

ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA IN CROATIAN AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION

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Abstract

This paper aims to illuminate the complex relationship between English as a mediating language and the field of audiovisual translation (AVT), based on a short survey conducted among professional audiovisual translators working into Croatian. Considering that English in its numerous international varieties, as well as in its incarnation in the form of English as a lingua franca (ELF) functions as a contact or mediating language in a number of contexts and situations, there is little surprise that it is likewise used as a vehicle for communication in various types of audiovisual media. While there has been a significant amount of research devoted to the issues related to the use of ELF in interpreting, relatively scant attention has been paid to ELF usage in the audiovisual industry and the issues pertaining to the translation of such media items.

1. Introduction

English is used for a variety of communicative purposes among and between native and non-native speakers, while playing a supplementary role as a pivot or mediating language between the speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In this last capacity it has firmly established itself as the most important lingua franca in the world, as is evident in the increased use of what linguists term *English as a lingua franca* (ELF), or a highly fluid variety of English characterized by the lack of adherence to the norms of standardized English varieties and a strong influence of contextual use, communicative purpose and idiosyncrasies of individual speakers (House 2013: 59-60). In her article on ELF and translation, Juliane House draws a distinction between ELF as a language for communication and the languages for emotional identification, which is a role reserved for the speakers' mother tongues (House 2003: 556-559). With ELF,

the primary focus is not on the proper and correct use of standard forms but rather on its usefulness as a communicative tool shaped by various types of cultural identities (House 2013: 60) which subsequently exert strong influence on the development and use of individual ELF forms. Specifically, ELF researchers note the powerful influence of the lexis and syntax of the speakers' mother tongues (Hewson 2009: 110) on diverse individual ELF variants. It depends on the speakers' coordinated effort to shape and sustain meaningful conversation, rather than any shared repertoire or common forms (House 2013: 60). While the description of ELF as a language for communication is apt, since all *linguae francae* throughout human history served this utilitarian communicative purpose, it again draws attention to the importance played by mutual intelligibility as the uppermost aim of its usage (Foley and Deocampo 2016: 146). An additional advantage of ELF, stemming from its inherent flexibility and historical origins as a cultural offshoot of the spread of the British Empire, is the ease with which it spreads through various geographical, cultural and technological spaces.

In the past few decades the unabating spread of English as the main international language of communication has been complemented by a similar increase in various types of media content, in which this kind of communication occurs with growing frequency, from live interviews conducted in English between journalists and their guests where neither party's mother tongue is English to short news clips containing speeches or statements given in English by non-native speakers or documentaries involving non-native speakers trying to convey something of importance using English as an intermediary language. Bearing in mind that non-native speakers of English make up three quarters of all English users and that most interactions in English nowadays occur among non-native speakers (Reithofer 2010: 144), it is unsurprising that instances of such usage may be on the increase in the audiovisual industry, despite the prevalence of audiovisual media produced by native English speakers. Following Campbell's (2005: 29) argument that "translation into and from English outside the Inner Circle is not an aberration, but occupies a legitimate space in the translation enterprise", where the notion of Inner Circle designates native speakers of English from the Anglophone countries as opposed to those speakers whose mother tongue is something other than English, this paper focuses on the

attitudes towards the use and translation of English as a lingua franca among Croatian audiovisual translators.

Since Croatia is primarily a subtitling country, with dubbing and voiceover being reserved mostly for content aimed at children or for documentaries intended to reach family audiences, the focus of the study is on the translation of subtitles. In addition, this survey is a part of an ongoing research project focused on the use of non-standard translation practices such as relay translation, and thus partially utilizes data gathered through previous research (see Čemerin, forthcoming).

When it comes to the translation of content involving non-native speakers of English, whether interviews, news items, documentaries or other genres, the issues facing subtitle translators are fundamentally the same as those related to the translation of content produced by native speakers. Typical issues of condensing and interpretation – or reformulation – of the source text to fit into the time frame, while at the same time paying attention to technical accuracy and style of the original, apply to translation of content produced by native and non-native speakers alike. A common denominator is the transfer of information through audiovisual (AV) channels between the authors of particular AV content and the subsequent viewers of such material. As regards English as a lingua franca, one of its main tenets is the aforementioned emphasis on functional effectiveness in its usage, or adaptation of language in accordance with relevant communicative needs, as opposed to strict adherence to the formal correctness of standard English patterns (Seidlhofer 2005: 340). Therefore, any research delving into the functional use of ELF in audiovisual translational practices needs to take into account the standard and non-standard use of language, vocabulary differences and the flow of the communication process. As has been previously noted by Hewson (2009: 113-114), the primary point when translating texts produced by non-native speakers of English or speakers of ELF – who may be characterized by extremely varying competence levels that could impact the translational process and the final product – lies in comprehensibility:

But things are not so straightforward for a large number of texts written by non-native speakers. Such texts will typically contain different types of difficulties. These may go from the relatively unproblematic (say the absence of nuance, or

decipherable borrowings from the writer's native language and/or culture) to the extremely taxing, i.e. the text which is in part or completely incomprehensible. [...] When the translator cannot obtain enlightenment from the client, she or he is forced to interpret alone – and while it is hard to guarantee accuracy, the professional will aim to produce a plausible interpretation couched in standard language. In the ELF context, the translator's role is thus no longer one of expressing an equivalent message in a second language, but involves an extended act of interpretation based on a partially undecipherable text, where the context plays a key part. (Hewson, 2009: 113-115).

However, while the source text may be plagued by the lack of comprehensibility, miscommunication and difficulties caused by the speaker's limited linguistic competence, it may be assumed that a competent working translator would have an arsenal of professional techniques to help him or her in the process of interpreting the original source input and transforming it into a usable and satisfactory final product. The key aspects of this process are certainly the translator's professional competence and the high quality and accuracy of their output, since their audience depends on the final subtitle file being able to fulfil its utilitarian purpose.

In addition, subtitling can be thought of as diasemiotic translation (Gottlieb 2004: 219), involving a shift from spoken utterances and visual or auditive gestures in one language to written verbal language in another (Assis Rosa 2001: 215). The result is a text which is necessarily grounded in the functional use of the multimodal properties of AVT, if the quality of the subtitle file remains sufficiently high.

2. Sampling

This paper is based on the results obtained from a pilot study conducted in 2014 on a sample of 44 professional audiovisual translators working in Croatian and focusing on the use of non-standard translation practices such as relay translation (cf. Čemerin, forthcoming). While the main body of the study involved a comparison of two groups of respondents, professional translators and fansubbers, this paper reports on an additional part of the questionnaire survey conducted solely with the group of professional subtitlers. Both questionnaires

were anonymous and conducted online, distributed through various social networks and the Facebook page of the Croatian Association of Audiovisual Translators (CAAT). The sample therefore consists of anonymous respondents willing to complete the questionnaire survey and provide their answers. This also means that the sample may not necessarily be considered representative of the entire population of professional audiovisual translators in Croatia. Likewise, this type of survey may be open to self-selection bias, either due to the fact that those willing to participate in the survey may generally be more motivated to partake in similar studies or due to the fact that the topic of the survey may draw those respondents with a previous interest in similar topics. Despite these shortcomings, since the study was designed as a small-scale pilot study with an aim of testing the questionnaire and collecting preliminary data in order to provide foundation for further, more detailed research, the author believes that the survey results have certain merit in terms of providing insight into specific points and issues within the wider framework of the project.

3. Methodology

Four questions probing the experiences and attitudes of professional subtitlers towards English as a lingua franca in their everyday work were included as an annex to the main questionnaire. The responses will be discussed in further detail below.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the mean age of the respondents was 31.4 years, and the sample mostly consisted of women (66%), with most (86%) of the participants having at least a graduate degree. On average, the respondents had been working as professional translators from English for 7.4 years, 4.6 of which they spent as audiovisual translators.

With regard to the type of content they most frequently translate, documentaries (86.4%) and feature films (79.5) predominated, followed by interviews (25%), reality TV programmes (9.1%), news (4.5%), TV commercials (4.5%), animated films (4.5%) and entertainment shows (2.3%). While TED talks belong to the volunteer category, rather than the category of paid

translation work, several of the respondents included them into their overall translation experience so they were represented in the final score.

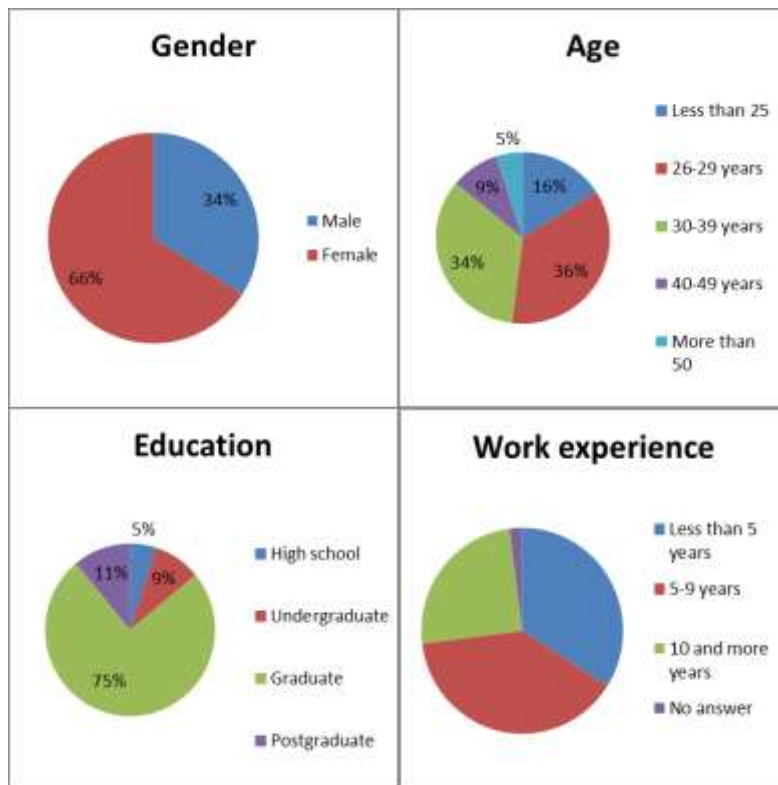


Figure 1. Demographic structure of the sample

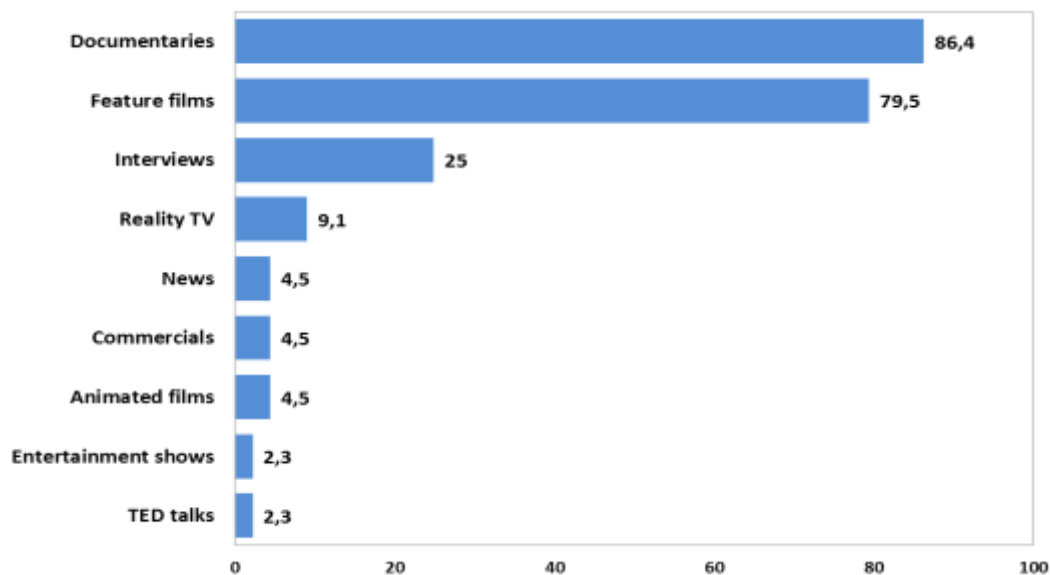


Figure 2. Types of audiovisual content most frequently translated by the respondents

It must again be noted that the sample itself is comparably small and cannot be said to fully represent the general population of audiovisual translators in Croatia, which should at any given time amount to at least several hundred people centred around two large service providers – the Croatian public broadcaster Hrvatska Radiotelevizija (HRT) and the largest privately owned AVT agency Mediatranslations – and several smaller translation agencies that cater mostly to cable TV channels or various festivals. This admittedly rough estimation of the total number of the general AVT translators' population cannot be fully verified since the names and complete lists of translators employed in individual agencies and companies obviously belong to confidential information. However, it gathers some support from the fact that the publicly available list of CAAT members includes 37 individuals, while the Mediatranslations' official website boasts of having a "highly organized network comprising of more than 400 professional translators". Nevertheless, as has been stated above, the sample has been used as a test sample for a larger study, which would be necessary to fully evaluate the use and effects of English as a lingua franca in the Croatian subtitling market.

4. Results and discussion

Despite the shortcomings and limitations of this survey, the results obtained demonstrate some revealing points. As is shown in Table 1, a large majority of respondents (82%) were at some point in their careers commissioned to translate one or more products involving speakers of different (non-English) native tongues conversing in English. This is neither surprising nor unexpected, especially when compared to the relatively high number of interviews (25%) the respondents reported translating on a regular basis. TV interviews typically involve at least one Croatian journalist or interviewer, not to mention the interviewees who could come from a whole variety of national, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Studies conducted in other subtitling countries may show similar results, simply reflecting the state of affairs, with English firmly established in the dominant position as the world's preferred language of intercultural communication.

Table 1. Have you ever translated a type of audiovisual content where English was used as a pivot or mediating language between two or more individuals who were not native speakers of English?

	N	%
Whole sample	44	100%
YES	36	82%
NO	8	18%

Even more interesting are the results related to the perceived difficulties in performing such subtitling assignments, as given in Table 2. The question involved a list of items which may be perceived as a potential source of difficulty when translating an audiovisual file, ranging from the speaker's pronunciation and the use of non-standard grammatical or vocabulary forms to actual grammatical mistakes and vocabulary misuse, as well as the use of humorous or idiomatic expressions. The choice of items has been made in order to include all potential sources of miscommunication which may prove to pose a problem in the translational process, from outright mistakes, misuse of idiomatic or slang expressions, non-standard yet acceptable grammatical or vocabulary forms (e.g. those belonging to a dialectal or sociolectal variety of English), the speaker's pronunciation difficulties or the instances where the speaker tried to use humour but failed to properly convey it.

Table 2. Did any of the following present any difficulty in translating audiovisual content?

	N	%
Whole sample	44	
Speaker's pronunciation.	21	48%
Non-standard grammatical forms used by the speaker.	15	34%
None of the items listed.	13	29%
Grammatical mistakes.	10	22%
Incorrect use of vocabulary.	10	22%
Slang.	7	15%
Use of non-standard vocabulary forms.	6	13%
Use of idioms or proverbs.	5	11%
Humour.	5	11%
Other.	1	2%

The respondents were allowed to choose as many answers from the list as they wanted (which is why the percentages in Table 2 do not add up to 100). Due to the preliminary characteristics of the study, the items were not ranked according to difficulty and the purpose was not to establish what proved to cause

most complications in the translation process, but rather to tentatively establish which listed items may require closer attention in further studies.

As can be seen from Table 2, by far the highest level of difficulty was ascribed to the speakers' pronunciation of particular utterances (48%), followed by the use of non-standard grammatical forms (34%). A relatively high number of participants (29%) claimed that none of the items listed as potentially problematic caused them any difficulty. The rest of the items listed received somewhat less attention from the examined group, with grammatical mistakes and incorrect use of vocabulary sharing the same number of participants who reported having difficulties with them (22%), as well as the use of idiomatic expressions and humour (11%), followed by the use of slang expressions (15%) and the use of non-standard vocabulary (13%).

It must again be stressed that this study involved a relatively small sample, and thus no statistical tests were appropriate and no statistical significance has been drawn from the results. However, it is interesting that these results correspond to the surveys conducted among professional interpreters working with non-native English speakers, who cited phonological, lexical and syntactic deviations from Standard English as a major stress factor when faced with such assignments (Reithofer 2010: 148). Unlike interpreters, confined to their booths, audiovisual translators have an advantage in the possibility of replaying the video material they receive from the agency. Likewise, they can ask a colleague to listen to the recording and help them discern what the speaker is saying, and they frequently receive scripts or journalists' notes related to the video recording they have to work with, which is standard practice in major agencies and TV networks. However, due to very tight deadlines, the time allotted for each individual translation task may not be sufficient to perform any of these additional activities and thus translators may be forced to rely on their own capabilities. In addition, the one disadvantage audiovisual translators may have when compared to interpreters is the fact that they have no direct access to the speaker themselves, and have no way of asking the speaker to clarify their meaning, repeat the utterance loudly and clearly or expand upon their original spoken input in order to clear any misunderstandings.

Since a subtitled product may be perceived as a sort of “captured” snapshot of communication, an interactive situation made available to another audience via subtitles (which in case of interviews is usually not scripted beforehand, as documentaries or films are), one may safely assume this availability of the original recorded conversation may aid the translator in his/her task. With subtitles, there is no direct interaction as with face-to-face interpretation, but there is usually sufficient time to verify and check the sound recording, in addition to the multimodal aspects of the products themselves, whereby the combination of sound and image may help in identifying important conversational points, as well as the overall comprehension. As has been noted above, extremely tight deadlines may interfere with this process and hinder the translator’s ability to properly interpret the source file.

An additional feature of subtitling is that subtitles, as a form which condenses original speech into written text, are necessarily a transformation of original ELF speech – to a greater extent than the oral production that is originally uttered in standard or more formal language – into a standard language variety, either completely obliterating the features of orality or reducing them to a minimum, although this happens less in subtitling for the deaf and hard-of-hearing. As Assis Rosa (2001: 215-216) has shown, this feature of subtitling is “even more obvious in subtitles of spontaneous oral communication, such as extracts of interviews in the news”, with morphological and syntactic features of non-standard language varieties mostly either omitted, lexicalized or substituted with less informal standard discourse. It may be surmised that a similar process would be at work with spoken ELF utterances, which would be rendered in subtitles in a formal and standard variety of the target language, with their non-standard features and idiosyncrasies being replaced with a formal written register. Perhaps ironically, if one remembers the preference of ELF speakers for communicative purpose over grammatical correctness, this may serve a particular communicative need: subtitles are usually rendered in standard national languages in order to reach the widest possible national audience, especially in the case of the national television networks.

Bearing this in mind, Table 3 shows the results of participants’ self-assessment of the level of difficulty posed by files containing non-native speakers



and non-standard forms. Since the aim of the preliminary study was to include all potential uncommon forms which could pose a difficulty for the translator in the process of interpreting source text, no distinction has been made between the influence of the speaker's mother tongue and the use of non-standard grammatical or vocabulary forms. Any further study would necessarily have to refine the questionnaire and make a proper distinction between those items. The influence of the speaker's mother tongue has been specifically included based on previous findings by researchers specializing in the overlap between ELF studies and Translation Studies, as may be confirmed by Hewson (2009: 120):

Many specialists in foreign language learning and teaching have pointed to the important influence that the mother tongue can have. One also finds literal translations of idiomatic expressions, and incorrect assumptions about the transferability of cultural references. In such cases, the task of the translator is a daunting one, either because there is no means of knowing what the ELF user's mother tongue is, or because the translator has no knowledge of that mother tongue and the cultural implicit on which it relies.

In addition, one may add the potential for fossilization of mother tongue grammatical forms which may turn into fossilized mistakes in English (such as using the verb in the second place in the German sentential word order) or false friends in the vocabulary, which again may lead to vocabulary misuse.

Table 3. How difficult do you find translation assignments which include speakers of "international" English or Englishes which involve non-standard language forms and the influence of the speaker's mother tongue?

Whole sample	100%
I don't have major difficulties.	48%
I have some difficulties, but nothing of significance.	21%
I don't have any difficulties.	18%
I don't know, I cannot estimate.	11%
I have major difficulties.	2%
I have extreme difficulties, I find it almost impossible to work.	0%

The largest number of respondents reported having no major difficulties with such assignments (48%), coupled with 18% of those who said they had had no difficulty whatsoever when translating audiovisual files where non-native speakers and non-standard forms are present. Twenty-one percent had had *some* difficulties when dealing with such files, but nothing significant, while 11%



of the respondents could not estimate the level of difficulty posed by such assignments. Only 2% of the respondents reported having major difficulties with such files, while no one claimed having extreme difficulties. As all of the respondents are professional and trained translators, whose education, training and working experience certainly involve a fair share of complex assignments, this fact should explain the results. The notion of training and education may warrant further clarification: since audiovisual translation is at present time not taught as a separate course at Croatian universities – although some departments do cover audiovisual translation within their courses – a lot of professional audiovisual translators receive training in the use of subtitling software and the practical aspects of AVT work when they gain employment in AVT agencies present on the Croatian market, which usually organize in-house training courses for new employees. Therefore, it may be inferred that all of the respondents possess AVT experience and training that relies heavily on the practical side of the work, rather than merely theoretical.

We may again recall the surveys related to interpreting, which have shown professional interpreters with long experience to be better at interpreting non-standard English than novices (Reithofer 2010: 148). Likewise, the knowledge of the non-native speaker's mother tongue is an asset and quite helpful when faced with such an assignment (*ibid.*). There is no reason to suspect a different outcome among professional subtitlers with long experience, but the empirical confirmation of this notion would require a much larger and detailed study. Moreover, any potential research project dealing with the translation of ELF in audiovisual products would have to involve an examination and analysis of a corpus of translated products in order to gather reliable data with regard to the translation practices and strategies used to overcome potential difficulties with ELF source files.

The final question was aimed at the perception of usefulness of English as a mediating language in communicative situations involving speakers of different mother tongues. Since the target group consists of translators working with English, it is reasonable to presuppose they will find no fault with the spread and use of English as a means of communication. This would perhaps be better aimed at translators working with other languages, whose fields of employment may

occasionally be encroached upon by the usage of English relay translations for language combinations where they are far from necessary, but may be used by some translation agencies as a means of reducing the overall cost of subtitling. (cf. Čemerin, forthcoming, where more than 65% of professional translators claimed they had performed relay translations of files originally created in other languages from English into Croatian during their professional careers. Despite misgivings on the quality of relay work, they also agreed upon such instances being a professional reality. It is worth noting that this is the same sample which is discussed here.) In addition, Georgakopolou (2011: 2) notes an ever-increasing demand for paid AVT services throughout the globe, coupled with a reduction of budgets and contraction of time frames in which those services are to be provided and followed by a reduction in subtitling prices in some countries where audio transcription as a first step before the creation of subtitle files has gained a significant foothold in the past few years (ibid., 3-4). A conclusion may be tentatively drawn that a further increase in the demand for AVT services involving English may be supplemented by a growing demand for AVT services involving ELF.

Table 4. Do you consider English useful as a mediating language in information transfer in the audiovisual media?

Whole sample	100%
Somewhat useful.	43%
Very useful.	38%
I don't know, I cannot estimate.	19%
Not useful at all.	0%
Not very useful.	0%

As may be expected, 43% of the respondents believed English to be somewhat useful as a mediating language in information transfer in the audiovisual media. This was followed by 38% of those who found it very useful and 19% of those who could not estimate. No one opted for the final two possibilities, that English is not very useful or not useful at all. As the demand for English audiovisual translation services is on the rise, directly correlated with their employment opportunities and livelihood, this would be expected to play a role in their assessments, despite the ever-decreasing rates within the AVT industry. This is opposed to the field of interpreting, where professional interpreters may feel threatened by the increase in non-native speakers who



may opt to dispense with their services and simply hold a conference speech in English as a lingua franca, coupled with its non-standard vocabulary and grammatical forms and emphasis on utilitarian aspects rather than standardized forms (Reithofer 2010: 153). Despite this, one may agree with House's assessment that ELF, as an important part of consumer-oriented economy, co-exists with translation and does not threaten it (House 2013:62). What may be expected is not for ELF to replace translation but rather to transform a portion of the translation market and lead to working conditions and practices adapted to dealing with it.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, we may first enumerate the results of this pilot study:

1. A large majority of respondents has at one point or repeatedly translated audiovisual files involving ELF speakers into Croatian.
2. A significant number of them had no problems in doing so, but for the rest of them most complications were caused by the speaker's pronunciation, the use of non-standard grammatical forms or outright grammatical mistakes and misused vocabulary.
3. Difficulties caused by those items were not major and respondents claimed they were able to deal with them efficiently.
4. A large majority of respondents considers English to be either useful or very useful as a mediating language in information transfer in the audiovisual media.

The spread and use of English as the primary international language of intercultural communication has obviously had significant implications for the audiovisual industry as well. While the results of this short survey cannot be conclusive and should be complemented by larger and more comprehensive studies, one may well expect a further increase in verbal ELF exchanges in the forms of interviews and news clips, which would be followed by their transference into subtitles, in countries where subtitling is the dominant form of audiovisual translation. For professional subtitlers and students of subtitling, it may be useful to practice translating such products during their training sessions, which may

help in reducing potential difficulties when faced with such assignments. Furthermore, research into strategies used by subtitlers to identify and translate ELF utterances may benefit from being combined with certain elements of fansubbing research, as well as studies related to the use of subtitles in language learning. As previous research into subtitling habits among Croatian fansubbing communities has proven, many of those belonging to the local fansubbing scene try to emulate a professional approach to fansub creation, so it may be of interest to see whether this stance applies to fansubs of files containing ELF speech (cf. Čemerin and Toth, forthcoming). Likewise, the general issues of subtitle quality – both those of professionally made files and those of fansubbed items – in terms of translation strategies utilized to deal with particular aspects of ELF speech or difficulties posed by the properties of individual files, may warrant further attention.

Despite the prevalent focus on the interpreting and language learning aspects of ELF research, research into the use of ELF in the audiovisual industry may yield new findings and provide a new angle for the examination of this phenomenon and its general impact.

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