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Subtitlers' beliefs about pivot templates

What do they tell us about language hierarchies and translation quality in streaming service platforms?

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Streaming service platforms are said to increase worldwide access to peripheral languages, often via the use of pivot templates. To shed light on how pivot subtitling practices impact language hierarchies and translation quality, we report on the results of an online questionnaire completed by European subtitlers. The questionnaire elicited data on the respondents' experiences and expectations when translating from pivot templates for streaming services and other media environments (such as cable TV, cinema, and websites). The questionnaire was completed by 370 subtitlers and the elicited data were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The results suggest that streaming platforms reinforce traditional language hierarchies by strengthening the position of English as a hyper-central language (Heilbron 2010). 'Peripheral-peripheral' subtitling practices (e.g., Korean-Danish) occur mainly through pivot templates in English, and so do 'central-central' subtitling practices (e.g., German-French). This means that even when the original content is in a language other than English, English is still the most common source language for subtitlers because of the use of pivot templates. Furthermore, according to our respondents, pivot templates are more common in streaming platforms than in other media environments. The use of pivot templates is also reported to negatively impact subtitlers' working conditions and give rise to particular ethical, linguistic, and technological challenges for which there are currently few guidelines and training opportunities.

Keywords: pivot templates, language hierarchies, translation quality, subtitling, streaming

1. Introduction

It has been said that streaming service platforms have worked to empower peripheral languages (e.g., Danish, Korean, and Arabic; see Heilbron 2010). This is because they enhance the visibility of these languages in the global media ecology and increase their access to other peripheries (Oziemblewska and Szarkowska 2022, 448). In the streaming media ecosystem, such 'periphery-periphery' subtitling practices typically rely on the use of pivot templates. In this study, we regard a template as "a subtitle file consisting of the spotted subtitles of a film done in the SL [source language], usually English, with specific settings in terms of words per minute and number of characters in a row, which is then translated into as many languages as necessary" (Georgakopoulou 2003, 210). Pivot templates are thus template files in a third language that differs from the language of the original content and the final subtitles. Following Heilbron (2010), peripheral languages are languages that occupy a marginal position in the traditional model of the world system of translation (i.e., they are the source language for less than 1% of translations produced worldwide). These contrast with hyper-central English (the source language for the vast majority of translations worldwide), semi-central languages (which account for between 1% and 3% world market, such as Italian, Spanish, and Russian), and central languages (which account for about 10% of the global translation market, such as German and French) (see Heilbron 2010).

Although pivot templates are increasingly used in streaming media distribution (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2021, 54) and have started to attract the attention of audiovisual translation researchers (e.g., Oziemblewska and Szarkowska 2022), little is known about how they impact language hierarchies and the subtitling practices that are informed by these hierarchies.

This article aims to address this topic by analyzing the responses of subtitlers in Europe to a questionnaire. The survey provides information on the languages subtitlers work with and their beliefs about how pivot templates impact their practice. The respondents' concerns about quality as well as the ethical and technological challenges they encounter help to shed light on how subtitling practices centred around pivot templates relate to power struggles between languages, in particular in streaming environments. Before reporting on the survey results, we first review how technological developments, media distribution, and language development intertwine, and what research has been carried out on pivot templates.

2. Related research

2.1 Technological developments, media distribution, and language development

Disruptive technological developments lead to structural change to established procedures. Whether positive or negative, such changes and the discussions that arise around their implementation shed new light on conventional processes and allow stakeholders to reconsider traditional ways of working. Moreover, beyond the professional context, disruption has social consequences. For example, in the 1990s, the incorporation of the DVD as a means to distribute audiovisual material led to the massive growth of the subtitling industry that continues to this day (O'Hagan 2007, 162). The DVD industry was disruptive because, for the first time, it provided users in dubbing countries with easy access to audiovisual material in the original language, and content in languages other than their own via subtitles. This access to a range of linguistic content in subtitles was also available to users in non-dubbing countries (DVDs allowed up to thirty-two subtitling tracks for the same product) in times when travelling and access to foreign products were not as straightforward as they later became. To keep up with the demand associated with this change, language-service providers needed to rethink their workflows so that they could efficiently manage multilingual subtitling projects. This led to the introduction of templates (Georgakopoulou 2006, 117; O'Hagan 2007, 162), which the industry presented as advantageous because they were done by native English speakers (thus ensuring the quality of the secondary source text as it would reproduce the dialogues accurately) and lessened the technological demands on the target text subtitler, who could now focus on the linguistic transposition (Georgakopoulou 2006, 117; 2019, 139; Nikolić 2015, 194). The introduction of templates thus sped up the subtitling process and made it more cost-efficient, despite raising concerns about quality and ethics (Díaz Cintas 2013, 279).

With the worldwide consolidation of the internet for domestic use and the introduction of mobile devices capable of accessing the internet (which led to the democratization of the internet), users gained agency in the selection and distribution of content. "Prosumers" (Toffler 1980) distribute the original form and translate content they want to see in their own languages, ignoring language hierarchies implemented in the selection process (Rembert-Lang 2010). In some cases, this has contributed to the globalization of audiovisual content produced in peripheral languages, requiring the 'official' translation of the early fansubbed products (Dwyer 2018, 440). Templates seem to have facilitated access to translators outside the Anglosphere (Carroll 2004, 166).

In the 2010s, streaming video-on-demand (SVOD) changed the way audiovisual content is selected and distributed. Access to full series that were just one click away prompted binge-watching (watching several episodes one after the other) and the demand by foreign audiences to receive the episode in the target language before spoilers from the source language leaked on social media increased. Experienced prosumers' direct demands of streaming platforms were met with unequal success. Szczepanik (2020, 322) reports on the influence of Filmtoro, a Czech VOD platform, on the introduction of Czech localization in the Slovak Netflix catalogue. Catalan language speakers have campaigned for the incorporation of dubbing in Catalan of older films with some success: Disney+ added the Catalan version of seventy-one films in June 2021, which is positive, but still a meagre 1.3% of the total Disney+ offer in Spain (Gutiérrez 2021). It therefore seems that SVOD is open to demands from peripheral languages.

For this reason (among others), it has been claimed that SVOD improves other languages' visibility in the global media ecology and increases their access to other peripheries (Oziemblewska and Szarkowska 2022, 448). For some years, streaming giants have proposed plans to increase their non-English programming (Rodríguez 2017), giving rise to claims that English may no longer be the main language of audiovisual productions. In the European Union (EU), Directive EU 2017/1808 required one-third of the content from VOD platforms to be of European origin for them to be able to operate in the EU (Roxborough 2018). In theory, the increase in EU local productions would also mean an increase in content produced in languages other than English. A recent review of foreign content on Netflix shows that foreign-language titles account for around 45% of Netflix's total library in the United States. As of August 2020, 35% of all Netflix Originals were in languages other than English (Moore 2020). In Europe, only Amazon Prime Video and Filmin have met the EU's 30% minimum requirement for original productions. As of June 2021, European titles accounted for 34.3% of titles on Amazon Prime, 25% on HBO, and 4.5% on Disney+, with Filmin standing out with 65.7% of their catalogue comprising European works (Gutiérrez 2021).

These changes have had two main consequences for language service providers. First, in the global distribution context, subtitles must be produced fast and cheaply, and second, English language production has started to give way to non-English production for a multilingual audience (also noted in Georgakopoulou 2019, 138).

2.2 Pivot templates: A tricky solution to market demands

The use of pivot templates to produce subtitles addressed problems already present during the DVD surge, namely the cost of subtitle production and the man-

agement of multiple subtitle files (Georgakopoulou 2006, 117; Díaz Cintas and Remael 2021, 54). Moreover, template usage facilitated outsourcing (Georgakopoulou 2006, 117; Kapsaskis 2011), and therefore access to a wider pool of (cheaper) professionals (Oziemblewska and Szarkowska 2022, 448). The fact that pivot templates were used to streamline translation processes means that the industry has resorted to a solution from an old playbook to address the new challenges that have come along with the advent of VOD platforms. After all, pivot translation is a long-standing practice in translation and interpreting. For example, instances of multiple source management abound in the history of Bible translation, while simultaneous relay interpreting has been standard practice in the Eastern bloc countries, with Russian serving as a pivot language to decrease the number of necessary language combinations, thus addressing the issues of availability and cost (Gambier 2003). Pivot approaches have given rise to specific challenges that have to do with translation quality (e.g., Pöchhacker [2004] 2016), ethics, and legal (copyright) issues (e.g., in literary translation, pivot translators are rarely compensated for the reuse of their renditions, and this reuse is often not acknowledged on the cover) (Ivaska 2021).

It has also been argued that template usage restricts the translator's role within the subtitling process (Kapsaskis 2011, 194), constrains translators' creativity (Audiovisual Division of ATA 2021)¹ and limits fine-spotting and adaptation to local norms (Georgakopoulou 2012, 81). Nikolić (2015, 199) adds a more balanced perspective arguing that pivot templates as a "source text of translation" are not necessarily problematic: what is problematic is when these translations employ text reduction and are not a "verbatim representation of the original," because this will then influence subsequent translations. Artegiani and Kapsaskis (2014) investigate the quality of pivot template usage and provide evidence to support translators' concerns regarding the influence of template files in quality failures; however, they suggest that it is the template format and the process around its use rather than the use of templates per se that is to blame. That is, giving more freedom to the translator would enhance the overall quality but complicate the project management process (see Georgakopoulou 2019, 154).

Discussions about the negative influence of templates on quality can also be found among subtitlers in Facebook groups such as "Subtitling is an art / Le sou-titrage est un art" or in translator associations' meetings. Translators claim to be corseted by template restrictions and the limitations of using English as a mediating language. While products from peripheral languages or created in peripheral countries are gaining a wider presence in the Anglosphere, it is unclear

1. Audiovisual Division of ATA (@ata_avdivision). 2021. "Interview with Jorge Díaz Cintas." Live broadcast on Instagram, March 20, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/tv/CMpfEISn_4P/.

whether those products reach other peripheral and central-language contexts equally. Research is needed to verify the extent to which translation decisions made during pivot template production hinder the chance for more cultural visibility.

Research on pivot translation in other domains (especially in interpreting and literature) has been carried out systematically for some time now (Pięta 2017). In contrast, research on pivot templates is only now starting to receive more scholarly attention. So far, this research has been mainly product-oriented, focusing on the mistakes that these pivot practices generate (e.g., Vermeulen 2011; Casas-Tost and Bustins 2021). Participant-oriented studies are recent and rare (e.g., Čemerin 2017; Oziemblewska and Szarkowska 2022) and their focus is mainly on quality, while the issue of how pivot templates affect language hierarchies has yet to be explicitly addressed. This is the gap we want to explore in this article.

The next section describes the research methodology and provides a description of the research design and how the data were analyzed.

3. Methodology

We opted for an online questionnaire because this allowed for flexible data collection and a more diversified set of questions, while at the same time being cost-effective and time-efficient (as compared to alternative survey methods such as interviews or focus groups). What is more, considering that the timing of this research largely coincided with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, administering the questionnaire online was the safest (and at times the only feasible) way of eliciting feedback from a relatively high number of respondents based in different countries. Of course, this type of data collection has its limitations, including the low control of the sample and of the data-collection environment (as the samples were self-selected), and the validity risks (e.g., respondents' concerns about reputational risks, or social desirability response bias) (see Mellinger and Hanson 2020).

To mitigate some of these risks, we made it clear that respondents' involvement would be kept confidential and their feedback anonymous; that the focus was on the general landscape of subtitling practices rather than on one single subtitler, company or platform; and that all these procedures were compliant with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). In addition, the consent form included in the introductory page informed the respondents of their rights, how the data would be stored, and how potential sensitive data would be dealt with. Respondents were also given the opportunity to ask any questions they might have. This was followed by three questions where respondents were asked to con-

firm that they had read and understood the consent form, agreed with the data collection, and consented to participate in the survey. By doing this, we followed the ethical standards of research set by our universities at the time of the study design and survey dissemination.

3.1 Questionnaire design and data collection

The questionnaire was designed in SurveyMonkey, which is GDPR-compliant. While designing the instrument, we specified that the aim of the questionnaire was to gain a better understanding of the general subtitling landscape across Europe and yield practical recommendations for subtitling practice and training. Literature on pivot translation, translating, and subtitling from templates and pivot templates was carefully consulted and, as described in Section 4, specific findings from previous research inspired some of the questions (Artegianni and Kapsaskis 2014; Pięta 2017; Georgakopoulou 2019; Torres-Simón et al. 2021; Oziemblewska and Szarkowska 2022, among others). Since our online questionnaire was self-administered, the questions made use of simple formulation and unambiguous wording and were accompanied by detailed instructions when needed. The questionnaire went through three rounds of pilot testing to identify and eliminate potential problems (e.g., ambiguities and skip-logic issues). Despite these measures, two of the respondents indicated that when answering some of the questions they were unsure if a particular question was referring to templates in general or pivot templates. This suggests that some of the questions were not phrased as unambiguously as they could have been.

The questionnaire consisted of fifty-six questions, grouped into two sections: (1) Questionnaire for subtitlers, and (2) Questionnaire for subtitling trainers. Both sections had two sub-sections: background, and experience in working from and/or for pivot templates.² In this article, we only report on answers provided by subtitlers and, in particular, subtitlers who translated from pivot templates (and not templators, or trainers).

The analysed section included fourteen questions, both closed- and open-ended. For closed-ended questions, we specified a set of alternative answers with a predefined response format (multiple-choice and verification box). In three of the predefined questions, respondents were asked to rate belief statements on a Likert scale. In these cases, the order of the statements was automatically randomized by the software to avoid order effects (see Bishop 2008, 397–399). This way, different participants were shown the statements in a different order. In addition to this, statements reflecting the same belief were not presented in succession. Positive

2. The complete questionnaire is available at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.19368896.v1>.

and negative statements were also used to avoid acquiescence bias (see Holbrook 2008, 3). For the open-ended questions, we asked respondents to express themselves using their own words.

To explicitly define our sampling frame, we stated who the questionnaire was aimed at in the introduction to the questionnaire. We opted for a European sampling frame to limit the scope of the research. The questionnaire was designed in English but, to enhance inclusivity and accessibility, respondents could answer in any European language. Most respondents answered in English, and a few answered in French and Spanish. The purpose of the questionnaire was also stated on the introductory page.

The questionnaire was released in early January and was available online until the end of March 2021. The call for respondents was made on social media, through European professional translation and audiovisual translation associations, through universities in Europe, and through personal acquaintances.

Additionally, to maximize the number of participants, and to increase benefit-sharing with the community (respondents would not receive financial compensation for time spent answering the questionnaire), we announced that a donation would be made to a non-profit organization. The donation was made in instalments between March and April 2021.

3.2 Respondents

In total, we received 419 responses. From these, we excluded respondents whose answers were incomplete, skewed by technical issues, and/or did not correspond to the targeted profile.

Overall, our questionnaire was answered by 370 subtitlers. Table 1 provides an overview of the respondents according to their subtitling practices: those who subtitle professionally (for a living), those who subtitle non-professionally (i.e., they identify themselves as fansubbers or volunteers), and those who combine these two activities. Despite efforts to reach non-professional subtitlers, for example by targeting groups like Amara or TED Translators, there is a wider representation of professionals.

Table 1. Overview of respondents according to their subtitling practices

Subtitling practices	Number of subtitlers
Professional subtitlers	295
Fansubbers or volunteers	50
Subtitlers that combine professional and volunteer practices	25
Total	370

Some questions were not marked as mandatory and were therefore not answered by all 370 subtitlers. In such cases, the total number of answers is indicated in our reporting.

The respondents who took part in the study came from thirty-two European countries. Most respondents are based in Portugal, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom (see Figure 1 for the distribution by countries). The overrepresentation of respondents from these countries is likely due to the fact that the authors are familiar names to translation professionals based in these regions.

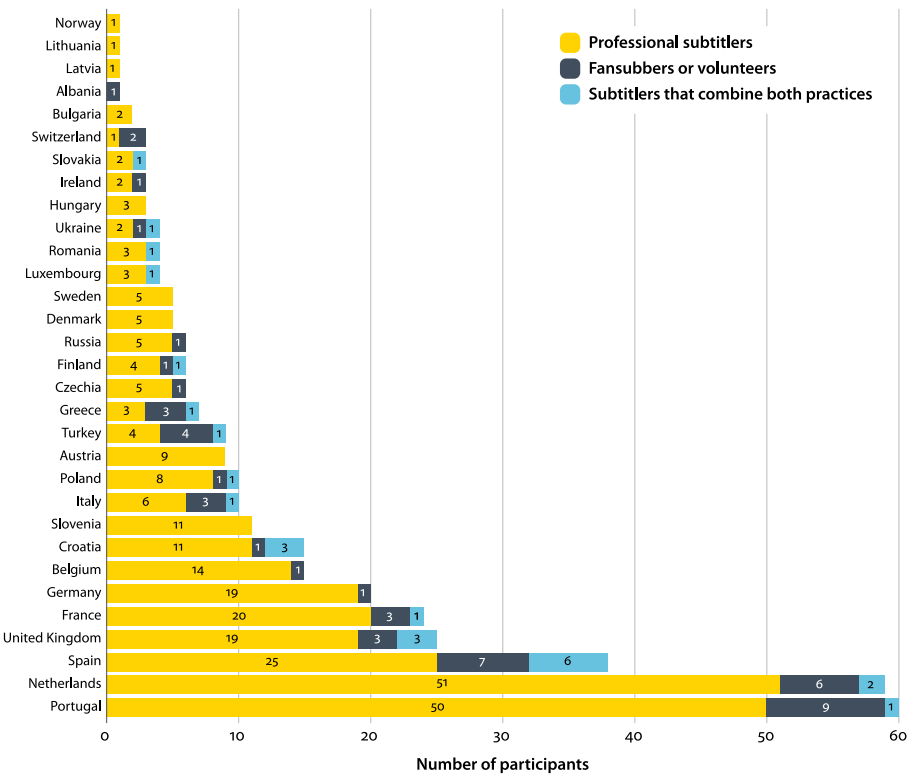


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by country

3.3 Data analysis procedures

We exported the responses into a spreadsheet and then proceeded with a qualitative analysis of the data for the open-ended questions (using Atlas.ti software) and a quantitative analysis of the data from the closed-ended questions (using Excel).

Our approach to qualitative descriptive analysis was data-driven because little is known about the researched phenomenon (pivot template usage and its impact

on language hierarchies) and we expected themes to emerge from the data. The data provided by the respondents were coded and a thematic analysis was performed using inductive coding (see Saldaña 2016, 105), which was independent of the language of the answer.

In Section 4, we present and discuss the results of the survey. Respondents' belief statements are quoted verbatim, and thus include linguistic errors. The answers which are not in English are included in their original languages and accompanied by English glosses.

4. Results and discussion

In Section 4.1, we describe the respondents' experience working from pivot templates. In Section 4.2, we outline their working and pivot languages, and in Section 4.3, we present their beliefs regarding the quality of pivot templates.

4.1 Experience working from templates

Given the widespread use of templates, we asked the respondents to indicate how often they translated from pivot templates to understand how common this practice is among our respondents. As shown in Table 2, 64 (18%) respondents indicated that they always or usually translate from pivot templates, while 119 (33%) do so sometimes. The difference in frequency between those who translate in professional contexts and those who translate in volunteer or fansubbing contexts does not appear to be considerable.

Table 2. Frequency of translating from pivot templates, with percentages in brackets

Frequency	Professional subtitlers	Fansubbers or volunteers	Subtitlers who combine both practices	Total
Always	14 (5)	1 (2)	1 (4)	16 (4)
Usually	39 (14)	3 (7)	6 (25)	48 (13)
Sometimes	100 (35)	14 (30)	5 (21)	119 (33)
Rarely	69 (24)	14 (30)	6 (25)	89 (25)
Never	65 (23)	14 (30)	6 (25)	85 (24)
Total	287 (100)	46 (100)	24 (100)	357 (100)

When asked about the channels or platforms where their pivot template-based subtitles are distributed (in a multiple-choice question), 127 (30%) respondents mentioned streaming services. This confirms our assumption that the use of pivot templates is more common on streaming platforms compared to the other media environments (see Table 3). This assumption was based on subtitlers' reports. For instance, DuPlessis (2020) states that "in streaming services, the pivot-language approach arose recently, as they distribute more and more non-English content into a variety of markets." As shown in Table 3, mention of other media environments is considerably less frequent: the second most reported environments are cable TV and open/public TV.

Table 3. Channels or platforms where pivot template-based subtitles are distributed: Frequency of mentions, with percentages in brackets

Channels or platforms	Professional subtitlers (n = 170)	Fansubbers or volunteers (n = 11)	Subtitlers who combine both practices (n = 11)	Total (n = 192)
Streaming services	117 (30)	1 (8)	9 (36)	127 (30)
Cable TV	60 (15)	0	5 (20)	65 (15)
Open/public TV	61 (16)	1 (8)	2 (8)	64 (15)
Cinema	42 (11)	0	3 (8)	44 (10)
DVD	36 (9)	0	3 (12)	39 (9)
Websites	25 (6)	5 (38)	1 (4)	31 (7)
YouTube	17 (4)	4 (31)	1 (4)	22 (5)
Film festivals	3 (1)	1 (8)	1 (4)	5 (1)
Gaming platforms	3 (1)	0	0	3 (1)
I am not informed	27 (7)	1 (8)	1 (4)	29 (7)

The next question was related to the potential impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the number of requests for translating from pivot templates. It was logical to suspect a decrease in available subtitlers, in general. Among the reasons for a decrease in availability are self-isolation and quarantine time, or additional caregiving responsibilities. Since the number of subtitlers working from and into minority languages before the pandemic was already smaller than the number of

subtitlers working from major languages (DuPlessis 2020), we assumed that this would potentially motivate an increase in the number of requests for translations from pivot templates. However, our assumption was not confirmed: for most of the respondents, the pandemic did not have an impact on the number of requests for translating from pivot templates. Of the 186 respondents who answered this question, the majority indicated that the number of requests stayed roughly the same (106, 57%) and only a smaller number of respondents saw an increase (33, 18%). It is not possible to explain these results based on the elicited data only.

4.2 Working languages and pivot languages

To better understand the role of (semi-)peripheral languages in the global media ecology and to shed light on the potential role of pivot templates in disrupting traditional language hierarchies, we asked our respondents about their typical working languages (the languages they usually work from, and the languages they usually work into). We also asked the respondents to specify the ultimate source language (USL, the language of the audio)³ and the pivot languages from which they work when using pivot templates.

Regarding source languages, the respondents reported regularly translating from thirty-nine different languages. As expected, several respondents translate from more than one language. Despite the diversity of languages, English was listed by the greatest number of respondents (339, 92%), distantly followed by Spanish (87, 24%), French (78, 21%), German (61, 16%), Dutch (Netherlands; 34, 9%), Italian (27, 7%), Portuguese (European; 21, 6%), and Dutch (Belgium; 18, 5%). Table 4 shows the breakdown of the most common source languages mentioned by the respondents. This order of importance largely coincides with the language hierarchy outlined in Heilbron (2010).

Table 4. Most common source languages among the respondents: Frequency of mentions, with percentages in brackets

Source languages	Professional subtitlers (<i>n</i> = 295)	Fansubbers or volunteers (<i>n</i> = 50)	Subtitlers who combine both practices (<i>n</i> = 25)	Total (<i>n</i> = 370)
English	272 (92)	42 (84)	25 (100)	339 (92)
Spanish	71 (24)	11 (22)	5 (20)	87 (24)
French	65 (22)	7 (14)	6 (24)	78 (21)
German	53 (18)	5 (10)	3 (12)	61 (16)

3. Ultimate source language refers to the language of the ultimate source text (Toury 2012, 82).

Table 4. (continued)

Source languages	Professional subtitlers (n = 295)	Fansubbers or volunteers (n = 50)	Subtitlers who combine both practices (n = 25)	Total (n = 370)
Dutch (Netherlands)	29 (10)	5 (10)	0	34 (9)
Italian	23 (8)	2 (4)	2 (8)	27 (7)
Portuguese (European)	16 (5)	5 (10)	0	21 (6)
Dutch (Belgium)	15 (5)	2 (4)	1 (4)	18 (5)
Other languages	55 (19)	8 (16)	3 (12)	66 (18)

When it comes to target languages, the respondents listed thirty-three languages. Several respondents translate into more than one language, which is in contrast with the widespread belief that translators should translate only into their first language. The most common target languages were English (115, 31%), Dutch (Netherlands; 65, 18%), Portuguese (European; 63, 17%), Spanish (41, 11%), German (34, 9%), French (30, 8%), Croatian (17, 5%), and Dutch (Belgium; 14, 4%). What is striking in the findings is that the most common source and target language among the respondents is English and that this result is not necessarily related to the respondents' countries of origin (compare with Figure 1).

Table 5. Most common target languages among the respondents: Frequency of mentions, with percentages in brackets

Target languages	Professional subtitlers (n = 295)	Fansubbers or volunteers (n = 50)	Subtitlers who combine both practices (n = 25)	Total (n = 370)
English	85 (29)	22 (44)	8 (32)	115 (31)
Dutch (Netherlands)	57 (19)	6 (12)	2 (8)	65 (18)
Portuguese (European)	53 (18)	9 (18)	1 (4)	63 (17)
Spanish	26 (9)	8 (16)	7 (28)	41 (11)
German	31 (11)	2 (4)	1 (4)	34 (9)
French	25 (8)	5 (10)	0	30 (8)

Table 5. (continued)

Target languages	Professional subtitlers (<i>n</i> = 295)	Fansubbers or volunteers (<i>n</i> = 50)	Subtitlers who combine both practices (<i>n</i> = 25)	Total (<i>n</i> = 370)
Croatian	13 (4)	1 (2)	3 (12)	17 (5)
Dutch (Belgium)	13 (4)	1 (2)	0	14 (4)
Other languages	66 (22)	14 (28)	9 (36)	89 (24)

Turning now to the USLs, the respondents were asked to indicate the languages of the audiovisual products they usually work with when translating from a pivot template. With this, we wanted to check the reported diversity of original content identified in the literature (see Section 2). Even though the most common USL among our respondents is still English (70, 19%), other languages follow close behind (see Table 6). Apart from English, the most common languages heard in the audio are Spanish (53, 14%), French (46, 12%), Japanese (44, 12%), Korean (35, 9%), German (30, 8%), Swedish (25, 7%), Chinese (20, 5%), Italian (20, 5%), and Norwegian (15, 4%).

Table 6. Most common USLs: Frequency of mentions, with percentages in brackets

Ultimate source languages	Professional subtitlers (<i>n</i> = 295)	Fansubbers or volunteers (<i>n</i> = 50)	Subtitlers who combine both practices (<i>n</i> = 25)	Total (<i>n</i> = 370)
English	63 (21)	3 (6)	4 (16)	70 (19)
Spanish	48 (16)	2 (4)	3 (12)	53 (14)
French	41 (14)	2 (4)	3 (12)	46 (12)
Japanese	37 (13)	1 (2)	6 (24)	44 (12)
Korean	31 (11)	0	4 (16)	35 (9)
German	27 (9)	1 (2)	2 (8)	30 (8)
Swedish	21 (7)	3 (6)	1 (4)	25 (7)
Chinese	18 (6)	0	2 (8)	20 (5)
Italian	18 (6)	0	2 (8)	20 (5)
Norwegian	13 (4)	1 (2)	1 (4)	15 (4)

The respondents were also asked to indicate the languages of the templates they usually work from. In asking this, we sought to identify which pivot languages are used and if these coincide or not with hyper-central English or central languages. As per Table 7, just under half of the respondents indicated that they usually work from templates in English (181, 49%). This confirmed our expectation that when the USL is in a language other than English, English is the most common source language of pivot templates. A smaller number of respondents indicated that they usually work from templates in Spanish (12, 3%), French (9, 2%), and Swedish (6, 2%), among other languages.

Table 7. Most common languages of pivot templates: Frequency of mentions, with percentages in brackets

Languages of pivot templates	Professional subtitlers (n = 295)	Fansubbers or volunteers (n = 50)	Subtitlers who combine both practices (n = 25)	Total (n = 370)
English	159 (54)	11 (22)	11 (44)	181 (49)
Spanish	10 (3)	2 (4)	0	12 (3)
French	8 (3)	1 (2)	0	9 (2)
Swedish	5 (2)	1 (2)	0	6 (2)
Dutch*	3 (1)	1 (2)	0	4 (1)
Norwegian	3 (1)	0	0	3 (1)
German	3 (1)	0	0	3 (1)
Portuguese*	3 (1)	0	0	3 (1)

* In the case of Dutch and Portuguese, the subtitlers did not specify the variant.

We also enquired into our respondents’ views regarding the ethical issue of who should translate from pivot templates. Oziemblewska and Szarkowska (2022, 448) indicate that translators should only translate from pivot templates when they are competent in the USL. When asked if this was the right thing to do, the vast majority ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ with this statement (155, 81%), as shown in Figure 2.

As we were interested in finding out whether the reported working languages and pivot languages in general (noted above) differed from the working languages and pivot languages for streaming, we correlated the questions on language with the question about which platforms or channels the subtitlers’ template-based subtitles are read or distributed. Table 8 shows an overview of the source languages, target languages, USLs and pivot languages of the 127 subtitlers that indicated that their template-based subtitles are read or distributed on streaming services.

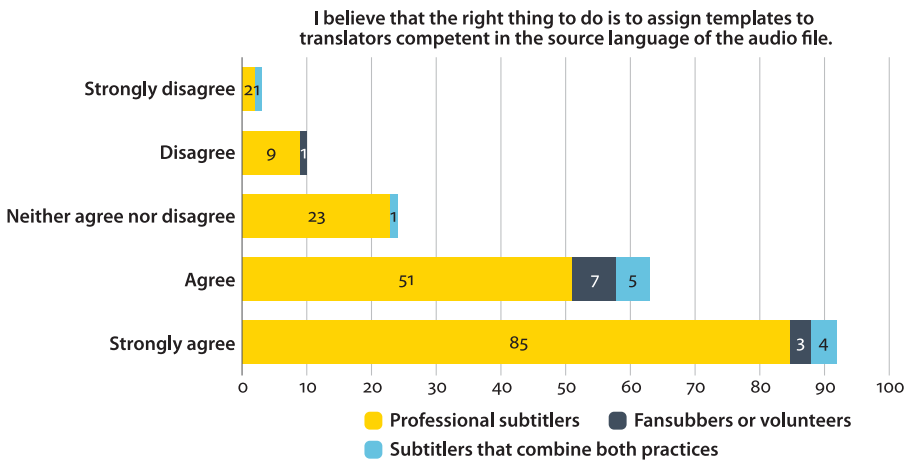


Figure 2. Self-belief that the right thing to do is to assign templates to translators competent in the source language of the audio file (absolute frequency, $n = 192$)

Table 8. Streaming language usage: The source languages, target languages, USLs and pivot languages of the 127 subtitlers whose template-based subtitles are read and distributed in streaming services; frequency of mentions, with percentages in brackets

Source languages		Target languages		Languages of pivot templates		USLs	
English	125 (98)	English	36 (28)	English	125 (98)	English	51 (40)
Spanish	40 (31)	Portuguese (European)	31 (24)	Spanish	11 (9)	Spanish	43 (34)
French	24 (19)	Dutch (Netherlands)	21 (17)	French	7 (6)	Japanese	39 (31)
German	17 (13)	Spanish	17 (13)	Swedish	4 (3)	Korean	33 (26)
Dutch (Netherlands)	13 (10)	German	9 (7)	German	2 (2)	French	33 (26)
Italian	11 (9)	Russian	6 (5)	Dutch	2 (2)	German	23 (18)
Portuguese (European)	7 (6)	French	4 (3)	Russian	2 (2)	Swedish	16 (13)
Swedish	7 (6)	Italian	4 (3)	Polish	2 (2)	Chinese	15 (12)

Concerning source languages, the most common language, indicated by 125 (98%) respondents, is English, followed by Spanish (40, 31%), French (24, 19%), and German (17, 13%). The most common source languages and their percentages do not differ greatly from the general findings reported above. The same can be

said for the target languages in streaming environments. English (36, 28%) is the most common language the respondents translate into. This might be revealing of the increase of audiovisual productions in languages other than English which have to be subtitled for an English-speaking audience. English is the most-widely used target language and is closely followed by Portuguese (European; 31, 24%) and Dutch (Netherlands; 21, 17%), which comes as no surprise considering that most of the respondents were Portuguese or Dutch. All in all, English is the most common source and target language in streaming environments.

When it comes to the USL, on streaming platforms, the most common languages continue to follow the tendency identified in the general outlook (see Table 6): English is the most common USL (51, 40%), followed closely by Spanish (43, 34%), Japanese (39, 31%), Korean (33, 26%), and other languages, as shown in Table 8. Of note is that Japanese, Korean, and Chinese are among the more common USLs even though these languages are not reported among the respondents' source languages.

Almost all the respondents report translating from English (125, 98%) when translating from pivot templates for use on streaming platforms. The number of respondents who report working from templates in languages other than English is considerably lower: Spanish (11, 9%), French (7, 6%), Swedish (4, 3%), and other languages whose percentages are almost residual. This suggests that English is the pivot language par excellence on streaming platforms, an unsurprising finding considering the commercial preference for using English as a mediating language by streaming platforms and language services providers and the hegemonic position of English.

English is thus a prominent source language (as both a working language and USL). This also confirms that English is a target language in streaming platforms, which suggests that subtitlers are frequently asked to subtitle into English even when English is not their native language. English as a pivot language in streaming platforms dominates the workflows as the go-to mediating language. Even though there is limited diversity among the more common languages in streaming, pivot templates seem to allow for non-European content (e.g., Japanese, Chinese and Korean) to be accessed, as shown in the USL column in Table 8.

4.3 Quality of pivot templates

Given that the poor quality of templates is a frequently reiterated belief in the reviewed literature and among subtitlers (see, for instance, Arteghiani and Kapsaskis 2014), we asked the respondents several closed- and open-ended questions to elicit their beliefs about this topic.

In the first instance, we asked the respondents if they believe that many translators consider the use of templates to affect quality negatively. Most of the respondents (129, 67%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, as shown in Figure 3.

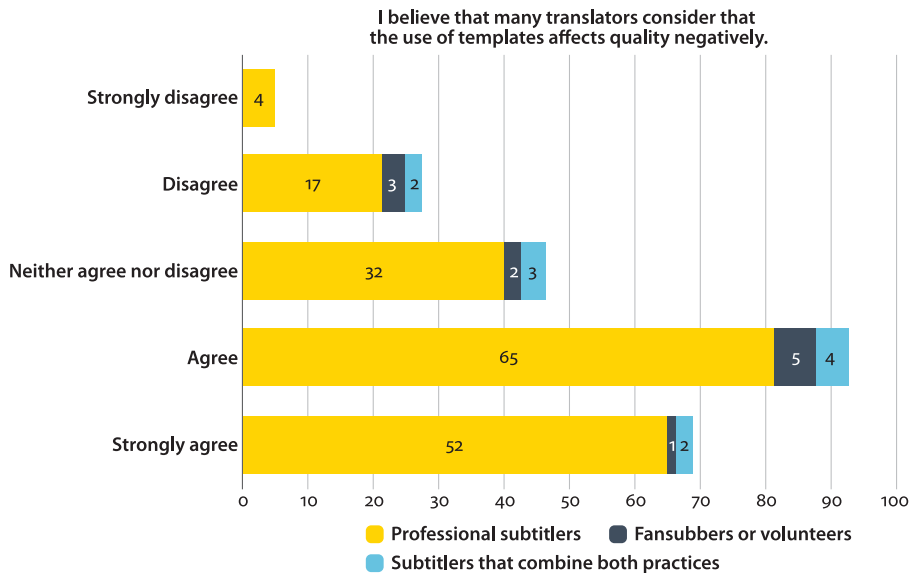


Figure 3. Respondents' belief about others' perception regarding the impact of pivot templates on quality (absolute frequency, $n = 192$)

One potential problem affecting quality when translating from pivot templates concerns discrepancies between the pivot template and the ultimate source text (UST).⁴ When faced with these discrepancies, the translator may ask which to be loyal to. To elicit subtitlers' beliefs about this, we asked them to rate five statements on a five-point Likert scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Overall, most of the respondents felt that in the case of discrepancies, translators should be loyal to or follow the UST instead of the pivot template:

- 164 (85%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement 'If I am aware of a discrepancy between the template and the audio file, I believe that I am expected to be loyal to the template and not the message in the audio file.'

4. The terms 'ultimate source text' (UST) and 'ultimate target text' (UTT) are adopted here in the sense used by Pięta (for instance, Pięta 2012, 313) to refer to the original (here, the foreign audio) and last texts translated in the process of pivot translation (subtitles produced from the pivot template).

- 183 (95%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘I believe that in case of discrepancies between the audio and the template, the translators should try to be faithful to the audio rather than the template.’

For a subtitle to follow the UST instead of the pivot template, some competency in the source language of the audio file would be preferable, as reflected in the results in Figure 2. However, approaching consultants with the right language combination and using speech recognition in combination with machine translation are also possibilities.

When it comes to trusting templates or the UST, the answers are not so clear-cut. Even though a clear majority of the respondents indicated that other translators should trust the UST, their own opinions about distrusting templates were less strong:

- 143 (74%) respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘I think that other translators believe they should trust the message in the audio file.’
- 93 (48%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement ‘The quality of templates is high and therefore I trust templates.’
- 86 (45%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘Subtitlers should avoid trusting templates.’

What these answers suggest is that believing that the quality of templates is generally high and therefore trustworthy, and not trusting templates in cases of perceived discrepancies between the UST and the pivot template, are not mutually exclusive. Further research is needed to better understand the conditions under which trust/mistrust arises when translating in template-centred workflows.

In an open-ended question, we asked the respondents about their biggest challenge, in terms of quality, when translating from pivot templates. The most common answers are collected in Table 9. The most frequently reported challenge, mentioned 82 times (35%), was that not being allowed to change some of the spatial and temporal features of the template had a direct and negative impact on the quality of the final product. Most of the respondents who reported this problem referred to the difficulties related to predefined, fixed timings, which negatively affect the internal segmentation of the subtitle event. As summarized by two respondents:

The timing from the template sometimes does not match what would be best suited for my language once adapted, which leads to less-than-ideal phrasing.

When I can't change the time codes, because the division of a subtitle in English is completely different than one in Portuguese. So my text is [sic] Portuguese is never as good as I liked because I have to break the text artificially.

Table 9. Biggest challenges, in terms of quality, when translating from a pivot template ($n = 189$); frequency of mentions, with percentages in brackets

Themes	Mentions
Locked template: Not allowed to change the timing; segmentation and merge and divide; number of lines	82 (35)
Poor timing and/or poor segmentation	44 (19)
Not trusting pivot templates and a potential discrepancy between pivot template and source AV text	40 (17)
Vagueness	29 (12)
Constraints on freedom and creativity	10 (4)
Technological challenges	6 (3)
Translating a translation	5 (2)
Other (less than five mentions each)	18 (8)
Total	234 (100)

Other respondents also referred to not being allowed to merge and split subtitle events or even the number of lines. The respondents were particularly critical of the resulting standardization of spatial and temporal features across languages that do not benefit, as one respondent wrote, “the end product and, therefore, the viewers’ experience.” These results reflect those of Oziembewska and Szarkowska (2022, 450), who also found that subtitlers believe they should do their own spotting.

Even though none of the respondents mentioned ‘locked’ templates, this was clearly what they were referring to. When working with ‘locked templates’, subtitlers are not allowed to change some of the spatial or temporal features of the template (e.g., merge or split segments, adjust in- and out-cues). In some cases, even though templates are, technically, unlocked, clients request that, if the subtitler feels the need to deviate from the template in the manner described above, they should provide a report of such changes and the reasons for them. In such cases, we cannot refer to a locked template, but this practice still constrains subtitlers’ work and discourages deviations from the template: justification of every change can be time-consuming, puts additional pressure on the subtitlers, and is typically not remunerated.

The second recurrent theme, expressed 44 times (19%), was a sense that pivot templates are poorly segmented and/or timed. The common view among the respondents who expressed this opinion was that subtitle duration was too short, that the in- and out-cues were poorly synchronized, or that dialogues were incor-

rectly segmented. When reporting these challenges, the respondents wrote, for instance:

When the subtitles are bad. They appear too late or too early, same thing when they disappear.

Poor time cueing of the template (e.g. Consecutive subtitles with very short durations, usually between 1 and 2 seconds).

Another group of respondents reported that their biggest challenge when translating from pivot templates is trusting the template, and that they often suspect discrepancies between the pivot template and the UST (mentioned 40 times, 17%). Commenting on the lack of trust towards the template, one of the respondents wrote: “You’re not sure the translation is correct if you don’t know the source language, so you can get things really wrong, especially when slang or jokes are being used.” Another respondent summarized: “If the audio is another language than English or Dutch. Sometimes you get the feeling the template isn’t right, but it’s difficult to check because you don’t speak that language.” As evident from these illustrative responses, the lack of trust in the pivot template is associated with the lack of knowledge of the USL. Our respondents also referred to a ‘feeling’ that the AV text was mistranslated (*A veces tengo la sensación, por el contexto, de que algunos segmentos no están bien traducidos* ‘Sometimes I have the feeling, because of the context, that some segments are not well translated’), and to translations with cryptic, obscure meaning (“I’ve sometimes had to work with English templates for Japanese or Korean audio that didn’t make much sense”). If the subtitler knows the USL, it is possible to check the accuracy of the translation.

The fourth most recurrent theme, mentioned 29 times (12%), is related to the vagueness of the pivot template. The respondents who expressed this referred to “not [being] sure which expression fits best in the context because the English translations can be vague.” Others also referred to “the ambiguity that arises from nouns without clear gender, for example ‘My cousin’. It is not clear whether the cousin is a male or a female,” or as another subtitler put it “the most obvious [sic] issue, that is always overlooked in templates, is that markers of gender and formality are lost in the English.” One of the respondents used this opportunity to explain how critical it is to understand the level of formality when translating from Korean (as a USL) in the following way:

The differences in language structure, for example the formal way of address in Korean, which isn’t visible in the English template, and then after a while a character says something about how he/she is spoken to, and you realize that you have missed that dimension of the conversation.

A few respondents implicitly or explicitly referred to the inadequacy of English as a pivot language. In this context, English is seen as a less than ideal pivot language since it does not lend itself to providing enough information, such as level of formality, gender, or case, that translators need when translating into other languages. Surprisingly none of these respondents mentioned the role of annotations and how these, if included in the pivot template, could provide the relevant missing information (see Oziemblewska and Szarkowska 2022, 443).

A smaller group of respondents (10, 4%), when answering this question, took the opportunity to discuss how they think pivot templates constrain their creativity. Some of these subtitlers referred to being less “free,” while others wrote about the difficulties of “deviating” from the template or “not sticking to the template,” corroborating previous studies on the topic (see Section 2). They also complained about the inadequate sentence structure of the pivot language and the challenges of finding a more natural way of phrasing in the target language. As one respondent put it:

L'interprétation du texte écrit peut être plus complexe. Je me sens moins “libre”, j'ose moins m'éloigner du texte du template. Par chance, je peux souvent faire appel à un locuteur natif de la langue d'origine pour vérifier certains passages (rarement le film entier).

‘The interpretation of the written text can be more complex. I feel less “free,” I dare less to deviate from the template text. Luckily, I can often call on a native speaker of the original language to check certain passages (rarely the whole film).’

Technological challenges were also mentioned, although less frequently (6 times, 3%). Here the most salient pitfalls seemed to be the lack of access to the source video, the unfriendliness of the subtitling software, or having to work in Excel.

Finally, for a small number of respondents (5, 2%), “translating a translation” is a problem in itself. As one of the respondents wrote:

I prefer not to work with a template when the source audio is not in a language I understand. Much detail can be lost, because you're translating someone else's translation (i.e. you're interpreting someone else's interpretation). That's why I rarely do this kind of work. In my opinion, translations should only be done by someone who knows and understands the source language.

Other challenges were mentioned but by fewer than five respondents each, such as short deadlines, lower rates, and lack of training.

Given the identified negative beliefs and the challenges when translating from pivot templates, we wanted to understand if our respondents believed that they and their colleagues should not work from pivot templates as a matter of principle. To elicit this, we asked respondents, in a close-ended question, to rate several

statements. Despite the challenges discussed above, in general, a significant number of the respondents that answered this question believe that they should work from pivot templates:

- 83 (43%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement ‘In an ideal world, I should refuse working from templates.’
- 74 (38%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement ‘Other translators with the same language pairs and equivalent experience avoid working from templates.’
- 110 (57%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘Working from templates provides me with more opportunities (e.g., more projects, different genres).’
- 110 (57%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement ‘I expect to be criticised by other translators if they knew I accepted translating from templates.’

Interestingly, a small group of respondents assume that others will not work from pivot templates (25, 13%), and believe that other translators will criticize them for working from pivot templates (30, 16%). This might suggest that working from pivot templates is a standard practice among subtitlers. Nevertheless, a meaningful percentage of the respondents selected ‘neither agree nor disagree’ for each item, suggesting that this topic is not clear-cut. For example, 94 (49%) respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement ‘Other translators with the same language pairs and equivalent experience avoid working from templates.’

5. Conclusions, limitations, and avenues for future research

In this article, we aimed to shed some light on how the use of pivot templates impacts language hierarchies and subtitling practices in streaming environments. A high number of respondents in our survey translate from pivot templates (272, 72%). That this is not a more prevalent practice is possibly because the main language of most audio is still English (i.e., the traditional *lingua franca* of the audiovisual world, and hence a language for which there is an ample supply of subtitling talent). This is indeed the main working language for the vast majority of respondents to our survey, whether they work in pivot workflows or otherwise.

Our results show that template-centred workflows, inherited from the boom of the DVD industry in the past century, are still in place in the new era of streaming media – so much so that currently the use of pivot templates might be more common in streaming services than in other media environments (as our data seem to indicate). Moreover, the USL reported by our respondents suggests that,

just as in the pre-streaming era, an important number of translation practices are taking place in streaming environments in configurations where the language of the audio is the (hyper-)central English. Central–central subtitling practices (e.g., a video in German subtitled into French) are much less frequent, and peripheral–peripheral situations are rare (e.g., Korean–Danish). When such central–central or peripheral–peripheral exchanges do take place, they occur mainly through pivot templates in English (i.e., the traditional language of international exchanges in the audiovisual ecology) (Gambier 2003).

When seen from this perspective, streaming services do not seem to challenge existing hierarchies between languages. Rather, they seem to exacerbate the imbalance that already existed before the advent of the streaming era. Not only are most audiovisual productions still created in English, but even audiovisual content produced in other languages – both central and peripheral – ends up being translated from English, and thereby filtered through the Anglocentric lens. In these scenarios, subtitlers report struggling to deviate from the English pivot template and being constrained in their freedom and creativity to find translations that are not too close to the English.

Since English continues to be the main source language for subtitlers even when they translate non-English audio, it seems reasonable to assume that streaming platforms are unlikely to create more job opportunities for subtitlers working with less common language pairs. After all, the English language is still the main gatekeeper, a constant bottom line in the process. All this means that in this respect, a possible change is not on the horizon. A true change is more likely to happen if content creators start giving proper value to subtitling quality, if there is a change in subtitling workflows, and if there are enough qualified subtitlers available to translate from one peripheral language to another. However, this last assumption seems unlikely since for the number of qualified and trained subtitlers to increase there needs to be a higher demand for these subtitlers so that subtitling companies and universities can invest in training for these less common languages.

We also observed that our subtitlers face a myriad of challenges when translating from pivot templates such as locked templates, poor timing and segmentation, and not trusting pivot templates because of the potential discrepancy between the template and the source audiovisual text. Subtitlers mainly reported negative beliefs regarding pivot templates – working from pivot templates and the inherent challenges thereof – that are associated with the quality of the pivot template and have consequences on the quality of the UTT. Possible ways to minimize the reported challenges are (1) to recommend the implementation of practices that reflect the identified subtitlers' challenges when translating from pivot templates, and (2) through training for templators that takes into consideration that these

templates will be used for further translation. Such training could focus, among others, on the creation of pivot templates that include annotations anticipating the challenges of subsequent translators.

A final interesting finding from this study was that the resort to English as a pivot language is reported to negatively impact the quality of translations based on pivot templates. Working from pivot templates in English is said to raise particular challenges that relate to terminological and structural limitations of the English language (lexis, formality, gender, case, tenses, causatives, diminutives, etc.). The data seem to suggest that despite its hyper-central position in the audiovisual world, English is a suboptimal candidate for a pivot language, because it lacks many linguistic aspects that a USL and UTL might have.

Apart from providing some tentative answers to the central question investigated in this study, our results also yield further questions and point to future areas in need of in-depth exploration. To develop a fuller picture of the use of pivot templates in streaming environments, future studies could focus on data beyond Europe. Further research could also explore the lack of trust towards pivot templates, which – as reported by our respondents – seems to be promoted by clients themselves. Possible solutions could be related to training and guidelines for template creation or even collaborative creation of pivot templates. To better understand template creation, future studies should also address questions about who template creators are, what challenges they face, and what type of competences are needed to create pivot templates.

This study presented limitations which were not anticipated at the outset. First, reactions from some colleagues indicate that some of the targeted subtitlers may have boycotted our questionnaire because we promised to reward every completed response with a donation to a cause with which they disagreed (Translators without Borders). Second, even though the participating respondents came from thirty-two European countries and translate regularly from thirty-nine different languages and into thirty-three languages, our data has an overrepresentation of respondents from Portugal, the Netherlands, and Spain. And even if a clear effort was made to reach subtitlers across Europe equally, this overrepresentation can probably be explained by the professional networks of the authors. We recognize that these issues should be amended in future studies that replicate this questionnaire. However, we also believe that, despite these limitations, the results of this questionnaire can provide useful paths for reflection, professional practice, and future research.

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Data availability statement








The data that support the findings of this study are available from the authors, upon reasonable request. The questionnaire used to elicit the data is openly available in Figshare at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.19368896.v1>.

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