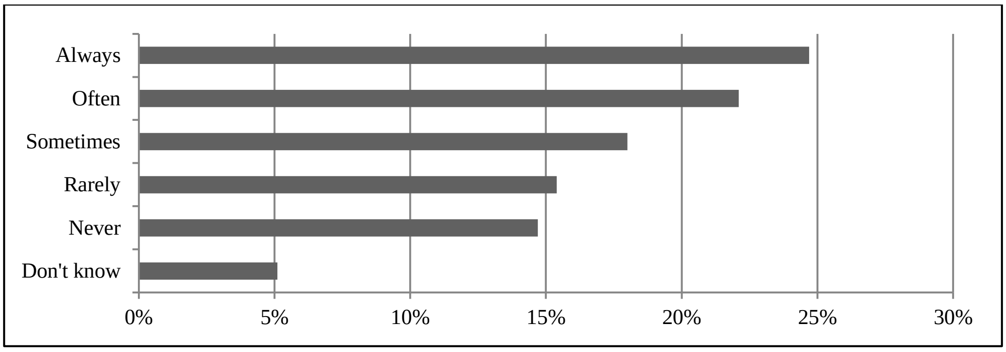

Fig. 7 Professional practice as regards the inclusion of the subtitler's name in the acknowledgement credits

Despite the preference of the majority, not all subtitlers were equally vocal or enthusiastic about their visibility. In fact, 6.5% did not want to be credited, with 19.1% preferring to be credited 'only under certain conditions' (see Figure 6). The reasons for such a preference varied from respondent to respondent, yet on the whole, they wanted to be credited only when they had been given enough time to work on the assignments, had been given the chance to agree with the revised version, personally liked the programme and when they had worked directly with clients instead of working through agencies. In other words, the confidence level that the respondents had in their own work strongly influenced their attitudes toward being (in)visible. Once again, this approach seems to be different from the practices observed in the world of literary translation, where the name of the person who has carried out the translation is published in most works.

4.5 Notices and deadlines

Short notices and tight deadlines to deliver work were a common reality for the respondents: 17.5% of the participants were usually given assignments with less than 24 hours' notice, 24.5% had 1-2 days, 32.4% received 3-7 days, and 11.9% were given 7-10 days. The situation varied among the remainder of the sample, with some stating that they worked on a monthly plan, some declaring that they proactively asked their clients for assignments when they had the time and some stating that they were simply given a different length of notice every time they were offered a job.

Concerning the time given to complete an assignment, the answers showed a marked variation, primarily based on the type of work and the duration of the programme to be subtitled, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Deadline range

	Most urgent		**Least urgent**	
Type of work	**Programme length**	**Time given**	**Programme length**	**Time given**
Translating from template	20 mins	3-4 hours	Varies	As much as needed
Time-cueing and translation	20-35 mins	8 hours	Varies	As much as needed
Proofreading	25 mins	1 hour	Varies	As much as needed

The tightest deadline was reported by a Turkish respondent, with a typical client/commissioner also based in Turkey. The reported answers not only cover a wide range of programme lengths and given times, but also vary greatly from person to person. Tellingly, only one Swiss respondent, with a typical client/commissioner in Switzerland, was able to decide her own deadlines, usually allowing more than two weeks to subtitle a 60-minute programme. The fact that many respondents have been forced to work to tight deadlines to some extent justifies their attitudes towards their (in)visibility, as discussed in section 4.4.

The survey results also highlight the tension that exists between tight deadlines and output quality, as this appears to be an issue for the majority of respondents. A total of 67.6% of participants considered that tight deadlines would affected the overall quality of their output, with 28.7% admitting that this tension existed to a 'strong' degree and 38.9% to a 'moderate' degree, as is shown in Figure 8. 38.5% of the respondents were convinced that generous deadlines would 'very much' help to increase the quality of the results they delivered, as more time could be devoted not only to documenting and finding appropriate solutions, but also to conducting a final quality check and revision.

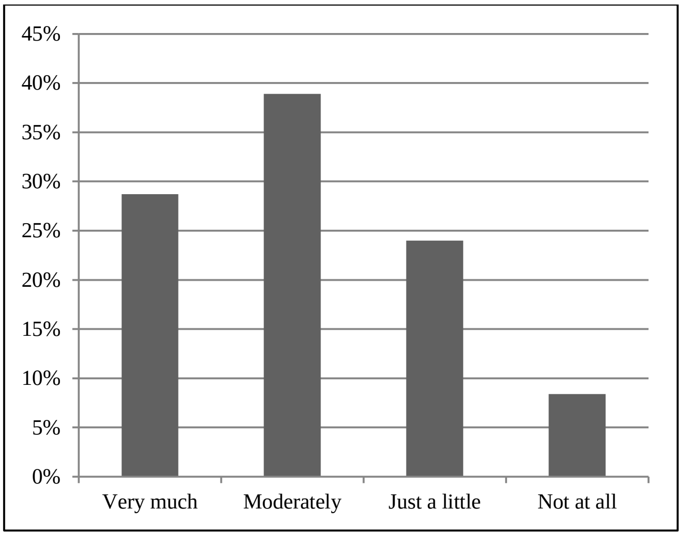

Fig. 8 Influence of tight deadlines on quality

4.6 Contracts and materialisation of jobs

Rules and regulations governing freelance practice vary from company to company, and from professional to professional, with some requiring clients, or being asked by clients, to sign contracts and purchase orders, whereas others tended to carry out the work on the basis of verbal agreements. Among the respondents, 20.3% stated that they had ‘always’ signed a contract with their clients before proceeding to translate the programme, while 24% had ‘never’ signed one; the remaining 55.7% signed at different frequency levels: 16.3% ‘often’, 21.4% ‘sometimes’, and 18% ‘rarely’. The survey results indicate that signing a contract with clients is not yet a routine practice in the industry.

One of the risks inherent in the profession is an assignment failing to materialise even if a contract has been signed between the parties, although according to the survey results, this does not seem to be very common. Among respondents, 1.9% declared they had ‘often’ encountered such a situation, with their typical client/commissioner based in Argentina, Brazil, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom; 19.3% had failed to receive assignments ‘sometimes’, whilst 50.6% confirmed that the situation had happened to them ‘rarely’. On the flip side, 28.2% of the respondents affirmed that their assignments always materialised following a contract.

4.7 Use of subtitling software

In practice, the support received by a subtitler in terms of dedicated software and working files such as scripts and consistency sheets is very likely to increase in direct proportion to the professionalism and established level of their clients. According to the survey results, a substantial 73.7% of participants declared that they had ‘always’ worked with subtitling equipment, whilst 6.1% had ‘never’ worked with it. The remaining 20.2% had worked with subtitling equipment at different frequency levels, from ‘rarely’ to ‘often’. Among those who worked with subtitling equipment, the majority used professional software. The above results are summarised in Figure 9.

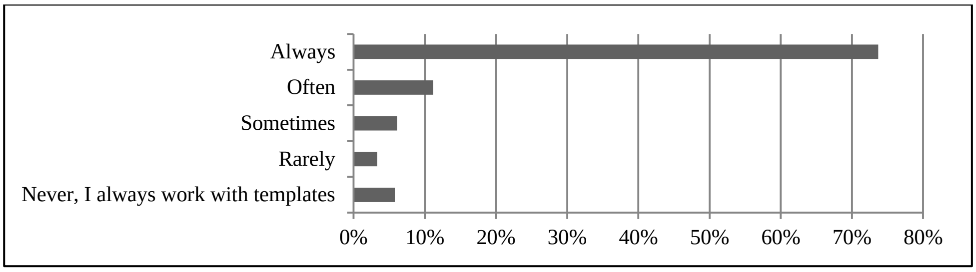

Fig. 9 Frequency of working with subtitling equipment

Among those who used subtitling software, 61% only used a single subtitling program, 30.3% made use of two, 5.3% used three, 1.7% used four, and the remaining 1.7% used more than four programs. The various professional subtitling programs mentioned by survey participants include WinCAPS, Spot, Swift, Titlevision, EZTitles, GTS, Ayato, Tempo, FAB, Eddie, Monal, Screen, TextYle, and Polyscript. As for freeware, the most popular programs were Subtitle Workshop, VobSub, VisualSubSync and offline versions of some commercial programmes such as Belle Nuit. Among those who used professional subtitling software, 46.6% bought subtitling software on their own, 34.3% used fully-fledged professional subtitling software provided for free by their clients, 10.9% used a freelancer version with reduced functionality, also provided for free by their clients, 7.7% paid to use a fully-fledged version provided by their clients, and 0.5% paid to use a freelance version with reduced functionality provided by their clients.

As regards technical support, among the respondents who used subtitling programs, 47.6% did not receive any technical support, 40% received support financed by the clients and 12.4% paid for it themselves. Among the latter, six respondents indicated that they did not pay extra for the service as it was already included in the price of the software program. The fees that respondents paid for technical support varied greatly from €60 per hour to €1,000 per year.

4.8 Provision and quality of supporting material

In addition to subtitling software, supporting material is also essential concomitant in the process of subtitling. In an ideal situation, material such as dialogue lists, templates, audiovisual programmes and consistency/terminology sheets should be provided to subtitlers in order to facilitate their task and to boost the consistency and quality of the output. For example, when a subtitler has to translate everything from the soundtrack without a script, the time needed will be significantly prolonged, and efficiency as well as accuracy can be substantially reduced. The chance of mishearing some words or expressions from the original can also increase considerably, sometimes leading to mistranslations. Table 8 refers to the frequency with which respondents received different types of supporting material in real-life scenarios.

Table 8. Supporting material provision

Type of material	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Guidelines	26.3%	27%	18.2%	15.9%	12.6%
Dialogue lists/Scripts	31%	47.3%	11.2%	5.4%	5.1%
Templates	20%	21.9%	20.3%	14.9%	22.9%
Audiovisual material	71.8%	9.3%	4%	4.2%	10.7%
Consistency/Terminology sheets	6.5%	13.1%	21%	27.5%	32%

It should be noted that some respondents mentioned that they had to translate without access to audiovisual material, i.e. video clips. This approach endangers the quality of the subtitling output, as images are a crucial part of the audiovisual programme and should be taken into consideration when producing subtitles that are coherent and cohesive with the overall semiotic complex.

The quality of the supporting material provided to subtitlers can also influence the quality of the subtitling output substantially. For instance, the audiovisual material may reach the subtitler in low resolution due to the fear of films or programmes being leaked before the official launch. The downside of this approach is that the resulting images are sometimes so blurry and fuzzy that the picture is unable to provide the subtitler with useful details. On the whole, the majority of respondents found the quality of the received materials either satisfactory or acceptable (albeit to various degrees), that is when they were available. The survey results concerning the perception of the respondents in relation to the quality of the main supporting material they had received from their typical clients are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Quality of the provided supporting material

Type of material	Very good	Good	Average	Fair	Poor	N/A
Dialogue lists/Scripts	16.3%	36.4%	29.1%	9.1%	2.6%	6.5%
Templates	12.6%	23.1%	21.7%	6.1%	7.7%	28.9%
Audiovisual material	21.5%	42.4%	23.3%	3.5%	2.3%	7.0%
Supplementary material (e.g. consistency sheets, glossaries, etc.)	4.2%	19.1%	19.8%	7.9%	8.2%	40.8%

The survey was set up to explore the correlation between the quality of the subtitling output and the quality of the supporting material. Although appreciation is necessarily subjective, the results show that there is, indeed, a clear correlation. The impact of different types of supporting material on output quality according to the subtitlers who completed the survey is shown in Table 10. In this regard, it seems that respondents greatly appreciate the quality of audiovisual material, dialogue lists and templates.

Table 10. Influence of the quality of supporting material on the final translation

Type of material	Very much	Moderate	Just a little	Not at all
Dialogue lists/Scripts	23.3%	36.4%	28%	12.3%
Templates	24.7%	31.7%	19.1%	24.5%
Audiovisual material	35.7%	36.8%	15.6%	11.9%
Supplementary material (e.g. consistency sheets, glossaries, etc.)	11.2%	27.7%	25.9%	35.2%

4.9 Changes since the economic downturn

The financial troubles that started in 2007-2008, affecting countries worldwide, developed rapidly into a profound economic crisis, which has had a tremendous impact on demand, investment and growth in many sectors. The subtitling industry has been no exception. This is why the survey also examined the resulting changes induced by the global economic crisis in the industry, with results grouped under four categories: (a) rates, (b) volume of work/clients, (c) payment terms and (d) procedures, all of which will be discussed in detail below.[7]

4.9.1. Rates

A total of 32.4% of the respondents noted that they had experienced diminished rate of pay, with levels varying from respondent to respondent, ranging from ‘slightly’, ‘lowered by a third’ up to ‘50% of the original rate’. Some respondents also pointed out that cuts in rates had begun even before the economic downturn and that they had been lowered several times prior to the point at which they filled in the survey. Cuts were implemented in many ways, with some companies negotiating lower prices with subtitlers, asking for discounts, lowering the price and adopting a take-or-leave-it policy or changing the payment policy from pay-per-subtitle to ppm. In addition, according to a couple of respondents, some subtitling studios had stopped offering bonuses for rushed assignments or programmes with high lexical density and a large number of subtitles. A Polish respondent commented that “[t]he rates are lower and there is no extra payment for a short notice assignment”. At the time of the survey, three respondents were either in negotiations with clients or had just been informed about potential rate cuts in their rates. Despite the fact that more than 30% of the respondents had experienced rate cuts, there were still five respondents (0.1%) whose rates had slightly increased. There was also one respondent who remarked that her rate was “initially reduced, but through negotiation the agreed final rate was even higher” than the one suggested originally.

4.9.2. Volume of work/clients

Changes affecting the volume of work varied from respondent to respondent, with some having suffered a decrease in job offers, while others had seen an increase in their workload. Overall, the results tend to be rather positive for freelance subtitlers. In the five years prior to the time of the completion of the survey, a total of 35.7% of the respondents reported that the subtitling output had decreased 'considerably' (21.2%) or 'slightly' (14.5%), whilst for a substantial 42.6%, it had increased 'slightly' (22.6%) or 'considerably' (20%); and for 21.7% it had 'remained the same'. In the opinion of some respondents, the increase in work was due to their establishment as credible professionals over the passage of time.

It is worth noting that, on occasion, decreased output was to some extent due to personal choice, as respondents had turned down job offers due to their personal unwillingness to compromise on new rates. As a respondent based in Finland commented: "[t]hey lowered the rate paid for programmes of a certain TV channel. I have refused to translate for this channel since then". There were also involuntary job losses and situations where respondents were simply assigned fewer contracts. The situation is gloomier for those who worked as in-house subtitlers and some were forced to shorten their working hours or days, whilst others lost their jobs altogether because their clients went bankrupt.

All in all, losses and gains in the job market clearly foreground the phenomenon of workload redistribution: those subtitlers who compromised on rates tended to benefit from a boost in their workload, whereas those who refused to accept lower rates were given fewer assignments.

4.9.3. Payment terms

Delays in payment were another issue reported by respondents as a collateral consequence of the cash-flow problems that had become more acute with the economic crisis. Nonetheless, the percentages are relatively low. Indeed, only 5.1% of respondents mentioned experiencing either delayed payments and/or extended payment terms, e.g. from 30 days to 60 days, or from 60 days to 90 days. Some respondents further indicated that they had even started to request upfront payment because some of their clients had gone bankrupt before making payments, thus incurring a loss. A respondent based in France also added that she had compromised on lower rates, but had "ask[ed] for payment on or before delivery".

4.9.4. Procedures

A small fraction of respondents had also been confronted with procedural changes: 2.8% pointed out that their typical clients had made procedural changes over the five years prior to the time they replied to the questionnaire. Some companies had chosen to reduce their budgets for procedures such as second proofreading/final editing, as well as requiring subtitlers to perform time-cueing. In relation to the task of time-cueing subtitles, concerns about the declining quality of master files due to budget cuts were also expressed. The reasons put forward were that clients no longer had enough manpower to take care of all the tasks in a satisfactory manner or they had started to hire cheap, low-quality labour to reduce costs. As one respondent based in the Czech Republic stated, "[my clients] decreased the rates, started co-operating with cheaper, less qualified translators". Along these lines, some of the respondents reported that they had been asked to take charge of more research and documentation tasks, such as creating consistency guidelines and compiling vocabulary lists.

According to the survey findings, the economic crisis has certainly compounded the difficulties with respect to the working conditions of many subtitlers and the state of affairs within the industry. However, further research is required to investigate the development of the ensuing situations.

5. Conclusion

Given the broad differences in practices and rates, not only between countries but also within the same country, drawing general conclusions on subtitlers working conditions is a difficult task. Nonetheless, the purpose of this chapter is to present empirical findings in order to offer an overview of the subtitling industry. Although the research scope is limited to the perspective of subtitlers, this study has yielded rich findings regarding the working conditions under which they perform their activities in different countries. One aspect that should be noted is that the survey results are more representative of Europe, where the majority of the respondents were based, despite the fact that some were from North and South America, Asia, the Middle East and Oceania.

Subtitling, with a century-old history, is a close-to-daily-life but often neglected profession. Subtitles, the so called 'necessary evil', make television programmes accessible to the deaf and the hard-of-hearing, enable the audience to understand the content of a programme without the need for a knowledge of the SL, and are widely used as a tool to aid language learning. There is, in fact, an undiminished need for them in the market. However, the vulnerability of subtitlers seems to have increased with the development of the industry. Facing competition from unlimited cheap labour on the Internet, and challenged by profit-oriented clients who endeavour to boost their turnover while offering lower rates, many subtitlers have been struggling with trade-offs in time, earnings, and performance quality. The disparity between rates reported by survey respondents not only among, but also within countries, indicates that the turmoil regarding rates in the subtitling industry is a prevalent global phenomenon. Results have also highlighted worrying trends, such as the lack of correlation between higher remuneration rates and urgent deadlines, higher qualification or levels of experience, as well as the lack of recognition of subtitlers' work in general. The current situation is set to deteriorate further unless awareness is increased and the measures put in place.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution, nor is there a shortcut for noticeable improvements, which might perhaps be possible if a more prominent subtitlers' network were built up. Such network would hopefully contribute to the reinforcement of the subtitling community, resulting in greater recognition of this profession. Nevertheless, this effort should be made not only at an international, but also at a national level. The survey has revealed differences between countries with strong subtitlers' associations and unions and those without. The working conditions of subtitlers in the former were more homogenous and more likely to remain at a certain level, particularly as regards rates, royalties, and credits, while the situation in the latter was more disparate, thus pushing the two extremes even further apart. if a solid network were built within countries, cooperation at international level would also become more effective.

To improve the working conditions of subtitlers, the scope of collaboration should be widened, instead of being limited to trade unions and associations of subtitlers. While translation agencies are blamed for ignoring quality in order to increase turnover, the crux of the problem may, in fact, lie in the attitudes of filmmakers, producers and the audience towards the quality of subtitles. If the audience were to understand the impact that the quality of subtitles can have on their viewing experience, they may demand better quality. If other stakeholders also become aware of these advantages, they might place more emphasis on subtitling and increase the budget allocated to it to ensure its quality. If effective communication channels could be implemented among the relevant industries and practicing subtitlers, the working conditions of subtitlers might improve somewhat with time. Although there is no shortcut to improving the current status quo enjoyed by subtitlers, small changes can be made enabling professionals to move, step-by-step, to greener pastures, where subtitlers working for a reasonable wage and under decent working conditions is no longer a dream, but a reality. Only when the need for good quality subtitles is created can 'the supply chain', the subtitling profession, become well established.

Notes

1. For further information, please refer to the Income section under OECD's Better Life Index: www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/income.
2. For further information, please see the report published by the World Bank: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/GDP.pdf.
3. For further information, please refer to the database of the World Bank: http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?order=wbapi_data_value_2010+wbapi_data_value&sort=asc.
4. For further information regarding Income Levels, please refer to the world development report by the World Bank: http://wdronline.worldbank.org/worldbank/a/incomelevel.
5. Due to rounding up numbers, some of the totals in the survey findings do not add up to 100%.
6. Some of the respondents further indicated that, despite being entitled to a royalty rate of 50% of the original translation fee by law (e.g. Finnish copyright law), not all the translation agencies followed the law. Sometimes commissioners only give royalties under certain premises, i.e. if they are the owners of the copyright themselves. In addition, the gross royalty to which subtitlers are entitled is still subject to some expense deductions.
7. The time frame for the changes indicated by respondents is between 2005 and 2010.

References

Andrews, Dorine, Blair Nonnecke and Jennifer Preece. 2003. 'Electronic survey methodology: A case study in reaching hard-to-involve internet users'. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* 16(2): 185-210.

Ballinger, Claire and Christine Davey. 1998. 'Designing a questionnaire: An overview'. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy* 61(12): 547-50.

Díaz Cintas, Jorge and Aline Remael. 2007. *Audiovisual Translation: Subtitling.* Manchester: St Jerome.

Dickins, James, Sándor G. J. Hervey and Ian Higgins. 2002. *Thinking Arabic Translation: A Course in Translation Method: Arabic to English.* Oxon: Routledge.

Downey, Gregory J. 2008. *Closed Captioning: Subtitling, Stenography, and the Digital Convergence of Text with Television.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Duff, Alan. 1981. *Third Language: Recurrent Problems of Translation into English.* Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Fock, Holger, Martin de Haan and Alena Lhotová. 2008. 'Comparative income of literary translators in Europe'. *Conseil Européen des Associations de Traducteurs Littéraires*.

www.ceatl.eu/docs/surveyuk.pdf
Frazer, Lorelle and Meredith Lawley. 2000. *Questionnaire Design and Administration: A Practical Guide.* Brisbane: John Wiley & Sons Australia.
Gouadec, Daniel. 2007. *Translation as a Profession*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
Ilieva, Janet, Steve Baron and Nigel M. Healey. 2002. 'Online surveys in marketing research: Pros and cons'. *International Journal of Market Research* 44(3): 361-76.
Newmark, Peter. 1988. *A Textbook of Translation.* London: Prentice Hall.
Oppenheim, Abraham N. 1992. *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Measurement.* London: Pinter.
Reyntjens, Marie-Noëlle. 2005. *A Quantitative Study on Subtitling Rates*. Unpublished MA Dissertation. Brussels: Institut Supérieur de Traducteurs et Interprètes.
Sapsford, Roger. 1999. *Survey Research.* London: Sage.
Wright, Kevin B. 2005. 'Researching Internet-based populations: Advantages and disadvantages of online survey research, online questionnaire authoring software packages, and web survey services'. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 10(3).
www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2005.tb00259.x/full?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter