

# **SUBSIGN: Subtitling Sign Languages**

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## **A2: Cross-reference with Slovak sign language**

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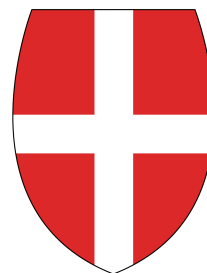
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**SU**titles



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## Introduction

This report refers to results of investigating the relationship between Italian Sign Language (LIS) and Slovak Sign Language (SPJ) within the context of audiovisual translation (AVT), particularly focusing on subtitling for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (SDH). The aim was to identify, compare, and assess subtitling strategies that can make audiovisual content more accessible and culturally appropriate for users of both sign languages as well as for users of spoken languages. By examining the linguistic, cultural, and semiotic features of LIS and SPJ, the project contributes to **a broader understanding of cross-linguistic transfer and accessibility strategies** in multilingual and multimodal communication.

The investigation was carried out following an extensive review of academic and professional resources concerning both Italian Sign Language (LIS) and Slovak Sign Language (SPJ), as well as surveying the local subtitling strategies. This phase focused on understanding the linguistic structures, cultural contexts, and communicative conventions of each sign language, as well as their established or emerging roles in audiovisual translation. Particular attention was given to how each **language interacts with subtitling practices in project partners countries** – examining timing, synchronization, and content considerations. This comprehensive background study ensured that the **comparative analysis was grounded in both linguistic theory and applied subtitling practice**.

After presenting the findings from the state-of-the-art review and conducting a detailed **investigation into the specific features of subtitling**, the project partners proceeded to examine existing subtitling practices in both Italy and Slovakia. This comparative analysis aimed to identify common strategies, recurring challenges, and national conventions related to subtitling for Deaf and Hard of Hearing audiences. The practices observed were then evaluated in terms of their linguistic, cultural, and technical applicability to both Italian Sign Language (LIS) and Slovak Sign Language (SPJ).

This focus was at the center of attention during the A2 in-person meeting in Nitra and a one-day Subsign seminar attended by Deaf associations, scholars, and students from both Slovakia and Italy. Particular emphasis was placed on **how subtitling conventions interact with the visual and spatial features of sign languages**. The evaluation also considered user **feedback from Deaf experts**, highlighting how



certain strategies prove more effective in supporting comprehension and accessibility across both linguistic communities. Ultimately, this stage of the project provided **critical insights** into the adaptability of established subtitling methods and their potential for enhancing sign language inclusion in audiovisual media and emphasised the need for specialised training of **sign-language subtitlers, supervisors and coordinators**.

After the conclusions from the in-person meeting and the seminar, the project entered the phase of drafting and designing the final **Guidelines for Subtitling Sign Language**. This stage aimed to synthesize the findings gathered throughout the comparative analysis of Italian and Slovak subtitling practices, integrating both accessibility and professional perspectives. The process involved translating theoretical insights and empirical observations into practical recommendations for subtitlers and audiovisual content producers. The guidelines were designed to provide a coherent framework for creating subtitles that align effectively with sign language, ensuring clarity, timing accuracy, and linguistic and cultural appropriateness. Particular emphasis was placed on strategies that enhance comprehension while **respecting the visual-spatial nature of sign languages**. This final drafting phase thus represented a key outcome of the project – transforming research results into actionable tools that support inclusive and linguistically sensitive audiovisual translation across languages and media platforms.

## Main conclusions from the Subsign seminar

The seminar took place on 23 May 2025 in Nitra as part of the activities focused on cross-referencing Slovak and Italian Sign Languages in audiovisual translation. The event aimed to share preliminary results from earlier project stages (Activity A1) and to discuss their applicability within the context of Slovak Sign Language (SPJ) and Italian Sign Language (LIS). The Subsign seminar welcomed 20 registered participants, including representatives of Myslím – Centre of Deaf Culture (SK), representatives and lecturers from the Slovak Sign Language and Deaf Studies study programmes, experts in the field of media and subtitling, subtitling students and practitioners. The seminar gathered key stakeholders to reflect on current subtitling practices, challenges in accessibility, and future educational and professional opportunities in the field of sign language subtitling.

Across all sessions, the discussions consistently emphasized **the need to strengthen collaboration** between Deaf users, linguists, and subtitling professionals to ensure



that audiovisual translation meets the linguistic and cultural needs of all audiences. The main conclusions could be outlined in following areas:

## 1. Understanding Current Practices

The morning sessions provided a broad overview of existing subtitling practices in Italy and Slovakia. Presenters and participants noted differences in how subtitling for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (SDH) is approached in each country, both in technical standards and in integration with sign language content. While Italy has developed a range of accessibility models also outside public broadcasting, Slovakia is still in the process of formalizing and standardizing subtitling strategies that would be applicable in other than public broadcasting contexts (e.g. film festival, cultural heritage, cultural and educational institutions, etc.). Both contexts, however, face similar challenges, mainly **related to limited number of experts and training opportunities** for subtitlers in working with sign language content.

## 2. The Need for Dialogue and Collaboration

The sessions collectively underlined that subtitling sign languages is not only a technical task but also a linguistic and cultural negotiation. Subtitles should not merely transcribe the utterance but should **complement visual-spatial communication** expressed through sign languages. Participants stressed that in doing so adequately, **the importance of collaboration** between Deaf experts, linguists, and subtitlers is indisputable, arguing that accessibility must be co-created with the Deaf community rather than imposed from outside. This **collaborative approach** was recognized as essential for developing inclusive media practices that reflect real communication preferences of sign language users. It was also noted that such collaboration enhances **mutual understanding** between hearing and Deaf professionals, fostering innovation and sensitivity in audiovisual translation. By integrating diverse perspectives and lived experiences, the subtitling process can become a model of participatory and socially responsible media production.

## 3. Quality, Readability, and Accessibility

In the afternoon discussions, participants analysed the quality and effectiveness of current subtitle practices. They identified readability, synchronization, and the



representation of emotion and tone as critical aspects influencing user experience. Several potential improvements were suggested:

- Consistent use of speaker identification and – where applicable – colour coding for clarity.
- Longer subtitle exposure times to match reading and comprehension speed.
- Specific attention to syntax to be paid.

These strategies were recognized as adaptable to both Italian Sign Language (LIS) and Slovak Sign Language (SPJ) subtitling, though specific timing and stylistic adjustments would be necessary in each context.

#### 4. Education and Professional Development

The final session focused on **educational pathways and professional opportunities** in subtitling and sign language accessibility. Experts highlighted the need to include subtitling for Deaf audiences as a topic in translation training programmes as well as to enhance continuous training possibilities for active professionals (continuous professional development courses). Strengthening cooperation between relevant institutions, universities, industry, Deaf associations, and media institutions was identified as a key step toward creating new professional profiles such as accessibility coordinators, **specialized subtitlers**, and supervisors, capable of bridging linguistic, cultural, and formal / technological gaps.

#### 5. Shared Vision and Future Steps

Overall, the seminar reached a shared understanding that subtitling for sign language users must move beyond a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Instead, it should embrace multimodal and multilingual accessibility, integrating **both text and sign in a coherent way**. The event’s outcomes will directly **inform the drafting of the final Guidelines for Subtitling Sign Languages**, ensuring that future practices are grounded in empirical evidence and community input and will also serve as a basis for **outlining the training activities conducted under the project**.

The discussions reaffirmed that accessibility is not merely a regulatory obligation but a matter of **cultural inclusion, linguistic equality, and social participation**. By linking research, practice, and community engagement, the seminar set a strong foundation for continued cooperation between Slovak and Italian partners and for promoting best practices across Europe.



## Main conclusions on subtitling practices and applicability to both sign languages

The comparative study of subtitling practices in Italy and Slovakia revealed both shared challenges and language-specific considerations that directly influence the accessibility of audiovisual content for users of Italian Sign Language (LIS) and Slovak Sign Language (SPJ).

In both Italy and Slovakia, subtitling remains the most widely used accessibility tool in audiovisual translation when it comes to audiovisual content in sign languages. However, its integration with sign language content varies. The study and subsequent seminar discussions highlighted that subtitling sign languages **involves more than an utterance translation**: it requires synchronization with visual-spatial expression and awareness of sign language grammar. LIS and SPJ coming from the same linguistic family share several characteristics that need to be reflected in their subtitling. To ensure accessibility, subtitles must respect those and pay attention to the visual rhythm of signed communication and avoid overloading viewers with information that competes with signing. The findings confirmed that both sign languages benefit from subtitles that are concise, clearly segmented, and carefully synchronized with sign language cues, ensuring that visual-spatial communication is not disrupted.

Building on these insights, it became clear that both national contexts require continued professional training **to train professionals that would further improve subtitling quality** for sign language users. Achieving this level of accessibility depends on interdisciplinary collaboration – involving Deaf consultants, linguists, subtitlers, and media producers – to align linguistic, cultural, and technical aspects of subtitling. Establishing **clear workflows and shared standards** between subtitlers and sign language experts and users was repeatedly emphasized as a key factor for **consistent and effective accessibility**. Moreover, participants highlighted the need to promote awareness and **professional recognition of sign language subtitling** as a specialized field, recognizing that it requires not only technical skill but also a deep understanding of linguistic and cultural nuances.

## Conclusions and next steps

In conclusion, while Italian and Slovak subtitling practices reflect different stages of development, the principles identified are mutually transferable. The project demonstrated that with appropriate adaptation, common guidelines can be applied across both languages. Such guidelines must, however, remain sensitive to the linguistic structures and communicative norms of each sign language. By integrating the insights from this comparative analysis, the project moves closer to establishing a unified yet flexible framework for subtitling sign languages that enhances accessibility, cultural inclusion, and professional cooperation across Europe.

A key next step identified by the project is the development of targeted training opportunities for professionals involved in subtitling for sign languages. These should focus on equipping subtitlers with the necessary skills to handle the linguistic, temporal, and visual-spatial challenges specific to LIS and SPJ – or to subtitling languages in general. Training should also promote interdisciplinary collaboration, emphasizing workflows that integrate Deaf consultants, linguists, and audiovisual content professionals to ensure subtitles are accurate, accessible, and culturally appropriate. By investing in professional development, the project aims to strengthen the capacity of both countries to produce high-quality, inclusive audiovisual content, while also fostering the recognition of subtitling as a specialized, professional field across Europe.

