

# Working for understanding subtitling as a task of paraprofessionals

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# Working for understanding **subtitling** as a task of **paraprofessionals**

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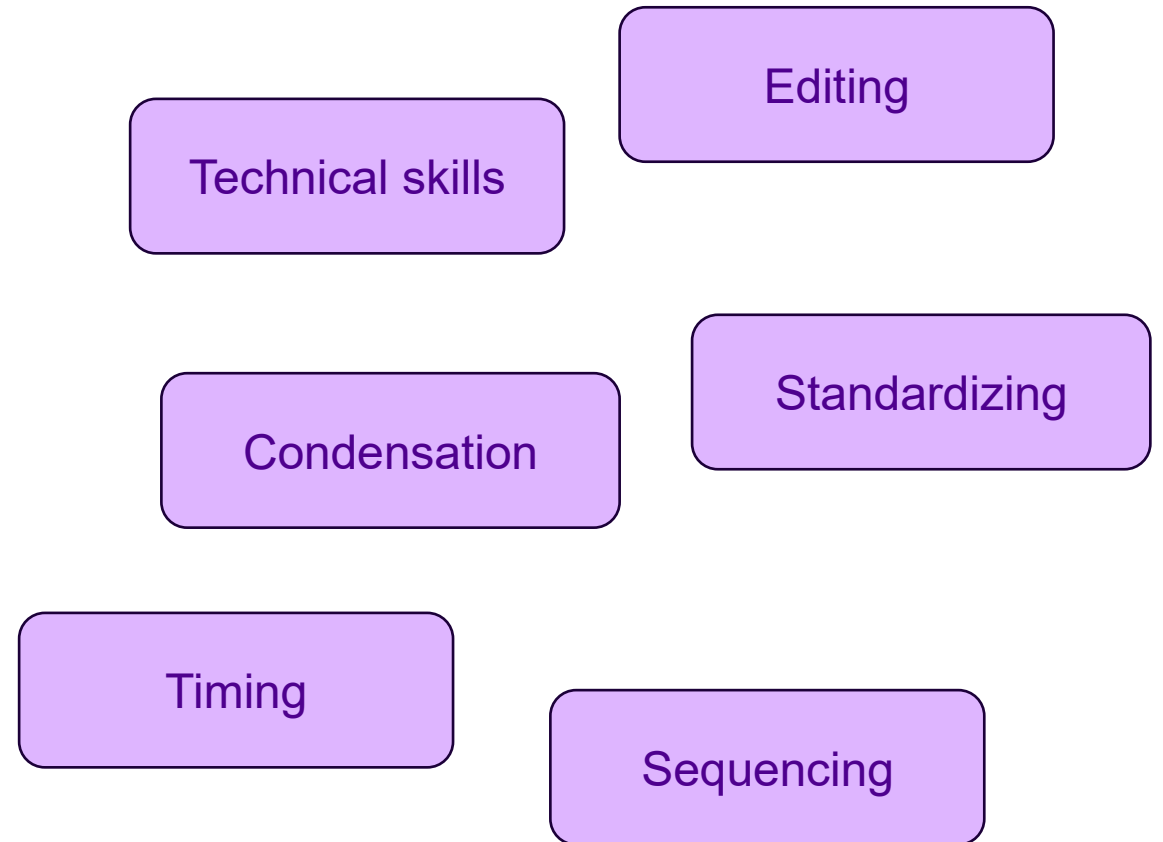
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# Subtitling?

- According to Finnish law<sup>1</sup> on digital accessibility, **all online videos** by public sector organizations **must be subtitled in the video language**
  - In June 2025 also by commercial operators
- The goal is to make information and communications accessible for everyone

<sup>1</sup> Laki digitaalisten palveluiden tarjoamisesta 306/2019; Laki eräiden tuotteiden esteettömyysvaatimuksista 102/2023

“Subtitling requires more than language transfer, it needs language processing. Messages will need to be decoded and re-encoded, perhaps in another mode or in another linguistic system.”



# Paraprofessionals?

- Some subtitling is outsourced to professionals ...but not all
- Many of the (e.g. social media) videos are subtitled within the organisation, by the organisation staff
  - Made subtitling **paraprofessional**<sup>2</sup> = done by not subtitling professionals, but by people doing subtitling among their other professional tasks
  - The legal demand of subtitling touches all public sector organisations. **How is it met?**

<sup>2</sup> see for example Koskela et al 2017; Koskinen 2025

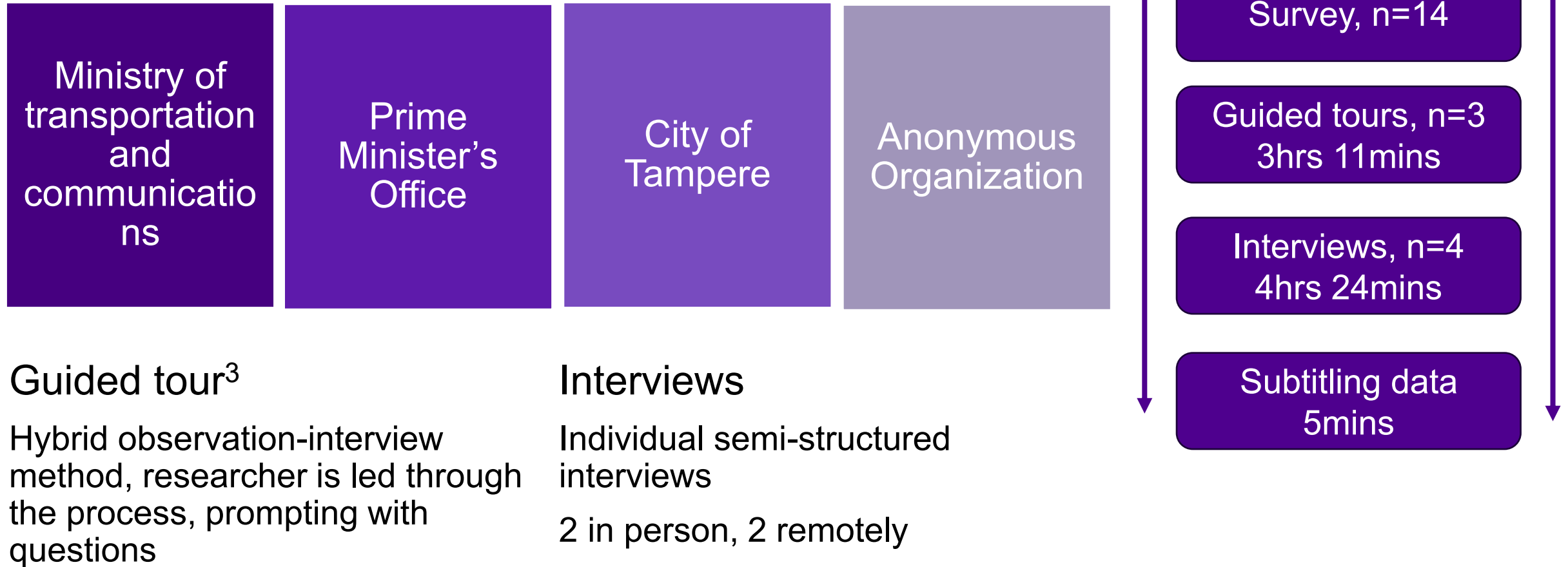
# Research questions

1. How is the subtitling of videos organized and what kind of resourcing is involved in subtitling work? What is the subtitling process like in practice?
2. What kind of experiences do paraprofessional subtitlers have about subtitling and what are their perceptual approaches to this task?
3. What kind of subtitling decisions do paraprofessional subtitlers make? How do they justify their decisions and what kind of language awareness and attitudes are present?
4. How do paraprofessional subtitlers take the social media platform into account when producing subtitles?

# Research questions

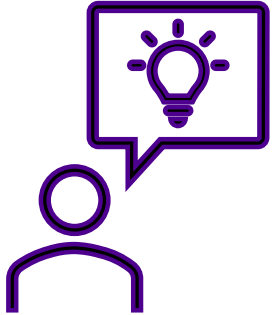
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# Research scope and data





# Co-researchers

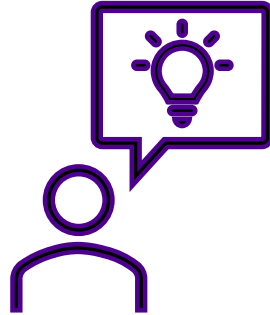


Subtitled 1

Works at communications  
at **Ministry of transportation  
and communications**

Bachelor of Business  
Administration

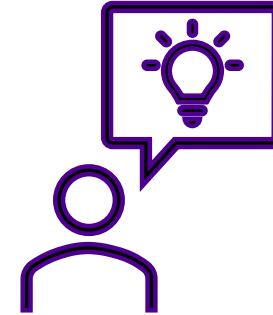
Subtitling manually with  
Adobe Premiere



Jaakko Ranta

Works at communications  
at **Prime Ministers Office**  
Master of Arts, History

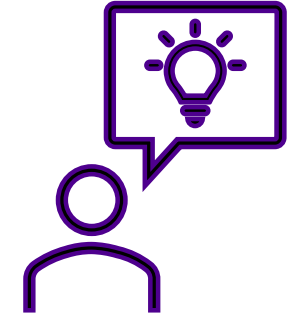
Subtitling manually with  
Youtube



Subtitled 2

Works at communications  
at **City of Tampere**  
Master of Arts,  
Communications

Subtitling manually with  
Adobe Premiere Rush



Subtitled 3

Works at HR  
Bachelor of Business  
Administration

Subtitling with  
automation with Veed

# Theoretical framework



## Translation studies

Intralingual translation  
Paraprofessional translation  
Translation process



## Sociolinguistics

Citizen sociolinguistics  
Language awareness (LA)  
research



## Participatory practice

# Participatory practice as incorporated into guided tour and interview method

# Citizen sociolinguistics and participatory practice as a mindset

- Communicated to the co-researchers from the first contact
- Presented as an opportunity to reflect on one's work tasks and processes, grow in one's role

Participation supports growing in one's role by offering an opportunity to reflect on the job description and the organising of work tasks.

I am interested in how *you* do this and *your* thoughts on this.

This is not an exam, there is no right or wrong answers. You are the expert of this process and I am here to learn about it.

We are producing new information *together*, there is no hierarchy.

# Citizen sociolinguistics and participatory practice as a mindset

- Although paraprofessionals in subtitling, co-researchers were seen as experts of *their own subtitling process*
  - honoring this expertise and the individual experiences
- No evaluation of right or wrong practices, only curiosity and appreciation for the new
- Giving the participating organizations and employees the opportunity to participate with their full name

# Citizen sociolinguistics and participatory practice in guided tour method

- Co-researchers are the ones *giving* the guided tour
  - Tour on their terms: they show what they want to, in an order that suits them
  - Researcher in a role of a 'curious student' willing to learn, not a facilitator
    - researcher asking follow-up or adjacent questions about the process
- Giving co-researchers autonomy, space and time in their participation

# Citizen sociolinguistics and participatory practice in interview method

- Emphasis on co-researchers' experiences, expertise and views
- Dialogic approach on interviewing
  - Producing new information together
  - Researcher sharing common practices and information
- Securing a relaxed environment – more of a chat than an interrogation

# Example 1: tapping into subtitling skillset

I: Can you specify **what kind of skills you feel are needed in subtitling?**

J: Well... well... Uh... well... Well, like... **Typing with a keyboard.** And then... such... How should I say? Certain... some kind of technical knowledge, to understand a little how different... Like... **some kind of IT knowledge**, let's put it this way. Yes.

I: Yes. **What about language skills? What kind of language skills do you think are needed?**

J: Well... Well, of course, in the sense that... That **the spelling** is that... That when it... If you write what has been said, then like... that the **compound words are correct.** And then it is precisely **the punctuation** that makes it easier to read. So... **Well, yes, Finnish language skills.** And then, of course, we also have videos in Swedish and English. So then of course, in them, the knowledge of those languages is needed. So that you can subtitle those videos.

I: Yes. Do you want to clarify what you mean by spelling?

J: **Well, that you know how Finnish... standard language is written.** I mean, like... **grammar...** Is it now 'grammar' or 'spelling rules'? That **and how punctuation marks are used in Finnish.** Because then in that way **the text corresponds to what is spoken.** And then... Also... It makes it easier to read. And the video... It enhances the videos accessibility. And that it is interpreted correctly.

I: Yes. How would you rate, **if you had to evaluate the importance of language skills, and then the technical skills and software competence.** Which one would you say, **which one would you say, is more important?**

J: **Well, I would say that the language skills maybe.** Because then... those... the software side or the IT stuff like... It... This is not like... it **does not require any very high skills.** Those that we use or... **It's hard for me to imagine that any subtitling program would be overly difficult.** So yes maybe I would emphasize the importance of language skills. **They are harder to learn than the technical program. Or take more time.**



## Example 2: tapping into linguistic variation

I: Can you give an example of that “modding” for different platforms?

P: Mmm... Well... Maybe, as I have social media on top of my mind all the time, because it's the job I do, so, maybe, when you are subtitling a video and the platform is TikTok.

So... So... **When a person speaks colloquial language in the video. So in that context, in a way, there is no need to start modifying it, in my opinion, into standard language.** Or somehow, like a comma here and a dot here. And like that into a flawless text.

**In my opinion, the text can also show that the person is rambling a bit here. Or the way he speaks, the exact style of how he speaks. Or if he speaks in a dialect, you can just as well subtitle it.** As “mie” and “sie”, you don't need to change it. To “minä” and “sinä”. Like that.

**But then if the same video was in a more official context.** Which then requires that it somehow... Well, if it's on TV, for example, so then they have to be different again, the

subtitles. That then they suddenly have to be more **official. And grammatically more polished. And... more systematic than on social media.** That's what I meant.

I: Yes. Thank you. Can you describe in more detail **what kind of language skills you think are needed in subtitling?**

P: Well... **Excellent Finnish language skills.**

Yes. Yes.

Because if you don't have those, and then, for example, if you don't use automation at all. That you start writing them by hand. So then there may be quite **a lot of errors that weaken the readability.** And then that may also **weaken the credibility of the content.** If there are some glaring **compound word mistakes** in the subtitles, for example. So yes, **I think you have to have pretty good language skills to be responsible for the subtitling.**

## Example 3: sharing information

I: Okay. **Are you familiar with a document called “Quality recommendations for program subtitling”?**

P: No.

I: Okay. It's the kind of document that... **Well, as the name suggests, it's made for television subtitlers.** It has been carried out by the Association of Language Experts and a few large language agencies, among others. And, for example, Yle and, as far as I remember, MTV3 and other big TV channels. **So, it mentions for example the use of the dash.**

P: Okay.

I: **Just like you have mentioned.** And then partly about... Quite a lot about if you have to chop the sentence into different frames. So how they suggest you should do that.

P: Yes. Okay. I'll have to look into that.

I: Yes. I can send [it] to you later if you want.

P: Yes. That would be nice.

I: **Yes, because it sounds like there's some nice overlaps...**

P: Yes.

I: **...in both of those. But they are, as they are for TV use, they are quite strict in some ways.** For example, they mention exactly those that I asked about, the reading time and the number of characters and things like that, that you can't even define in all programs. **It might be worth skimming them through and pick out what is useful for you. And remember that this is a bit different media than TV subtitles.**

P: Yes.

# Takeaways

- Seeing participants as *co-researchers* opens up a new kind of open dialogue instead of top-down data collection
- Offers value to co-researchers
  - Acting as a co-researcher can strengthen one's professional competence and self image
- However: can interview truly be participatory?

# Preliminary research observations

## Paraprofessional subtitlers

- are usually more or less self-taught on subtitling
- widely recognize linguistic expertise and other skills needed for subtitling
  - however, the perceived special nature of these skills vary
- recognize the societal importance of subtitling and accessibility
- see themselves strongly as representatives for their organization

## Organizations

- give freedom of choice to the subtitlers
  - do not necessarily provide comprehensive guidelines, guides or training for subtitling

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