**Dubbing and Subtitling**

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Dubbing and subtitling are two major types of screen translation, the two most used in the global distribution and consumption of filmic media. Since their arrival with the introduction of sound to cinema, both have been seen as compromised methods of translating dialogue because they interfere in different ways with the original text, sound track, or image. Since the early 1930s, most countries have tended to favor either one mode or the other. While there are many forms of language versioning or transfer in current use in the global audiovisual industries, and any one of these might be used in some cases on its own or in combination with others, dubbing and subtitling have remained the most recognizable, as well as the most debated, methods for cinema.

**DEFINITIONS**

Dubbing is a form of post-synchronized revoicing that involves recording voices that do not belong to the on-screen actors, speaking in a language different from that of the source text and ideally in synch with the film image. But dubbing can also refer more generally to adding or replacing sound effects or spoken lines by the source actors themselves in the language of the film's production, often because of poor sound quality in the original recording or for the deletion of expletives from the theatrical version for release on television. While this latter form of post-synchronized revoicing is present in virtually all modern films, it is often called "looping" to distinguish it from dubbing as language translation. Another form of revoicing is the "voice-over," in which a nonsynchronous voice that does not replace the source text and language is added to the sound track but does not replace the source text and language. Popular in Russia and Poland and used more in television than in filmtranslation, voice-over is a relatively minor mode compared to dubbing and subtitling.

Subtitling, like voice-over, presents the translated and source languages simultaneously, but it transforms speech into writing without altering the source sound track. Subtitling may be either intralingual or interlingual. In the former, the written text that appears over the image is that of the source language. This kind of subtitling, for viewers who are deaf and hard-of-hearing, is often called "captioning," and it is in prevalent use in television broadcasting. Interlingual subtitling translates the source language into the target language (or languages) in the form of one or more lines of synchronized written text. These verbal messages may include not only speech, such as dialogue, commentary, and song lyrics, but also displays, such as written signs and newspaper headlines. Subtitles usually appear at the bottom of the screen, though their placement may vary among language groups. In bilingual subtitling countries such as Belgium, Finland, and Israel, film subtitles are often present in both languages.

The national preferences for subtitled or dubbed films stem from several factors, including historical and political circumstances, traditions and industries, costs, the form to which audiences are accustomed, and the generic and artistic standing of the films themselves. Before these can be considered, it is necessary to address the historical circumstances that gave rise to dubbing and subtitling and to their emergence as the preferred forms of verbal translation in film.

## EARLY SOUND FILM AND MULTIPLE LANGUAGE VERSIONS

Silent films presented few problems for language transfer, though they still entailed translation for international audiences. While silent films were well suited to consumption in a variety of cultural contexts, this was due less to their status as a universal language of images than to their intertitles and the flexibility they provided. Intertitles were not simply translated from source to target languages but creatively adapted to cater to diverse national and language groups: the names of characters, settings and plot developments, and other cultural references were altered as necessary in order to make the films internationally understandable for different national audiences. By 1927, the intertitles of Hollywood films were routinely translated into as many as thirty-six languages.

With the sound film, it was no longer possible simply to replace intertitles. Subtitling and dubbing have been in use since 1929, but when the first American sound films reached Europe they did not immediately become the preferred solutions to the new problem of sound film translation. Instead, multilingual productions or multiple language versions (MLVs) experienced a period of ascendency and decline from 1929 to 1933. During this time, American film studios either brought foreign directors, scriptwriters, and actors to Hollywood or set up film production studios in Europe. Warner Bros. was the first American producer to engage in MLV production, with some European producers and all of the major Hollywood studios following suit. Paramount invested the most, building a huge studio in early 1930, at Joinville in the suburbs of Paris, that was soon producing films in as many as fourteen different languages. Films that were shot simultaneously in two or three languages usually had just one director, but for a higher number of MLVs each could have a different director. Polyglot actors might perform in more than one language version, but the norm was different casts for different versions. Sets and costumes were reused, which meant shooting versions in shifts according to a twenty-four-hour schedule. Production time was short, often less than two weeks per feature. At its peak, between March 1930 and March 1931, Joinville turned out an astonishing one hundred features and fifty shorts.

Despite such rationing of production time, MLVs meant an enormous increase in costs, and their standardized plots worked against satisfying the cultural diversity of their target audiences. Their lack of profitability, inability to meet generic requirements across cultures, and the perception that they were purely commercial products led to a precipitous decline in MLVs, with Hollywood ceasing multilingual production entirely in 1933 and Germany and France soon thereafter. Although many established and promising young directors made MLVs, few of their works are considered to be of lasting artistic value. An exception is Josef von Sternberg's *Der Blaue Engel* (*The Blue Angel*, 1930), shot in English and German versions for Ufa (Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft) and Paramount. *The Blue Angel* was a substantial international hit and features the same actors (Emil Jannings and [Marlene Dietrich](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/marlene-dietrich)) voicing their lines in both versions.

While the MLVs are generally considered to be a failed experiment of the early sound period, multilingual versions continued to be made sporadically in Europe. [Jean Renoir](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/jean-renoir)'s *Le carrosse d'or* (*The Golden Coach*, 1953), for example, was shot at Cinecittà with a largely Italian cast, most of whom, including the star, [Anna Magnani](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/anna-magnani) (1908–1973), played and spoke all three languages in separately shot English, Italian, and French versions. [Werner Herzog](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/werner-herzog)'s *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht* (*Nosferatu the Vampyre*, 1979) was double shot, with the same cast performing separate German and English versions.

## THE DUBBING AND SUBTITLING INDUSTRIES

The most common explanation for the divide between dubbing and subtitling countries derives from cost: dubbing, the more expensive translation mode, is adopted by the larger, wealthier countries with significant single-language communities, subtitling by the smaller countries whose audiences comprise more restricted markets. While there is some truth to this rationale, cost alone does not dictate national choice: small Central European countries such as Bulgaria, the [Czech Republic](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/germany-scandinavia-and-central-europe/czech-political-geography/czech-republic), Hungary, and Slovakia prefer dubbing, despite its high cost. Historical and political developments, along with tradition, are equally important factors.

In [Western Europe](https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/modern-europe/ancient-history-middle-ages-and-feudalism/western-europe), dubbing emerged in the early 1930s as the standard method of language transfer in France, Italy, Germany, and Spain (sometimes referred to as the FIGS group). In France, where the Joinville studio was converted into a dubbing center, the supremacy of dubbing derives from the nation's cultural mission to preserve and protect the [French language](https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/language-linguistics-and-literary-terms/language-and-linguistics/french) in the face of foreign (especially American) influence, and the prevalence of French as the [lingua franca](https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/language-linguistics-and-literary-terms/language-and-linguistics/lingua-franca) for a populace accustomed to hearing it in its own films. For the other countries of the FIGS group, culture and political ideology were determining causes. Italy, Germany, and Spain, all of which faced cultural boycotts in the mid-1930s and were ruled by fascist governments, only allowed dubbed versions of foreign films. The dictators of these countries understood how hearing one's own language served to confirm its importance and reinforce a sense of national identity and autonomy. In Italy especially—where most people, including the filmmakers themselves, spoke dialect rather than the official Tuscan—dubbing forged the synthetic unity of a shared national language. As early as 1929, Benito Mussolini's government decreed that all films projected on Italian screens must have an Italian-language sound track regardless of where it was produced. Both [Francisco Franco](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/history/spanish-and-portuguese-history-biographies/francisco-franco)'s Spain and [Adolf Hitler](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/history/german-history-biographies/adolf-hitler)'s Germany established strict quotas regarding imports, almost all of which were dubbed. Through the quickly established and standardized dubbing industries that were built up in these nations, dubbed movies came to be seen as local productions. The highly developed and still active dubbing industries in these countries are thus remnants of their political contexts of the early 1930s, when sound film emerged.

Dubbing is a labor-intensive process. In a sound booth, dubbing actors view film segments repeatedly while voicing their lines from a prepared script. Several recording attempts may be necessary to achieve, as near as possible, the synchronization of translated lines of dialogue or other vocalizations with the lip movements of the original on-screen actors. Films are dubbed well or badly depending on the time and care taken and the resources devoted to the process. Until the 1960s, lip synchrony was held by the dubbing industry as the most important factor for sustaining the illusion of watching and hearing a homogeneous whole. Now, lip synch is considered to be of secondary importance, since research has shown that the viewer cannot discern minor slips and discrepancies in lip movements, and asynchrony is not bothersome to audiences in dubbing countries. Audio synchrony, or using voices that fit the characters on the screen, is important to the overall effect, and studios tend to employ the same dubbing actors for well-known foreign stars. This has led in some cases to voice actors achieving star power within the industry, or even becoming film actors in their own right: for example, Monica Vitti (b. 1931), the star of several [Michelangelo Antonioni](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/michelangelo-antonioni) films in the 1960s, came to the director's notice through a dubbing assignment for his film *Il Grido* (*The Cry*, 1957). In the postwar Indian film industry (now commonly referred to as "Bollywood"), the ubiquitous song sequences are sung not by the actors but by professional singers who can become as famous as the screen stars who lip-synch their recordings during shooting.

Even in the dubbing countries there are sectors of the audience who prefer to watch subtitled films. In France these are advertised as "version originale soustitrée" ("original version with subtitles"); in Spain, cinemas increasingly offer both subtitled and dubbed versions of foreign films. Source-language countries—which means English-speaking countries, especially the [United States](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/united-states) and the United Kingdom—import few films that are not in English and so use these language transfer modes as needed and in a mixed manner. But several non-English-speaking nations, many of which import a high proportion of films, prefer subtitling, including Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Japan, the Netherlands, Portugal, and the Scandinavian countries.

Subtitling, more cost-effective than dubbing because it dispenses with [sound recording](https://www.encyclopedia.com/science-and-technology/computers-and-electrical-engineering/electrical-engineering/sound-recording) and voice actors, is nonetheless complex work. The subtitling industry is not nationalized to the same degree as the dubbing one, since the translators are the key personnel and need not reside in the target country. But a primary issue for subtitling lies in the translation, which entails enormous cuts to the source dialogue—as much as half. While the ideal in subtitling is to translate each utterance in full, the limitation of screen space is a major obstacle. The average viewer's reading speed is 150–180 words per minute, with necessary intervals, which severely limits the duration and hence completeness of the subtitles. The final part of the process involves striking a duplicate photographic print of the master print, while simultaneously exposing it with titles to produce a new print with the titles "burned in." Companies hired to affix the subtitles to film prints face a myriad of possibilities concerning type size and typeface, background and placement, indications for extended sentences and multiple speakers, and the like. As with dubbing, films can be subtitled well or badly.

## SUBTITLING VERSUS DUBBING

Many introductory film textbooks discuss a debate regarding subtitled versus dubbed prints of foreign films viewed by Anglo-American film studies students, and all state a preference for subtitling. The case against dubbing includes imperfect synchronicity between lip and audio or voice and body, flatness of performances and acoustics, and alteration or elimination of the original film's sound track and design. The quality of the acting is frequently noted as suffering in dubbed films, as the vocal qualities, tones, and rhythms of specific languages, combined with the gestures and facial expressions that mark national characters and acting styles, become literally lost in translation. While subtitling is acknowledged to have drawbacks as well—it is distracting and impedes concentration on the visuals and often leaves portions of the dialogue untranslated—it is seen to alter the source text the least and to enable the target audience to experience the authentic "foreignness" of the film.

But this position often does not acknowledge the selected acceptance of dubbing in subtitling countries or cases where dubbing makes more sense than subtitling. Foreign films and television programs aimed at children are dubbed in target countries that tend otherwise to subtitle because their viewers have not yet learned to read or cannot read quickly enough for subtitles to be effective. While serious moviegoers demand that art films be subtitled, they rarely complain that foreign films in lower, more commercial genres such as the "spaghetti western," *giallo*, [martial arts](https://www.encyclopedia.com/sports-and-everyday-life/sports/sports/martial-arts), comedies, and anime are usually released in dubbed versions. For Italian cinema, popular or art, the authenticity argument does not hold: almost all Italian films are shot silent and then dubbed after filming has been completed, so there is no original sound track to speak of. The postwar era saw increased levels of co-production among nations, with the casts of co-produced films often coming from different countries and not speaking the same languages; their parts were thus dubbed by voice actors of the country in which the film was shot, and the international nature of what is in fact a polyglot film was erased. [Federico Fellini](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/federico-fellini)'s *La strada* (*The Road*, 1954) features two lead performers from the [United States](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/united-states) speaking English ([Anthony Quinn](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/anthony-quinn) and Richard Basehart) and one from Italy speaking Italian (Giulietta Masina). In terms of screen time and verbal utterances, the two American actors predominate; the Italian lead's lines are negligible. In spite of this, Anglo-American purists invariably judge the dubbed-in-Italian, subtitled-in-English version to be the more authentic even though the lips of two of the three main characters are clearly out of synch with their voices and the film was shot without sound.

The claim that subtitling involves the least interference with the original film is also arguable. Subtitles obstruct the integrity of composition and *mise-en-scène* by leading the viewers' eyes to the bottom of the frame. They focus audience attention on the translated words and the actors speaking them to the exclusion of peripheral or background dialogue, sound, or characters. They do not provide as full a translation as dubbing, and audiences of subtitled films do not experience the words and the expressions of the performers simultaneously. Subtitling may thus be regarded as undoing the synergy of performance and script, elevating selectively translated dialogue and downgrading the impact and importance of visual expression.

Although neither subtitling nor dubbing is an ideal form of audiovisual translation, recent technological developments have widened their application and reception. The number of individual sound tracks used in feature film sound design has increased (twenty-four tracks or more are now commonplace), as has the number of sound tracks used in the dubbing process. When each speaking character has a separate voice track in the film's original recording, dubbing only for language is possible, leaving the rest of the original aural expression of the film intact. For subtitling, laser processing has enabled the introduction of larger letters, outlined words, broader color ranges, and translucent background bands to increase legibility. But it is digitalization that has brought the most dramatic changes. Analyzing and resynthesizing the voices of dubbing actors make it possible for intonation, tone, and timbre to be adjusted to match those of the source actors almost identically. Asynchrony between lip movements and translated revoicings can also be corrected digitally to achieve lip synchrony, which is especially important in close-ups. The introduction of "soft titles," which are similar to the simultaneous translation one may experience with opera, has been enabled by CD-ROM technology and has allowed for high-quality subtitling for films that have no existing subtitled prints, providing a cheaper and more easily transportable solution than the expensive process of burning subtitles onto a newly struck print.

Finally, the introduction of Digital Video Broadcasting (DVB) and the Digital Versatile Disc (DVD) has produced increasing user choice and demand for television and film in other languages. Digital TV (DVB) enables transmission of a number of signals and thus live or simultaneous subtitling—a particularly important development for those countries accustomed to reading subtitles, as it means new access to foreign satellite channels. DVDs have become a crucial mode of film consumption. Their viewers can choose between dubbed or subtitled streams in a range of languages—up to four dubbing tracks and thirty-two subtitled tracks. Translations or subtitles are also required for the extra features frequently found on DVDs, such as trailers, behind-the-scenes documentaries, and biographical information on key cast members. While the subtitling versus dubbing debate is unlikely to ever be resolved, digital technologies have provided new opportunities for both modes of audiovisual translation.

**SEE ALSO** *[Dialogue](https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/dialogue);[Sound](https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/sound);*[*Technology*](https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/technology)

## FURTHER READING

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