

Proposed guidelines for inclusive subtitles in a Maltese context (EN)

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The following guidelines are to be considered work in progress. Further experimental studies are necessary to test and develop them further. Meanwhile, they are being used for didactic and educational purposes, applied research, and for local media localisation projects.

The parameters and specifications provided are intended for interlingual and intralingual subtitling both in English and Maltese (source languages: English, Maltese, or foreign languages). They are meant to guide audiovisual translators in a Maltese linguistic and cultural setting. They draw on widespread standards and conventions and their variations in use across TV networks, streaming platforms, and localisation companies globally, and have been adapted to suit Maltese-specific needs.

Inclusive subtitles are intended for a broad spectrum of viewers who may or may not have hearing loss, and who may or may not understand Maltese. The specifications and strategies proposed aim to create an inclusive enjoyable experience that can be shared by all alike. The aim is to seek a balance that ensures that no viewer is deprived of essential information (e.g., relevant sounds, or culture-specific terms and references) while trying to avoid overabundant or redundant information.

For further detail on the ongoing research carried out to develop these guidelines, refer to the author's forthcoming articles.

1. Character limitation

- Characters per subtitle line for documentaries, TV programmes, interviews, or similar reality productions: 40 (spaces included)
- Characters per subtitle line for fiction productions (film & TV series): 38 (spaces included)

2. Reading speed

- Adult programmes: max 15 cps (characters per second)
- Children's programmes: max 12 cps (characters per second)

3. Duration

- Minimum duration: ideally, 1 second. Minimum 20 frames in the case of one-word subtitles.
- Maximum duration: 6 seconds per subtitle event

4. Frame gap

- Minimum 2 frames between subtitles

5. Position

- In general, subtitles should be centre justified and placed at the bottom of the screen, unless otherwise requested by the client.
- Subtitles can be aligned to the top throughout opening credits or if there is on-screen text in the video material. Maintain consistency at the top all throughout the opening credits instead of alternating between the top and bottom of the screen.
- Displacement to the left or right can be adopted in short dual dialogue scenes. Character tags are not necessary if displacement is used in such instances.
- Creative positioning and subtitle display options can be discussed with the client depending on the type of production at hand. Compatibility with the editors' program needs to be verified to ensure that any typeface formatting, alignment, or displacement are not lost.

6. Text segmentation into subtitles

- Maximum of 2 lines per subtitle.
- 3 lines can be used at the end for subtitling credits.
- Prioritise two-line subtitles in documentaries, informative videos, or similar genres.
- Use both two-line and one-line subtitles for fiction productions as necessary. Merge and separate lines according to the speech flow, rhythm and pauses to enhance the reading experience.
- Avoid segmenting text in such a way as to have to resort to the euphonic /i/ in MT at the beginning of the next subtitle. Resort to reformulation where necessary.

7. Timing and shot changes

- Ideally subtitles should match the duration of the utterance. If this is not possible and a longer duration is required, extend up to 12 frames max.
- Whenever possible, avoid subtitles that cross over shot changes (that is, subtitles that continue over a cut). Start or end the subtitle with the shot change when the cross-over duration before or after the shot change is 7 frames or less.
- Ideally, the time code of entry and exit should match the speech utterance. However, customised solutions are often necessary to suit local productions, particularly in the case of inconsistencies or broken speech in documentary interviews (e.g., false starts with pauses, a word repeated multiple times at the beginning of a line, and so on). It might be necessary to cue in a subtitle slightly later when the speech starts to flow, thus adopting a more customised synchronisation approach.

8. Line break

- When the text needs to be subdivided into 2 lines, prioritise the reading flow. Ideally, break the line before conjunctions, after punctuation marks, before prepositions, possibly obtaining a self-contained semantic unit on each line.
- Ideally, the line break should not separate a noun from an adjective or an article, a verb from the subject pronoun, a prepositional verb from its preposition, a verb from its auxiliary, reflexive pronoun or negation.
- Try not to separate names from surnames.
- When subtitling in MT do not separate hyphenated or prepositional articles from the noun (e.g., fix-xitwa, it-traduzzjoni).

9. Italics

- In fiction productions: voice-over speech, narration, or inner thoughts.
- In documentaries/TV programmes: italics may be avoided for narrators/speakers/presenters when the voice-over narration constitutes almost 50% of the spoken content in the programme. Name tags can be used to indicate voice over narration (e.g., [host], [Clare], [narrator]).

- Only when the speaker is not in the narrative/diegetic space and not merely off camera.
- Dialogue heard over the phone, television, computer, or any electronic device that produces a voice effect.
- Song lyrics. Use quotation marks for song titles. A musical note can be added at the beginning of each song lyric subtitle. The last lyric subtitle will have a musical note at the beginning and end to highlight the end of the song.
- Titles of books, newspapers, works of art, music albums, movies, TV shows.
- Unfamiliar foreign words and phrases. Names of food/dishes or other culture-specific elements.
- Do not italicise proper names such as MT or foreign locations or company names. Simply use upper case for the first letter.
- In EN subtitles, do not italicise MT words in general, such as intercalary words (e.g., mela, ejja) or familiar words in other languages (e.g., “ad hoc,” “rendezvous”) when retained in the target text.
- In MT subtitles, do not italicise EN words in general or familiar words in other languages.

10. Dual speakers

- Use a hyphen without a space to indicate two speakers in one subtitle. One line per speaker. The hyphen precedes any name tag.

Subtitle 1

-Where have you been?
-London.

Subtitle 1

-[Clare] Let's talk about it.
-[Joe] Yes, of course.

Subtitle 1

-[Joe laughs]
-I told you so!

- Use two hyphens when you have a sound caption or tag on one line coming from one source and a dialogue line on the next line coming from a different source.

-[phone rings]
-Hello?

11. Ellipsis and suspension dots

- Do not use ellipses (3 dots) or dashes when an ongoing sentence is split between two or more continuous subtitles.

Subtitle 1 We had asked you

Subtitle 2 to focus on your final exams.

- Use ellipsis at the end of the first subtitle only if there is a long pause between subtitles. In this case, it is not necessary to use an ellipsis at the beginning of the second subtitle. If the pause is very long you can consider ellipsis also at the beginning of the second line to indicate that it is a continuation. Otherwise, when there are no pauses, do not use dots every time you split a sentence.

Subtitle 1 Had I known...

Subtitle 2 I wouldn't have called.

- To indicate a pause within the same subtitle, use three dots without leaving a space.

Subtitle 1 Had I known...I wouldn't have called.

- Use suspension dots to indicate an incomplete sentence or an abrupt interruption.

Subtitle 1 Where the hell are yo...?

Subtitle 2 Shut your mouth!

- Use an ellipsis without a space to indicate that a subtitle is starting mid-sentence.

Subtitle 1 ...be going to school.

12. Written graphics/on-screen text

- When the main SL is MT, and the TL is EN, any MT or foreign-language on-screen text requires an EN translation unless 'covered' in the dialogue/speech or purposely added in the subtitled speech content (e.g., adding the title or designation of an interviewee in the subtitles).
- When the main SL is EN, and the TL is MT, it is not necessary to translate the English on-screen text.
- Use upper case letters for the whole text, except for written passages taken from books, letters, newspapers, or very long chat messages. If the characters are reading the on-screen text aloud use quotation marks.

Subtitle 1 NO TRESPASSING

- If a character/speaker reads the on-screen text, use inverted commas (and no upper case letters) to highlight that the text is being read. Use a name tag if the character/speaker is not on screen.
- Avoid graphical overlap with any onscreen text - position subtitle where it would be easier to read.
- Do not combine dialogue and narrative titles in the same subtitle.
- If a narrative title interrupts the dialogue, use ellipsis at the end of the subtitle and the beginning of the next one.

Subtitle 1 When I was young...

Subtitle 2 NO SMOKING

Subtitle 3 ...we were allowed to smoke anywhere.

- When translating and subtitling the title of a production use upper case for the whole text (e.g., CULHAT AL BELT, THE LOCAL TRAVELLER).

13a. Numbers and Time (English)

- From 1 to 10 - written out in words (e.g., wiehed, tnejn, tlieta).
- Above 10 - written numerically (e.g., 11, 12, 13, 135, 1,000) Use the written form (or a combination of numeric and written form) for larger numbers with several zeros, and the numeric form for numbers with a decimal point for ease of comprehension (e.g., one million, 12 million, 100 thousand, 2.5 million).
- Use word form when a number is at the beginning of a subtitle.
- Be consistent with points and commas (e.g., 5,000, 1.95 million inhabitants, 9.30 pm).
- Be consistent with dates and ordinal numbers (e.g., 5th May, May 5, or 5th of May). The first option is preferable.
- Use numerals for dates (even 1 to 10).
- Time: a) Use numerals (e.g., 11.30 am); b) Use lowercase am, and pm when specifying is necessary; c) Time expressions that do not include numbers need to be written in words (e.g., half past, quarter to, midnight, noon).

13b. Numbers and Time (Maltese)

- From 1 to 10 - written out in words (e.g., one, two, three, etc.).
- Above 10 - written numerically (e.g., 11, 12, 13, 135, 1,000 etc.).
- A combined numeric and word form can be used for larger numbers (e.g., 70 elf).

- Use the numeric form for numbers with a decimal point (e.g., 2.5 miljun).
- Use word form when a number is at the beginning of a subtitle.
- Use word form for all morphological inflections (e.g., ħamest itfal, żewġ, mitt, 1,000, mitt elf, ħames miljuni, tlett irġiel).
- Use numerals for dates (5 ta' ġunju)
- Time: use numeric form and the 12-hour clock format (e.g., fid-9 am). *Nofsillejl* and *nofsinhar* can be written out in words, time and space permitting.

14. Units of measure and currency

- Translate but do not convert old units of measurement that are not in use today (e.g., in history documentaries).
- When the target audience is unknown it is recommended to translate and convert imperial measurements into the metric system (centimetres and metres rather than feet, inches, yards etc.).
- If the target audience is Australian or Maltese, imperial measurements can be taken into consideration. Adopt consistency throughout.
- When the TL is MT, convert units of measure according to MT usage.
- English abbreviations for measurements can be used in MT subtitles (e.g., cm, m, km).
- Whenever possible use currency in words (pounds, yen, krona) instead of the symbol. An exception can be made for the more commonly used € and \$ in the case of time and space restrictions.
- The % symbol (no space) can be used, and fractions can resort to the numeric form (e.g., 1/3, 2/3).
- 'M' can be used for million or miljun.

15. Abbreviations

- Well-known abbreviations/shortenings/acronyms/contractions may be used. No full stops. Use upper case for abbreviations: FYI, ASAP, FBI, EU, MEPA, WWI, and a blend for contractions if needed (e.g., Dr, Mr, km, cm, m)

16. Quotes

- Double quotation marks are to be used for quoted words, phrases, and sentences; use single quotation marks for quotations within quotations.

Subtitle 1 She told me: "Lectures are cancelled."

- If the quote extends beyond more than one subtitle, use an open quote at the beginning of the first subtitle and an end quote at the end of the last subtitle.

Subtitle 1 "If you can fill the unforgiving minute

Subtitle 2 With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,

Subtitle 3 Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it."

- Periods and commas precede closing quotation marks, whether double or single.
- Colons and semicolons follow closing quotation marks.
- Question marks and exclamation marks follow quotation marks unless they belong within the quoted text:

Subtitle 1

Which poem contains the phrase:

"If you can fill the unforgiving minute...?"

Subtitle 2

"If" by Rudyard Kipling.

- Song titles should be enclosed in quotes. Italics are used for the lyrics and names of music albums.

17. Sensory access

- Providing sensory access to HOH viewers among the broader target audience is taken as a default approach unless otherwise specified by the client.
- Sounds and speaker identifiers: Use square brackets and lowercase letters (except for proper nouns) for captions describing sounds, music, as well as name tags (e.g., [Joe laughs], [whistling softly], [Joe] I knew it was her).

Do not italicise even if the dialogue that follows is in voice-over etc.

- Dialogue: In the case of intralingual subtitles include as much of the original content as possible – ideally verbatim. Omitting parts of the original dialogue should be a last resort when synchronisation and reading speed is an issue.

- Include name tags or sound effects only when the speaker or source of sound cannot be seen or clearly identified visually – that is, either off screen or on screen but not clearly visible.
- When the source of the sound is visible on-screen use sound captions only if necessary to qualify the type of sound (e.g., [door creaks], while [door opens] may not be necessary). Consider volume, intensity, duration, and other qualities of the sound.
- Describe generic ambience (e.g., [crowd murmur]).
- Describe diegetic or extradiegetic music. Capture the mood of the music (e.g., spiritual, relaxing, ethereal). More specific descriptions can be used, too (piano ballad, cello solo, percussions). Distinguish between diegetic and extra-diegetic music (e.g., [upbeat music] for extradiegetic music; [Street violinist playing] for diegetic music if violinist is not seen. If the violinist is seen describe the style of music).
- Song lyrics: Subtitle song lyrics that are relevant and that do not interfere with dialogue. Where possible avoid alternating dialogue and song lyric excerpts. Use [song] at the beginning of the subtitle unless the musical note symbol is available in the subtitling software. Use only question marks and exclamation marks at the end of lines, no commas or full stops. Commas can be used within the lyric line if necessary.
- Add song/music titles when known before the start of a song (space and time permitting). The titles can replace the lyrics when these cannot be included. Place song titles in quotes and album titles in italics (e.g., [“Bohemian rhapsody” playing]).
- Use tags to specify that a foreign language is spoken (e.g., [bit-Taljan] or [in Italian] followed by the translated text when this is meant to be understood by the viewers). Otherwise, include a tag and leave dialogue untranslated (e.g., [in foreign language])
- For MT captions use nouns when the source is generic or extended to several people and not specific to one character or person (e.g. [čapčip] rather than [nies ičapčpu], [lehen baxx], [dañq], [xita], [ħoss tal-magna]. However, use [tibki], [jisgħol], [jonfoħ], [jidħqu], [Joe jidħaq] when the character/s and/or gender are specified).

18. Glossaries

- In the case of serial productions, create a shared consistency sheet or glossary with key names and phrases and/or specialised jargon. The consistency sheet can also contain specific notes, such as forms of address. This would need to be updated constantly.
- These specific key names and phrases can be decided upon by the translator in question when they first appear. The rest of the team will follow. Alternatively, the keywords in the original version can be identified and listed, and then discussed together with the team before submission.
- A consistency sheet may consist of various data including source language version, target language version, episode number, sound tags adopted, MT orthographic adaptation of EN loanwords (only if applicable, see 20).

19. TL-specific guidelines: EN (SL- MT)

- Adopt standard English.
- Adopt a standardised and neutralised speech register unless a distinct register is relevant to plot and characterisation. Avoid slang and colloquialisms where not necessary.
- When having to choose an English variety, adopt British English spelling, vocabulary, and spontaneous speech features (discourse markers, fillers, interjections, etc.) Avoid over-domestication. Avoid American vocabulary such as “elevator”, “sidewalk”, “pants”, “purse”, “hall” etc.
- Avoid lowering or over-formalising the general language register in documentaries or informative productions (e.g., opt for “poor” rather than “bad,” “efficient” or “effective” rather than “good”).
- Retain -whenever possible- culture-specific terms and names in MT in order to ensure an MT flavour. Use italics to highlight culture-specific items (or, as a last resort, single inverted commas in the case of client software incompatibility with typeface formatting). Consistency would be necessary throughout. Discuss this translation strategy with the client, when appropriate, and consider the target audience (general web, Australian-Maltese, local residents (Maltese and local non-Maltese)).
- Consistency would be required for names of streets and squares.

- Spell names consistently across episodes even when there are inconsistencies in the original text. Prioritise spelling visible in on-screen text.
- Monument names or other cultural sites and museums that are widely known and publicised among locals and tourists in EN may be translated in EN (e.g., St. John's Cathedral).
- Numbers: see 13a.
- Watch out for source language calques on a lexical and syntactical level. Avoid literal translation and prioritise the target text flow and comprehension.
- Tighten sentences by omitting redundancies, repetitions, hesitations, speech errors (e.g., when interviewees correct themselves), and simplify or sharpen sentences that sound too blurred. Comprehension and avoiding viewer distraction are a priority.
- Adopt reduction as a strategy where necessary but avoid lines that are way shorter than the original.
- Use up-to-date inclusive language to refer to ethnicity, race, age, mental health disorders, religion, sexual orientation, disabilities, and so on. Refer to local associations to identify sensitive language and preferred terms and use of language in English among local communities (e.g., a viewer "has" a hearing impairment rather than "suffers from" a hearing impairment; the deaf and hard-of-hearing). This applies especially to non-fiction productions. Non-inclusive language can be considered in fictional productions only if functional to the plot and characterisation and therefore contextualised.

20. TL-specific guidelines: MT (SL- EN)

- Use standard MT- neutralise any slang and dialects.
- In general, pick the more familiar term if a choice arises between an EN term widely used in spoken spontaneous language and its less used MT equivalent - unless the intention is didactic or to enhance the use of less common MT vocabulary (e.g., use "selfie" rather than "stessu", "flashcard" rather than "leħħa", "orange juice" rather than "sugu tal-laring").
- In fiction productions, use the MT equivalent of geographical names only when these are familiar and commonly used in everyday spoken language. In documentaries, speeches, TV programmes, and other formal contexts, use official MT equivalents when these are available. Refer to <http://publications.europa.eu/code/mt/mt-5000500.htm>

- Toning down vulgar language depends on the medium, target audience, and individual dialogue context within the AV content – whether its function is relative to the plot, characters, or circumstance. In the case of free-to-air TV channels, vulgar language should always be toned down, and similar though less strong equivalents sought. More flexibility can be applied in the case of feature films in cinema theatres, pay platforms and services, and online platforms in general. MT direct equivalents may be stronger than their SL counterparts: due attention must be given to MT language norms.
- On-screen text in English can remain untranslated (e.g., newspaper headings, chat messages, slogans, billboards, etc.) (See 12).
- Any English language dialogue segments should be subtitled verbatim or edited slightly (hesitations, errors, repetitions can be filtered), thus making them accessible to the HOH.
- No italics for English borrowings (See 9).
- Avoid unnecessary contractions (e.g., haw', fej', 'ħabba).
- Avoid informal variants (e.g., iwa).
- Adopt punctuation and upper case according to the MT language [e.g., Tlieta and tlieta to distinguish between the weekday and the number]
- Write foreign territory addresses in their original form (e.g., Gower Street, Londra, and not Triq-Gower). If an address that has both an EN and MT version is spoken by a character or narrator, subtitle it in the same language used by the narrator.
- Avoid coining new MT equivalents.
- Use up-to-date inclusive language to refer to ethnicity, race, age, mental health disorders, religion, sexual orientation, disabilities, and so on (e.g., persuni b'dizabilità, persuni neqsin mis-smiġħ, persuna b'kundizzjoni ta' saħħa mentali, nies LGBTI, Rom, persuni gay, persuni omoesswali, persuni transgender, Indjan, Pakistan, Ċiniż, persuni anzjani). Refer to https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35465/mt_inclusive-comm-gsc-28052018.pdf Refer also to local associations and communities. This applies especially to non-fiction productions. Non-inclusive language can be considered in fictional productions only if functional to the plot and characterisation, and therefore contextualised.
- In intralingual MT, standardise the language and keep condensation to a minimum (ideally, verbatim when possible). The text may be edited to omit hesitation, repetition, and to clean up broken or inconsistent

speech – unless these have a function relevant to plot and characterisation.

- Use correct grammar despite any incorrect grammar in the original source text, unless the use of incorrect grammar has a specific function.
- In the case of wordplay, word puns, or rhyme that do not have an MT direct equivalent, the original wordplay can be retained when the SL is EN. Find corresponding or similar wordplay or pun or rhyme to convey the effect when the SL is a foreign language.
- Do not translate song lyrics if these are in EN.
- “OK” is acceptable in MT subtitles.
- When using EN loanwords, an initial epenthetic vowel is sometimes necessary following the article in MT (e.g., l-ispeaker).
- EN loanwords that end in ijiet in the MT plural form adopt MT orthography even in their singular form (e.g., brejk, brejkijiet, kejk kejkijiet).
- When EN loanwords are conjugated in MT, adopt MT orthography (e.g., chat, tičcettja, save, tissejvja).
- EN words that end in /s/ in the plural form are retained in EN. In general, it is preferable to avoid orthographic adaptation for EN loanwords that do not require any morphological inflection when used in MT in both the singular and plural form (e.g., use “claim” and “claims” rather than “klejm” and “klejms”, “shower” rather than “xawer”, “fridge” rather than “frigġ”, “technician” rather than “teknixin”, “canteen” rather than “kentin” or “kantin”, “manager” rather than “meniger” or “maniger”). This is especially the case when more than one MT variant exists.
- Exceptions to the above based on widely used MT orthography are acceptable. However, though due to the functional and visual/graphic nature of subtitling (that differs from written text on paper or on web), and, in the absence of an official list to refer to, subtitlers need to avoid choices based on subjective linguistic style, and require strict criteria to ensure consistency across serial productions. A possible solution could be to create a project-specific MT consistency sheet or glossary to be shared and integrated by the entire translation team across all AV content related to the same localisation project. In order to develop and enhance subtitling habituation, consistent standards across productions and media would be preferable.

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N.B. The above guidelines take into account the decisions published by the Kunsill Nazzjonali tal-Ilsien Malti. These have been customised to AVT-specific needs where necessary. Further studies based on viewer experience and professional practice feedback are necessary to enhance these guidelines.

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