

Subtitling for the deaf and hard-of hearing: *an atypical audience for screen translation in Lithuania?*

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Abstract & Keywords

English:

In every society, there are individuals with different needs and abilities. This makes every society unique and distinctive. In order to ensure that social groups with different abilities are fully integrated into public life, a wide range of accessibility issues are relevant. Media accessibility for deaf and hard-of-hearing people is one of them. After the Soviet occupation, when the Baltic countries - Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia - regained their status as independent states, the distorted public perception of people with disabilities, their adaptation possibilities, and a widespread frame of mind for their social life still face the relics of the Soviet occupation regime - a certain stigmatisation of these social groups. Nonetheless, with changes in the legislative framework, modern foreign practices and encouraging examples, this flawed attitude towards people with disabilities is gradually changing. This paper aims to present the needs and expectations of Lithuanian hearing-impaired people and discuss perspectives on media accessibility for this particular audience in Lithuania. Firstly, statistical information about the Lithuanian target group will be provided, then the principles of media adaptation for the Lithuanian deaf and hard of hearing will be discussed and finally, the needs of the target group in terms of media accessibility will be considered. The data presented in this paper includes results from the research project "Inclusive Culture: the Study on Accessibility of Audiovisual Products for the Visually and Hearing Impaired" (KlaRega), which was conducted between 2021 and 2023.

Keywords: Lithuanian audience, audiovisual translation, media accessibility, subtitling for the Deaf and hard of hearing

Introduction

Lithuania is one of the Baltic countries that was under the regime of the Soviet Union for over 40 years. "Not only was the expression of Baltic culture strongly suppressed in every respect" (Tulun 2014: 140), but also an inadequate distorted awareness of the harmonious society raised by the Soviet Union had a significant impact on the social attitude towards the abilities and needs of persons with disabilities. The promoting idea about the non-existence of this social group did not stimulate any discussion about the accessibility of cultural products for this marginalised type of consumer. Furthermore, such stigmatisation has given rise to two-sided consequences; namely, a disinterested, unsympathetic and irresponsible social approach to people with disabilities and their needs has been developed; secondly, self-isolation of this group and their decision to go into a social decline have been experienced. In Lithuania, the onset of a novel perspective for people with disabilities began with the implementation of the Law on the Social Integration of the Disabled (1991, 2005) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol (2008), which have highlighted the state policy for the integration of people with disabilities through physical, medical, social, educational and cultural spheres of life by treating those persons with "respect for their inherent dignity" (Article 1:4). Therefore, a barrier-free life for people with disabilities must be ensured in Lithuania ever since. According to the state policy, access to audiovisual content in the areas of cinema/theatre, television and the Internet should also be guaranteed. However, due to a lack of both specialists' knowledge and competence in producing audiovisual material accessible to deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers, the implementation of the measures has not been put into standard and accepted practice yet. The first attempts to adapt films and performances for the hearing impaired have only been made in Lithuania since 2017.[1]

In this context, the paper aims to provide an overview of Lithuanian practice in relation to the accessibility of audiovisual material for deaf and hard-of-hearing people, both in terms of intralingual and interlingual parameters. Firstly, historical aspects related to the notion and tendencies of accessibility of audiovisual content for the target audience in Lithuania will be presented. Then, principles and strategies associated with subtitling for this audience in the Lithuanian setting as well as respective accessibility options suggested by the target viewers will be discussed.

The paper focuses on the results of the research project "Inclusive culture: the study on accessibility of audiovisual products for the visually and hearing impaired" (KlaRega) (2021-2023) which was conducted by the author and her colleague, Laura Niedzviegienė (Vilnius University, Lithuania). In this case, empirical subtitling research relevant to the issue, dominant features and principles of subtitling audiovisual products for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH) is introduced. First and foremost, this includes the subtitling needs of hearing-impaired viewers. As this is a heterogeneous target audience offered to enjoy films with standard subtitles in Lithuania, certain preferences for acceptable Lithuanian subtitles to ensure adequate readability for most viewers in this group are reviewed. Finally, the major findings and insights of this research are briefly discussed and suggestions for further research are presented.

1. The hearing impaired as a certain social cluster in Lithuania

1.1. A stigmatising historical perspective on persons with disabilities

For more than 40 years, Lithuania was suppressed in various aspects by the Soviet regime. Not only language policy, but also cultural events such as music, art, literature, theatre and films were affected by the strict Soviet guidelines. Alongside the suppression of culture, the ethnic composition of the Baltic region and the apparent exclusion of the mother tongue from various areas of social life, the issue of disability had the tendency to be ignored as well. As rightly pointed out by Oleg Polozhiuk (2005: 9), "there was no sex or disability in the Soviet Union. Under Soviet rule, these things were unrealistic and non-existent; therefore, persons with disabilities in the former Soviet Union remain in many respects an *unknown population*". This reality can be illustrated by one historical fact: "During the 1980 Olympic games in Moscow, a Western journalist inquired whether the Soviet Union would participate in the first Paralympic games, scheduled to take place in Great Britain later that year. The reply from a Soviet representative was swift, firm, and puzzling: 'There are no invalids in the USSR!'" (Fefelov 1986 in Phillips 2009). This official's denial "of the very existence of citizens with disabilities encapsulated the politics of exclusion and social distancing that characterised disability policy under state socialism. Historically throughout the former Soviet bloc, persons with physical and mental disabilities have been stigmatised, hidden from the public, and thus made seemingly

invisible (Dunn and Dunn 1989 in Phillips 2009). Due to these ideological factors, hearing-impaired people in Lithuania were also pushed to the margins of social life: they lived in isolated spaces (either with relatives or in special boarding schools); cultural life was also inaccessible to them, even inclusion in world sporting competitions such as the Paralympic Games was only possible for them to a limited extent.[2] Furthermore, the language used by the Soviet regime about deaf people was also often not very inclusive. In many cases, Soviet authorities did not employ what is now considered correct or respectful terminology when referring to deaf individuals. Instead, they used outdated or derogatory terms that were stigmatising or insensitive. In the post-Soviet states, for instance, the practice of referring to deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals as *deaf-mute*, *deaf-dumb*, or even *invalids*, *disabled* was frequently used by hearing people. The attitude towards sign language has also been inappropriate and disrespectful since the Soviet era. Sign language as such was not regarded as an effective means of communication for deaf people; on the contrary, in the social context, it was portrayed as a problem of backwardness (Show 2011: 192).[3] Consequently, since the Soviet times, deaf people have developed the audist notion[4], that is, they have considered themselves as inferior members of the hearing society; therefore, they had no expectations of better access to cultural life. Although Lenin's propaganda message that "*of all the arts the most important for us is the cinema*" (first published in Kinonedelia 1925) was widespread in the country, audiovisual material was not accessible to the Lithuanian deaf and hard of hearing either. The first reason for this was related to the predominant film translation mode – the so-called 'Soviet voice-over', which was performed "in a straight, formal tone without regard to lip movements, gender, or character emotions and the original audio was still audible in the background" (Shih 2020). Subtitled films were the exception rather than the norm. On the other hand, as already mentioned, the deaf audience like all persons with disability were "invisible", non-existent and any ideas about film adaptations were regarded as utopia, as fantasy rather than reality. As a result, deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers in Lithuania at that time, were more likely to enjoy the visuals than to engage in the film plot, read the characters' expressed emotions, experience the mood-setting music, and so on. This distorted perception of media accessibility, both in society and among deaf people themselves, was particularly pervasive until a legal basis (the Law on the Social Integration of the Disabled [1991, 2005] and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol [2008]) has emerged to change this situation in Lithuania. Nowadays, according to the state policy, in the country access to all types of media should be equally guaranteed for everyone, regardless of physical and/or mental disability. Therefore, filmmakers, broadcasters and distributors in Lithuania have launched new initiatives to adapt the media for the target viewers, taking into account their physical and sensory abilities.

1.2. Statistical and socio-cultural overview of deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Lithuania

As far as the size of the target audience is concerned, it should be noted that there are around 30,000 hearing-impaired people in Lithuania.[5] According to the statistics of the Lithuanian Association of the Deaf, there were about 8,000 deaf people in Lithuania in 2022 and more than 3000 of them were registered as members of the Lithuanian Association of the Deaf.

Comparing the data with other groups of people with disabilities, according to the Ministry of Social Security and Labour (2022), there were about 223,000 people with disabilities in Lithuania at the end of 2022, of whom almost nearly three per cent were hearing impaired.

From a socio-cultural perspective, deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Lithuania, as in other countries, represent a heterogeneous group from a cultural and sociolinguistic point of view, according to the model of identity development of deaf people proposed by Neil Stephen Glickman (1993: 62-63) and the scientific findings of Agnieszka Szarkowska (2013). In general, four large groups can be distinguished. The first group is culturally hearing and includes persons who have higher degrees of residual hearing, perceive deafness as a disability (rather than a cultural difference), typically identify themselves with the hearing culture instead of the Deaf culture (Iriarte 2017: 22) and give preference to oral communication. Their oral language skills vary depending on "when the hearing loss was sustained, that is in childhood or adulthood, the degree and nature of the hearing loss, and the effectiveness of subsequent therapeutic programs" (Ross 2005: 7). The second, culturally marginalised group, includes individuals who are part of deaf and the hearing world but do not feel comfortable in either world (Glickman 1993: 93); for instance, deaf children born into hearing families. The third group is associated with the process of immersion in the deaf world; it thus includes people who do not see their deafness as a disability and view themselves as a "cultural linguistic minority" (Adams and Rohring 2004: 70), using only sign language and never speaking with their voice (Glickman and Carey 1993: 277; Glickman 1993: 99). Finally, the last – bicultural – group, which includes the hearing impaired who recognise deafness as a cultural difference and feel comfortable in both deaf and hearing worlds (Glickman 1993: 100-104). Consequently, "there are those who were born deaf, use sign language as their mother tongue and identify themselves with the Deaf community; those who are hard of hearing, who often have residual hearing; and those who are deafened and who lost hearing at a later stage in their lives and have an oral language as their first language" (Szarkowska 2013: 69).

Despite these explicit groupings, as the data from the research project "KlaRega" reveals, deaf people in Lithuania can still be relatively divided into those born before 1995 (when the Lithuanian government signed a resolution legalising sign language as the official language of the deaf community) and those born after 1995. The former group includes persons who lived under the Soviet regime, where communication in sign language was humiliated, as mentioned above. Therefore, persons from this group are excellent lip-readers and have a sufficiently sophisticated auditory apparatus to pronounce words clearly and combine them into sentences. There are also some who are bilingual and able to lip-read in several languages, mostly Lithuanian and Russian. Deaf people born after 1995 are young people who are less likely to be able to read Lithuanian texts, and only a few can lip-read. Due to the pervasive influence of English in all areas of their lives, small English texts have risen in their favor. However, the preference is given for sign language interpreting in all areas of their lives, including media accessibility (Kerevičienė and Niedzviegienė 2022a).

Considering the heterogeneous nature and different cognitive abilities of the Lithuanian deaf and hard of hearing, their needs for media accessibility also appear to be diverse.

2. Deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers as a specific audience in Lithuania

2.1. Research analysis and methodology

Nowadays media accessibility is increasingly becoming a realistic ambition for producers of audiovisual material. In Lithuania, filmmakers, national broadcasters, audiovisual distributors are targeting socially marginalised audiences and trying to apply foreign practices and adapt audiovisual products for the Lithuanian deaf and blind. However, the adaptation methods tend to vary as media practitioners do not sufficiently understand the specificities, physical abilities, and needs of the target groups. Therefore, this variation does not always result in a quality adaptation of audiovisual (AV) material for the target audiences. Therefore, the research project "Inclusive culture: the study on the accessibility of audiovisual products for the visually and hearing impaired" (KlaRega) (2021-2023) was conducted. One of its main tasks was to identify the needs of the Lithuanian deaf and hard of hearing in terms of media accessibility. The project is included in the national research program "Welfare Society" with the purpose "to carry out integrated scientific studies of the preconditions for a welfare society and its development in Lithuania" as well as making recommendations for the development of audiovisual accessibility for the special social groups of the Lithuanian population.[6]

Methodologically, an online survey and interviews were used to identify the needs of Lithuanian deaf and hard of hearing in terms of already adapted AV products in Lithuania. All persons with hearing impairment and those registered as members of various deaf organisations in Lithuania were invited to participate in this online survey. However, due to objective circumstances related to the

threatening situation of COVID-19 and the low activity of participants, only a small number of deaf individuals expressed their willingness to participate in the study. Thus, a total of 58 people from various deaf associations in six major Lithuanian cities (Vilnius, Kaunas, Panevėžys, Šiauliai, Klaipėda, Kėdainiai) took part in the online survey. As the results of the survey revealed, about half of the respondents were middle-aged and older (32 per cent of those over 50 and 21 per cent between 41–50). 16 per cent of participants were 31–40 years old and 14 per cent of respondents were between 18–25 years old. Most passive respondents were in the 26–30 age group (nine per cent). Secondly, the majority (83 per cent) of respondents stated that sign language is their first language and only a small proportion of respondents (16 per cent) indicated that their first language is still Lithuanian. Due to special communication and learning needs, almost all respondents (93 per cent) were educated in centres for deaf and hard-of-hearing pupils either from infancy (33 per cent) or from the first grade (48 per cent), except the small group of the interviewees (seven per cent) who attended national standard schools for hearing students. What concerns education, it was indicated that the majority of deaf and hard-of-hearing respondents (64 per cent) had only completed secondary school, while some respondents managed to achieve high and higher education (12 per cent and 17 per cent respectively). In terms of the degree of hearing loss, the majority of the survey participants were deaf (72 per cent), some were hearing impaired from birth (81 per cent), others were deafened in childhood (eight per cent) or later (nine per cent). Despite their sensory diversity, the majority of respondents lived in hearing families (76 per cent), other deaf and hard-of-hearing interviewees lived either in deaf (17 per cent), hard of hearing (three per cent), or mixed (three per cent) families.

In addition, a comprehensive online questionnaire with 55 questions on the needs and experiences of deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Lithuania concerning the adaptation of AV products was developed for the study. The questionnaire was conducted using a Google survey form. The main part of the survey form was focused on the qualitative and quantitative aspects of AV products adapted in Lithuanian theatres, broadcast on TV channels and distributed on various film platforms. The questionnaire contains questions to recognise respondents' interests and habits concerning AV production (for example, what kind of films and performances they like to see, what their preferences are: watching TV, going to the cinema, using Internet platforms, which subscription to streaming AV production they prefer; how often they visit public places related to the screening of AV productions (cinema, theatre), what their opinion about films with SDH is, what benefits and drawbacks they recognise, what suggestions they would make to improve subtitles and surtitles in order to gain more useful audible information, and so on.). In addition to the questions, in this survey form, short (up to one minute) video fragments of AV products were presented, which were adapted for the target audience according to the proposed methodology. The video excerpts were used to identify the needs, preferences and interests of the target audience and, on this basis, to create guidelines for adapting AV products to the target audience[7]. To promote the survey, the Lithuanian Association of the Deaf prepared a short video in sign language to provide information about the survey and the data to be collected. Besides, the questionnaire was also adapted for deaf respondents; that is, questions and possible suggested answers were interpreted into Lithuanian sign language and recorded. In addition to this questionnaire, a free-form interview-survey method was also used to investigate the needs of members of the target groups. It was designed to assess the quality of accessibility of the already adapted AV products in Lithuania and distinguish the benefits of the modified AV material. Therefore, contact meetings were organised with members of Lithuanian deaf associations. Each meeting-interview was scheduled to last up to one hour. First, a short presentation was given on the practice of accessibility of AV products (films and performances) abroad and in Lithuania; afterwards, various excerpts from films, cartoons and performances with specially designed SDH were demonstrated. After this, interviews were conducted with deaf and hard-of-hearing people. They included a series of pre-determined targeted questions aimed at clarifying the needs of the target groups; namely, scale-type questions (with response options such as "I agree/disagree/partially agree with statement X") and funnel-type questions (where a broad, usually open-ended question is given at the beginning, and additional questions later narrow down the topic by detailing the information). In order to establish principles for the adaptation of AV material for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers and to identify their needs for AV production, the following topics were discussed: strategies for rendition of audible information, including off-screen sounds, personages' manner of speaking, the background music and finally the linguistic character of the subtitled text. Hence, the results of the questionnaire and the insights from the discussion helped to determine general trends in the reception of adapted AV products and establish the needs of the Lithuanian target group (that are briefly presented hereinafter).

2.2. Delivery modes of audiovisual material for Lithuanian hearing-impaired viewers

Deaf and hard-of-hearing people are a special audience as they are not receptive to auditory information due to their physiological characteristics. For this reason, AV material is either interpreted into sign language, subtitled or delivered by a special AV mode - subtitles for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers (SDH). Due to the aforementioned prevailing Soviet attitude towards the hearing impaired, films and performances in Lithuania (both in cinemas and theatres) are still presented with standard subtitles. In the case of the Lithuanian national broadcaster, AV material is usually displayed with standard subtitles as well; although daily news or other current affairs programmes (political debates, interviews, and so on.) are broadcast with sign language interpretation. Regarding the needs of the target viewers, as the research detected, deaf socio-cultural subgroups of the older generation in Lithuania would prefer edited or standard subtitles, while the hard of hearing opt for verbatim[8] or standard subtitles. The respondents explain that the AV delivery format with standard subtitles is sufficiently suitable for them, as they are already used to it. During the Soviet era, sign language was not recognised as their mother tongue. Therefore, deaf people were taught to lip-read, and better reading skills were developed in educational institutions. For this reason, the Lithuanian target viewers are now able to watch films with standard subtitles by using their lip-reading skills. The situation is different for the younger deaf generation. They would prefer subtitled films and SDH. However, it is expected that sign language interpreters will be used for most audiovisual products. Again, their preference is associated with the fact that the younger deaf viewers in Lithuania have not experienced such social pressure and received information mainly in sign language. Reading long texts therefore seems to require more effort and concentration. On the other hand, viewers in this age group are more technologically literate and have seen foreign AV productions with SDH. Despite these differences, the Lithuanian deaf and hard-of-hearing respondents do not make any complaints about their reading skills and therefore do not question the simplification of subtitled language. The most common reading difficulties encountered by the respondents are related to the inappropriate spotting time of subtitles.

As the research results showed, Lithuanian hearing-impaired people who have developed good reading skills can be considered regular media consumers. Most of the target audience (38 per cent of the respondents) subscribed to streaming AV productions either from various foreign film platforms, or from the Lithuanian Internet platform "Mediateka" (31 per cent of the interviewees). Only some of them consume AV productions from various Lithuanian film platforms (21 per cent of the respondents). As a rule, the majority of the viewers spend more than two hours daily watching TV (almost 80 per cent of the surveyed) or enjoying AV material on the Internet (almost 70 per cent of the interviewees). Only 17 per cent of respondents stated that they have never watched films on the Internet. Regarding viewers' choice of AV products to watch, the following chart shows the preferences of the Lithuanian deaf and hard of hearing when watching TV (in percentages):

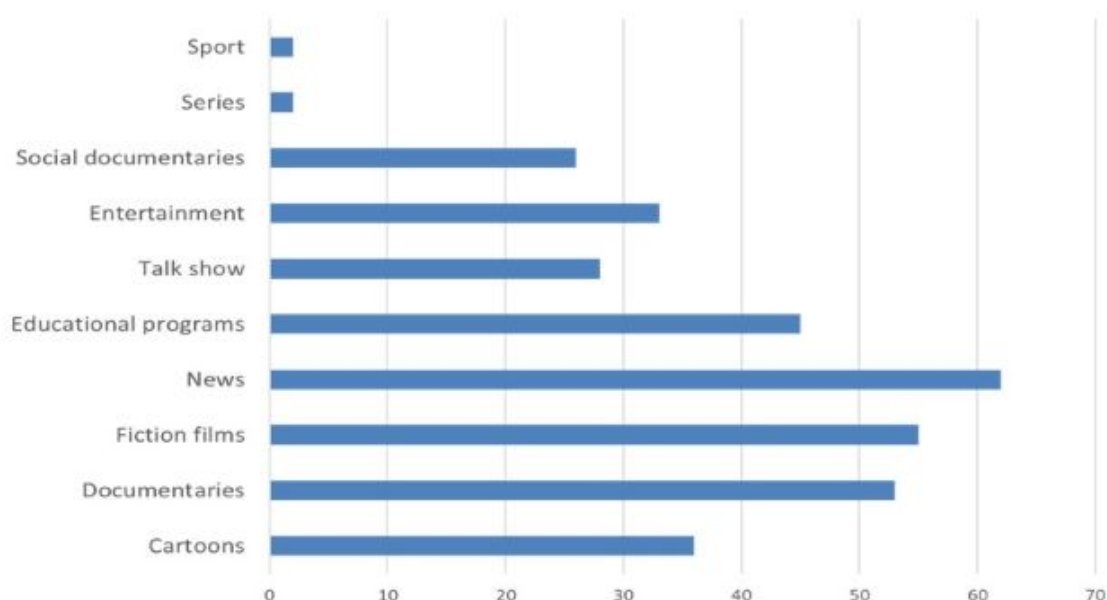


Fig. 1. TV viewing preferences of Lithuanian deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers

Obviously, the news is of the utmost importance to Lithuanian hearing-impaired viewers. On the other hand, the target audience are also engaged in watching films of different genres and enjoy various television programmes.

Therefore, Lithuanian deaf and hard of hearing of different subgroups take an interest in watching AV subtitled productions. They are quite active media users with sufficient reading skills and the vast majority of them (almost 90 per cent) consider it highly relevant to be familiar with all the information they find in the AV material. Both the spoken language - dialogues - and off-screen audible information seem to be significant for the complete understanding of the AV material. Thus, according to the respondents, films and performances with SDH would be the major mode of media accessibility for the Lithuanian target audience.

2.3. Off-screen audible information for Lithuanian deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers

As mentioned above, most of AV products in Lithuania use standard subtitles; therefore, the priority of the hearing impaired is given to SDH, where audible information should be indicated. As the results of the survey show, the majority of the target audience emphasise the importance of information about off-screen sounds in films and performances. In particular, the need to include information about natural and environmental sounds in subtitles is notably highlighted. According to the respondents, the most relevant off-screen audible information includes nature sounds (such as 'waves crashing', 'leaves rustling'), city noises (for instance, 'traffic noise', 'bells ringing'), animal noises (like 'dogs barking', 'horses neighing'), human sounds (as 'laughter', 'applause'), and noises caused by physical actions (for instance, 'slammed doors', 'loudly shutting windows'). The indication of these sounds allows the deaf viewer to understand what is happening in the auditory background of the film, to predict what may relate to the characters' future actions, to recognise what causes the characters' reactions and to anticipate what will happen next. The appropriate position of subtitles for rendering such off-screen audible information, according to the respondents, should be in the centre, at the bottom of the screen; they can also be placed at the top or in the corner if important information is displayed below.

In addition to this, the references to music are also worth mentioning. Lithuanian deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers would like to read information about the rhythm of the music, the mood it creates, as well as the changes in the music such as its softness or loudness, pauses, and so on. For clarity, the respondents suggest that various linguistic comparisons such as 'like a police siren' and so on, could be used to describe this type of information. Less relevant information for the target audience would relate to the descriptions of the music genre or the musical instruments used. After watching film excerpts with SDH, the respondents prioritised the informative descriptions of sounds as follows:

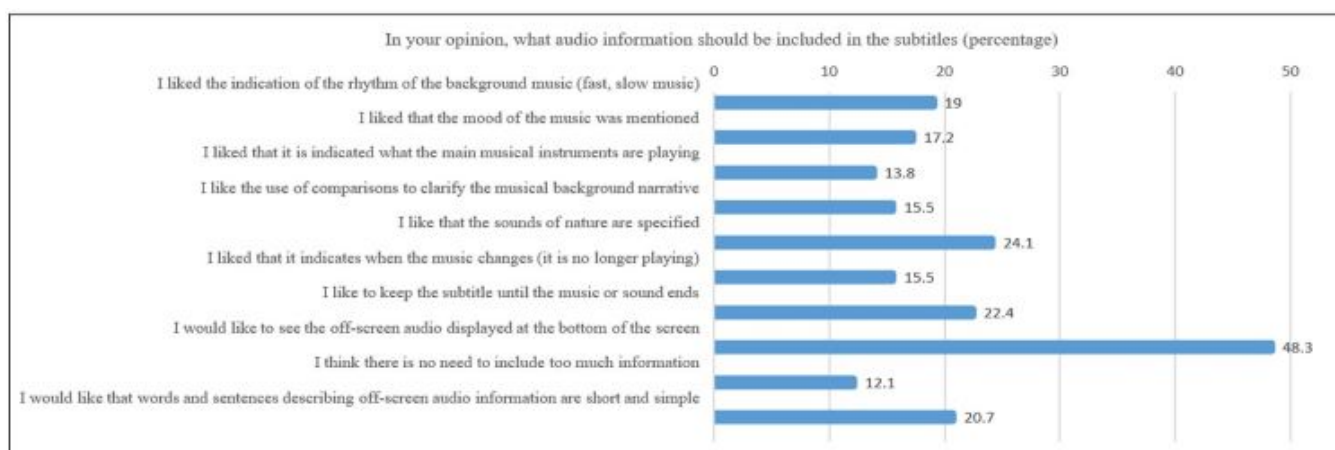


Fig. 2. Preferences of paralingual information about music in Lithuanian SDH

As for the details that should be indicated when describing the type of music in films and performances, the following aspects were highlighted. Firstly, the majority of the Lithuanian deaf and hard of hearing suggest including the lyrics of a song in the subtitles and adding a musical note (♪ or 🎵) at the beginning and end of each subtitle; others recommend adding the name of the song, artists and

composers. Secondly, according to the respondents, information about the rhythm of the music and the main musical instruments would also be relevant. In the case of a foreign song, Lithuanian viewers tend to emphasise the translation of lyrics in the subtitles. Conversely, brief information in which only the singer or the name of the song is mentioned is not favourably supported by the respondents. Information on the gender of the singer and the genre of the music in the film was also not necessary for the audience. Thus, summarising the variants suggested by the respondents, it can be concluded that deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Lithuania prefer SDH that contain more extensive information about the off-screen sounds and music played in the film or performance; and, if possible, the translation of the lyrics of foreign songs into Lithuanian should be provided. In addition, the song lyrics should be distinguished from the dialogue subtitles by marking them with musical notes.

2.4. Language rendition in subtitles for the Lithuanian target audience

The plot of the film is inextricably linked to the thoughts and dialogues of the film characters. When the actors' faces are clearly visible on the screen, deaf people can understand the spoken text by watching their lips. However, if the speakers are in the background or not visible, the content of the dialogue becomes incomprehensible to the deaf viewer. In this case, an additional identification of the speakers becomes significant. Following the practices of various foreign broadcasters, the speakers can be distinguished either by name tags, colours or speaker-dependent placement. The Lithuanian target audience express their preference either to use name tags in capital letters (14 per cent of the interviewees) or colour-coding (26 per cent of respondents). Only a small number of respondents (ten per cent) reject the identification of characters, stating that the content of the speech, not the speakers, included in the standard subtitles is essential in a film. They therefore prefer single colour subtitles. The discussions revealed that this opinion is mainly held by the hard-of-hearing and younger deaf viewers.

Furthermore, various feelings and emotional states experienced by characters are encoded not only in the film content that is uttered but also in the manner in which it is said. Although these audible aspects are conventional to the ordinary viewer, they are inaccessible to deaf persons without specific written textual references. Consequently, Lithuanian hearing-impaired viewers are concerned about this kind of information being added to the subtitles. Again, the indication of the speech features is particularly important when the actors' faces are not visible. As for the positioning and formal presentation of subtitles describing the issues, informative references should be displayed in square brackets next to the subtitled dialogue.

When subtitling films with multilingual content, the Lithuanian hearing impaired express their suggestions for indicating the foreign language spoken by the characters with an additional label in the subtitles and providing a translated version of the dialogue. According to the respondents, this method would not require their deeper linguistic knowledge; on the contrary, it would reveal information about the content of the dialogue, and at the same time help to understand the idea of the AV material. Therefore, the Lithuanian hard of hearing prefer the translation of a multilingual text together with a foreign language labelling.

Since sign language is the native language for the majority of deaf people and another language, such as Lithuanian, is already the second one that the target viewer has to learn and use daily, it is common in foreign practices to simplify the subtitled text in SDH. Regarding this aspect, the results of the questionnaire and the discussions identified two different groups of opinions among the Lithuanian deaf and hard of hearing: some respondents express their preference for the comprehensible, grammatically correct, edited subtitle text that conveys only the main ideas to read and thus provides the opportunity to grasp the information quickly; consequently, viewers will gain the great opportunity to expand their language skills. Others, however, prefer a less condensed and edited, non-standard subtitled text (that is less censored conversational content) and therefore retain the original, albeit long, subtitled version of the dialogues. However, this variant of the subtitled text would require the audience to have good speed-reading skills. Yet again, the diversity of opinions and suggestions seemingly is based on the experienced insufficient social influence on the deaf, which leads to different cognitive abilities and preferences of subgroups of the target viewers.

3. Conclusions

In view of the above, the results of the project research can conclude that Lithuanian deaf and hard of hearing constitute a heterogeneous group of viewers whose varying needs in terms of media adaptation are related to their age, previous experience, reading skills and technological literacy.

Despite this diversity, relying on the research data, the Lithuanian target audience emphasise the value of specialised subtitles (SDH), which would contain clearly visible and comprehensible subtitles with informative cues about off-screen sounds (highlighted by 88 per cent of the respondents), speaker identification and references to the way the characters speak, their emotional state (pointed out by 45 per cent), the inclusion of information about the background music, the pieces of music played in the film (emphasised by 35 per cent), references to the foreign languages spoken in the multilingual film and the translated content of the dialogue (mentioned by 35 per cent). Some respondents (38 per cent) emphasise the specificity of the characters' speech, where any censorship of dialogue, including swearing, is rejected. Finally, the majority of deaf and hard-of-hearing people (65 per cent) stress the grammatical correctness of the language in the subtitles. In addition, the results of the survey showed that deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers consider the subtitling practices in Lithuania unacceptable due to the limited diversity of AV production with SDH.

Furthermore, Lithuanian hearing-impaired viewers will no longer be considered *atypical* if they are no longer stigmatised any longer. In the future, they will communicate and collaborate with AV specialists, researchers, filmmakers and broadcasters to share information about their specific needs and abilities. On the other hand, media accessibility will improve significantly when professionals are more aware of techniques for adapting AV productions to the target audience and implement guidelines on how to make all types of AV material accessible to Lithuanian deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences.

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Notes

[1] In Lithuania, the first subtitles for the viewers with hearing impairment were specially designed for the Lithuanian film "Miracle" (directed by Egle Vertelyte) in 2017. In the same year, the International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival "Inconvenient Films" demonstrated the first 6 films with specially produced SDH. In addition to this, the National Drama Theater of Kaunas (Lithuania) invited people with hearing disabilities to a performance "The Tribe" (directed by Agnius Jankevicius) that provided surtitles for viewers with hearing impairment. Since then, the audiovisual production adapted for the hearing impairment audience has increased in number and varied in Lithuanian theatres and cinemas.

[2] On the one hand, the Paralympic Games were special competitions for athletes, who had physical or mental disabilities; however, for a long time the Deaf status and their participation in the sport event have been disputable since there was a widespread "misconception among the non-deaf community that deafness is simply another form of disability" and that the Deaf is "a minority subgroup among the greater disabled community" (International Committee of Sports for the Deaf). On the other hand, the Deaf did not consider themselves as disabled at the time and therefore have supported the idea to participate in separate Deaf Games (Deaflympics) but not in the Paralympic Games that was regarded as a special sport event exclusively for athletes with physical and mental disabilities (for more information, see Ammons and Eickman 2011).

[3] As Claire Louise Show noted, the formation of the distorted attitude towards the usage and significance of sign language was influenced by the Stalinist understanding that "sign is not a language, and not even a linguistic substitute that could in one way or another replace spoken language, but an auxiliary means of extremely limited possibilities to which man sometimes resorts to emphasise this or that point in his speech. Sign and speech were thus as incomparable as are the primitive wooden hoe and the modern caterpillar tractor." (Stalin 1950:2 in Shaw 2011:192)

[4] Audism is regarded as “**the notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or to behave in the manner of one who hears**” (Humphries 1977:12). In other words, audism either emerges “in the form of people who continually judge deaf people’s intelligence and success on the basis of their ability in the language of the hearing culture” or it manifests when deaf individuals themselves “actively participate in the oppression of other deaf people by demanding of them the same set of standards, behavior, and values that they demand of hearing people” (Humphries 1977:12-13).

[5] Compare, according to Worldometer, the current population of Lithuania is 2,611,009 in total, in 2023.

[6] For more about the research project and achieved results see Kerevičienė and Niedzviegienė 2022a.

[7] The results of the study formed the basis for the first Lithuanian guidelines on adapting audiovisual products for the Lithuanian hearing and visually impaired (compare, Kerevičienė and Niedzviegienė 2022b).

[8] Verbatim subtitles are “a full and literal transcription or translation of the spoken words” (Cintas and Remael 2020: 24). Although verbatim subtitles present all information to the viewer, they require great reading speed from the viewer and sometimes make AV material not enjoyable to watch.

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