

# Literacy Through Entertainment

**Subtitles at the bottom of the screen during shows and films in either the same or in a regional language may be annoying for many of us, but in fact, they help improve literacy.**

BY PRIYANKA TILVE

**W**hether it's watching a TV show or a movie in the theater, we are all used to seeing the familiar strip of text at the bottom; some of us are so used to it that we can easily tune it out. But believe it or not, there are many who look forward to these subtitles and actually learn from them.

## The Need for Subtitles

The trend of adding subtitles has been around for a while. There are two types of subtitles; one is the same language subtitles, which means that if the program is in English, then even the subtitles are in English. This is very commonly seen on channels like Star World, AXN, Star Movies, etc. These are helpful to those who aren't that comfortable with the language or may have difficulty in following the accent. The other type of subtitle is in a different language, which means that program may be in one language, but the subtitles are in the local native language. For instance, most Bollywood movies have English subtitles. This is beneficial for people who are not native Hindi speakers.

Radhika Chinai, VP, Media Processing Services of Prime Focus Technologies, who handle clients like News Corp-owned Star TV, Colors, Disney, Sony Pictures UK, and Paramount says, "Subtitles are meant to provide audiences who do not know the source language of the video content, as close to an original viewing experience, as those that do. This is why it is imperative to create subtitles where dialogue is translated such that it reaches out to the target audience, keeping cultural sensitivities in mind, and yet retains the original meaning of



Villagers of Gulbai Tekra Slum, Ahmedabad enjoying songs with same language subtitling.

the dialogue. Same language subtitling is referred to as closed captioning, and caters to hard-of-hearing viewers who require subtitles to understand the dialogue despite knowing the source language." Prime Focus Technologies specializes in foreign language subtitling and same-language subtitling.

There is a lot of work that goes into these subtitles. There are teams who first translate the content in case of different language subtitling, then each subtitle is timed with the video, and then there's the quality control process. Explaining the whole process of subtitling, Radhika Chinai says, "Most of the time, we are not provided with a script. The process entails firstly scripting the program or film i.e. translating it from the source language to the target language, then time-coding each subtitle and finally QCing (quality control) the subtitles for accuracy of the translated content, adherence to our clients specifications, grammar and punctuation."

She states further, "We have a three-pronged quality control process. After translating the content, our subtitlers are expected to re-check their work from start to finish. Thereafter, it moves through two more editors for proofing and finalisation. To achieve error-free subtitles, it is vital to have the right kind of talent

and skills set for subtitling, time-coding and final editing." In some cases the subtitles are then forwarded to the client to get final approval before they are telecast.

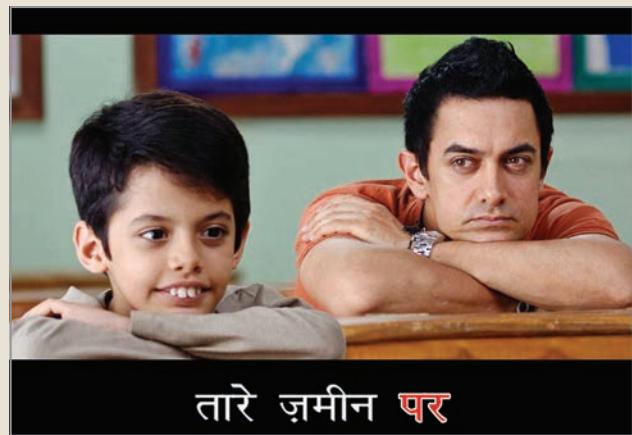
They have to follow strict guidelines for subtitles based on the censor board policy of different regions where the programs will be aired. That's the reason you will find that certain swear words and other content that is deemed unsuitable is replaced by special characters like "\$#%". Radhika Chinai says, "The Censor Board decides on the references which are permitted and those that are not. In addition, each country has its own censor board regulations, which our clients share with us if they are located outside India."

## Subtitles for literacy

Away from the media, subtitles serve a far greater purpose. They also help spread literacy. Take for instance, the PlanetRead.org initiative, which promotes same language subtitling to help reinforce mass reading skills. Brij Kothari, founder of PlanetRead says, "PlanetRead was built around the core innovation of same language subtitling (SLS), first developed at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (IIMA) and now jointly championed by both organisations. SLS is simply the idea of subtitling audio-visual



Yash Raj Films, film 'Chak de India'



Aamir Khan Productions, film "Tare Zameen Par"

SLS has been implemented on eight weekly song-based programmes on Doordarshan (DD), where every word in text is highlighted in perfect timing with the sound.

content in the 'same' language as the audio. What you hear is what you read. Every word in text is highlighted in perfect timing with the sound."

How does it help literacy? Brij explains, "Officially, at 74% literacy, India has 778 million so-called "literates". However, over half the "literates" cannot read functionally a newspaper headline or a class two level text. The problem starts in primary schools – 50% children in class five are weak-literates and remain so. With SLS, PlanetRead infuses reading into an existing and lifelong demand for Bollywood film songs. Reading practice becomes a by-product of entertainment or an inescapable part of TV viewing. India has 700 million viewers, 44% of whom are weak-literates."

Since 2002, they have implemented SLS for 30 minutes on eight weekly song-based programmes on Doordarshan (DD) in languages like Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, Gujarati, Marathi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil. They chose musical programmes for a reason, as Brij explains, "SLS on songs is easier for weak-literates to read along with because the lyrics are already in the head and can be anticipated, not to mention the value of repetitive practice for skill strengthening. We would like SLS to first succeed in the most favorable context in which viewers support subtitling. After that, it can be layered on to other content."

He states further, "We support SLS on English movies because the viewer has something to gain; ability to understand accents, for instance. It is actually doing wonders for English language learning. But Hindi subtitling of Hindi dialogue may not be received with the same enthusiasm, so one has to

approach subtitling, informed by research, otherwise, we might take a context where it does not work and make decisions based on it, for another where subtitling works beautifully."

Brij says that the SLS initiative has so far delivered regular reading practice to an estimated 200 million weak-literates and that several studies have revealed that SLS more than doubles the number of functional readers. It also increases newspaper reading from 40% to 70%. The initiative has been well received by the masses that benefit from this unique, yet simple initiative that helps them learn via entertainment.

"The response has been overwhelmingly positive. 90% viewers, including the literates, weak-literates and even non-literates, prefer film songs with SLS than without, for different reasons. For SLS to succeed on mainstream TV, it is important that all types of viewers feel like they have gained something. The literates like to sing along and know the song lyrics – it's karaoke for them. The weak-literates too enjoy it for these same reasons, and in addition, appreciate its value for improving their own reading skills. From basic alphabetic familiarity to functional literacy is a long journey. Weak-literates often find it difficult to persist with printed text long enough to get there. With songs, motivation remains high and frustration at not being able to read, low, because the 'answer' to any reading challenge is always there in the audio. The feeling is always, 'I can read!' Finally, the illiterates support SLS because they view it as being good for their children."

Buoyed by the success of SLS, they are now aiming for it to be accepted by

the broadcast policy in India on all songs and languages on the national network. Brij also hopes that the success of SLS in India can be replicated the world over. "A policy-mediated scale up in India is expected to pique the interest of other governments around the world, because anything that works in India, given its diversity and challenges, has a high probability of success in many developing contexts." Apart from SLS, Brij is also involved with developing 'AniBooks' or animated stories for children in many languages with SLS under an initiative called BookBox. These are available on YouTube and presently there are about 40 such stories in more than 25 languages.

## Subtitles for you

If you are learning a foreign language or watching a movie in foreign language, then you can benefit from subtitles. Learning a new language will be infinitely easier if you take a movie that you like and source from the Internet the subtitles for it in the language that you are learning. Since you are already familiar with the movie, keeping up with the subtitles shouldn't pose a problem. There are many sites where you can find these subtitles, like [openseadragon.org](http://openseadragon.org), [moviesubtitles.org](http://moviesubtitles.org), [subtitlesource.org](http://subtitlesource.org), and [divxsubtitles.net](http://divxsubtitles.net). Similarly, you can find on these sites English subtitles for a foreign film or TV series. Many of these sites also offer online translations. On the other hand, if you have a video, which you wish to share with the world, you can increase its reach by adding the option of subtitles in a number of languages. You can easily do this with the help of sites like [universalsubtitles.org](http://universalsubtitles.org). 

- priyanka.tilve@chip.in