

Subtitles in Theatre?

-report on a seminar on captioning in Finnish theatres

A seminar on theatre captioning was organized on 20 November 2007 at the Ateneum Art Museum in Helsinki. Captioning theatre performances has not been practiced widely in Finland thus far, although the need for captioning continues to grow. At the seminar experts from both the theatrical and scientific communities and from various special interest groups presented their views on the subject. The audience consisted of, for example, people with hearing impairments, theatre professionals and captioners, many of whom took part in the discussion following the seminar in a lively exchange of opinions and experiences. The discussion has also actively continued after the event in, for example, Internet discussion boards for people with hearing impairments. In addition, 19 articles were published in connection with the seminar in various media, which in the context of Finland is a rather notable amount.

Investment in the captioning of theatre performances is likely to benefit all the parties involved. Audiences could enjoy the performances from a more equal footing and new, potential theatre-goers could find their way to the theatres. Captioning is an auxiliary service that causes additional costs for theatres. Thus in Finnish circumstances the captioning should be concentrated in fewer performances, and audiences should be informed about it more effectively to especially attract the interest of those groups who would benefit from the captioning the most. Captioned performances should also be concentrated, at least to begin with, in those theatres that already have the required equipment and are experienced with the practical work of providing captioning.

The Finnish Federation of the Hard of Hearing, the Finnish Theatre Information Centre, the School of Modern Languages and Translation at the University of Tampere and the Culture for All service at the Finnish National Gallery together conducted a study in 2007 on the possibilities of theatres to increase captioning with both their Finnish and Swedish language performances. The seminar was organized so that individuals and groups interested in the subject could learn about the results of the freshly completed study and join discussion on the topic. The aim of the study was to assess the potential of providing captioning, primarily from the standpoint of theatre-goers who are deaf or hard of hearing but also from that of ageing people and people learning Finnish as a second language, such as immigrants. The study is one of the cultural projects carried out in Finland in connection with the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All.

Well-realized captioning is experienced as a positive accompaniment to performances

The seminar was opened by Sari Salovaara from the Culture for All service and Sinikka Pihlmaa from the Finnish Federation of the Hard of Hearing, who introduced the background of the seminar and the study from the perspective of the coordinating bodies. The first actual presentation was given by Tanja Borg, a student at the University of Tampere who was responsible for the practical implementation of the study. Borg gave a general description of the study and the two-part questionnaire survey for theatre audiences and professionals which served as its basis. This provided an overall picture of the current situation with theatre captioning in Finland and highlighted the major

development areas for the near future in the field. The survey was carried out in the Espoo City Theatre in 17-18 April 2007 in connection with a visiting production of the Swedish Riksteatern and Regionteatern Blekinge Kronoberg theatres. A few answers were also obtained from some of the other localities on the production tour. The play in question was an adaptation of the emigrant epic *Utvandrarna* (The Emigrants).

According to the answers, patrons have very positive views about increased captioning in theatres. People with hearing impairments remarked that they would go to the theatre much more often if there were more captioned performances available. On the other hand, theatre-goers without problems with hearing did not feel that the captioning disturbed their own theatre experience. They also expressed positive views about captioning, which they had already become accustomed to in the opera and in cinemas.

The survey also showed what kind of wishes theatre-goers had in regard with the practical realization of the captioning. One common request was that special attention should be paid to the placement of the text. The captioning and the action on stage should fit into the viewers field of vision at the same time, to provide a comprehensive theatre experience. Ideally, the captioning should be placed in different parts of the scenery depending on where the scene is taking place, so that it is easier to follow. Many of the viewers of the captioning, not only those with hearing impairments, found it at times difficult to connect the dialogue to the right speaker, and it was suggested that, for example, different colors or typefaces could be used to differentiate the speakers. Many of the theatre-goers with hearing impairments felt that the captioning didn't always perfectly correspond with contents of the performance. Their wish was that captioning should be as informative and complete as possible. Another important issue of improvement was technical functioning, since many of the participants who were hard of hearing had had to leave in the middle of the second performance within the study due to a failure of equipment which considerably hindered their ability to follow the performance.

The results of the other questionnaire survey, which was aimed at theatre professionals, showed that the theatre community also mostly regarded increased captioning as a welcome development. It is perceived as something interesting and useful. The greatest problem connected with captioning arises from the costs of acquiring and using the required equipment. There is a pressing need for additional financing from, for example, the municipalities, cities, the state or interest groups for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

The conducted study is a good start but more research is needed

In addition to Tanja Borg, the background and methodology of the study was also described by Liisa Tiittula, Borg's instructor and professor at the School of Modern Languages and Translation at the University of Tampere. She reminded us that brief questionnaire surveys are not always the key to a greater truth, because of their limited nature. All the distributed questionnaires are not always answered. The questions often have to be formulated in a way that they are easy to answer, which means that the answers are not very substantial either. Questionnaires can however help to point out, for example, differences between the experiences of hearing and hard-of-hearing audiences. Tiittula stressed in her presentation the need for continued research. Theatre professionals

should be interviewed and different financing models and international practices should be explored. There is also some international literature available on the subject – for example, a doctoral thesis touching upon the topic was published in Germany this year.

Theatres are powerless alone – increasing captioning requires cooperation among different parties

Chairman of the Association of Finnish Theatres, Matti A. Holopainen, spoke at the seminar about the way in which the theatrical community relates to captioning at a general level. He underscored that behind a theatre performance there is always a story, which the performance should, as its central task, strive to convey, even though theatre is about much more than verbal expression. He emphasized the importance of equal opportunities to enjoy theatre and reminded us of the challenges that changes in the age structure of the population at large, including theatre-goers, will pose for theatre performances in the future. Holopainen also described some of the technology that can be used in theatre-captioning. LED displays using bulbs to form the captioning have already been in use in Finland for relatively long, as well as video projector technology. Internationally, also individual captioning devices have been installed, such as text display screens attached to seat backs or eye-glasses with the text reflected on one lens. In the future, the prospects of mobile technologies for captioning should also be considered. Individual captioning devices are however expensive, and thus not very likely to enter widespread use in Finland very soon. Here we should rather focus on exploring educational and cooperation options with, for example, the opera or television, fields with a longer tradition of professional captioning.

People with hearing impairments do not get their money's worth

Planning officer Sami Virtanen from the Finnish Federation of the Hard of Hearing brought to the seminar the perspective of theatre-goers with hearing impairments. Virtanen himself considers the price of a theatre ticket too expensive if he is not offered the possibility to enjoy the performance to its full extent. Virtanen described how he has sometimes even had to seek out the original script of a play after the performance in order to grasp all the different nuances. As a person with a hearing impairment, he at present would choose foreign films, which are always subtitled, over live theatre performances. Finnish films are shown only with Swedish subtitles, which means that people with hearing impairments who cannot speak Swedish often miss out also on Finnish films. Work is carried out in the Finnish Federation of the Hard of Hearing to address this shortcoming as well.

Captioning and its practical requirements

The practical work of subtitling was described by audiovisual translator Leo Bessonoff who has mainly prepared translations of foreign TV programs but has also subtitled theatre performances in Finnish. He spoke about adapting the reality of the script and performance into text form: how this takes place in practice and what kind of tools a captioner needs in order to realize the text in the best possible way. In Finland computer software products especially designed for captioning are not in very extensive use, and it

would be important to create or acquire them, although captions can be produced considerably well with basic word processing or presentation graphics programs too.

Captioning as part of the set design

Laura Gröndahl, professor of Production Design for Theatre at the University of Art and Design Helsinki, spoke in her presentation about the ways in which captioning affects the work of a set designer. All in all Gröndahl considered the arrival of captioning in theatres a positive development, and remarked that since especially young actors often have difficulties with articulation, captions should improve the way in which a performance is experienced by all patrons. Gröndahl remarked however that dialogue is only one part of the soundscape in theatre and in the future attention should be paid to how the other sounds could also be made accessible to theatre-goers with hearing impairments. Captioning is a very strong element that influences the set design from the very start. Challenges are involved, since captions cannot be reflected on all materials. On the other hand, set designers always have to take into account the special requirements of each performance at hand and to plan their work accordingly. Set designers should be informed in advance when a performance will be captioned, so that the captions can be integrated from the very start into being a natural part of the scenery and thus the performance on the whole.

Captioning improvisation is difficult, fixed performances are easier

Besides the speakers, the seminar also featured a pre-captioned scene from a play. In addition to the practiced scene, actors Ville Ahonen and Niina Sillanpää performed an improvised act which was simultaneously captioned by interpreters. The captioners were unable to keep up with the actors' pace of speech during the improvisation, which made it difficult for the audience to follow the performance. The actors also found it hard to control their movements on stage and kept passing by the caption screen from time to time, blocking the audience's view. Well-prepared and correctly paced captions add to the viewers' experience, but captioning improvisation seems, at least on the basis of this experiment, a rather difficult task in practice.

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