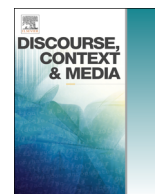




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Impact caption as a highlighting device: Attempts at viewer manipulation on TV



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ABSTRACT

The novel use of intra-lingual subtitles other than as an aid for the hard-of-hearing population originated from Japanese TV in the 1990s. This innovative use, also known as impact captions, is now seen as a feature of Japanese (and other Asian) TV but has also spread into Western broadcasts (cf. the drama series *Sherlock* on BBC and the film *Night Watch*) in recent years. However, there is little research on the interpretive mechanism or viewer experience of such use and hence industries continue to use impact captions in an ad hoc manner. Working within Sperber and Wilson's (1995) relevance theory, this paper is an attempt to explain the way viewers interpret the content of programmes with impact captions and the role these captions play in the interpretation process. I claim that impact captioning is a device the creators can use to manipulate the viewers' interpretation by highlighting certain elements.

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1. Introduction

Intra-lingual subtitles have traditionally been used as an aid for individuals with hearing impairment. However, since the 1990s, there has been a trend towards using Open Caption Telop (OCT) in Japanese TV as an aid to enhance humour by spelling out certain aspects of programme content in the intra-lingual subtitles, or to “highlight and frame humour” (O'Hagan, 2010: 72). This novel use of OCT is also known as *impact captioning* (Park, 2009), and as anyone familiar with Japanese (or in fact, Asian) TV would note, the prevalence of impact captions on Japanese TV is unmistakable, yet there seem to be no guidelines for good practice at present. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to give meaning to what appears to be often ad hoc operations and to come up with a systematic explanation so that their possible impact on viewers can be explained from a theoretical perspective, giving this increasingly prevalent practice a predictive tool. Working within Sperber and Wilson's (1995) relevance theory, I examine the way viewers interpret programmes with impact captions and the role impact captions play in the interpretation process. An examination of a range of impact captions will show that the impact caption is a device which TV producers can use to manipulate viewer interpretations by drawing attention to (or *highlighting*) certain aspects of content. Impact captioning, as a highlighting device, helps to raise cognitive and affective mutuality between viewers and the

characters that appear in a particular programme in order to achieve the mediators' editorial intentions.

Section 1 sets out the background and evolution of impact captioning and provides an overview of how impact captioning has been analysed in previous studies. In Section 2, the relevance-theoretic (Sperber and Wilson, 1995) framework underpinning this paper is introduced. In this section, there is also a special focus on the notion of the secondary communication situation (cf. Gutt, 1990, 1998, 2000) and its applications for impact captioning (Shiota, 2003). A range of OCT uses in Japanese TV and a British drama are analysed in Section 3.

1.1. Background

The use of OCT as an aid for enhanced viewing experience originated in Japan in 1990 and is now used as a standard editorial prop in Asian TV. Indeed, in the majority of Japanese TV programmes, the screen is filled with a range of textual props—some of which reproduce spoken utterances or explain or elaborate on content. Other captions may simply show the title of the programme, or even the weather forecast—see Fig. 1.

In Fig. 1, we see that the programme title *Kitchen de SHOW* together with the name of the dish on the top right. On the left is a clock, and a weather forecast. At the bottom of the screen, we see useful tips for this recipe.

While the telops in Fig. 1 remain on screen for a duration of time, other captions ‘pop up’ and give rise to extra effects, some of which involve humour and surprise. In Fig. 2, we can see impact captioning together with more static OCTs.

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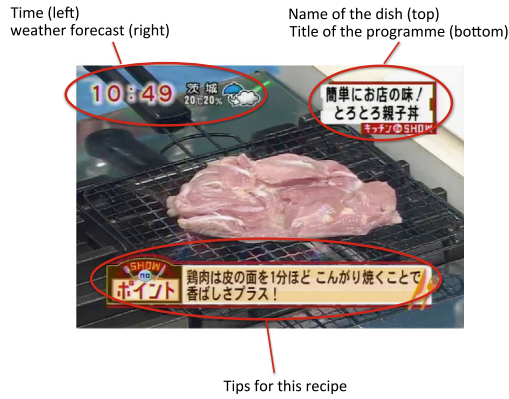


Fig. 1. *Kitchen de SHOW* Fuji TV (broadcast on 30th September 2008).



Fig. 2. *Sekai Marumie DX Tokubetsuban*, Nihon TV (broadcast on 27th May 2012).

Fig. 2 is a screenshot taken from a section of a travel–entertainment programme. This particular section introduces alternative ways of experiencing ‘foreign’ holidays while staying in Tokyo, i.e. trying out the local specialties of popular holiday destinations without actually visiting the country. This particular screenshot was taken when the extortionate cost of travel to Tahiti was mentioned. In this example, two OCTs at the top of the screen show the programme title (left) and the section title (right). The OCT in the middle of the screen is a literal rendering of a spontaneous utterance produced by one of the panelists. Another OCT at the bottom of the screen shows the return airfare to Tahiti. While the OCTs at the top are static and remain for the duration of this section, other OCTs disappear as the programme progresses. It is the ‘pop-up’ OCT (i.e. impact captions) form, which is the focus of this study.

The use of impact captions is not limited to the entertainment genre. In Fig. 3.1 we can see the impact caption is deployed in drama genre.

Fig. 3.1 displays a scene from a Japanese drama where the impact caption is intended to show the protagonist's inner thoughts—or, perhaps, the creator's interpretation of the protagonist's thoughts. Also, as Pérez-González (2012) reports, the use of impact captioning has recently spread into Western broadcasting. Many examples, regardless of country of origin, are found in the drama genre—see Fig. 3.2.

In Fig. 3.2, we can see that impact captioning has been employed as an editorial tool in a BBC drama in order to show the protagonist's inner thoughts. In this case, the captions show the observations that Sherlock is making about Dr. Watson or at least, that is what the TV producers want the viewers to understand. The occurrence of OCT in a genre other than in entertainment

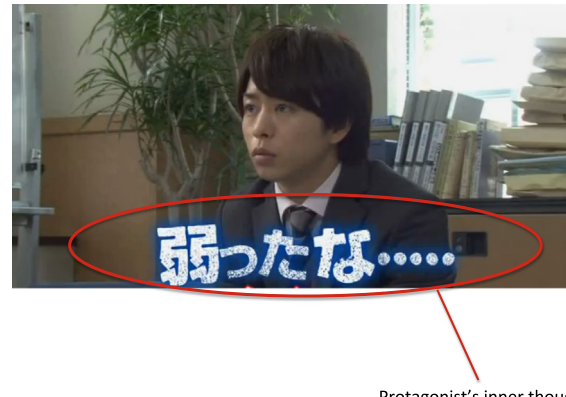


Fig. 3.1. *Tokujo Kabachi*, TBS (broadcast on 7th March 2010).

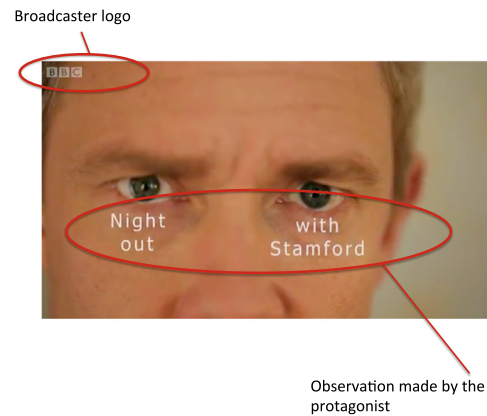


Fig. 3.2. *Sherlock* BBC (broadcast on 1st January 2012).

programmes and also in Western programming indicates that the novel use of intra-lingual captioning is no longer a culture- or genre specific matter. This suggests that we may locate this phenomenon within the context of a broader discussion in the area of cognitive pragmatics, as it would provide us with a framework that can deal with how all humans from any background process meaning, enabling us to understand what is going on with the interpretation of OCT in a range of cultures.

Interestingly, viewer reactions to impact captioning are divided. On the one hand, some scholars report negative reactions to impact captioning. For example, Sakamoto (1999) argues the overuse of impact captions has a dumbing-down effect as it deprives the viewers of the opportunity to think for themselves. Shiota (2003) claims that some impact captioning irritates the viewers by imposing an interpretation on them. On the other hand, it has been reported that viewing rates decreased when some programmes reduced their use of impact captions (31st January 2005, Asahi Shimbun). This suggests that separate considerations are needed, depending on the purpose, type, and, perhaps, even the amount of captions used. As the purpose of this study is to find out the role that impact captions play in the viewers' interpretation process, this study focuses on impact captions rather than other types of textual inserts used on TV.

2. Previous studies

2.1. Functions of OCT

It is generally agreed that OCT is a case of intervening in the viewer experience and a taxonomic approach is often taken in order

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