Surtitling and the audience: A love-hate relationship

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to describe audience attitude towards spoken theatre surtitling. More specifically, it reports on an experiment carried out during a major Spanish theatre festival (Festival de Otoño en Primavera*,* Madrid*,* 2014), with the purpose of assessing audience reception of a surtitled production (*Le voci di dentro* by Piccolo Teatro di Milano) and their awareness of what they consider quality in surtitling, or what jeopardises it. After an overview of the theoretical framework about surtitling live performances, the paper focuses on the data and the results of the survey. The experiment data ranges from a general appreciation of the surtitled production to a more specific evaluation of its comprehension under varying factors. In total, results from over 70 reception tests are reported and discussed. Finally, promoting a more systematic use of reception studies in audiovisual translation research and, in particular, in a yet undefined practice like surtitling spoken theatre is also a key objective of this article.

KEYWORDS

Surtitling, spoken theatre, audiovisual translation, reception studies, audience.

1. Introduction

As artistic manifestations, opera and spoken theatre have been profoundly influenced by the recent and quickly-extended introduction of surtitles in their dimension as communicative phenomena. This modality of language transfer on stage dominates over other ways of live interpretation (e.g. summarising translation, simultaneous interpretation) for being relatively unobtrusive: live interpreting by means of loudspeakers, for example, can interfere with the comprehension of the representation for those who are familiar with the original language of the play and have attended the performance to see and listen to the actors.

First introduced in operas performed in a language different from the one spoken by the audience in the 80s, surtitles have been extended and generalised to the point that, at present, surtitles exist in most of the opera houses around the world and they are taken for granted and have become an essential part of the opera. Nowadays, they are no longer limited to the genre of opera: surtitles are used to translate spoken theatre and live performances when foreign language companies go on stage within international festivals (Festival Grec in Barcelona, Festival de Otoño en Primavera in Madrid, Festival de Teatro Clásico in Almagro, etc.) as well as at major theatres (like the Teatre Lliure in Barcelona, the Teatro Valle-Inclán in Madrid or the Teatro Central in Seville). The Spanish National Institute of Scenic Arts and Music actually reports that more than 100 international theatre festivals take place in Spain and, according to the Universitat de Barcelona (2007), 27.6% of theatre productions held in Spain

came from abroad (Bonet et al 2008: 88). In addition, in many of these venues, surtitles displayed at the top of the stage or on individual devices at the rear of the seats are currently used to make a production accessible to spectators with hearing impairments.

As a whole, surtitles are not perceived by the audience as another theatrical sign (like lights, costumes, furniture, etc.), but as a functional element for the comprehension of what is represented (Griesel 2009: 121). In the case of opera, surtitles have changed the expectations of the audience, who identify in this device their "right to understand" the linguistic content of the performance: when surtitles are projected, the public and the critics consider the simultaneous written translation a tool to access and enjoy the show. Accordingly, their absence or malfunction may provoke frustration and result in possible claims against the organisers of the show. This leads us to deduce that the opera public is ready to visually receive the translated text through the surtitles. An example of such degree of expectation may be provided by the review published in the *Diario de León: Edición Digital* (25 June 2004): "Representing opera without surtitles has been one of the major failures of the opera season at the Auditorio Ciudad de León. No one, except here, would represent opera without surtitles. A novice audience cannot be expected to be familiar with opera and polyglot as well. Opera is elitist enough to make it more elitist because of the language" (De Frutos 2011:5, my translation).

However, opera and spoken theatre are two different genres for semiotic and pragmatic reasons; consequently, opera surtitling and spoken theatre surtitling differ greatly (see Griesel, 2007; Carlson, 2000): "Opera surtitling is not the same as theatre surtitling, it has its own specifics, a repertoire that is quite different, another theatrical sign system, where music plays a vital role" (Griesel, 2009:120). Unfortunately, within the fields of audiovisual translation studies and theatre studies, academics have tended to describe many features of opera titling, paying less attention to spoken theatre surtitling, maybe because of its younger life. This is the reason why this research will have to rely mostly on bibliographical references about opera titling to support arguments about spoken theatre surtitling, whenever the aspects of both modalities converge.

In addition, audiovisual translation research focusing on the reception of surtitling is scarce and experiments aimed at assessing the reception of interlingual surtitles are nearly non-existent, although extremely useful. Over the past fifteen years, the use of interdisciplinary methods for empirical research (such as research on eye tracking, quantitative and qualitative surveys, etc.) has opened up new possibilities for the evaluation of perception of audiovisual texts in translation: e.g., works by Sario and Oksaken (1996), Gambier (2003), Mateo (2007), Orero and Vilaró (2012), Perego (2012), Di Giovanni (2013), and Romero Fresco (2015). For this reason, this article aims to promote the use of reception studies in audiovisual translation research by presenting and discussing an

experiment with the purpose of evaluating the reception of interlingual spoken theatre surtitling.

2. Surtitling live performances

Condensed translation into one or two lines of no more than 40 characters projected on a screen at the same time as the source text is spoken is what subtitling (film and TV) and surtitling (opera, musicals and spoken theatre) have in common (Low, 2002). From a technical and semiotic point of view, these two modalities of language transfer on screen are actually similar. First of all, space and time constraints are factors that influence the subtitlers' task to ease the spectator's understanding of the action, so it is important to avoid useless repetitions, long words and keep a semantic unity within each title (Díaz Cintas and Remael, 2007, for all these recommendations). Consequently, a search for simplicity (Burton and Holden, 2005:3) and readability (Orero and Matamala 2007:265) dismisses literary translation strategies (Burton and Holden 2005:4) in order to minimise interference with hearing and vision (Desblache 2004:28).

However, there are relevant differences between film subtitling and live performance surtitling. In the theatre, the audience is not watching a pre-produced movie over and over; actually, they are attending a unique, "non-reproducible" experience, according to Peggy Phelan's definition of performance as 'representation without reproduction' (1993: 146):

> Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology.

Furthermore, in 'theatre' (Pavis, 1998:387), unexpected changes can occur (e.g. actors improvising or forgetting lines, technical failures, an interactive audience), making 'that' representation unique: this is also dependent on the *hic et nunc* of the liveness of the theatre play as much as the audience and the acting performance. During an opera, accidents can also happen but, regarding the degree of improvisation, this aspect is a minor risk because of the musical frame that guides singers. As for surtitling, in both cases, there may be a lack of synchronisation between surtitles which have been previously prepared and what is occurring on stage. As Desblache (2007: 164) points out, "opera and theatre surtitles require flexibility of timing as they are issued for each performance and also, to some degree, flexibility of meaning, as each production and, at some level, each performance gives a new meaning to the interpretation of the work." Besides, changes like cutting scenes and lines (more frequent in spoken theatre) may be made by the director in last-minute rehearsals or during a run. Clearly, this affects the surtitles which should be updated in order to reflect the revised play. Thus, according to production requirements or the

considerations of the director, surtitles can be changed even after each performance (Oncins 2013: 58):

> Whilst the former (surtitling) might be defined as an 'unfinished product' and is usually modified after each performance, the latter (subtitling) could be considered to be a 'finished product' because once subtitles are engraved they remain unchanged for each projection.

3. Reading surtitles during live performances

Reading subtitles at the cinema or surtitles at the theatre is quite a different experience: one of the most important aspects to consider is the space where subtitles/surtitles are projected. As Eugeni (2006) states, in the cinema, the spectator's attention is focused on a limited bi-dimensional space, where both images and subtitles are projected. In this case, regardless of the spectator's seating, eye movement between images and subtitles is limited.

On the contrary, in the theatre, the spectator is seated in front of a three-dimensional scene where they must act as 'personal director,' choosing what to focus on when, jumping on stage and off stage and splitting their attention between the action and the surtitle screen (Eugeni, 2003: 4).



Figure 1. *The Changeling*, off stage[1].

In Figure 1, a picture taken from *The Changeling*, performed by the company *Cheek by Jowl* in Madrid (2006), it is possible to see a moment of the play where the actor, Will Keen, is speaking among the public, who are looking at him, while the surtitles are projected above the stage. The audience will have to constantly move between the actor and the surtitles if they want to get the meaning of his words, otherwise they will have to make a decision about what is more relevant to them: the actor or the text.

As observed by Sario and Oksanen (1996: 193), it is not easy to see the most informative part of the stage in the theatre. Every spectator will choose a theatrical element (objects, actors, lights, etc.) and then will quickly move to the surtitles to understand the spoken message. For this reason, it is quite different if the spectator is seated in the front stalls or in

the upper circle, or if the surtitles are projected above the stage or at its sides. Similarly, it is important that the surtitler knows the play and its scenes (off stage acting/light design, screen size, etc.) in order to opt for the most effective way to project surtitles: in case of dark scenes at night, for example, a huge screen placed above the stage projecting bright surtitles could disturb and distract the audience while, as stated by Low (2002) and Desblache (2007), surtitles need to be "relatively unobtrusive."

4. The locus and the audience

Cinemas and theatres represent two spaces in which a subject (the public) goes to observe an action (or an image). According to this *spatial* perspective, these two places constitute a similar *locus* sharing the presence of the public, which is essential for the communicative act to take place.

The public is a group of subjects who attend a (movie) theatre for different reasons: being entertained, educated, being intellectually challenged, etc. But there are also a variety of reasons why theatregoers and cinemagoers are different.

First of all, the stage in theatre always represents something. Spectators have come to believe that the stage reproduces a real location: "the stage locus represents a 'real', concrete space with its own limits, surface, depth, and objects, a fragment of the world suddenly and integrally transported onto the stage" (Ubersfeld 1999: 97). Consequently, the two rituals occurring on stage are also quite different. According to Susan Sontag in "Where the Stress Falls" (2002), ritual power in theatre is stronger than in cinema because of the physical presence of the actors on a stage, which provokes a greater visual and auditory attention. Here, the actor is "alive" in front of the public while, in the movie theatre, the actors are projected on a screen and their life is not as real: there is a difference between "being alive" and "being lively" (Blau 1982: 134).

Accordingly, while the cinema can easily activate fantasy, in the theatre, the spectator is aware of the conventions (the fourth wall, the character, dramaturgy); therefore, they actively decide to take part (or not) in the theatrical event: "The theatregoer moves toward the stage of his own accord, while the filmgoer is relentlessly absorbed by the screen" (Pavis 1998: 349).

Above all, the filmic text is a fixed and finished product, which cannot be directly affected by its audience; "no two theatrical performances can ever be the same precisely because of this audience involvement" (Bennett 1997: 46). In many theatre productions, the audience becomes a self-conscious co-creator of performance and enjoys a productive role which exceeds anything demanded of the reader or the cinema audience: the spectator can intervene on stage, applauding or whistling, interfering with the performance (e.g. a mobile phone ringing can interrupt the action); in

the cinema, the spectator's attitude may only affect other spectators, but never the actors on the screen.

A theatre audience can then be considered as a "collective consciousness composed of the small groups in which spectators attend theatrical events" and, at the same time, "it is also a specific number of individuals" (Bennett, 1997: 154).

As for its composition, a recent study conducted by Jaume Colomer (2016) is helpful in defining segments of audience according to factors like age, personal situation and education. According to Colomer, the typical Spanish spectator group is mainly between 15-19 years old followed by a group of adults 35-44 years old. Many of them are single, followed by couples or married couples. Most of the spectators have a university degree. The social implication of the age, for example, can determine the economic status and consequently the localisation of this segment in the theatre: students usually buy the cheapest seats which are farthest away, often with a restricted view, while front stalls and more expensive tickets (or season tickets) are generally bought by older segments of the audience.

Within this undistinguished group of spectators, which is very heterogeneous indeed, some may be familiar with the language of the performance, while others may have no knowledge of it (Griesel 2009). In such a situation, surtitling can be considered unnecessary and redundant by the first group, but an indispensable and required tool by the rest of the public. Even though many claim that it is possible to understand what happens on stage by just following the images and the scenes (Fischer-Lichte 1994; Griesel 2007), the needs and the expectations of such a mixed public cannot be ignored.

5. The reception of surtitles

Despite its functional value for the understanding of a theatre production performed in a foreign language, opera and spoken theatre surtitling has not always received positive opinions: the audience, the press and company directors have expressed both positive and negative reactions. Most of the references that will follow deal mainly with opera surtitling that has been investigated by academics and critics.

When surtitles first appeared during an opera, the public was torn between the classic 'operagoers,' who knew the main plot or the *libretto* of the opera by heart, and the generic public who lacked this knowledge and used to take the lack of linguistic accessibility for granted as part of the artistic experience.

A classic pro-surtitles argument is the possibility of making a performance accessible to a wider audience, overcoming linguistic or sensorial barriers. As many scholars have pointed out (Bonwit 1998; Dewolf 2001; Carlson

2000; Mateo 2007), the impact of surtitles on the reception of operas is relevant: they helped increase the audience by attracting new social segments (Mateo 2007a: 137). The audience's positive opinion towards opera surtitling has been illustrated by Marta Mateo (2007: 148), who designed a pioneer survey whose two last enquiries focused on public reception, in which they expressed their opinion as "highly favourable: moreover, theatregoers frequently enquire whether a foreign show will be surtitled, and complain if it is not". Likewise, Desblache (2007: 167) affirms that "surtitles are overwhelmingly requested by the public" and Gambier (2003: 176) states that "in an audience poll, approximately 80% gave their approval." Besides, Sario and Oksaken (1996: 195-196, my translation) have argued that "the public accepts surtitling very well. As well, after various surveys conducted in France between 1987 and 1992, almost 96% of respondents had a favourable opinion to the surtitles."

On the other hand, surtitles have also faced a large group of critics, in particular when referring to opera: "A celluloid condom inserted between the audience and the gratification of understanding," stated David Pountney, English National Opera's director of productions. "You cannot feel an opera in your bollocks if you are having the information fed to you," added Paul Daniel, ENO's music director. The most frequent reason to criticise the use of surtitles is indeed their interposition in the immediate and direct communication between the actors and the public. According to this idea, surtitles can be a visual distraction and surtitle reading can prevent the audience from getting all the elements of the performance. This issue is also critical in spoken theatre surtitling when surtitles present problems of synchronicity with the spoken text or poor visibility: rather than a helpful device to the understanding of the production, they can be seen as distraction. An article from *The Guardian* entitled "Mind your language: the trouble with theatre surtitles" stated that: "great translations make foreign productions accessible, but poor ones are a distraction. Should surtitles sometimes be shown the stage door?" (Gardner 2014). It referred to the Spanish production of *Punishment Without Revenge*, staged at the Globe in 2012.

Another aspect to consider is that, as for film and TV subtitling, source text (the aural element) and translated text (titles) are presented simultaneously and, for this reason, the translated text is what often exposes the surtitler to judgement. Thus, by receiving a fragmented version of the source text (and not a word-to-word translation), the audience has the impression of a careless translation and starts the so-called *gossiping effect* (Díaz Cintas, 2003:43): the audience feels the need to judge and analyse the work of the surtitler, often following the parameters of literality and quantity unlikely to be related to the professional practice that the public does not know. According to Bartoll (2012: 34, my translation), in fact, "even theatre companies don't know the process of surtitling and sometimes underrate the surtitler's task"[2].

This is the same reason why Díaz Cintas and Remael have defined subtitling (and, consequently, surtitling) as a *vulnerable* translation modality (2007: 57) as follows:

> We would like to call subtitling an instance of 'vulnerable translation'. Not only must the subtitles respect space and time constraints, they must also stand up to the scrutiny of an audience that may have some knowledge of the original language. […] They may then, rightly, start wondering what was 'lost in translation'.

As previously mentioned, reception studies about surtitling are few and most of them deal with opera titling; even if opera and spoken theatre have some features in common (they both are live performances, sound-word-image compounds, determined by the presence of actors/singers, etc.), they are very different genres, each one constituted by specific semiotic elements. Consequently, opera and spoken theatre surtitling present different features that are worthy of further analysis, in particular aimed at illustrating different knowledge and expectations of the two types of audience.

The experiment illustrated in the following pages originates, then, from the need to cast light on the attitude of the audience towards spoken theatre surtitles. It also stems from the idea that a reception study would be a valid tool to provide qualitative data about audience expectations and experiences. More importantly, it also aims to provide valuable feedback for the advancement of an unexplored field like surtitling of live performances.

6. Questionnaire at *Le voci di dentro*, Teatros del Canal, Madrid

The XXXI edition of the Festival de Otoño en Primavera took place between 4 October 2013 and 29 June 2014. We deliberately chose the production *Le voci di dentro*, performed in Madrid on 14 and 15 May, as it was a valid representation of a production which had Italian as a source language, yet was filled with many dialect intrusions, so as to ensure that the viewing experience was guided by the surtitles, even for those people who could boast any kind of familiarity with Italian. The nature of the production, its style and the translational decisions made by surtitlers for this performance were not relevant for our research, which aimed at eliciting more general considerations.

The survey was designed on the basis of a five-point Likert scale format: this kind of survey measures the respondent's degree of satisfaction about some experience, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 5 means "strongly agree." In this case, the distributed survey appeared on a single page and was divided into three sections: the first was designed to obtain data about the localisation of the spectator's seating; the second part included the evaluation of the surtitling and the last section sought to obtain data about the spectator's previous knowledge of the play and familiarity with the source language.

The questionnaire was distributed randomly at the doors of the theatre, after the performance, without any prior explanatory announcement at the beginning of the show, in order to prevent any influence on the answers. The survey was filled in by 73 respondents out of a maximum capacity of 843 seats.



Figure 2.Teatros del Canal, Sala Roja



Figure 3. Teatros del Canal, Seating plan[1]

The respondents were mainly seated in the front stalls, in the rear stalls of the ground floor (Figure 4: 24% and 24%) and in the centre and rear seats

[1] Seating plan: 843 seats (stalls, 595; dress circles, 248 and grand circles, 20)

of the upper circle, (19% and 14%), while 10% of the respondents were uniformly occupying the remaining seats.

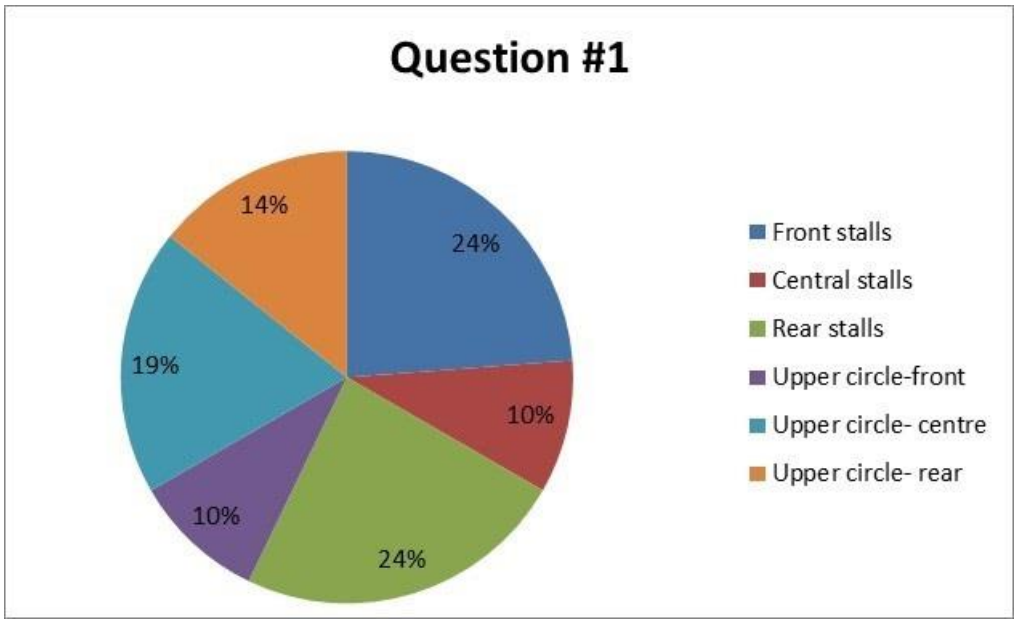
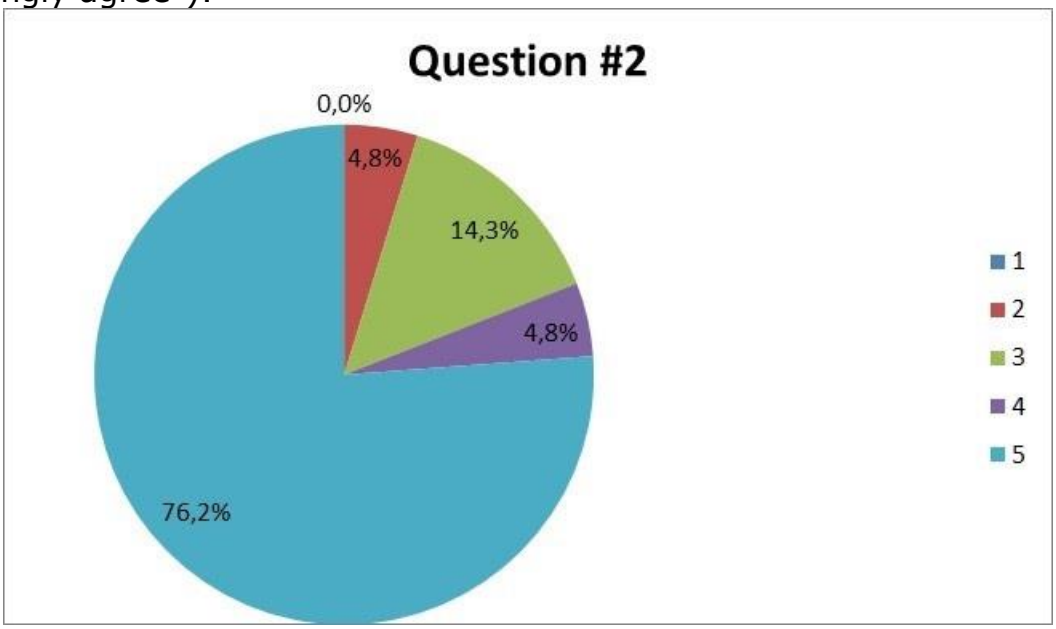


Figure 4. Localisation of respondents

In most cases, the respondents assessed their localisation related to the surtitle screen as very satisfactory. (Figure 5: 4.8% "agree" and 76.2% "strongly agree"):



[Figure 5. "From my seat, I could see the surtitles clearly"]

Since the majority of the surveys gave this response, it was predicted that a positive opinion of the overall experience could be expected from the respondents. However, many factors could still interfere with the results, including space and time factors. The next figure will show the results dealing with the space constraints of surtitles: each factor (size, colour,

length, duration) could potentially affect public reception, as much as it had affected the translator's strategies, as previously seen.

As regards line length, the next figure shows very positive results: the vast majority of individuals (71.5 % in total) selected "strongly agree" and "agree" to assess the length of surtitle lines projected on stage.

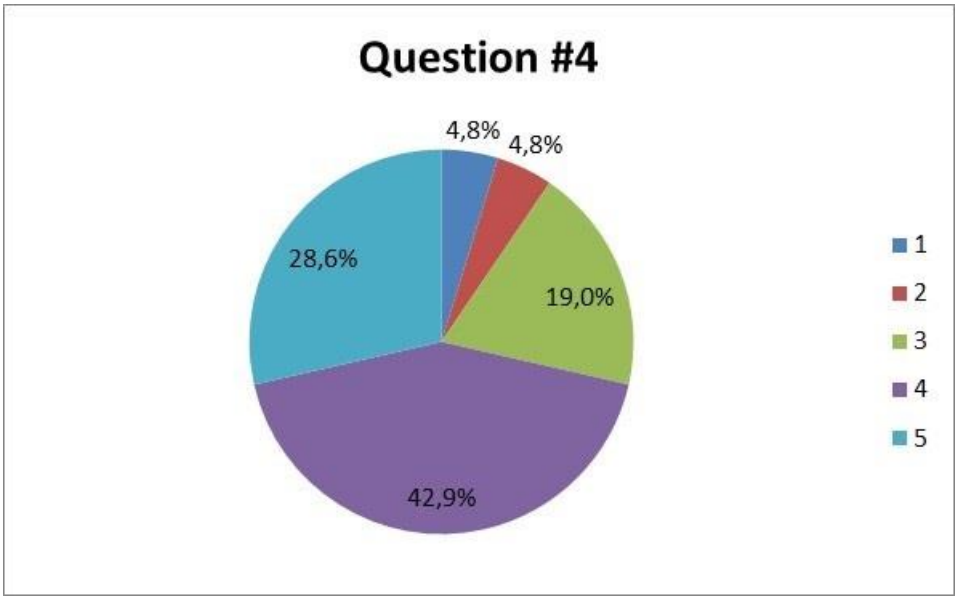


Figure 6. "The surtitles had an adequate length."

In terms of colour, surtitles are usually displayed in monochrome and projected on a black background while, in the case of surtitling for the hearing impaired, surtitles appear in different colours according to the character speaking: white, green, amber or red surtitles (Oncins, 2013: 58) are the most common options, but this always depends on the lighting in the scene. In the case of very dark scenes with poor lighting, red or amber are chosen as colours for the surtitles to prevent "light pollution" (Vervecken, 2012). From the pictures taken during *Le voci di dentro* (Figs. 8 and 9), it is possible to see that the surtitles were displayed in light blue and, according to the respondents' opinion, this decision was appreciated.

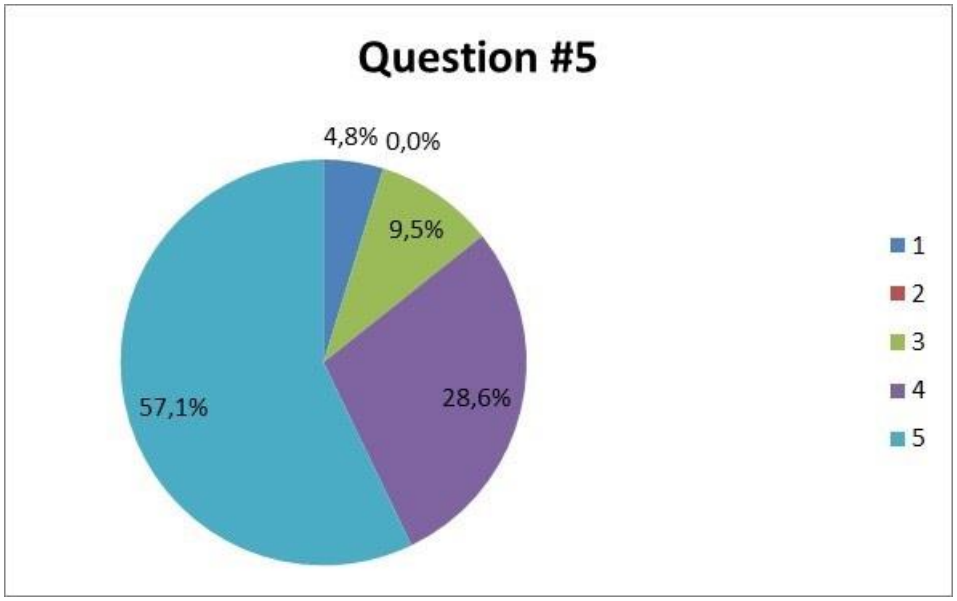


Figure 7. "The colour of the surtitles was clearly visible."

The next figures show some pictures taken during *Le voci di dentro* (Madrid, 15 May 2014) from the rear seats in the upper circle:



Figures 8 and 9. *Le Voci di dentro*

The next question, which aimed to further investigate the respondents' degree of satisfaction regarding the size of the font in the surtitles was the following, shown in Figure 10:

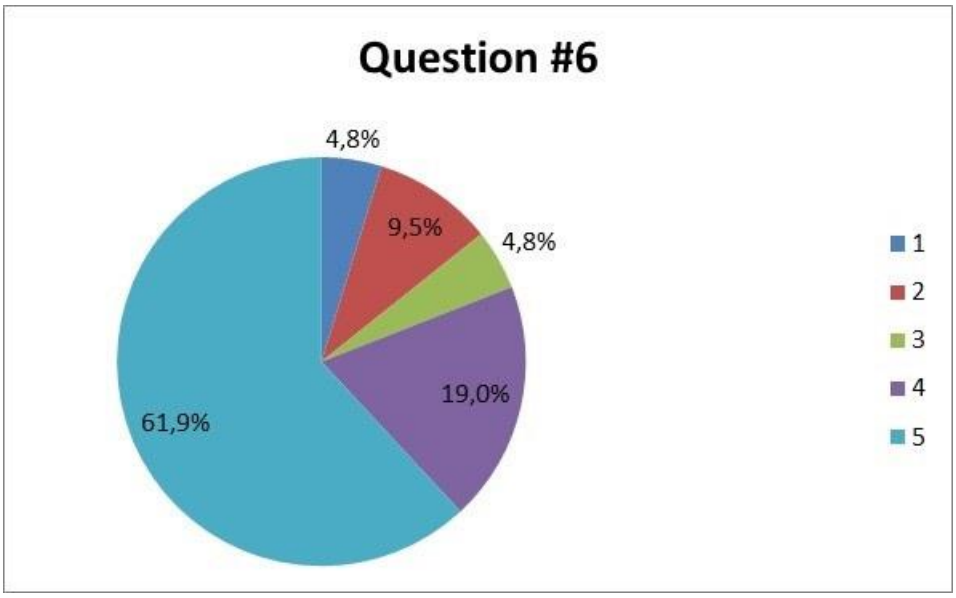


Figure 10. "The size of the surtitles was adequate."

Size might seem to be a secondary factor, but this is not the case for those spectators seated at the rear of the venue, who can feel frustrated because of the source language and the lack of proportion between the viewing distance and font size.

Eugeni (2003) outlines that two surveys conducted by Stagetext (November 2000-April 2001 and October 2001-January 2002), revealed that 5cm letters were too small according to 41% of respondents, while 86% of those who participated in the survey were very satisfied with 7.5cm characters.

Amongst the issues which emerged from the answers given within this section, it is worth noting the results yielded regarding synchronisation.

In actual fact, during the performance there had been moments where surtitles were delayed, missing or not synchronised with the actors' utterances: as previously stated, sudden changes to the performance due to failures or improvisations are a major characteristic of live performances, in particular of spoken theatre. In this case, perhaps predictably, the lack of synchronisation can jeopardise the quality of a performance in the eyes of the audience: namely, it can jeopardise the reception of the translated text.

In Figure 11, we cannot help but notice a high percentage of respondents (42.9%) who expressed their discomfort towards the synchronisation of the surtitles with the spoken text:

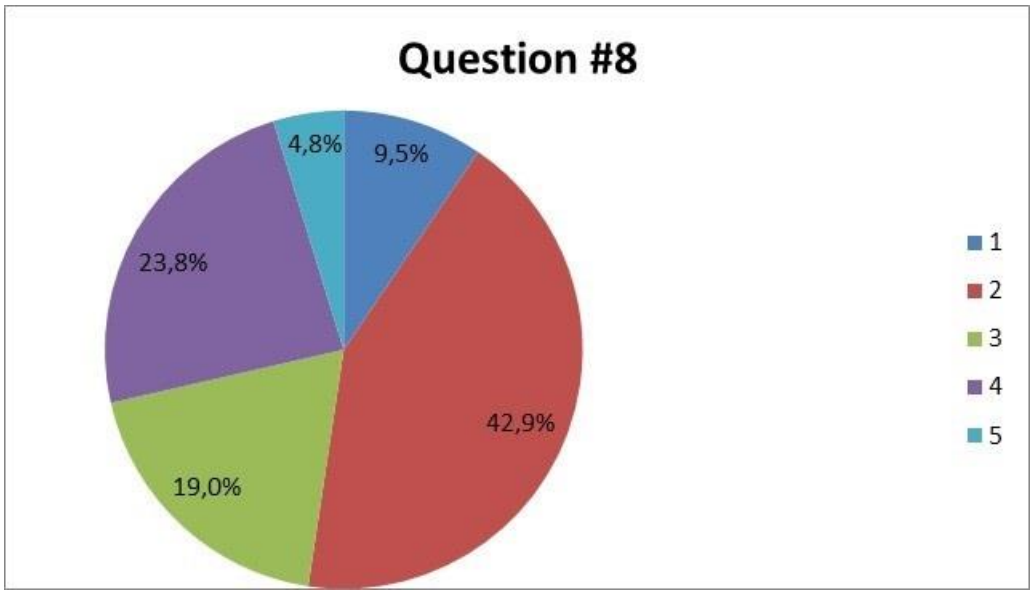


Figure 11. "The surtitles were synchronised with the actors' words."

Also, in some cases, the public wanted to express their opinion by leaving comments like "Not always," "There have been blanks," "Sentences missing," among others. In particular, the comment "They didn't translate everything the actors said" is particularly interesting since it demonstrates the tendency to judge the surtitler's work. We decided to deliberately investigate if this sense of dissatisfaction jeopardised the overall comprehension of the performance. The request for a judgement expressed by the item "I understood all the performance" was actually designed to confirm (or invalidate) the conclusion that the lack of synchronisation, very common in live performance surtitling, could be a determining factor in the comprehension of the performance.

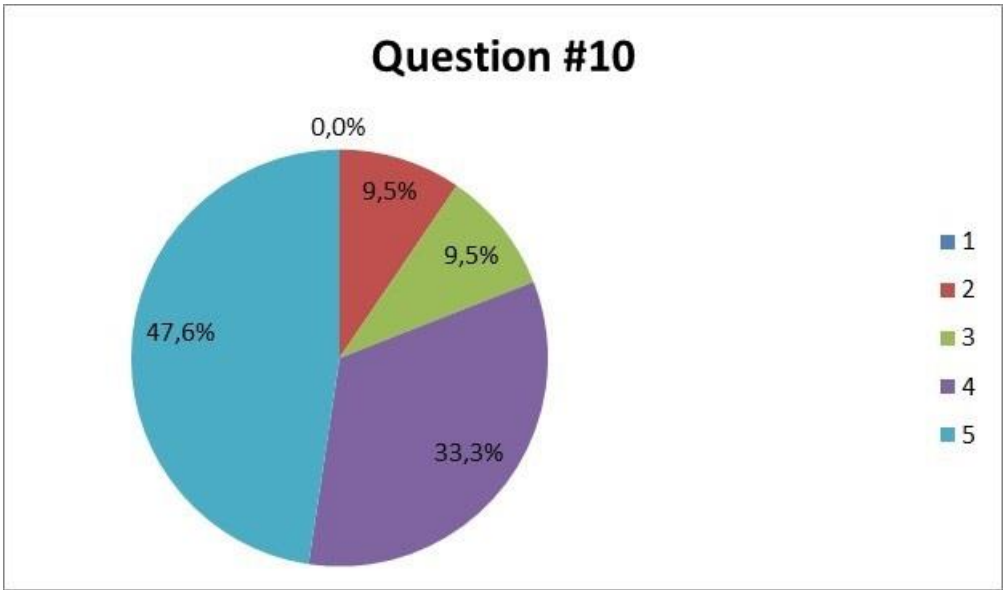


Figure 12. "I understood all the performance."

Surprisingly, in Figure 12, it is possible to observe that there is a positive trend in the data: most of the respondents perceived their experience of understanding the surtitled performance as satisfactory. This value is reinforced by a countercheck carried out by matching the data collected in Question 8 (Figure 11) and that yielded by Question 10 (Figure12): it is evident that the negative peaks of the first are not reflected in the positive trend of the latter:

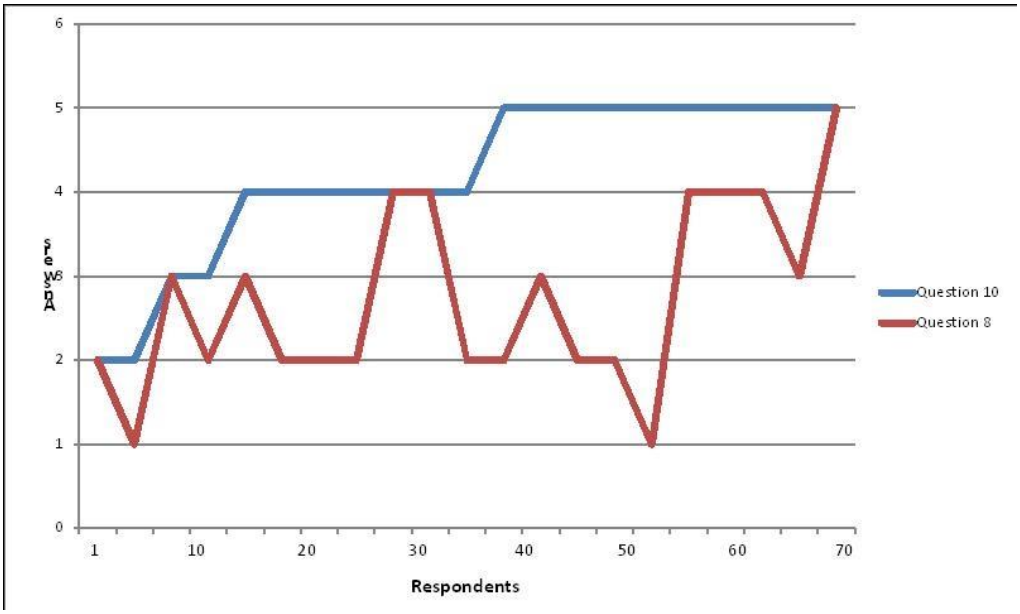


Figure13. The relationship between the lack of synchronisation and the general understanding of the play.

We wondered if the general understanding of the performance, despite the partial lack of synching, was guaranteed by a supposed familiarity with Italian language; to this end, Figure 14 is useful as it collected data about the respondent's knowledge of Italian:

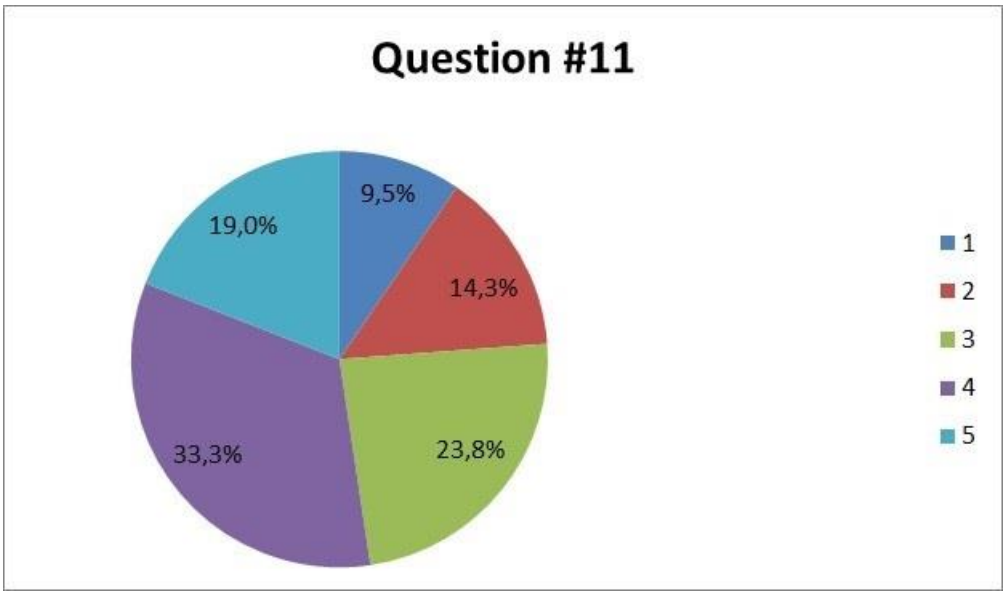


Figure 14. "I am familiar with the Italian Language."

Figure 14 shows inhomogeneous data that, we believe, cannot be exclusively responsible for the successful comprehension of the performance, in particular, if we consider the fact that a great part of the ST was written in Neapolitan dialect. Indeed, by comparing this data with that collected in Question 10, it is possible to observe that there is no correspondence between the degree of familiarity with the source language and the comprehension of the performance.

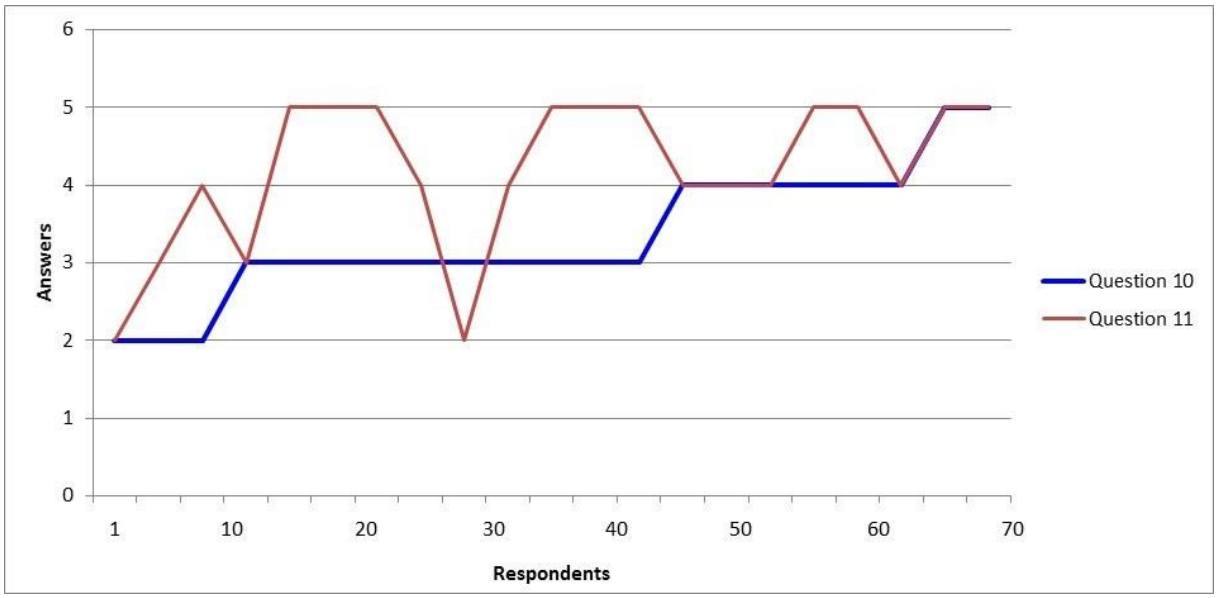


Figure15. Relationship between familiarity with the source language and the comprehension of the performance.

As further confirmation, we wondered if having some kind of knowledge of the play or of its plot would be likely to help the audience to understand the performance, even in cases of lack of synchronisation. According to the data obtained (Figure 16), it seems that very few respondents knew the plot (14.3% and 9.5%). Also, according to the database of the *Centro de Documentación Teatral* (a unit belonging to the Spanish National Institute of Performing Arts, whose objective is to collect and make available to researchers and professionals the artistic, graphic and statistical material produced by staging activities), *Le voci di dentro* had not been represented before, not even in Spanish.

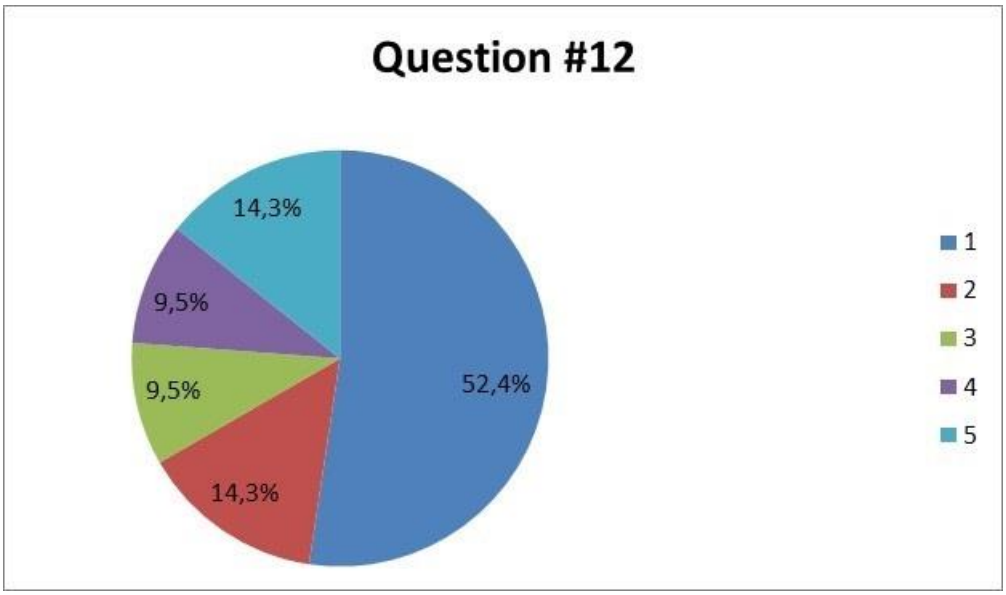


Figure 16."Did you have any previous knowledge of the plot?"

On the other hand, Figure 17 shows significant information about the nature of the audience who attended the performance. As illustrated in the figure below, a striking 80.4% "always", "very frequently" or "occasionally" attend surtitled performances: all respondents confirmed they had some experience with surtitled productions, even though no one mentioned which kind (opera, spoken theatre, musicals, performances).

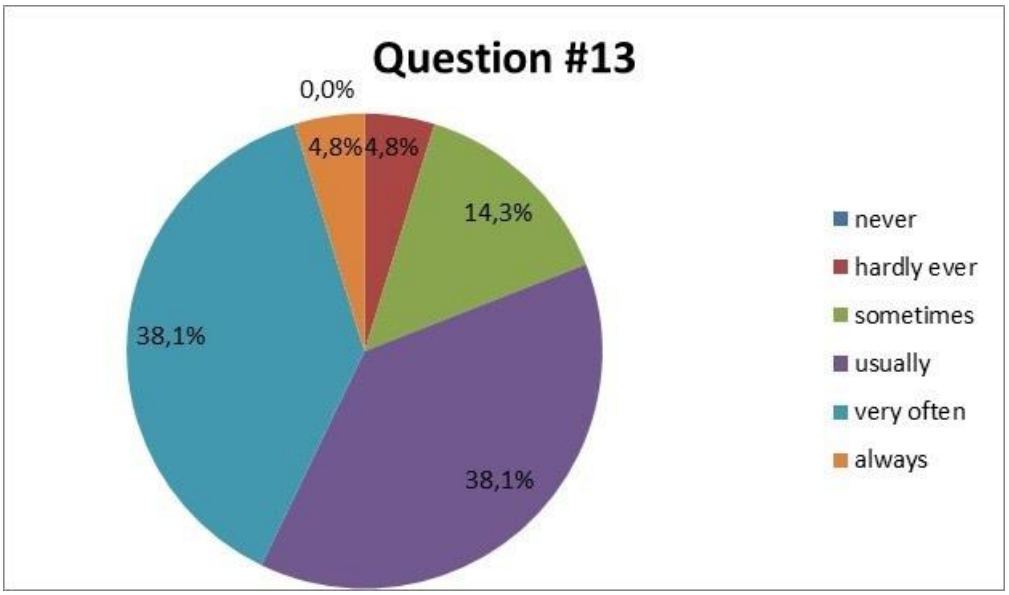


Figure 17. "How often do you attend surtitled performances?"

This data highlights the fact that, predictably, the spectator is familiar with visual priorities and with the mechanism that must be activated to follow the performance and translated text simultaneously. This kind of spectator 'feels' able to judge the surtitling by comparing the current experience with previous surtitled performances and, probably, is already aware of the unexpected events that can occur (delayed or missing surtitles).

The evidence from this study suggests the idea that some lack of synchronisation is far less frequently acknowledged as a potential problem than we might think. The audience has, i.e., "reported" an incorrect synching, but has not considered it as decisive to the final result.

7. Conclusions

As stated in the Introduction, our primary concern was to know the attitude and the expectations of the audience of spoken theatre productions towards surtitling. We began with the initial hypothesis that the reception of surtitled performances was somehow difficult to define considering that the audience is a heterogeneous group of individuals (e.g., play attendees).

The respondents of the survey appeared aware of the importance of surtitling and its function; they stated what their ideas and expectations were in terms of quality. All of these results appear even more interesting if we consider that the audience at a major theatre festival like the Festival de Otoño en Primavera, for instance, is used to surtitling and has probably shaped their expectations about this modality of language transfer through different experiences.

The most striking result to emerge from the data is that, contrary to expectations, our questionnaires did not reveal significant problems when dealing with lack of synchronisation between spoken text and surtitles. The difficulty of surtitling live performances like spoken theatre and the need to solve problems when dealing with sudden changes to the ST can jeopardise the performance result or expose the surtitler to unjustified criticism. Nonetheless, within the framework of this experiment, it is demonstrated that the understanding of the performance and the general satisfaction of the audience had not been compromised as we might have expected.

By casting light on the audience, we obtained valuable and highly informative feedback from the respondents: however, given that our findings are based on a limited number of samples, the results from this analysis should thus be treated with caution. A systematic, large-scale study on the reception of spoken theatre surtitles would definitely improve knowledge about this mode of translation. Indeed, it would be useful to repeat the experiment with other productions, in different venues and observing different language combinations. Also, due to the uniqueness of the theatrical event, our results only refer to the performance represented on 15 May 2014. We believe that carrying out a similar survey with a larger group, maybe during all the repeat performances, together with the possibility of recording each representation, would probably raise new reception issues and new investigations.

We are also confident that these results may improve knowledge about spoken theatre surtitling as a product, especially if compared to the results yielded in previous studies focused on opera surtitling.

We hope that our research will contribute to raising awareness about the useful data emerging from reception studies on audiovisual translated texts and that the receivers of surtitled spoken theatre will be the pioneers in defining and improving the quality of this mode of audiovisual translation for the benefit of the venues, translators, the academic community and, finally, the audience itself.

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Antonia Mele Scorcia has a degree in Modern Languages and Literatures from the University of Bari. In 2008 she graduated in Translation at the University of Trieste. She has worked as Teaching Assistant in Italy and Spain and has translated several theatrical plays from English and Spanish into Italian. In 2016 she obtained a PhD in Translation Studies. Currently is Head of Studies and Italian teacher at the Centre of Italian Language and Culture in Bilbao.



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Notes

[1] All images are courtesy of Centro de Documentación Teatral.

[2] " […] El que sorprèn, però, no és que el públic desconegui el procés d'elaboració dels subtítols, sinó que siguin les mateixes companyies les que desconeguin i fins i tot menyspreïn la feina feta pels traductors."