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*Full Length Research Paper*

## Analysis of the prospects and challenges of subtitling as a mode of audiovisual translation in Cameroon

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This article aims to evaluate the prospects and challenges of subtitling in Cameroon and its positive impacts based on the perceptions of a cross-section of respondents (students) of the University of Buea. The purpose is to assess the effectiveness and the relevance of this mode of audiovisual translation in improving the rate of literacy, its contribution to social development and the level of its use by the most popular television media in the country. A survey research method was used. Data were collected through questionnaires, observation and interviews. Results after analysis of the data revealed that the respondents appreciated the importance of subtitling and its role in audiovisual translation in the country. The results further indicated that alternative approaches could be adapted to enhance the usefulness of this mode of translation. Proposals towards improving its utilization for literacy improvement especially for the under-scholarised population as well as for improvement in translation skills have accordingly been presented.

**Key words:** Audiovisual translation, subtitling, television media, translation skills, rate of literacy, social development.

### INTRODUCTION

Many authors specialized in audiovisual translation (AVT) have devoted most of their works on subtitling which is considered as one of the best known and mostly employed procedures of AVT (Gottlieb, 1998; O'Connell, 1998). Subtitling has been considered as one of the most important modes of linguistic transfer mostly used in the audiovisual world since the advent of the first talkies in 1929 (Gottlieb, 1998). Since then, the practice has witnessed profound changes both in the method of production and in the instruments used (Carrol, 2004; Georgakopoulou, 2006). Admittedly, these studies can be credited for providing an overview as well as a global

picture of what subtitling entails. However, within the framework of this study, there are still many aspects that need to be highlighted: problems related to the didactic function of subtitling, to the reception, reading, initiation to reading (the literacy rate in Cameroon still stands at 71.3% - Mundi, 2014) and the understanding of subtitled programmes.

The evolution of subtitling, its impact in the academic milieu, accessibility and the conditions that favour accessibility in subtitling have received much attention and support from Gottlieb (2002), Gambier (2004), Diaz (2005), and Ayonghe (2009a).

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Caimi (2006) showed the relevance of the didactic function of subtitling by making a distinction between subtitles intended for the deaf and the hearing-impaired. Kothari *et al.* (2002) proved that adding subtitles to current TV programmes (films, songs, videos and music) can help improve the reading aptitude of millions of persons. Ayonghe (2009a) showed that the use of subtitles as a tool for pedagogic assistance can improve the reading and comprehension aptitudes and consequently the success rate of university students.

With regard to reception, Kunzli and Ehrensberger-Dow (2011) researched on the reception capacities and audience ratings of subtitled films. Their results have shown that viewers of subtitled programmes receive and understand much more information than it is the case with established norms. According to Tuominen (2011), subtitles have more reception impact on viewers when they do not attempt to follow the two (the programme and the subtitle) at the same time. They have to choose one of them as a source of primary information because there is usually interference between “listening to the spoken message” and “reading the subtitle”. For Compte and Dageron (2008), the television has a social impact on its viewers because more than the cinema, it has always ensured the transmission of a language that is understood by everybody and that is careful about sensitive issues. Today, as a result of the ever increasing demand, the productivity of subtitlers exceeds expectations and contributes in highlighting the undeniable importance of subtitling. The main objective of this study was therefore to analyze the challenges and the prospects of subtitling in Cameroon in a bid to underscore the favourable impact that it can have. The specific objectives were to assess its role in increasing literacy, evaluate its use in the most important television stations in the country and assess its role for social development. The outcomes of the foregoing are then used to discuss the challenges and prospects of the use of subtitling in television channels in the country.

## METHODOLOGY

A wide range of students comprising forty-five (45) males, and fifty five (55) females took part in this study at the University of Buea. Variables such as sex, age group, the linguistic context and the centre of academic interest were considered. Information was also obtained from resource persons comprising individuals who consume audio-visual products and program directors of targeted television stations. This disparity in sex is a reflection of the student population, as the statistics indicate that females constitute more than half the population of the University of Buea (UB Annual Report 2012).

These persons were aged between 17 and 40. From a linguistic point of view, the population used in the study was made up of two groups: Francophones and Anglophones. Instituted by the fundamental law of Cameroon as official languages, French and English have permitted the distribution of the multi-ethnic population of Cameroon into Francophones and Anglophones (Echu, 2004). Thus, this study was carried out in a particular context, but can

however, serve as a point of departure for other studies. The French language was considered here as L1 for Francophones and L2 for Anglophones, while the English language was considered L1 for anglophones and L2 for francophones. A survey research method was used in this study. The questionnaires were served to each student and collected after being filled. Some of the students filled and returned their questionnaires instantly. The students of the University of Buea are from the ten regions of the country. The directors of programmes and the resource persons were interviewed in their offices based on appointments, as well as by phone.

## Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through four methods which included observations, administering of questionnaires, interviews and the consultation of reference documents. In view of the fact that the study was restricted to subtitling used by Cameroon televisions with specific focus on three stations: CRTV, STV and Canal 2 International.

Two questionnaires were carefully designed for use in gathering information that enabled us to evaluate the perceptions of respondents about subtitling and their appreciation of AVT programmes in Cameroon. Reference documents were consulted from websites and encyclopedias such as Encarta 2008, supported by statistics in the 2008 Report on the follow-up of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and information from the website of Index Mundi (2014).

The data were analyzed in the light of the model used by Jakobson (1963) to describe the spread of subtitling as a process of communication. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used and the results presented as percentages and charts. That is to say that the different actors involved (sender, receiver, addressee, message, code, channel and context) as well as the relation that binds them were cited.

## RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

With regards to the role of subtitling in increasing literacy, the results indicated that subtitling promotes the linguistic capacity building of viewers. Indeed, the idea of linguistic capacity building and the improvement of comprehension were raised by 38 and 31 participants respectively while foreign language learning and improved translation skills were raised by 18 respondents as shown in Figure 1. Thus, the main advantage of subtitling is that it enables receivers to appreciate the contextual use of language. Other viewpoints from the respondents on its role in increasing literacy are shown in Figure 1.

It should be underscored that the concept of literacy should not only be limited to the abilities to read and write. It also involves listening, comprehension and speaking which are essential in a communication context since they promote better decoding of the message by all viewers. More so, if the literacy level of viewers is improved through a larger broadcast of subtitled programmes, the bilingual context of Cameroon will facilitate a better acquisition and even use of the two official languages (French and English).

With regards to its use by the most important television stations in the country, the results indicated that CRTV

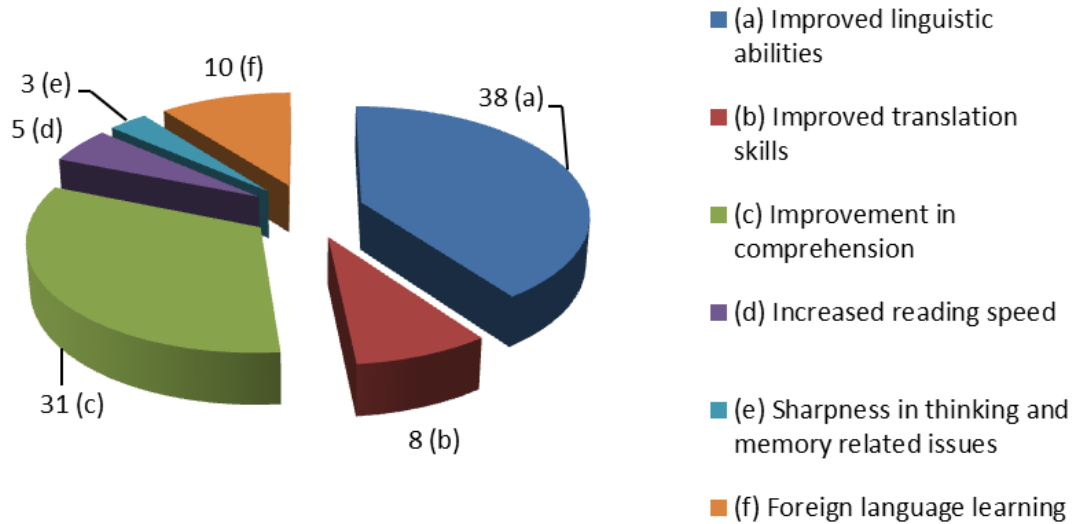


Figure 1. The importance of subtitling.

### Subtitling and TV: Viewers' Perception

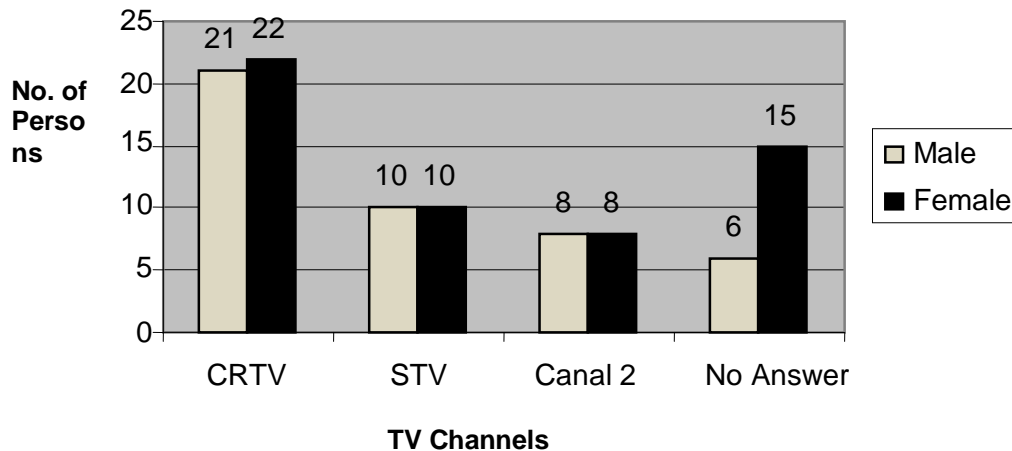


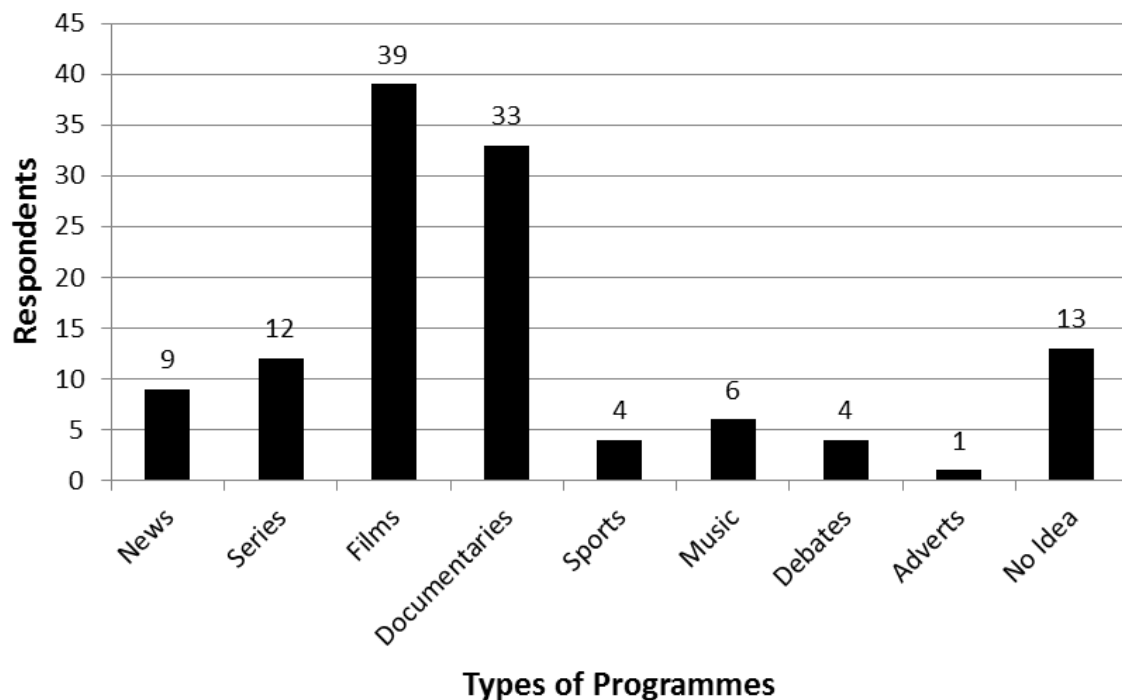
Figure 2. Channels with the highest subtitled programmes based on the perception of the viewers.

comes in the first position with 43% respondents, followed by STV 2 (20%) and Canal 2 International (16%) as indicated in Figure 2. Programmes shown on these TV channels vary from films, documentaries, series, TV news, to adverts as illustrated in Figure 3 and it was evident from the results that films, documentaries and series are the most subtitled programmes. The national channel (CRTV) benefits from state subventions, hence justifying investment in the purchase of broadcast rights of programmes produced out of the national territory while the private channels have limited means. Therefore,

if there are prospects of having a booming local production, then the above parameters must be taken seriously into consideration. It should be recalled that despite their average level of education (Baccalaureat/ General Certificate of Education, Advanced Level), most of the respondents were laymen in the domain of audiovisual translation (AVT). It is therefore possible that they were not versed with the specificities of the practice as well as the terminology of the domain, reason why 13% did not know what to say. It is evident from these results (Figure 3) that TV production in Cameroon is

**Table 1.** General preferences in terms of the types of subtitling.

Combinations		Francophones	Anglophones	Total
Programme	Subtitles			
French	English	10	18	28
English	French	14	20	34
Intralingual subtitle (i.e. French-French and English-English)		6	19	25
Two preferences on three		4	4	8
The three preferences		1	2	3
No response		1	1	2
Total		36	64	100

**Figure 3.** Subtitled TV programmes.

diversified and preferences of the types of subtitled programmes are as shown in Table 1. In this connection, it is conclusive that audiovisual medias in Cameroon further serve as platforms for the broadcasting of subtitled programmes designed in other countries.

The first impression that is discerned from table 1 is that interlingual subtitling is the most popular. This is certainly due to the bilingual context in which the Cameroonian population finds itself. With French and English being the official languages, Cameroonians have the tendency to further appreciate subtitling when it establishes a link between these linguistic systems. The difficulties encountered by the respondents when they watch subtitled programmes can be classified under two groups: technical and linguistic (Figure 4).

The audience used in this study which does not watch subtitled programmes regularly finds that the subtitles added to the programmes are not allowed enough time for the audience to read all of it. This difficulty was observed by 71% of male respondents, and 66% of the female respondents. The difficulty relating to dividing attention between the pictures and the text was also highlighted by 40% of the respondents whose reactions varied from boredom to stress and even irritation.

As a result of the bimodal transmission (oral and written codes) that characterizes subtitling, this mode of translation is generally considered as demanding more efforts from recipients. Viewers do not have a mastery of the images since a good part of the information may not be visible if the programme is subtitled. This disturbs the

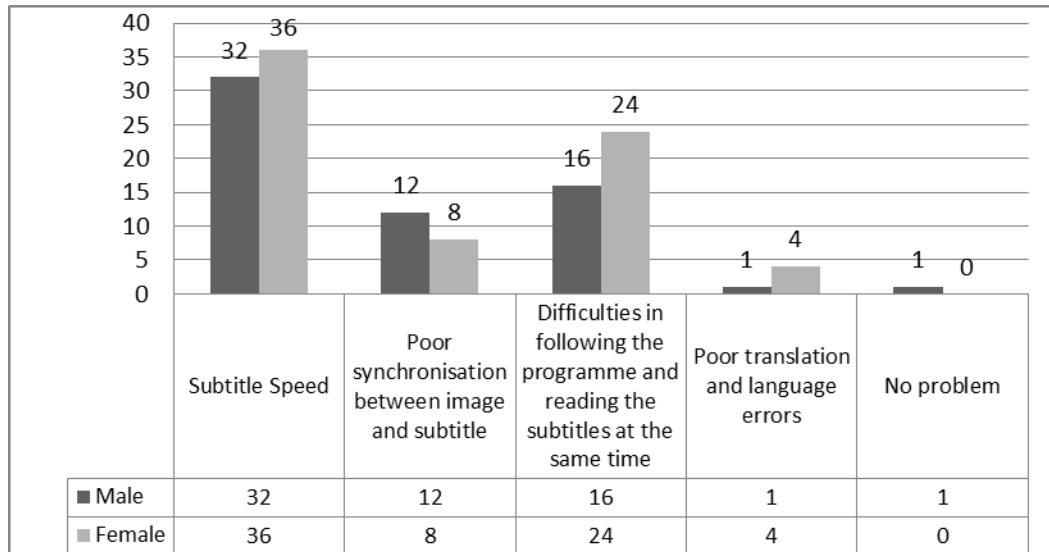


Figure 4. Problems posed by subtitled programmes.

fluidity of interaction between transmitters and the receivers (viewers) and there is therefore need to resort to the reception strategy proposed by Tuominen (2011).

Furthermore, the problem of synchronizing the images and the subtitles equally constitutes a major difficulty as 20% of the respondents acknowledged that there is an interval between the images and the subtitles.

Cases of bad translation and poor use of language (barbarisms, grammar, spelling, etc.) which occasionally occur in the subtitles are due to the inattention of subtitlers. They equally contribute in hampering the fluidity of the interaction between transmitters and the different receptors. These problems, though minor, are however signaled by 5% of the respondents. This preoccupation highlights the importance of revision in every translation endeavor and translation through subtitling is not an exception.

Moreover, the low percentage of respondents who declared not having any problem (1% only) shows the complexity of consuming subtitled programmes (Figure 2). In fact, subtitling distinguishes itself from the other modes of AVT and is presented as a strategy that brings to force the two languages involved in linguistic transfer. Moreover, spectators of subtitled programmes receive and usually understand more information and this specificity creates conditions that are certainly not easy from the reception point of view, but it should be observed that subtitling is equally important.

With regards to the contribution of subtitling to social development, the results from the respondents indicated that nearly all of them own a television (99%). This high proportion illustrates the enthusiasm of the Cameroonian population for a media which is the channel of audiovisual communication. The TV screen is, a priori, an adequate support that transmitters can wittingly exploit for the transfer of all types of messages which are

essential for social development. In fact, 70% of the respondents declared that they watch TV every day, and 17% do so from time to time, while barely 10% watch TV on four days a week. However, it should be observed that the persons questioned within the framework of this study watch television habitually.

## DISCUSSION

With regards to the role of subtitling in increasing literacy, the results indicated that subtitling promotes the linguistic capacity building of viewers. This is equally confirmed by the studies of Borrás and Lafayette (1994), Kruger et al. (2003), and Ayonghe (2009b). Thus, one of the advantages of subtitling is that it enables receivers to appreciate the contextual use of language (Danan, 2004). Literacy also involves listening, comprehension and speaking which are essential in a communication context since it promotes better decoding of the message by receivers as equally explained by Kruger and Verhoef (2002). In fact, by broadcasting subtitled programmes designed in the strategic objective to initiate viewers to learn by reading, TV stations can play a key role in increasing literacy and hence contribute to the social development of the country as proven by Kothari et al. (2002) and Ayonghe (2009b).

This study has equally showed that CRTV, which is the Government owned TV channel, shows the highest number of subtitled programmed as earlier confirmed by Obia (2010), Ntowa, (2013) and Ako (2013). Moreover, spectators of subtitled programmes receive and usually understand more information (Kunzli and Ehrensberger-Dow, 2011) and this specificity creates conditions that are certainly not easy from the reception point of view.

Furthermore, accessibility provided by new technology

and audiovisual translation (AVT) tools has reinforced the general idea that everybody needs this medium of information for socio-economic development. Consequently, its impact has brought forth progress, better quality of the audiovisual material and of life, and universal accessibility to information for its users.

It can be inferred from the results of the study that Cameroonian viewers do not always watch the local stations. This explains the lack of local and national information and consequently the slowdown in socio-cultural development. Since the advent of several foreign channels which are available through the TV cable, Cameroonian TV stations have witnessed their viewers reverting to watching foreign stations. The television industry in Cameroon therefore has a lot to do in order to win back the attention of its local viewers, while also nursing the ambition to go international. The launching of some Cameroonian stations, which are now available on satellites, is in line with this approach. It is accordingly necessary for promoters to go out and conquer international audiences while conserving the local audience. Resorting to subtitling, among other modes of audiovisual translation, would enhance this "audience-winning" crusade.

This study has enabled us to realize that, far from being involved in the production of subtitled programmes, TV stations in Cameroon instead support in broadcasting imported subtitled programmes. Since the practice of subtitling is more or less non-existent in the country, we have to point out an alternative procedure: the production of "titles" which run through (at the bottom part of the television). From a morphological and functional perspective, such titles that appear under the screen of the television are similar to subtitles. This implies that those in charge of producing and broadcasting them have the requisite aptitude to practice the art of subtitling. Furthermore, resorting to "polytiting" usually enables one to attain a semiotic cohesion that facilitates access to broadcast programmes. That is why it is necessary to have a flexible approach with regards to the issue of subtitling in the country.

### **The challenges of audiovisual translation**

As we have noted above, subtitling presents major challenges. It should however be noted that it equally has many advantages. The challenges of this AVT technique with regards to its contribution towards improved literacy shall be highlighted in a bid to better understand its prospects. The literacy rate refers to the number of persons from 15 years and above who can read and write (Index Mundi, 2014). According to statistics published by CIA World Factbook (2014), the rate of literacy in the country is estimated at 71.3%. We can cite the creation of more than 200 specialized centres among many efforts so far undertaken by the State to improve literacy in

Cameroon.

The stated objective of such actions was to attain parity between the two sexes at all levels of teaching by 2015 (Millennium Development Goal No. 3). This was because, according to more recent statistics, 35% of women were illiterate as against 22% of men (Index Mundi, 2014).

Even though literacy centers have so far trained more than 120,000 Cameroonians, it should however be acknowledged that Cameroon still has a long way to go in a bid to attain the objectives cited above. That is why in 2009, during the week of "Education for All" organized under the theme "*Youth and Adult Literacy and Life Training*," emphasis was placed on reading as a facilitator of literacy. This theme invited specialists to envisage activities that have more repercussions on youths than on adults. It should be observed rightly that subtitling can be considered within this line of reasoning. In fact, by broadcasting subtitled programmes designed in the strategic objective to initiate viewers to learn by reading, TV stations can play a key role in increasing literacy and hence contribute to the social development of the country.

### **The prospects of audiovisual translation**

Since the population chosen for this study was mostly composed of students, there is every reason to think that with their level of learning, their listening faculty, and their aptitude in understanding, there is every indication that they fully understood and appreciated the relevance of this study and its prospects. However, the difficulty related to the speed of insertion of subtitles in programs underscores the discrepancy between the norms stated by Karamitroglou (1998) and the specificities of the TV audience represented in this study by the respondents. Moreover, given that the respondents complained about the speed with which subtitles appear and disappear on the screens, we can imagine that the difficulty encountered by the under-scholarised population under similar circumstances will be double-fold. This fact opens the way for alternative approaches. From the point of view of respondents, those who watch the television will prefer subtitles with the following three characteristics:

- (i) Make conventional norms for subtitling and state proper principles for the Cameroonian audience;
- (ii) Stick to the world conventional norms by imposing to the inhabitants, a practice whose standards hardly serve the principle of accessibility;
- (iii) Adopt a procedure that will facilitate the appropriateness between decision of the population and the actions of the audiovisual communication transmitters.

The procedure for these alternatives will consist of:

- (i) Gradually introducing subtitling in mass communication

through the television;

(ii) Do a review of variety in the choice of the types of subtitles;

(iii) Adapt subtitles to the types of programmes broadcast (using for example, summarized subtitles for TV news and debates);

(iv) Allow viewers to decide whether or not they want subtitles to appear during the broadcast of the programmes they are watching (see CEEFAX / Teletext in UK);

(v) Give viewers the opportunity of choosing between the principal modes of AVT that better meets their aspirations; and

v(i) Put at the disposal of viewers, a reserve of textual utterance (subtitles) or oral (sound bands) that they can decide to activate at their convenience (through a decoder for example).

## Conclusion

This study was focused on an assessment of the role of subtitling in improving literacy, on an evaluation of its use in the most popular television stations in the country, and on its role for social development. The results indicated that a majority of the respondents acknowledged being “televiseurs”, and affirmed to be daily watchers of the television. From this fact, we can rightly suggest that the modes of linguistic transfer used in a mass media like the television offer many prospects which include literacy improvement. Furthermore an evaluation of its usage in television channels in the country indicated that CRTV which is the national channel was the highest in using subtitling in their programmes. This is due to the fact that it benefits from State’s subventions and hence it is capable of purchasing broadcast rights of programmes produced with subtitles unlike the private channels which have limited means.

In terms of its contribution to social development, 99% of the respondents indicated that they own televisions and watch programmes on daily basis and such exposure is important for social development. This study has accordingly been used to highlight the favourable impact of subtitled films in the promotion of literacy. It has equally underscored the immense impact and potential this audiovisual media has on the inhabitants such as in socio-economic development especially when the subtitling mode of translation is used in broadcasted programmes.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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## APPENDIXES

## APPENDIX 1: Questionnaire for students.

**UNIVERSITY OF  
BUEA, Advanced School of  
Translators and Interpreters**

**ASTI**



**TRANSLATION  
DIVISION**

Dear Sir/Madam,

This questionnaire is designed as a data collection tool for a study entitled "Subtitling in Cameroon: Challenges and perspectives for development". You are hereby requested to provide true answers to the questions below, so as to make the data both scientific and reliable. Your personal information will be kept secret, and will only serve to analyze your answers in accordance with your background.

Faculty/School \_\_\_\_\_ Programme \_\_\_\_\_ Level \_\_\_\_\_  
Please, specify your 1<sup>st</sup> language \_\_\_\_\_, 2<sup>nd</sup> language \_\_\_\_\_, 3<sup>rd</sup> language \_\_\_\_\_  
(If any).

How old are you?  Below 20  21-25  26-31  31 and above

Gender M  F

1. Do you like watching TV? Yes  No

2. How often do you watch TV?

Every day  4 days per week  Once a week

Once in a while  Never

3. Which Cameroon TV station(s) do you watch?

CRTV  STV  Canal 2  Equinox TV

LTM tv  New TV  Ariane TV  Samba TV

Other (please, specify) \_\_\_\_\_

4. Do you know what subtitling is all about? Yes  No

5. Do you like subtitled programmes broadcast on TV? Yes  No

6. Why?

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7. If you were to choose between subtitled programmes and programmes without subtitles, what would you prefer? Why?

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8. What problems do you encounter when watching subtitled programmes?

Subtitles appear and disappear too fast

Subtitles do not appear at the right times

It is difficult to read subtitles while following the programme

Other \_\_\_\_\_ (please, specify)

---

No problem

9. Which subtitling combination(s) do you prefer?

French programmes with English subtitles

English programmes with French subtitles

Programmes with same-language subtitles (French-French/English-English)

10. According to you, which of these TV stations broadcast most subtitled programmes?

CRTV                       STV                       Canal 2 International

11. What are these programmes?

News casts                       Series                       Films                       Documentaries

Sports                       Talk shows                       Musical programmes

Other (please, specify) \_\_\_\_\_

12. How useful can subtitled programmes be to you?

i. \_\_\_\_\_  
ii. \_\_\_\_\_ iii. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

13. What recommendations can you make to people in charge of subtitling in Cameroon's TV stations?

i. \_\_\_\_\_ ii. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ iii. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your kind collaboration.