

Breaking the Rules, One Subtitle at a Time: A Comparative Analysis of Discrepancies between Theory and Practice in Professional Subtitling and Captioning

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Abstract

Subtitling has increasingly become a central mode of audiovisual translation, particularly with the rise of streaming platforms as the predominant medium for global entertainment consumption. This rapid expansion has intensified the demand for high-quality subtitling to ensure both audience satisfaction and broader market accessibility. However, despite the noticeable disjunction between established academic conventions and the realities of professional subtitling practice, researchers have not sufficiently explored this in academia. The present study seeks to address this gap by conducting a systematic analysis of the contradictions and inconsistencies in professional subtitling and captioning practices across multiple domains within six major streaming platforms operating in the Middle East and North Africa region. Employing a comparative content analysis informed by established theoretical frameworks in audiovisual translation studies, the research adopts a mixed-methods design that integrates qualitative textual analysis with quantitative measures. Through this methodological synthesis, the study not only seeks to map the extent of divergence between academic research and industry practices but also aims to enable academics to develop theoretical frameworks to more accurately reflect contemporary subtitling and captioning realities, while simultaneously offering practitioners research-driven insights into misalignments and strategies for reconciling them through enhanced approaches to readability and accessibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

Subtitling has emerged as a key form of audiovisual translation, particularly with the rise of streaming platforms as a dominant medium for global entertainment. Unlike conventional broadcast channels, international streaming services cater to massive and diverse audiences at once, spanning multiple regions and languages. This swift expansion has significantly increased the need for high-quality subtitling, where precision, consistency, and readability play a vital role in ensuring both viewer satisfaction and wider market accessibility.

Some streaming platforms offer customizable subtitle and caption features, enabling viewers to adjust their viewing experience to accommodate individual preferences and accessibility

needs (Bucaria, 2021). Nonetheless, these options are often restricted to modifications such as font size or colour schemes, omitting other critical elements that contribute to effective readability and accessibility. Therefore, the default set of subtitles and captions provided across platforms should conform to established standards of professional practice. Said standards were introduced by numerous scholars and researchers as a set of recommendations, later developed into widely accepted guidelines and conventions, to define best practices and safeguard quality in subtitling and captioning.

At the same time, several companies have established their own in-house guidelines, which at times do not align with academic recommendations, potentially leading to inconsistency and confusion for viewers. As Díaz-Cintas and Remael state:

The consumption of just a few subtitled programmes brings home the realization that there is a general lack of consensus and harmonization when presenting subtitles on screen. Conventions are not always systematically applied, and variations can be observed at a technical level as well as in the layout of the subtitles. (2007/2014, p. 80)

Nevertheless, research critically addressing the disjunction between established subtitling and captioning conventions and professional practice standards remains insufficient. Researchers behind much of the critical discourse to date have focused disproportionately on fansubbing. Additionally, the technical dimension parameters of subtitling have received comparatively less criticism, especially when contrasted with the criticism given to issues of subtitle layout (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007/2014). Therefore, the present study aims to address this research gap by systematically analysing the divergences, contradictions, and inconsistencies in professional subtitling and captioning practices across multiple domains within leading streaming platforms. In doing so, it constitutes one of the first attempts to foreground these tensions within an industry-specific context. Moreover, this study holds particular significance in light of the global predominance of streaming platforms, and its emphasis on Arabic subtitling constitutes a noteworthy contribution to a field that has been predominantly centred on European languages.

The investigation is based on a corpus of audiovisual material excerpted from six prominent platforms operating in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region: Netflix, Disney+, Prime Video,

Apple TV, Shahid, and OSN, which are considered the leading video streaming services in the region (Morelo, 2023). The study employs a comparative content analysis approach, informed by established frameworks in audiovisual translation studies (e.g., Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007/2014). Central to this analysis is the systematic examination of key parameters within the technical dimension and the layout dimension. The study further employs a mixed-method design, combining qualitative textual analysis to assess how these parameters are applied in practice and quantitative measures, such as the calculation of average characters per line. By integrating these methodological strands, the study aims not only to map the extent of divergence between academic research and industry practices but also to enable academics to develop theoretical frameworks that more accurately reflect contemporary subtitling and captioning practices, while also offering practitioners insights into existing misalignments and

strategies for reconciling them through research-based approaches to readability and accessibility.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Foundational Work on Subtitling and Captioning Practices and Conventions

Several publications relate to subtitling and captioning practices and conventions, but a few in particular stand out as especially influential and worth highlighting here. Many researchers regard Ivarsson and Carroll's handbook (1998) as a foundational publication that codifies early "rules of good practice" in subtitling and remains a common point of reference for professional standards. It lays out core principles, such as line length, reading speed, segmentation, punctuation, and placement. The book offers concrete dos and don'ts for breaking lines, aligning subtitles with speech and action, and preserving meaning. The authors also address accessibility, including SDH (subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing) and considerations for blind viewers. Díaz-Cintas and Remael's textbook (2007/2014) is also a landmark that provides a comprehensive, research-informed introduction to the practice, theory, and technical conventions of subtitling. The authors cover the fundamental principles of timing, segmentation, and reduction, while also explaining the rationale behind key conventions such as line breaks, punctuation, formatting, and standards for SDH. They pay special attention to the challenges of rendering culture-specific elements, humour, songs, marked speech (dialects, registers, swearwords), and other forms of expression. Jan Pedersen's textbook (2011) is another important publication that offers a detailed empirical investigation of Scandinavian and European subtitling practices, with particular emphasis on the treatment of extralinguistic cultural references. The book demonstrates how implicit rules and conventions, or norms, govern subtitling.

These are not the only publications addressing subtitling and captioning conventions, but they represent the most prominent contributions, while numerous individual researchers have also played a role in shaping and introducing such conventions and norms.

2.2. Research on Subtitling and Captioning Practices

The earlier contributions of Luyken and Herbst (1991) and Gottlieb (1994) share several significant aspects that have influenced subtitling guidelines. They both recognize the need to consider multiple constraints simultaneously, temporal, spatial, technical, and cultural, when transferring content from the source to the target audience. Karamitroglou's (1998) article represents one of the earliest systematic efforts to standardize subtitling practices across Europe, at a time when subtitling national conventions diverged considerably. His work advanced a coherent framework aimed at promoting greater consistency, encompassing both technical and linguistic parameters.

More recent scholarly work has included multiple empirical studies aimed at investigating the fundamental conventions of subtitling, including spatial conventions. Gerber-Morón and Szarkowska (2018) conducted an eye-tracking study to demonstrate that segmentation affects gaze behaviour and processing cost. Viewers showed a preference for syntactic segmentation

(breaking at clause/phrase boundaries), which improved processing. In another study, Szarkowska and Gerber-Morón (2018a) examined mixed-methods evidence to compare two-line and three-line subtitles, highlighting important processing trade-offs. Although three-line subtitles can accommodate more unreduced text, they may also increase cognitive load and reduce viewing enjoyment in certain contexts. These findings support policies that default to two-line subtitles, allowing three lines only when clearly justified. Specifically, the authors reported that “three-line subtitles resulted in higher cognitive load than two-line subtitles” (Szarkowska & Gerber-Morón, 2018a, p. 25).

Other empirical studies have examined the temporal conventions of subtitling. Szarkowska and Bogucka (2019) investigated whether the traditional 6-second rule remains suitable for modern audiences and how both the film dialogue’s speech rate and the language proficiency of the viewers influence the subtitle processing. Using eye-tracking methods, they found that faster dialogues led to less comprehension when compared to slower speech rates. Moreover, viewers with higher proficiency in the film’s spoken language did not spend as much time reading subtitles compared to those with lower proficiency. In an eye-tracking study, Szarkowska and Gerber-Morón (2018b) examined whether viewers can keep pace with gradually accelerating subtitles and how their ability to do so is shaped by prior exposure to subtitling and proficiency in the film’s spoken language. The findings showed that many viewers managed faster subtitle speeds effectively when watching English-language videos, whereas excessively slow subtitles often led to rereading and feelings of frustration. Liao et al. (2021) conducted an eye-movement study to investigate how subtitle speed and the availability of accompanying video, or lack thereof, could shape viewers’ reading behaviour. Their findings showed that participants adjusted their viewing patterns to engage with both the moving image and the text, yet consistently gave priority to reading subtitles, particularly when these appeared for only a short time. Interestingly, comprehension improved when video was available, even at higher subtitle speeds, suggesting that visual cues from the footage helped offset the challenge of rapid text presentation. In a later study, Szarkowska et al. (2024) replicated the results of this study and reinforced the conclusion that subtitle speed and the availability of video exert significant effects on processing across various audience groups.

2.3. Industry Guidelines for Subtitling and Captioning

In addition to academic work and research, many broadcasters and streaming platforms issue their own subtitling guidelines. For instance, the BBC provides detailed rules on timing, positioning, capitalisation, speaker identification, and the treatment of SDH. Such broadcaster manuals extend beyond recommending good practice, covering aspects such as segmentation, punctuation, on-screen text overlap, and sound tags. Regulatory agencies and standards organisations, such as the FCC, W3C, EBU, ATSC, and DVB, set formal requirements that define what counts as “correct” captions and subtitles in professional production. These rules establish expectations for accuracy, timing, placement, completeness, and the use of interoperable file formats. In the United States, for example, the FCC’s Closed Captioning Quality rules (introduced in 2014 and updated through subsequent notices) require closed captions to be accurate, synchronised with the audio, complete, and properly positioned, thereby exerting a strong influence on industry captioning practices.

Major streaming platforms, including Netflix, Disney+, OSN, Prime Video, and Apple TV, have developed their own subtitling and captioning guidelines, which specify per-language parameters such as permissible reading speeds, line lengths, punctuation standards, conventions for SDH, and technical requirements relating to file formats and encoding. In describing the strict policies of one of these streaming platforms, Pedersen states, “Netflix’s guidelines exert a great deal of pressure on the subtitlers’ behavior and are thus expressions of strong norms” (2018, p. 87). This resulted in several of these publicly available style guidelines not only shaping professional practice but also being frequently referenced in academic research and translator training contexts.

Given the wide range of subtitling guidelines, whether originating from academic literature or industry standards, a notable lack of consistency emerges, likely stemming from insufficient dialogue and coordination among these sources. This disconnect, which calls for closer examination and critical reflection, has received little attention, as most critical discourse has focused instead on fansubbing, often highlighting its departures from professional norms. The present study aims to address this gap by systematically examining the contradictions and inconsistencies in professional subtitling and captioning practice in different areas within several streaming platforms, thereby offering one of the first studies to foreground these issues within an industry context.

3. METHODOLOGIES

The present study seeks to investigate the divergences, contradictions, and inconsistencies that emerge between academically established subtitling conventions and the industry standards currently implemented by leading global streaming platforms. In doing so, it adopts a methodological framework that combines comparative content analysis with mixed-method approaches. The analysis is guided by well-established theoretical work within AVT studies (e.g., Karamitroglou, 1998; Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007/2014), enabling a systematic and comprehensive evaluation of subtitling and captioning practices. Specifically, the study assesses a range of key parameters situated within both the technical and layout dimensions of subtitling. The examination was not only in terms of adherence to or deviation from academic conventions, but also with regard to their practical application and potential implications for readability and viewer accessibility.

The investigation is based on a purposefully compiled corpus consisting of audiovisual material excerpted from six major streaming platforms operating within the MENA region: Netflix, Disney+, Prime Video, Apple TV, Shahid, and OSN. The dataset comprises 51 subtitled and captioned samples encompassing both films and television series, thus allowing for a balanced and representative analysis across genres and formats. For analytical clarity, the identified issues were categorised into four broad domains: spatial conventions (such as the number of characters per line, line positioning, and segmentation), temporal conventions (such as synchronisation, subtitle duration, and the treatment of multiple voices and shot changes), typographical conventions (such as font colour, punctuation, and capitalisation), and other conventions (such as the subtitling and captioning of songs, cultural references, and visual elements). This quadripartite categorisation facilitates a more detailed examination of subtitling and captioning practices, while also providing a structured framework through which researchers may systematically identify, evaluate, and contextualise divergences from

established academic norms within broader debates on AVT quality, readability, and accessibility.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Spatial Conventions

4.1.1. Number of Characters per Line

According to Karamitroglou (1998), a maximum of 35–37 characters per line should be the norm. However, according to Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2007/2014), the maximum number of characters per line depends on the medium. For television, the standard limit is usually 37 characters per line, including spaces and typographical signs, each of which counts as a single character. In cinema and DVD subtitles, the limit is slightly higher, commonly set at 40 characters per line. Older formats, such as VHS, generally allowed between 33 and 35 characters per line. Although platform-specific guidelines are not always consistent, streaming platforms share key characteristics with formats like DVD and VHS, such as the ability to pause and replay content. Therefore, a reasonable character limit for streaming subtitles in theory is expected to fall within the range of 35–40 characters per line. This is well-suited for streaming services because viewers watch on a range of devices, such as phones, tablets, smart TVs, and laptops, and shorter lines fit small screens more neatly, preventing awkward wrapping or excessive obstruction of the screen.

However, in the example shown in Figure 1, which comes from the movie *Mr. Ex* on Shahid platform, the subtitles exceed the maximum character limit per line for all the aforementioned media formats, reaching up to 43 characters.



Figure 1 An Example of Subtitles Exceeding the Maximum Character Limit per Line on Shahid Platform

The trend may be shifting towards allowing more characters per line, likely due to the increase in viewing experiences. However, longer lines can force viewers to spend more time reading and less time engaging with other visual and auditory elements of the film. Even though pausing or replaying is possible, doing so can disrupt the viewing flow and diminish

immersion. Further research into viewer perception could help clarify the impact of this emerging practice.

4.1.2. Lines Position on the Screen

Subtitles typically appear horizontally at the bottom of the screen to avoid covering key visual elements. However, repositioning may be necessary in certain situations, such as when the lower background is too light for clear reading, when an important action occurs in that area, or when essential on-screen text appears there with an ongoing dialogue that still needs subtitling. In such cases, subtitlers most often move subtitles to the top of the screen, though in rare instances they may place them in the middle.

In an example from the series *Romantic Killer* on Netflix, shown in Figure 2, subtitles were unnecessarily placed at the top of the screen multiple times.



Figure 2 An Example of Subtitles Being Unnecessarily Placed at the Top of the Screen on Netflix

As seen in Figure 3, the same problem existed on the Disney+ platform during the movie *The Princess Diaries*, where the subtitle appeared at the top of the screen despite there being no credits or visual elements at the bottom.

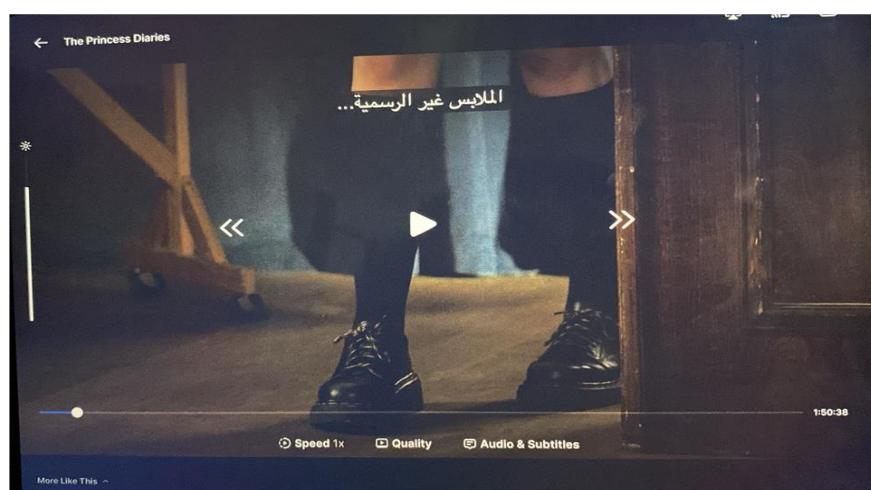


Figure 3 An Example of Subtitles Being Unnecessarily Placed at the Top of the Screen on Disney+

Conversely, subtitles needed to be on the top of the screen in some cases, but were kept on the bottom of the screen. This caused an overlap with other elements, as shown in an example from

the series *Only Murders in the Building* on Disney+, shown in Figure 4. The subtitle covered on-screen information, making it hard to read either element.



Figure 4 An Example of Subtitles Covering On-Screen Information on Disney+

Another example is from the movie *Contagion* on Prime Video, as shown in Figure 5. The subtitle was partially covering the on-screen text. Although this overlap was not as bad as the previous one, it still unnecessarily broke convention for no apparent reason.

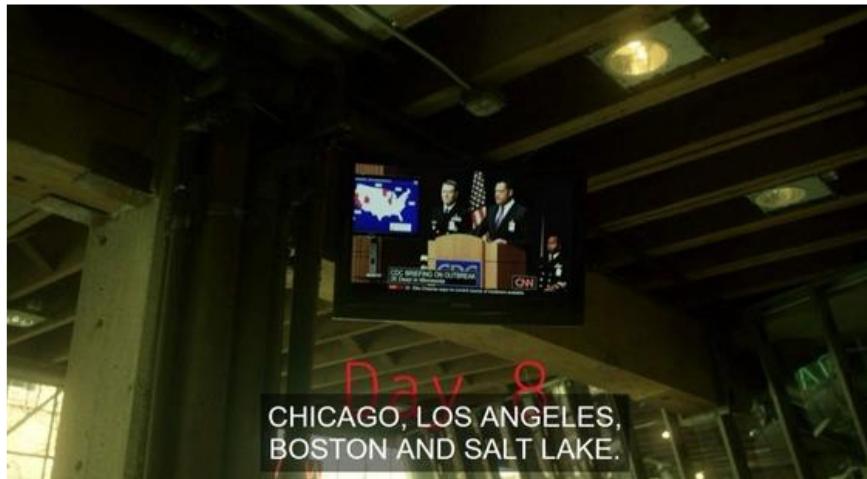


Figure 5 An Example of Subtitles Covering On-Screen Information on Prime Video

4.1.3. Segmentation and Line Breaks

Segmentation in subtitling refers to the division of spoken dialogue into sections that are displayed as subtitles. This process often involves breaking down a single sentence into two or more subtitles. Aesthetically speaking, the first line should preferably be shorter than the second line, a common convention used to not occupy a big portion of the screen and disturb the viewer (Bogucki & Deckert, 2020). However, effective segmentation prioritises syntactic and grammatical structures over other considerations. According to Karamitroglou (1998), subtitle units should ideally be segmented at the highest syntactic nodes, with each subtitle containing a complete sentence whenever possible. In cases where a sentence exceeds the space of a single subtitle line or unit, the break should still align with the most prominent syntactic

boundaries. This approach ensures that each segment conveys a semantically coherent and complete unit of meaning, thus facilitating better comprehension for the viewer.

Nevertheless, the following examples of professional subtitling have broken both conventions, with the first line being longer than the second line, without the line-break being syntactically coherent or complete. In the movie *I Am Mother* on Netflix, most of the top subtitle lines are unnecessary longer than the bottom ones, whereas the line-break can be improved if done differently, as shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6 An Example of the Top Subtitle Lines Being Unnecessarily Longer Than the Bottom Ones on Netflix

One of the examples is of the Arabic sentence: "مررت تقريباً ساعة حتى وجدتنا الآلات مختبئين في الحقل" (it took about an hour for the machines to find us hiding in the field). The line break after the phrase "find us" was not syntactically coherent. Another choice could have been to introduce the break after "it took about an hour", hence ending the first line at a natural temporal clause ("مررت تقريباً ساعة"), which is a complete and meaningful segment. The second line would have begun with the result or continuation of the action. This choice would have not only maintained semantic coherence and readability but also reserved the convention of the first line being shorter than the second line. The same argument can be made about the second example, where the first line could have presented the main clause: "يجب أن تحتوي كل زجاجة" (every bottle should have). The second line could then carry the prepositional phrase specifying what the bottle should contain. This break respects the grammatical structure and does not separate a preposition from its object or a noun from its modifier. However, a more problematic example can be seen in a scene from the film *The Rookie* on Netflix as shown in Figure 7.



Figure 7 An Example of the Top Subtitle Lines Being Unnecessarily Longer Than the Bottom Ones on Netflix

Arabic أيتها الشرطية

In the sentence:

Officer Chen, this is Sherisse from the shelter”, the line break could have been after the word “Chen”. In doing so, the first line would then be a vocative phrase addressing the character directly, and the second line would introduce the speaker and their affiliation. This division respects the grammatical structure, avoids breaking within a name or phrase, and ensures natural reading flow.

The following example exhibits a different problem in segmentation where the subtitle was unnecessary split into two lines. The example in Figure 8 comes from the series *Mu'awiyah* on Shahid platform.



Figure 8 An Example of the Subtitle Being Unnecessarily Split Into Two Lines on Shahid Platform

Díaz-Cintas and Remael state that one-liners are the right choice “when the original utterances are very short themselves” (2007/2014: 93), which applies to the five-word sentence seen here. The sentence is a simple imperative one, and splitting it across two lines separated the verb phrase from its object which could disturb comprehension and interrupts reading flow. This choice aligns with Lomheim as well (1999) who seem to be in favour of using one-liners as he believes that they are easier to read than two-line subtitles.

4.1.4. Font Size

Subtitles should have a clear and consistent font size that is large enough to be easily visible, but not too big as to disrupt the viewer’s visual experience. Karamitroglou (1998) and Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2007/2014) pointed out that subtitle presentation conventions, such as typeface and font size, can differ across languages and regions. These variations are intended to account for factors like scripts that occupy more vertical or horizontal space, as well as characters that are denser or visually more intricate. For this reason, Arabic subtitles are often set in a slightly larger font than their English counterparts. However, the slight difference

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intended should not be as significant as in the subtitles of *Vinland Saga* on Netflix, as shown in Figure 9.



Figure 9 Unwarranted Differences in Subtitle Font Size Between Languages

The

Arabic subtitles appear disproportionately large compared to the English ones, hence occupying excessive screen space and obscuring visual elements. This abrupt visual shift between languages is unnecessary and creates an imbalance that undermines the intended goal of enhancing readability.

4.2. Temporal Conventions

4.2.1. Synchronization

Subtitling must adhere to the principle of synchronicity, meaning subtitles should align precisely with the timing of the spoken dialogue. Ideally, a subtitle should appear the moment a speaker begins to talk and disappear as soon as they finish. However, the synchronicity was not achieved in a scene from the Saudi series *Horooj* on Shahid platform. The subtitle **السيدات أولاً** “ladies first” appeared a few seconds prior to the actor delivering the corresponding line, which was meant to be said at the door, as shown in Figure 10.

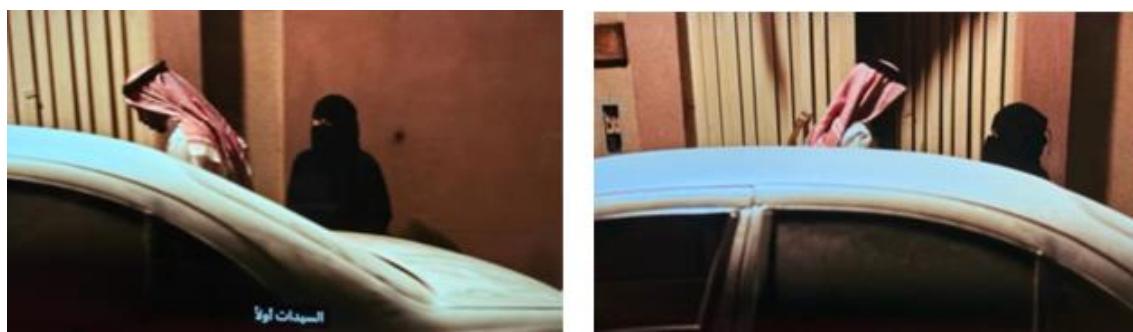


Figure 10 An Example of Subtitle Synchronization Problems on Shahid Platform

A similar problem was detected in a scene from the series *Squid Games* on Netflix, as shown in Figure 11. The subtitle appeared several seconds ahead of the actor delivering the corresponding line.



Figure 11 An Example of Subtitle Synchronisation Problems on Netflix

4.2.2. Subtitle Duration

Another issue observed in professional subtitling is the failure to follow the convention of keeping subtitles on screen for a minimum of 1 second. This standard ensures that viewers have sufficient time to read the text and allows for a clear visual break between consecutive subtitles. As a result, viewers can recognise that new content has appeared and not skip on reading it. As Diaz-Cintas and Remael (2007/2014) note, when one subtitle is immediately replaced by another without even a single frame of separation, the viewer's eye may struggle to detect the presence of new information. This has a greater chance of occurring "when the two subtitles share a similar layout" (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007/2014, p. 92). An example of this is in Figure 12, taken from the movie *Me Before You* on Prime Video.

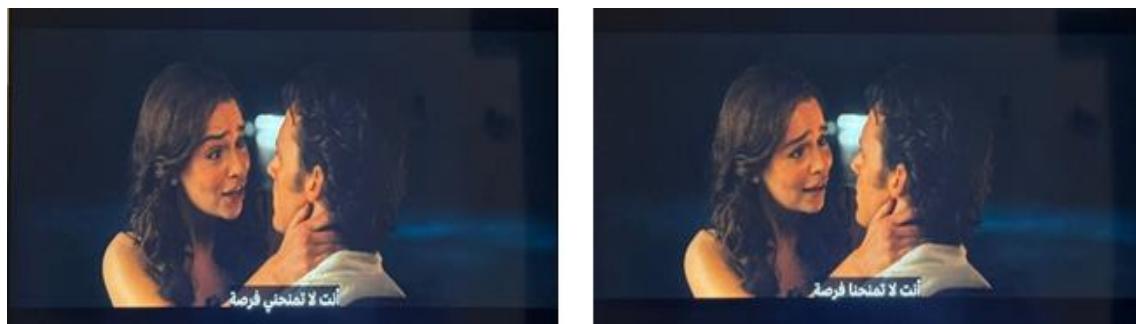


Figure 12 An Example of Subtitles Staying on Screen Less Than the Minimum Required Time on Prime Video

However, as Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2007/2014) note, a short subtitle remaining on the screen for an extended period of time may result in viewers mistaking it for a new one, hence rereading

it repeatedly. This can be equally distracting, as illustrated by a scene from the film *Mr. Ex* on Shahid platform, shown in Figure 13.



Figure 13 An Example of Subtitles Staying on Screen Longer Than They Should on Shahid Platform

4.2.3. Multiple Voices

Subtitling guidelines recommend that a separate line is assigned for each speaker when two share the same subtitle, with each line preceded by a dash (–) to signify a change in speakers, thereby clarifying turn-taking within the exchange (Gottlieb, 1994; Ivarsson & Carroll, 1998; Luyken & Herbst, 1991). This aligns with the conventions of some platforms, such as Netflix, which explicitly encourages the use of a hyphen “to indicate a change of speaker when two characters speak within the same subtitle” (Netflix Timed Text Style Guide, 2022). BBC guidelines also emphasise the use of “a dash at the beginning of a subtitle line when a new speaker speaks within the same subtitle block” (Clevercast, 2023). However, there was a lack of indication for the two speakers on various occurrences across platforms. One example comes from the movie *Lilo and Stitch* on Disney+ shown in Figure 14. In this scene, both Lilo and Stitch are responding to Nani’s question. However, no dashes were used to indicate speaker changes, although the subtitler allocated each speaker a separate line



Figure 14 An Example of Two Lines for Two Speakers Not Being Preceded by a Dash on Disney+

In another scene from the show *You* on Netflix, two characters are speaking at the same time, as shown in Figure 15. However, there were no dashes to distinguish different speakers, and the subtitler did not allocate each speaker a separate line, making the dialogue appear as if it was produced by one speaker.



Figure 15 An Example of Two Speakers Not Being Assigned Different Lines on Netflix

In a scene from the show *Only Murders in the Building* on Disney+, shown in Figure 16, the subtitler improperly placed the dialogue of both speakers on the same line, with the dash only added to the second speaker. When two speakers share the same line and the dash is added between them, it can create confusion, making the dash appear as mere punctuation within a sentence rather than as a marker of a new speaker.



Figure 16 An Example of Two Speakers Not Being Assigned Different Lines on Disney+

4.2.4. Shot Changes

Another important rule advises against a subtitle remaining across a cut; instead, the subtitle should disappear just before the cut. Research on eye movement has shown that when a subtitle

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remains on screen during a cut, viewers often assume a new subtitle has appeared and begin rereading the same subtitle (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007/2014). An exception for this rule is when the dialogue continues seamlessly over the cut, creating what is known as a sound bridge. In the example shown in Figure 17, a subtitle from the series *Squid Games* on Netflix is unnecessarily maintained over the cut.



Figure 17 An Example of a Subtitle Being Unnecessarily Maintained Over the Cut on Netflix

The same problem appeared on two other platforms. As shown in Figure 18, in a scene from the Saudi film *Horrooj* on Shahid platform, the subtitler also unnecessarily maintained the subtitle over the cut. Additionally, in a scene from the series *Cold Case* on Prime Video, the subtitler performed the same action of unnecessarily keeping the subtitle over the cut, as shown in Figure 19.

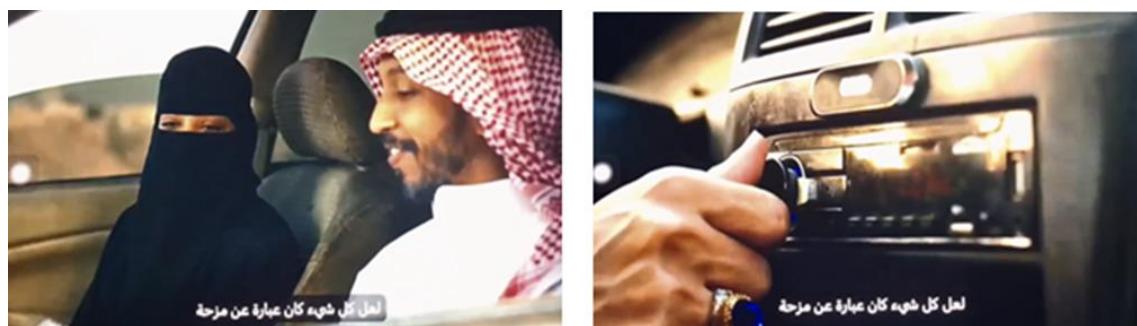


Figure 18 An Example of a Subtitle Being Unnecessarily Maintained Over the Cut on Shahid

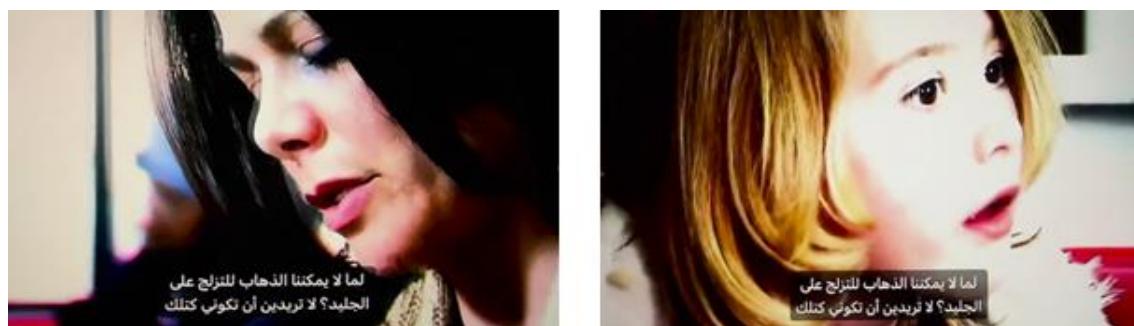


Figure 19 An Example of a Subtitle Being Unnecessarily Maintained Over the Cut on Prime Video

4.3. Typographical Conventions

4.3.1. Font Colour

Subtitles are typically white, though yellow is sometimes used in black-and-white films to create stronger contrast with the image (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007/2014). Additionally, to improve readability against light backgrounds, subtitlers often give subtitles a shadow or black outline. However, this solution is not always sufficient, in which case they may place the text inside a semi-transparent grey or black box to ensure clarity.

Nevertheless, there were some problems in implementing such conventions. An example of this is a scene from the anime *The Disastrous Life of Saiki K* on Netflix. Figure 20 illustrates an issue of a white subtitle blending into a partly white background with no grey or black box, hence obstructing the readability of some parts of the subtitle.



Figure 20 An Example of a Background Obstructing the Readability of the Subtitles on Netflix

A similar problem can be seen in Figure 21, in two scenes taken from the movie *The Conjuring 2* on OSN platform. Here a white subtitle is displayed against a multicoloured background with no grey or black box, which hinders the readability of the subtitle.

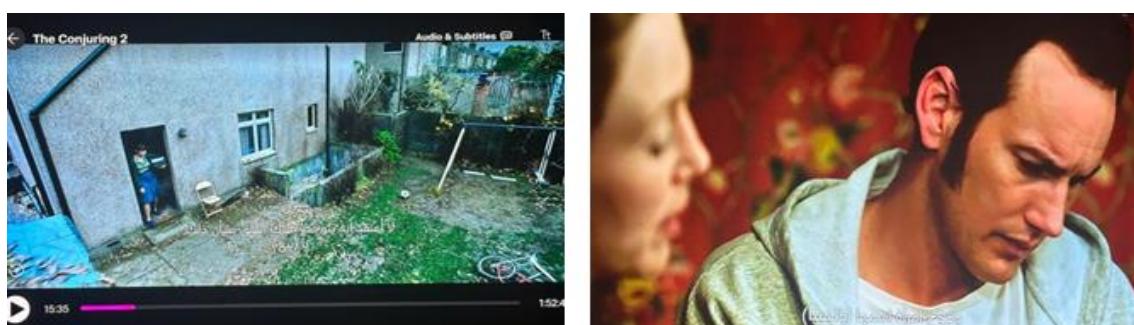


Figure 21 An Example of a Background Obstructing the Readability of the Subtitles on OSN Platform

4.3.2. Punctuation

Punctuation rules in subtitling are largely similar to those used in other forms of writing, with a few exceptions tailored to the medium. However, issues and inconsistencies continue to characterize the use of punctuation in professional subtitling. As illustrated in Figure 22, in two scenes from the Netflix series *Bet*, a full stop and an exclamation mark appear at the beginning of the line instead of at the end, a mistake particularly problematic in Arabic, where text flows from right to left. This error may be attributed either to subtitling software that lacks adequate support for Arabic script and right-to-left alignment, or to the subtitler failing to manually align the text correctly. This issue is also the result of insufficient quality assurance and post-production revision in the subtitling process.

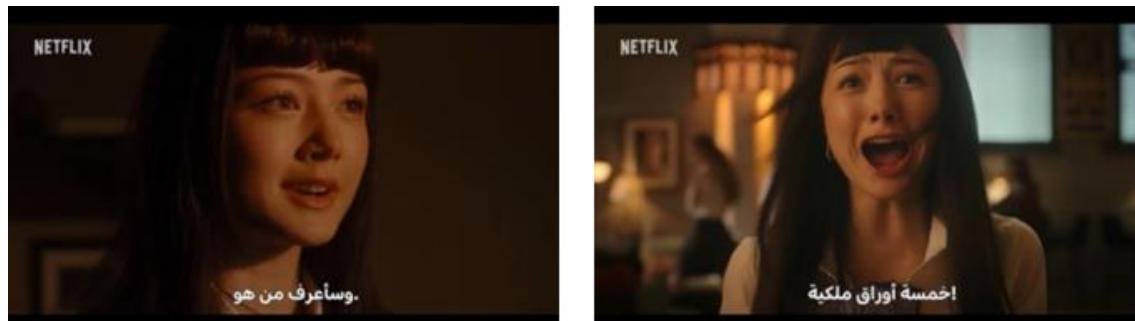


Figure 22 An Example of Punctuation Misplacement on Netflix

A similar issue appears in a scene from the movie *Blade Runner 2049* on Shahid platform, as shown in Figure 23. The subtitler uses the dashes incorrectly by placing them at the end of the subtitle line instead of at the beginning, a convention meant to indicate a change in speakers during a dialogue.



Figure 23 An Example of Punctuation Misplacement on Shahid Platform

Another issue was the unintended space inserted between the end of a sentence and its punctuation mark, occasionally causing the punctuation to appear on a separate line. An example of this occurs in a scene from *Bob's Burgers* on Disney+, as shown in Figure 24.



Figure 24 An Example of Punctuation Misplacement on Disney+

Other problems include the misuse of commas where they should not be used. An example of this is a scene from the movie *Bilal* on Shahid platform, as seen in Figure 25. The subtitler unnecessarily adds the comma after the word أين “where”, which interrupts the natural flow of the sentence and affects its readability.



Figure 25 An Example of Punctuation Misuse on Shahid Platform

As per other recommendations, subtitlers are expected to use full stops at the end of a complete sentence unless the sentence continues in the following subtitle (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007/2014). Cerón emphasizes the importance of this practice, arguing that:

Some companies do not make use of the full stop at the end of a subtitle, which creates the most confusing and even irritating situation of all, as it may mean two contradictory things: either that the sequence stops there or that it goes on. Needless to say, this makes subtitles following this style very difficult to read (2001, p. 176).

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This scholarly opinion is met with inconsistency by the industry. Examples of this can be seen in Figure 26, which shows a scene from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* on Netflix where the subtitle ends with a full stop, and in Figure 27, which shows a scene from the movie *Just Friends* on Shahid platform where the full stop is omitted.



Figure 26 An Example of the Inconsistency of Using a Full Stop at the End of a Sentence from Netflix



Figure 27 An Example of the Inconsistency of Using a Full Stop at the End of a Sentence from Shahid Platform

4.3.3. Capitalization

In subtitling, capital letters should follow the same usage rules as in standard writing. In the past, full capitalisation was often used to convey shouting, but this practice is now far less common. In captioning, full capitalisation is used to allow faster real-time captioning, given that the live captioner had to pause and account for appropriate capitalisation due to limitations in character generators and caption decoders (Robson, 2004). Nowadays, with all the advances in technology, full capitalisation is usually used only to describe non-speech cues to differentiate them from the dialogue. This is because fully capitalised subtitles not only take up more space than lowercase letters, but they might be harder to read. A study by Tinker (1954) indicated that reading is noticeably slower in all-capital text compared to Roman lowercase. This is supported by a previous eye-movement study conducted by Tinker and

Paterson (1932), which revealed a significant rise in the number of fixation pauses when reading text in all capital letters. To Tinker and Paterson (1946), all caps become more of a problem and hence should be eliminated in contexts where speed of reading and reader perception are important, which aligns with the medium constraints of subtitling.

However, some practices within the industry do not conform these findings. An example of this is shown in Figure 28, from the show *Dog With a Blog* on Apple TV, where all captions are capitalised at all times.



Figure 28 An Example of Capitalised Closed Captions on Apple TV

Other examples include closed captions for the series *Gilmore Girls* on Netflix, with all captions capitalised at all times, as shown in Figure 29.



Figure 29 An Example of Capitalised Captions on Netflix

4.4. Other Conventions

4.4.1. Subtitling Songs

One recommendation for subtitling songs is to use the same font style as that employed for dialogue subtitles, thereby avoiding any visual distinction between song lyrics and spoken text (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007/2014). An example of this can be seen in Figure 30 of a scene from *Horooj* on Shahid platform.



Figure 30 An Example of Inconsistencies in Subtitling Songs from Shahid Platform

However, inconsistencies can be observed with other approaches being used as well. For instance, adding quotation marks around the song subtitles to set them apart from the rest of the dialogue. An example of this is shown in Figure 31 from the movie *Beetlejuice* on OSN platform.



Figure 31 An Example of Inconsistencies in Subtitling Songs from OSN

In most streaming platforms, closed captions and SDH are used interchangeably. Apple TV, for instance, does not distinguish between the two except in saying that SDH is “available in additional languages” (2024). Netflix also states that both “are intended to support the viewing needs of people who cannot hear the audio fully” (n.d.). Taking this into account, one of the recognized captioning conventions is to place a music symbol (♪) at both the beginning and end of song lyrics to indicate the presence of music (BBC, 2025; Netflix, 2025). This is due to the fact that they incorporate features designed to enhance accessibility, and the use of a music symbol provides a clearer indication to viewers that a song is playing. An example of this can be seen in Figure 32 of a caption from the movie *Barbie* on Apple TV.



Figure 32 An Example of the Captioning Practice of Adding a Music Symbol around Captions on Apple TV

However, inconstancies still existed within the same platform. As seen in Figure 33, captions from the movie *Mamma Mia* on Apple TV did not include any music symbols around them.



Figure 33 An Example of Inconsistencies in Captioning Songs on Apple TV

An examination of Disney+ subtitling and captioning practices, particularly in relation to musical sequences, a defining characteristic of the company's cinematic legacy, reveals a series of inconsistencies, both within the platform itself and in comparison with other streaming services. One discrepancy concerns the treatment of song lyrics in English and Arabic subtitles: whereas English subtitles consistently employ italics to distinguish lyrical content from spoken dialogue, a convention also implemented by Netflix (2025), their Arabic counterparts omit this typographic differentiation, thereby diminishing a key semiotic cue. An example of this can be seen in the Arabic and English subtitles of a song from the movie *Encanto*, as shown in Figure 34.

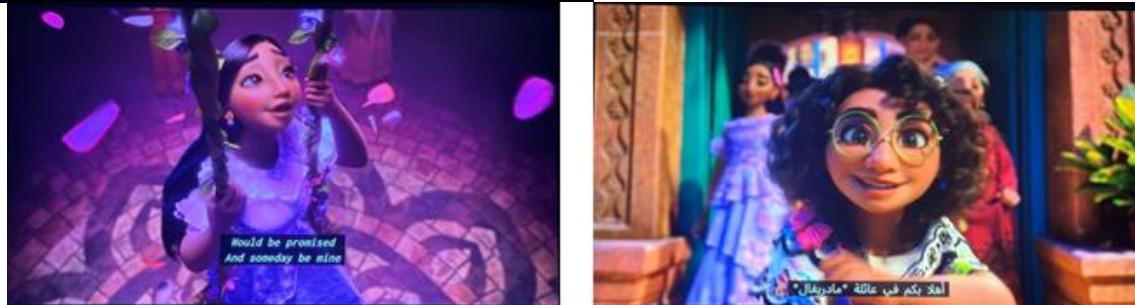


Figure 34 An Example of Inconsistencies in Subtitling Songs Between Arabic and English on Disney+

Further variation is evident in captioning practices, where paratextual markers such as the generic tag [SINGING] are employed to help viewers distinguish spoken dialogue from sung lyrics. An example of this can be seen in the captions of one of the songs from the movie *Encanto*, as shown in Figure 35. Although Netflix adopts this practice as well to highlight ambient music (2022), it is not consistently adopted across other platforms, thereby demonstrating a lack of standardisation in captioning practices.



Figure 35 An Example of Inconsistencies in Captioning Songs on Disney+

A third inconsistency emerges in the subtitling of older titles within the Disney catalogue. In some instances, the music symbol (♪) is placed before or around the lyrics, as is sometimes practiced in Apple TV captioning. However, in the non-English subtitling of older titles, as well as in the subtitling of more recent productions, a streamlined approach that omits such notation is generally preferred. An example of this can be seen in the movie *Beauty and the Beast*, as shown in Figure 36.



Figure 36 An Example of Inconsistencies in Subtitling Songs in Older Titles Between English and Arabic on Disney+

Collectively, these observations emphasise the absence of a coherent and consistent subtitling and captioning strategy for lyrics across platforms, raising broader questions about accessibility and audience reception in subtitling and captioning practices.

4.4.2. Subtitling Cultural References

Additional inconsistencies appeared in the representation of cultural references (CRs) in subtitles, as well as in determining what constitutes a CR. One of the approaches used to signify CRs is the use of quotation marks. Typically, quotation marks are used to introduce someone's exact words. However, they can sometimes be used "with names of restaurants, cinemas, hotels, wines and other brand names that are left in the original language in the subtitles" but not with "proper names, names of cities or other places, celebrations and events that are sufficiently well known by the target public" (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007/2014, p. 122). On this basis, quotation marks can be employed to indicate CRs under two conditions: 1) if retention strategy is used, hence preserving the CR in its original form, and 2) if the CR is not well known by the target audience.

An example of quotation marks use in signifying CRs can be seen in Figure 37, of a scene from *Friends* on Netflix. The name of the song "Tupelo Honey" and the name of the singer Van Morrison were surrounded by quotation marks because they might not be well known to the target audience.



Figure 37 An Example of Inconsistencies in Signifying CRs from Netflix

However, the subtitler of the movie *Las Vegas* on Shahid platform used round parentheses to signify proper names, as seen in Figure 38. Does this imply that quotation marks are used to indicate proper names, except when referring to addressees, for which round parentheses are employed?



Figure 38 An Example of Inconsistencies in Signifying CRs from Shahid Platform

This reasoning gave rise to another inconsistency. In Figure 39, , the subtitler used quotation marks instead of round parentheses to refer to the addressee ‘Daphne’ in the movie *Me Before You* on Prime Video.



Figure 39 An Example of Inconsistencies in Signifying CRs from Prime Video

More inconstancies appeared in the movie *Beetlejuice* on OSN platform, as shown in Figure 40. In this example the subtitler signified the CRs for both 'Charles' and 'Winter River' by round parentheses instead of quotation marks.



Figure 40 An Example of Inconsistencies in Signifying CRs from OSN

Other inconstancies included not using any signifiers whatsoever for the CR, as shown in Figure 41. The CR 'Massi', denoting a proper name in the movie *Mr. Ex* on Shahid platform, appeared in the same font as the rest of the subtitles without any distinguishing signifiers.



Figure 41 An Example of Inconsistencies in Signifying CRs from Shahid Platform

Another issue arose in determining what constitutes a CR. In the movie *Mamma Mia* on Apple TV, the subtitler did not signify the CRs Las 'Vegas' and 'Monaco' in the subtitles, indicating they are well known to the audience, as seen in Figure 42.



Figure 42 An Example of Inconsistencies in Determining What Constitutes a CR from Apple TV

However, in the movie *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice* on OSN platform, the subtitler signified the CR ‘Paris’ by round parentheses as shown in Figure 43. This was inconsistent with how names of cities were treated in the previous example.



Figure 43 An Example of Inconsistencies in Determining What Constitutes a CR from OSN

Further inconsistencies can be seen in the movie *Last Tango in Paris* on Prime Video, with the CR ‘Paris’ signified by single quotation marks instead of the round parentheses, as shown in Figure 44.



Figure 44 An Example of Inconsistencies in Determining What Constitutes a CR from Prime Video

Other types of CRs were treated inconsistently as well. An example of this is a mention of the vanilla flavour, which people are generally expected to recognize everywhere. However, the subtitler signified the flavour by adding quotation marks in *Gilmore Girls* on Disney+, as shown in Figure 45. This gives unnecessary emphasis, making the word seem more special when it is not, especially when followed by a list of other flavours like chocolate and strawberry without any signifiers. Another subtitler on Netflix, however, treated the same word like the rest of the dialogue without any distinguishing signifiers, as seen in Figure 46.



Figure 45 An Example of Inconsistencies in Determining What Constitutes a CR from Disney+



Figure 46 An Example of Inconsistencies in Determining What Constitutes a CR from Netflix

4.4.3. Subtitling Visual Elements

Another area of inconsistency was the way subtitlers rendered written visual elements in the subtitles. Such elements can include signs, posters, graffiti, messages on computer monitors or

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phone screens, and any other form of writing. In the movie *The Conjuring 2* on OSN platform, the subtitler rendered a sign with the writing ‘Green Street’ in the subtitles using the transliteration strategy, surrounded by round parentheses, as shown in Figure 47.

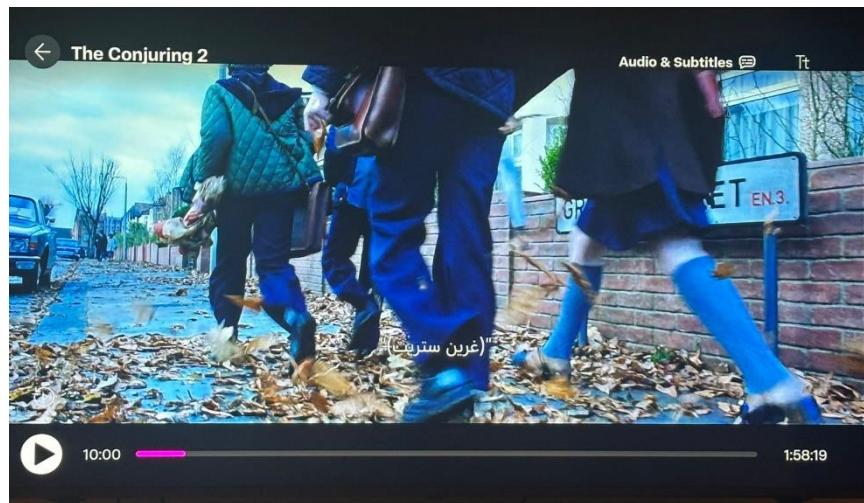


Figure 47 An Example of Inconsistencies in Rendering Written Visual Elements from OSN Platform

This was not consistent when rendering the writing of a flyer on a bulletin board in the movie *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice* on OSN platform. The subtitler treated the writing like a normal dialogue in the subtitles except for the word ‘Northanger’, which they treated like a CR and placed between round parentheses, as shown in Figure 48.



Figure 48 An Example of Inconsistencies in Rendering Written Visual Elements from OSN Platform

Similarly, when rendering the writing of a café sign in the movie *Me Before You* on Prime Video, the subtitler treated the writing like a normal dialogue in the subtitles except for the name of the café ‘The Buttered Bun’, which they treated like a CR and placed between quotation marks, as shown in Figure 49.



Figure 49 An Example of Inconsistencies in Rendering Written Visual Elements from Prime Video

Another inconsistency can be seen in rendering the writing on a phone screen in the movie *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice* on OSN platform. The subtitler placed the writing between quotation marks in the subtitles, as shown in Figure 50.



Figure 50 An Example of Inconsistencies in Rendering Written Visual Elements from OSN Platform

More inconsistencies can be seen in rendering the writing of a sign in the movie *Will Trent* on Disney+. The subtitler placed the writing between quotation marks inside round parentheses, as shown in Figure 51. Additionally, the rendering of the on-screen visual element briefly overlapped with the subtitling of the spoken dialogue, thereby breaking established conventions.



Figure 51 An Example of Inconsistencies in Rendering Written Visual Elements from Disney+

To prevent visual clutter and preserve clarity, subtitlers could place on-screen elements at the top of the screen while keeping spoken dialogue at the bottom. As Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2007/2014) note, the top of the screen may be used when visual and verbal channels overlap, a solution that would have resolved this issue.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study examines the commonly overlooked disjunction between established subtitling and captioning conventions and prevailing professional practice standards, through a systematic analysis of divergences, contradictions, and inconsistencies evident in professional subtitling and captioning within leading streaming platforms. In addressing these tensions within an industry-specific context, the study represents one of the earliest efforts to do so. Furthermore, its focus on Arabic subtitling constitutes a significant contribution to a field traditionally dominated by research on European languages. The systematic analysis across the six leading streaming platforms in the MENA region demonstrates that although there is a shared reliance on broadly recognised conventions, significant divergences emerge in spatial, temporal, typographical, and other domains. These variations highlight both the flexibility and inconsistency of current industry standards, suggesting that platform-specific policies often override established academic conventions.

However, as Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2007/2014) assert, the proposed guidelines should not be regarded as an intrusion upon national or corporate subtitling traditions; rather, they represent an effort to establish baseline professional standards and to safeguard the rights of subtitlers. Additionally, Romero-Fresco and Chaume use the term ‘creative media accessibility’ to refer to “those practices that not only attempt to provide access for the users of a film or a play but also seek to become an artistic contribution in their own right and to enhance user experience creatively or imaginatively” (2022, p. 84). While this notion could elevate subtitling and captioning beyond their instrumental role, it simultaneously raises questions about the permissible boundaries of creativity in such contexts.

Moreover, the assumption that audiences benefit from such creative decisions remains underexplored. Existing research frequently prioritizes the viewpoints of practitioners or theorists, while the experiences and responses of diverse audiences, particularly those for whom accessibility is critical, remain insufficiently examined. Accordingly, the possibility that such divergences between theory and practice could give rise to some adverse consequences still exists. First, from a quality perspective, they may affect readability, cognitive processing, and ultimately audience engagement, something that warrants further investigation. Second,

from an accessibility standpoint, the lack of uniformity risks excluding or disadvantaging certain viewers, particularly those reliant on subtitles for linguistic, sensory, or cultural reasons, which also merits further examination. By situating the findings within ongoing debates on audiovisual translation, this study highlights the need for audience reception research, greater dialogue between industry and academia, and the development of guidelines that effectively balance efficiency, readability, and inclusivity.

In the future, researchers may prioritise the refinement of subtitling and captioning standards that are both systematic and responsive to audience needs, thereby positioning these practices not merely as mechanisms of linguistic translation, but as integral instruments for ensuring equitable and reliable access to global media content. Researchers could also broaden the scope of this comparative analysis by incorporating additional platforms and contexts beyond the MENA region, thereby enhancing the generalisability of the findings. Moreover, in further inquiry researchers might investigate how audiences within the MENA region perceive, interpret, and engage with variations in subtitling practices, thus establishing a critical link between technical conventions and broader concerns of comprehension, viewer experience, and accessibility.

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