The Dubbing Standard: Its History and Efficiency Implications for Film Distributors in the German Film Market

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Techniques for Transferring Foreign Language Films into German

- **Dubbing (cinema: 95%, TV: 80%)**
  - Replace voice sound track with domestic dialogue (lip-sync.)

- **Subtitling (cinema 5%, TV: 10%)**
  - Original soundtrack
  - Translations of dialogues in text form appear on screen

- **Country size Argument**
  - Historically unjustified: Dubbing was conceived for small countries
  - small traditional dubbing countries: Hungary (12m), Czech Rep.(9,5m)
  - large traditional subtitling countries: Japan(145m), Brasil (80m)
Path Dependence

- Path dependent adoption process → prevalence of dubbing
  

- Historical events / circumstances
- Self-reinforcing mechanisms
- Strong rigidity / Lock-in
- (potential) Inefficiency
History: Introduction of Sound Film

- 1929-1931: audiences widely refuse dubbing (“synthetic man” not accepted, low quality)

- By mid-end 1930s: German audience habituated to watching all films in German
Historical Events I: The early 1930s

- **Double Shooting: Language Versions**
  - introduced to overcome drawbacks of dubbing; faded out after 1932
  - habituation to watching all films in German

- **Policies discouraging subtitling, favouring dubbing**
  - **Censorship**
    - Dubbing used to shield off foreign cultural influences
    - "Adapt films to German mentality"
    - Censor
    - Film ratings
    - Tax breaks: incentive to dub

- **Protectionism**
  - 1930 and 1933 Quotas protect domestic film industry
  - Dubbing Regulations
  - dubbing cluster Berlin
Historical Events II: post war allied film policies

- US film studios backlog of 2500 films since 1941
  - Problem: Anti-German bias → Films could not be released
  - Solution: dubbing, decided by authorities
Mechanisms reinforcing dubbings’ domination

- **Market level:**
  - **Transaction Costs:** higher for subtitled films
    transportation, time, limited choice
  - **Complementarities:** TV, Video

- **Individual level:** **Habituation**
  exposure↑ → habituation↑ → demand↑ →....→ domination
Rigidity I: Habituation & Behavioural lock-in

- Dubbing specific consumption skills
  - Ignoring inconsistencies inherent in dubbing
    (dissonance cultural context, lip asynchronism)

- Subtitle related consumption skills
  - Foreign language skills
  - Subtitle reading skills (reading, effortless switching between picture & title)
    (Experimental & Survey Evidence: Luyken et al., 1991; Spinhof and Peeters, 1999; Koolstra et al., 2002)

- Changing to subtitling rejected → Switching costs due to lack of skills
  - Germans’ preferences 1980s-1990s:
    78% pro dubbing
    13% pro original / subtitling
Rigidity II:

→ Film Distributors: bound (locked) to consumer preferences. Deviation from dubbing standard results in severe box-office losses.

- TV License
  - License area limited to national market / language area
  - Public German channels can be received abroad: no problem with dubbing
  - Subtitling → Violation of license agreement
Inefficiencies: Dubbing Costs

Fixed costs:

- Dubbing: relatively expensive: €25,000 - €80,000/ Master
  - Dubbing script, Studio time, Dubbing actors wages
- Subtitling: relatively cheap: €2,500
Inefficiencies: Dubbing Costs under Digital Theatrical Distribution

- Large films: cost difference negligible
- Small/medium films: dubbing’s fixed costs relatively large (budget €250,000)

Small films put at disadvantage: economise on dubbing-quality & Advertisement ↓

Subtitling: Small distributors could release 11% (or 21) more foreign films a year

→ Inefficiency? Normative Cultural Diversity Argument

- EU MEDIA 2007 Programme (€755m): “increase the circulation of European audiovisual works inside and outside the European Union” (EU (2006) Ch. 1 art. 1)

- TV: 1997 TV stations in Germany spent 1bn DM for “dubbing and the like” (Blickpunkt:Film)
Inefficiency: Language Skills

- “One-quarter of Dutch primary school children are convinced they even learn more English from radio and television than at school”
  
  Vinjé (1994)

- Experimental evidence: watching subtitled programs enhances foreign language comprehension as compared to dubbing (vocabulary acquisition and word recognition)
  
  (Koolstra et al. (1999) e.g., D’Ydewalle and Van de Poel, M. (1999)

→ Cost-, Language- & Cultural Policy point of view: Subtitling desirable.
Dubbing Standard Forever?

- Digital Film Supply & Consumption = Costs shift in favour of subtitling
  - Consumer transaction cost for subtitling ↓ in Home Ent. (transport, time, price)
  - Cinema market: Film distributors costs for subtitling ↓ (laser subtitling 750€/copy)

→ Incentives to supply and consume films exclusively in subtitled version

- 28% of German DVD / video consumers:
  "important" or even "very important" to "watch films in other languages or in subtitled original version" (FFA, 2006: 28ff)
  - Schooling & practice of foreign Languages ↑?

? Future: substantial part of the audience habituated to subtitling?
The End
Inefficiency: Dubbing Costs

- **Large films**: cost difference negligible
- **Small films**: dubbing’s fixed costs large (budget €250,000)

→ Small films put at disadvantage (economise on dubbing-quality)

Subtitling: Small distributors could release 11% (or 21) more films a year
Consumption skills

Figure 3, Indicators for Consumption Skills in Germany and The Netherlands: Statements about Subtitling and Dubbing

- The dubbed Soundtrack does not always match the actors’ lip movements
- Dubbing lessens my enjoyment
- Subtitles ensure satisfactory understanding
- Subtitles lessen my enjoyment of the programme
- Subtitles do not interfere with the flavour of the original
- Subtitles are difficult to follow

Bars represent:
- NL 1999
- NL 1987
- D 1987
## Dubbing Costs

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Copy class: Maximum No. of copies per film</th>
<th>Average No. of foreign long films released yearly to German cinema market 2000-2005, per copy class.</th>
<th>average number circulating copies per film in each copy class</th>
<th>Estimate of dubbing costs in Euro</th>
<th>Total dubbing costs per copy class in €</th>
<th>Total subtitling costs per copy class in €</th>
<th>Differences between subtitling and dubbing costs in €</th>
<th>Total dubbing costs per copy class in € (No. of films * cost of Subtitling of €2,500) + No. of films * average No. of copies * 75</th>
<th>Differences between subtitling and dubbing costs in €</th>
<th>sum of cost difference</th>
<th>No of films that could be distributed additionally with the savings from a switch to subtitling: sum of cost difference * estimated average distribution budget of 250,000 Euro</th>
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<td></td>
<td>absolute</td>
<td>in %</td>
<td>in Euro</td>
<td>No. of films</td>
<td>in %</td>
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## Dubbing & Subtitling Market Shares

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## Preferences for Subtitling/Dubbing

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Source (Luyken G. et al., 1991), * Preference for subtitling/dubbing of films serials, drama
Country Size Argument

- country size argument does not necessarily apply directly to dubbing
- Dubbing is done in small countries
- Protectionism and Quota systems favoured dubbing in small and large countries that adopted dubbing:
  - Germany, Spain, Italy, France, Hungary, Czechoslovakia
- Nationalism was a wide spread (in large and small countries)
  - Germany, Spain, Italy, France, Hungary, Czechoslovakia
- Japan: Large market subtitles, (Brazil, Russia)
  - Dubbing: D (127m admissions 2005), Esp (127m), F (174m), I (102m), Hung (12m), Cz.Rep. (9,5m), Slovak Rep. (2m)
  - Subtitling: NL (20m), Scand. (6-14m), Jp. (145m), Brazil (80m), GB