

## Text of Many Colours: Subtitling *The West Wing* into Croatian

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### Abstract & Keywords

#### English:

This article deals with the subtitling of *The West Wing* in Croatia, showing the subtitler's perspective of this process and exploring translating culture in subtitling. The process of subtitling is characterized by constraints, both temporal and spatial. While subtitling a fast-paced TV-series such as this one, the subtitler should keep in mind that viewers should be able to follow the programme, and s/he should adapt the subtitles accordingly. The audiovisual text used as a background for this paper is the 10th episode of the first season of "*The West Wing*" entitled "*In Excelsis Deo*", which is riddled with instances of possible adaptation challenges. The article is based on an interview with the subtitler of "*The West Wing*", which was broadcast by the Croatian public broadcaster (HRT), and on theoretical research on rendering culture in subtitling.

**Keywords:** subtitlers, Croatian TV, fast-paced TV series, culture, audiovisual translation

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### 1. Introduction: the subtitler's perspective

The TV series *The West Wing* (1999-2006) was broadcast by Croatian Radio and Television[1] almost simultaneously with its broadcasting in the United States and it had a large following among viewers. It was translated as *Zapadno krilo*, which is the correct Croatian translation of the part of the White House in which the US President's office is located, as in the original title. To be able to better understand the issues behind the subtitling of this TV-series, I conducted an interview with Mr. Damir Štefotić, the subtitler who subtitled all seasons of this TV-series for the HRT, except for the last one. Mr. Štefotić has been working as a subtitler for 16 years and what follows is an interview conducted in May 2011:

*Q1. What were the most complicated issues in the subtitling of this TV-series?*

Answer: The TV-series is wonderful, among other things, because it is full of interesting and amusing dialogues, but it is also extremely fast-paced, which is a big problem in adapting it for subtitles. There were several problematic issues I encountered in the subtitling of this TV-series:

- a) Fast-paced dialogue exchanges: a lot of text in a short time. All the characters talk a lot and they talk quickly, very often cutting one another off. It was sometimes difficult to decide what to include in the subtitle and what to leave out.
- b) It is of the utmost importance to be well-equipped with knowledge of the American political system and the jargon the characters use (lots of acronyms; frequent references to various political and state institutions; references to committees and councils which usually do not have an equivalent in Croatia; references to politicians and NGOs which are not necessarily well-known outside the United States; the way the two-party system functions in the USA, etc.)
- c) Even though this is a drama, and a TV-series that could be dubbed "serious", there are many jokes, witticisms, proverbs and other culture-specific terms for which it was necessary to find suitable equivalents understandable to the viewers.

*Q2. On a scale from 1 to 10, which mark would you give to the complexity of subtitling this TV-series and why?*

Answer: Very complicated, 9. This has been perhaps the most complicated material I have ever subtitled. As I have already said: with a lot of text, it is difficult to decide what goes into subtitles and what not. Furthermore, the text is rather complicated and a subtitler has to conduct extensive research in books, dictionaries and on the Internet.

*Q3. Which of the episodes of *The West Wing* was the most complicated to subtitle?*

Answer: The first episode of the first season was the most difficult to subtitle. I had to get into the story and one should not forget that this episode was broadcast at a time before the Internet and *Google*. Not to mention the fact that old technology was used in subtitling at that time, as well as complicated subtitling software.

*Q4. How did you decide which culture-specific terms to leave in the original and which to paraphrase or replace with a cultural equivalent more accessible for the Croatian viewer? Namely, on the basis of what were you choosing strategies while subtitling, on your intuition about what viewers might know or not know, or on something else? If so, what did you rely on?*

Answer: It's a good question. I often had to rely on my own intuition about what viewers might know, although I supposed that people who watched the TV series probably knew something about the subject matter. I think those curious, but not informed about the subject matter and not very interested in the goings-on at the White House, gave up following the TV-series after the first couple of episodes. I also sometimes talked to my colleagues-subtitlers about it, as well as with the fans of the TV-series, and that helped a bit in the decision-making process.

*Q5. Did you know anything about the target viewers? Did the HRT send you any feedback?*

Answer: I didn't get any feedback from the HRT, but from friends and acquaintances who watched the TV-series. It was allegedly very popular in the Croatian President's office, at least that's a rumour that reached me at some point. The TV series was definitely not easy to follow for an average viewer not particularly acquainted with the subject matter and there are no action scenes in it or spectacular scenery, which would attract a wider TV-audience.

## 2. Subtitling a fast paced TV series ridden with elements of culture

The issue of spatial and temporal limitations in subtitling is discussed in Ivarsson and Carroll's seminal book on subtitling entitled *Subtitling* (1998).

Some people talk nineteen to the dozen with words tumbling out so fast that they manage to say in a few seconds three to four times as much as there is space for in the two subtitle lines below the picture. Just visualise an excited crowd and a cacophony of voices and the problems associated with them! In such cases the dialogue obviously has to be condensed, which means selecting what to translate and what to omit. These two processes are undoubtedly the most difficult elements of the art of subtitling (Ivarsson and Carroll 1998:85).

Since the publication of *Subtitling*, there has practically been no article or book written on subtitling that doesn't mention this problem since it is indeed rather obvious. Díaz Cintas and Remael write about "total" and "partial reduction" in subtitling (2007:146). For them, "partial reduction is achieved through condensation and a more concise rendering of the ST. Total reduction is achieved through deletion or omission of lexical items" (ibid.).

In a TV series such as *The West Wing* this problem is even more evident since the subtitler is faced with a number of culturally specific terms, called ECRs, or extra-linguistic cultural references, by Pedersen (2007 and 2011), or ECs, elements of culture, (Nikolić, 2012). Pedersen's classification was used in the analysis of the elements of culture extracted from *In Excelsis Deo* since it is considered comprehensive enough for the study of culture in subtitling. As we can see in section one of this paper, the Croatian subtitler mostly had to rely on his intuition, since there are very few surveys of viewers (Gambier 2003:184) on which a subtitler could rely, and that was the case when this TV series was subtitled into Croatian. However, when a subtitler relies on intuition, it is possible that their intuition may not meet the expectations and knowledge of the viewers. Intuition is a rather individual matter and may include aspects such as prejudice on the part of the subtitler. For instance, a subtitler may hold prejudice against his/her viewers and consider them rather ill informed about many cultural references present in the source text. This may lead to paraphrasing and explicitation in instances when that is unnecessary. On the other hand, a subtitler may think too highly of his/her TV viewers, and may expect them to be quite familiar with the elements of culture of the ST. Even if a subtitler knew that for instance 30% of the viewers of the tenth episode of the first season of *The West Wing* were familiar with most cultural references and 70% were not, the decision making process in subtitling would not be easy since there would be 30% of viewers who would possibly be unhappy with the choices made in translation. This leads us to the conclusion that the subtitler is doing his/her job wrongly, at least partly, at all times.

However, decisions have to be made in subtitling rather quickly and TV series must be subtitled for the target audience. When subtitling a TV series, a fact confirmed by Mr. Štefotić in section one of this paper, the most difficult episode is episode one when the subtitler has to shape the style and the register that will be used in subsequent episodes. Furthermore, the subtitler needs to "slow down" the fast-paced dialogue that is used in such a TV-series. Namely, the translation must fit into the country and client norms as regards the duration of subtitles. In the case of Croatia, the standard is 4-7 seconds for a two-liner, and 2-4 for a one-liner (Nikolić 2005). In the case of this TV series, a subtitler is faced with the same problem of guaranteeing the viewers consistency in following the programme. Consistency refers to using the same translation for an element of culture, for instance, throughout the TV-series, in all its episodes, which means that the subtitler has a difficult job when faced with an element of culture for the first time. Let us use the example of NSA, National Security Agency, which might have been mentioned for the first time in one of the episodes of *The West Wing*. The subtitler must decide whether to use the abbreviation the first time around, or perhaps to use the full form. If the full form is used, the question is whether to use the Croatian translation or the English original. While subtitling a TV-series such as *The West Wing*, the subtitler is constantly faced with such choices. Country norms are of course not invented just to make the subtitler's life difficult, but to enable viewers to follow even the most dialogue-ridden programmes. Lack of consistency may be rather frustrating for the TV-audience, and one of the means of ensuring consistency is commissioning only one subtitler for the subtitling of a whole series, which is not always possible. As we can see in section one, this was the case at HRT with *The West Wing* in Croatia, excluding the last season. However, this practice is no longer pursued very often at commercial broadcasters, which usually give shorter deadlines and usually several subtitlers work on the subtitling of a TV-series. Communication among subtitlers, especially today when Internet and e-mail are standard methods of communication is not difficult and subtitlers can now, in 2016, work on one TV series more easily and effectively than during the subtitling of *The West Wing*. Notwithstanding this, subtitlers are pressed with short deadlines and that presents a rather serious obstacle for effective communication among subtitlers. Subtitlers may even manage to achieve consistency at the level of terminology, which is important in a TV series, but it is unlikely that they will achieve consistency at the level of style.

Lexical consistency is difficult to achieve in subtitling documentaries and other non-fictional programmes, since the subtitler must be careful in the process of reducing the amount of text in the translation. For instance if a subtitler omits the translation of the already mentioned NSA in the second minute of the documentary, faced with temporal and spatial restrictions, and the NSA is mentioned again in the 15th and 22nd minute of the documentary, they have to go back to minute two and include this element of culture in the translation, which is time-consuming. *The West Wing* contains many factual elements of culture, which may be, as in a documentary, mentioned throughout an episode or in more than one episode, while these factual elements of culture are intertwined with fictional dialogues and events. In such a "documentarial" TV-series, the subtitler is also faced with another challenge: distinguishing between fictional and non-fictional. This implies thorough checking and double-checking of all elements of culture, and words that look like elements of culture, but are actually fiction. An example of this issue of fiction that resembles fact is the American TV-series *Alias* (2001-2006) that was broadcast on HRT. The TV-series is entirely fictional, while it is at the same time full of elements of culture, such as locations and institutions, and potential elements of culture. The potential elements of culture are those that resemble the elements of culture, although they are actually a product of the scriptwriter's imagination, and distinguishing between the two may be a subtitling challenge in some TV-series and films. For instance various

abbreviations, that may be fictional or not, or names of associations and organizations. In the case of *Alias*, there were a number of organizations used in the script that actually do not exist.

Since the tenth episode of the first season of *The West Wing* entitled *In Excelsis Deo*, as well as all others, contains much more text than can be subtitled because of the already mentioned restrictions and country norms regarding the duration of subtitles, parts of the ST must be reduced, either “partially” or “totally” (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007:146). Croatian subtitling country norms do not prescribe, i.e. limit, the number of speakers per subtitle and the subtitler may include as many dialogue exchanges as he/she wishes, unlike in some other countries where there may only be two speakers per subtitle, for instance in Scandinavian countries (Pedersen 2007:86). However, if all dialogue exchanges, especially the short ones, were included in the subtitle, the viewer would have difficulty in following the programme. Therefore, the easiest things to exclude are the short answers, such as “yes” or “no”. These may be totally reduced, as well as the number of speakers. If there are two speakers whose dialogue should be inserted into a two-liner of five seconds, and there are two more who only say “yes”, or “no” in those five seconds, which is frequent in *In Excelsis Deo*, the other two may also be totally reduced, excluded. But let us turn our attention to the elements of culture and their reduction and rendering in general in the tenth episode of *The West Wing*’s first season: in *In Excelsis Deo*.

### 3. Subtitling American culture into Croatian

Pedersen distinguishes between “transcultural”, “monocultural” and “infracultural ECRs” (Pedersen 2010:73), adding that “knowing when a cultural item is monocultural is half the battle for producing culturally fluent subtitles” (75). In the case of *In Excelsis Deo*, one of the challenges is to determine whether an element of culture belongs to one Pedersen’s three categories of ECRs. The bigger problem, if not one of the biggest in this instance, is to “give a new life” to the monocultural elements for which there is no standard or accepted Croatian translation. Another issue is the question of how to subtitle the already rather familiar elements of culture such as, for instance, the Federal Reserve, which are very often translated as *Federalne rezerve*, i.e. literally translated into Croatian, although the term actually refers to the US central bank. Let us examine some of the elements of culture that appear in *In Excelsis Deo*.

As Mr. Štefotić points out in his interview, one of the prerequisites for the following of this TV-series is a substantial degree of cultural literacy as regards American culture. In the very beginning of *In Excelsis Deo*, Steve Gould is mentioned. Steve Gould is an abbreviation for Steven Charles Gould, an American writer. The viewer has to know who Steven Gould is to be able to fully understand the mention of this author and all connotative meanings this name may carry. The subtitler may not totally reduce this name since there may be viewers who are familiar with it, not to mention that there may be those who have read books by him. If such a relatively unknown name, which is again a personal impression, is mentioned more than once, it may become a serious issue in the process of subtitling the episode, especially if dialogues don’t reveal anything more than the name and the scriptwriter presupposes the familiarity of this name with the general public. In such instances, the subtitler may at least resort to explicitation, if temporal and spatial limitations allow for it, add author Steve Gould in the translation. On the other hand, adding words such as author in such fast-paced subtitles means that another part of the text needs to be omitted in TT and is not straightforward.

Several seconds later in the episode, the term D.C. is mentioned. The Croatian subtitler will, whenever possible, resort to substituting this term with Washington, since Washington stands for the capital of the United States for the Croatian viewer, unlike for the American, to whom it may mean The State of Washington, one of the 50 states that form the United States, or George Washington, one of the founding fathers of the United States. All other “Washingtons” would have to be further explained to the Croatian viewer, Washington State would have to be *Savezna država Washington*, or at least *država Washington*, since the Croatian viewer may easily mistake it for D.C. *Savezna država Washington* would be the most appropriate and a safe choice for the subtitler, however, it is rather obvious what sort of a challenge that is for the subtitler, given the spatial and temporal restrictions of subtitling. A subtitler may choose to reduce the dialogue by as much as 50 % if it is fast-paced (Gottlieb 2005:20) and in this TV-series this may indeed be necessary. Therefore presuming, like Mr. Štefotić, that those unfamiliar with the subject matter of this TV series simply give up watching it, the subtitler may decide to use the D.C. from the ST in his/her TT.

The fourth minute of *In Excelsis Deo* brings yet another frequent subtitling issue and that is a monocultural element of culture used as an abbreviation: “You’re gonna call the V.A.”? The V.A. stands for “Veteran Affairs” or “The United States Veteran Affairs”. In Croatia, there is a similar body, a ministry instituted upon the completion of the Croatian Homeland War of the 1990s which is in charge of the War veterans. The subtitler may also resort to cultural substitution in this instance. However, this is impossible in this case as there is neither an official nor an unofficial abbreviation for *Ministarstvo hrvatskih branitelja*, which is the full form of the Croatian ministry in charge of war veterans. The subtitler will in such an instance use the full translated form of the V.A., which would be *Ministarstvo veterana* or a similar expression and will resort to the method of “cutting off” or partial deletion, which means cutting off the “unnecessary” parts of the dialogue from the previous or the following subtitle (or both) to gain more time to be able to insert the full form of the Department. The question “You’re gonna call the V.A.”? is followed by “V.A.?”, another question by another speaker. The subtitler may also resort to the total reduction of the second question if he/she concludes that it is absolutely necessary that the viewers clearly know what V.A. means, and in the case of this episode it is, since one of the stories of this episode is the story of a homeless war veteran.

Marine battalion is mentioned in the fourth minute of *In Excelsis Deo*. Since this culturally specific item, Marine, is rather frequent in American TV-series and films, especially in those concerning war, it is usually translated into Croatian as *marinac*, since the marine is a special member of the American Army infantry specialized in naval assaults. This is an example of a culturally specific element of culture that has become so familiar to the Croatian viewer that it has a Croatian translation.

The beating up of a gay high-school senior, which is mentioned in *In Excelsis Deo* and is one of the topics of this episode of *The West Wing*, is a hate crime that is not very common in Croatia, because gay high school seniors usually don’t ‘come out’, but it is not incomprehensible. The issue as regards subtitling here is terminology. Namely, in Croatian, there is no politically correct term for a homosexual except for *homoseksualac*. The noun gay is then usually replaced with *homoseksualac*, or it is sometimes left in the original form: gay, written in italics as a foreign word. All other terms denoting a homosexual in Croatian are either terms of almost endearment, such as *homić*, or, more often, they are derogatory terms, such as for instance *peder* and *tetka*. The

word gay is mentioned more than once in this episode of *The West Wing* and one can only imagine the difficulty the subtitler has when replacing gay with *homoseksualac*, namely a word with three letters in the ST that can be uttered very quickly in such a fast-paced TV-series, with a 13-letter one in the written form of TT. This example highlights one of the many difficulties a subtitler is faced with because of the differences between languages and also because of the dangers if the subtitler is not aware of which terms are politically correct and which are used derogatively. Although this instance is rather obvious, that is the subtitler will probably know which term to use, there are other instances when the issue of using politically correct form is not particularly straightforward.

The term Secretary of Labor, mentioned in the 14th minute of this episode, may easily be mistranslated into Croatian. This term is usually translated as *tajnik* into Croatian, for instance the UN Secretary General is *glavni tajnik UN-a* in Croatian. This element of culture underlines the importance of the need for thorough knowledge of the American political system when subtitling *The West Wing*, but not only *The West Wing* since elements of the US political system are often referred to in TV-series and films in which one would not even expect it, for instance in low-budget action films. The subtitler must know that the secretary is actually a minister in the Croatian political system and that it would be best to replace it with *ministar rada*. However, a more critical subtitler may say that this is too domesticated, and that perhaps, since the American political system is different from the Croatian, this element of culture should be foreignized, and translated as *tajnik*. It is quite likely that almost every subtitler who is knowledgeable about the American political system would translate this term as *ministar* in Croatian. However, one may wonder whether this term must always be fully domesticated. If it appears in situations, texts, aimed at experts, for instance diplomats who are well aware of the American political and governmental system, foreignization may be a more obvious choice.

Medical school is mentioned in the 16th minute of *In Excelsis Deo* and it is a textbook example of an element of culture that may easily be mistranslated in Croatian. Because of the differences between the Croatian and the American educational systems (Nikolić, 2012) the subtitler may easily mistranslate Medical school as *medicinska škola*, which is in fact a nursing high-school in Croatia. This does happen, especially in DVD translations, which are usually of appalling quality. The reason is usually not quite so much the lack of knowledge, as the pressures subtitlers are faced with because of the lack of time, namely because of short deadlines and low fees which push them to work hard and fast.

The Washington Monument is mentioned in *In Excelsis Deo* as well and although this is not a significant subtitling problem, this element of culture demonstrates the importance of the need Mr. Štefotić says he relied on, the knowledge of the audience. Mr. Štefotić says that he believes that this TV series' viewers were more familiar with the subject matter. The monument has a strong symbolic value in American history and culture and that may not be rendered in translation, as the connotative meaning is left out. This TV series is teeming with elements of culture such as this one, and the subtitler can only hope that viewers have the background knowledge that is necessary to follow such a programme.

There are other elements of culture which demand special attention in subtitling in *In Excelsis Deo*, to name just a few: James Adams, Georgetown, The Nature of Things, Rare Books, Life of Epicurus, Chesapeake, Purple Heart, Republican, civics lesson, IRS, Keynote Kops, Mural Room, and others, not to mention idiomatic expressions such as "to float a test balloon". This makes the subtitling of this TV series into Croatian like walking in a mine field[2]. The differences between the two cultures, the American and the Croatian, are surely among the reasons for that.

#### 4. Differences between American and Croatian culture

Some of the differences were illustrated in the previous section. The underlying difference between American and Croatian culture, relevant for the subtitling of *The West Wing*, is the difference between the two political systems.

The institution of the president is not a strong position in Croatia in terms of the power the president is given, since the situation changed after the constitutional changes were introduced at the beginning of the 2000s, giving the president only limited powers, while most of the executive powers are in the hands of the government led by the prime minister. Even though many Croatians respect the institution of the President, the fact is that it is nothing like the role of the president in the United States. The President of the United States is effectively the head of the US Government, and that means that he has different powers and plays a role similar to that of the Croatian government.

However, the differences between the two cultures are not perceptible only in the sphere of political culture. As Mr. Štefotić says in section one of this paper, this TV-series is full of amusing dialogues, which also means jokes that may be culture specific and difficult to subtitle, not to mention the historical and geographical references, some of which were mentioned in the previous chapter. Cultural differences, as we have seen in this paper, stem from areas such as education and place names, but they may also be reflected in all walks of life, for instance in terms of address, family relations, habits, customs, and many others.

The cultural specificity of this TV-series is one of the most challenging aspects of subtitling it into Croatian, even though it is not always clear which aspects of it are clearly "monocultural" (Pedersen: 2010:73), since many aspects of American culture have permeated other cultures or have at least become well-known or relatively well-known to other cultures. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of subtitling this TV-series into Croatian is to determine, on a very practical level, the degree of familiarity of the Croatian viewer with American culture, while the subtitler is left mostly with only one resource in that process: personal intuition.

#### 5. Conclusion

Without a clear picture of what viewers may and may not know, subtitling as a process is often based on individual expectations and observations of the subtitler, as has been confirmed by Mr. Štefotić, the Croatian subtitler of *The West Wing*. Now in 2016 reception studies in AVT are more common than they used to be at the time of the creation of Croatian subtitles for *In Excelsis Deo*. Yet, reception studies are rarely used by practicing subtitlers as a source of information or learning material, and this gap could be bridged by offering short courses to subtitlers presenting results of such studies, that may help subtitlers to rely less on intuition only.

This paper has shown, relying on Pedersen's classification of cultural elements in AVT, the difficulties subtitlers are faced with when rendering, especially monocultural or culture-specific elements of culture. The interview with the subtitlers was used to try and shed more light on the practical aspects of subtitling and to see whether what is theoretically difficult, is indeed the biggest challenge for the subtitler. This paper shows that subtitlers rely on

intuition when it comes to dealing with culture-specific elements in subtitling, rather than research or study of these elements. Broadcasters in Croatia are not particularly interested in conducting research into audience needs and expectations as regards subtitling, and the subtitler doesn't have a choice but to rely on his/her own resources, and intuition, as Mr Štefotić confirms.

Another layer of analysis of the translation of *In Excelsis Deo* could be the study of the amount of the text that is reduced or left out in the TT. Yet, such analysis should perhaps be useful only if conducted in combination with an eye-tracker that would determine what these reductions mean to the viewer and how they react to reductions. Namely, subtitles are an integral part of the image and the parts of the ST that are omitted in TT may be explained by that image.

Given the spatial and temporal constraints of subtitling, especially in a TV-series such as this one, subtitling may seem like one of the worst jobs there are, since it involves fast decision making and cutting sometimes large amounts of ST, whilst it has to enable full understanding of the programme to viewers. However, as confirmed by Mr. Štefotić, subtitling a TV-series such as *The West Wing* may also be quite rewarding, which is why he describes this TV-series as "wonderful". Although challenging, subtitling a high-quality TV-series such as *The West Wing* enables the subtitler to be the mediator between two cultures in the true sense of the word, and it may also be a learning process for the subtitler, both cultural and linguistic, and the viewer. Subtitling, on the other hand, may be a lonely job, and what is "wonderful" for one subtitler may be quite horrible for another, and that very individual aspect may influence the TT to a great extent. Mediation between cultures is a serious, responsible and difficult task, as may be seen in the example of *In Excelsis Deo*. After studying literature on rendering culture in subtitles, conducting the interview with the subtitler of this TV series into Croatian, and studying concrete examples from the Croatian version of *In Excelsis Deo*, one may conclude that subtitling, especially a TV series such as *The West Wing*, is a hard, intellectual, cognitively demanding job with a value which should not be undermined. This explains why subtitling has already been the topic of scholarly investigation for several decades.

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## Notes

[1] <http://www.hrt.hr/> (Date of access: 5th April, 2016).

[2] The former head of the Croatian Radio and Television's Subtitling Department, Ms. Bojana Zeljko-Lipovščak, compared subtitling with walking in a mine field, trying to say that often the subtitler walks onto a mine, i.e., makes a mistake such as mistranslation or misunderstanding of the context.

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