

GUIDELINES FOR SUBTITLING IN THE NETHERLANDS

There has always been a rich tradition in subtitling in the Netherlands. The Section Subtitle Translators of the *Auteursbond* feels that the time is right for drawing up general guidelines that serve as a starting point for conscientious subtitling.

We are here dealing mainly with subtitling for the small screen. Subtitling for feature films projected in cinemas are sometimes based on a faster reading speed and a longer line length.

LAYOUT

Subtitles consist of a maximum of two lines. If there are two speakers within one subtitle, they each get their own line. In that case the second speaker's words are preceded by a dash to indicate that another person is speaking. The dash is not followed by a space.

E.g.:

Where are you from?
-From Amsterdam.

The subtitles are centred. If a subtitle consists of two lines, the break between the two lines comes at a logical point. If possible, the two lines should be roughly of equal length.

E.g. not:

I said
that I didn't feel one bit like it any longer.

But:

I said that I didn't feel
one bit like it any longer.

If a sentence runs on into the next subtitle, we use three continuation dots. We only use continuation dots at the start if a speaker becomes audible halfway through a sentence.

E.g.:

If a speaker, for whatever reason
needs more than one subtitle...

we only use continuation dots
and start the second subtitle with a lower-case letter.

But:

...comes in halfway the sentence,
we use continuation dots at the start.

We try to allow a sentence to run on for no more than two or three subtitles.

LINE LENGTH

The maximum length of a subtitle line is usually around 42 characters, including spaces.

SPOTTING/TIMING

A subtitle appears on screen two to five frames before the sound; that creates the impression for the viewer that the two are synchronous. After the speaker has finished the subtitle remains on screen for about half a second.

If a speaker starts speaking on or immediately after a shot cut, the subtitle appears on screen on the shot cut. If a subtitle disappears from screen just before a shot cut (ten frames or less) we place the out cue one frame before the shot cut as long as there is no subtitle immediately following.

A subtitle may never stay on screen across a scene change.

Subtitles are on screen a minimum of one second and a maximum of eight seconds. Shorter exposure time is only allowed if the subtitle appears immediately before a scene change. Note: Subtitles that are on screen for less than one second are difficult to read. If necessary, we allow such a short subtitle to appear on screen a few frames early.

The average viewer needs around three seconds to mentally process one line of subtitle text. In most subtitling software this corresponds to a reading speed of 10 to 12 characters per second. Children read more slowly so for that target group a different reading speed applies. There is always an interval of at least three empty frames between two subtitles.

If there is an interval of less than a second between two subtitles, we allow the two subtitles to link up.

THE TRANSLATION

A good subtitle should meet a number of requirements.

-No essential information must be lost in the translation. It will always be necessary to compress, but information that is vital for the story must be retained.

-A subtitle should be grammatically correct, even if the original is not. If substandard language is used for a comical effect, we prefer not to follow it up.

-It must be possible for the viewer to read and digest the subtitle at a glance. We therefore avoid complicated constructions and words that do not read easily.

-The style of the subtitle should correspond with the original. In costume dramas people speak in a different register from low comedy or gangster movies.

PUNCTUATION

We use normal interpunction for subtitles. Only the semicolon and the exclamation mark are banned. If characters are raising their voices, that is obvious enough.

The colon:

After a colon we use a capital letter only for direct speech. This includes the speaker's thoughts. In all other cases a lower-case letter follows.

E.g.:

He said: You'd better not go.

And also:

He thought: What is this all about?

But:

There was some finger food, too:
crisps, peanuts, and bits of toast with tapenade.

When quoting someone we only use quotation marks after the colon if not doing so might lead to confusion.

He said: 'Many people prefer it this way.'
Obviously not everybody does.

We try to limit the use of quotation marks and colons.

E.g. not:

I said: 'I thought it was great fun.'

But rather:

I said that I thought it was fun.

TITLES/TEXT ON SCREEN

This includes all elements of text visible on screen. It could be an indication of the location, a date and time, or a sign saying No Entry.

In the case of a short text ('No Trespassing', for instance) we use capital letters and no punctuation marks. If the text is longer, (for instance describing what happened to the character later, or an introduction) we use lower-case letters and the original punctuation marks as much as possible. If the translation is identical to the original, we do not produce a subtitle as in 'New York 1879'.

We translate only the text on screen that is vital to the story.

Spoken text always has priority. If there is text on screen while someone is speaking, the speaker is subtitled.

SONGS AND POEMS

In principle, poems are always translated; songs only if they are relevant to the story. In songs and poems, we do not use a capital letter at the start of the sentence and no punctuation marks apart from commas and question marks.

VOICE-OVER

A voice-over is translated exactly like an ordinary speaker. Normal punctuation marks, no quotation marks and no italics (if that should be an option). If the voice-over is interrupted by a speaker (as often happens in trailers), we use continuation dots in the voice-over titles.

This time...

Looking for trouble?

...it's serious.

SWEARWORDS

Swearwords and strong language have more impact in writing than when they are spoken. That is why we tend to tone them down a little. Words such as 'fuck' and 'shit' are so commonly used in Dutch that they do not need translating.

CONTRACTIONS

We use contractions in verb forms if the collocation is not stressed.

E.g.:

He's gone and left us.

But:

We thought he hadn't finished the job
but he has finished it.

Other contractions are only used in exceptional cases for reasons of space.

Contractions are also used for animals and objects.

E.g.:

What kind of dog was that?
-It's not a kind I know.

What shall I do with my old car?
-It's ready for the scrap yard.

Some standard expressions are always written in the contracted form.

E.g.: It's a piece of cake.

HYPHENS

If a long word is hard to read at a glance, we will use a hyphen to break it up. Readability is the prime concern. We may break off a word at the end of the line, but only in the case of a composite word.

E.g. not:

I had no idea he was so de-
termined to leave.

But what might be possible is:

I have always thought that the word xeno-
transplantation was self-explanatory.

NUMBERS

Numbers from one to twelve we write out in full. The same goes for tens, but not if they are used in combination with units or measures. We only start a subtitle with a digit if the full form exceeds the number of characters allotted.

E.g:

I've told you twenty times.

But:

It's about 20 km to the next exit.

WHAT DO WE LEAVE UNTRANSLATED?

Words like No, and Okay we often leave out, unless the speaker is off-screen, in which case it may be better to include them in the subtitles.

The same rule goes for names. We often leave them out (for reasons of space and reading time), but sometimes the name is required for clarity, especially when lots of people are speaking at the same time.

ITALICS

Many clients indicate that the use of italics is technically not possible. If, however, italics are allowed, we use them for the following:

Titles of books, films etcetera.

Names of newspapers and magazines.

Words in foreign languages if they are not established in the Dutch language and there is no Dutch equivalent available.

Do not italicise:

Voice-overs.

Thoughts and memories.

Off-screen voices.

SPELLING/GRAMMAR

For the spelling and meaning of words we base ourselves on the *Groene Boekje* and the *Van Dale* dictionary of the Dutch language

For points of grammar we consult the website *Onze Taal*.

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Amsterdam, month, year