

# Linguistic Accessibility for Small Language Cinema

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## Abstract

Audiovisual accessibility is considered as a basic right. In a world where audiovisual material is more and more present, several measures have been taken in order to facilitate the access to it by people living with sensory disabilities; some of them at regulatory level and others at technological level. As a part of a wider project, this article addresses the issue of accessibility to audiovisual material from another perspective: that of small languages. From this point of view, language is a barrier which prevents potential viewers from watching cinema in small languages. This is a major concern especially in contexts where dubbing is the norm for language transfer. This paper presents and discusses some results of the analysis of regulation and practices of audiovisual accessibility, as well as the outcome of some experiments conducted by applying the technology for audiovisual accessibility in the field of linguistic accessibility. The case of cinema in Basque language is considered for this purpose.

**Keywords:** Audiovisual accessibility, linguistic accessibility, cinema, small languages, minority languages.

## INTRODUCTION

Funding is one of the most evident obstacles faced by anyone who wants to produce cinema. In a field dominated by big production companies, it is necessary to search for markets wide enough to generate a minimum profitability for cinematographic products. In the case of cinema produced in small languages (whether these have a minority character or are simply languages with a low number of speakers), language can be an obstacle for achieving such minimum market quotas, especially in those places where there is a strong tradition of dubbing films produced in foreign languages. Cinema has become a highly monopolized industry and a small number of companies concentrates the greatest part of production and distribution. In this context, language diversity is considered as an obstacle for globalised markets, and minority and small languages are viewed as niche markets (Guyot, 2012).

In Europe, the tradition of dubbing is very deeply rooted in many countries, affecting regions in which there is a slight production of cinema in minority languages. This is, for example, the Basque case in the context of Spain and France. In comparison to subtitling and voice-over, the tradition of dubbing imposes two economic difficulties on cinema in small languages. On the one hand, it is more expensive than subtitling. On the other, unlike subtitling, it does not allow screening in two languages simultaneously, since both require the same audio channel. This becomes a handicap for the productions in small languages; indeed, these companies face the problem of how to target greater audiences whose linguistic skills in that language are low or null.

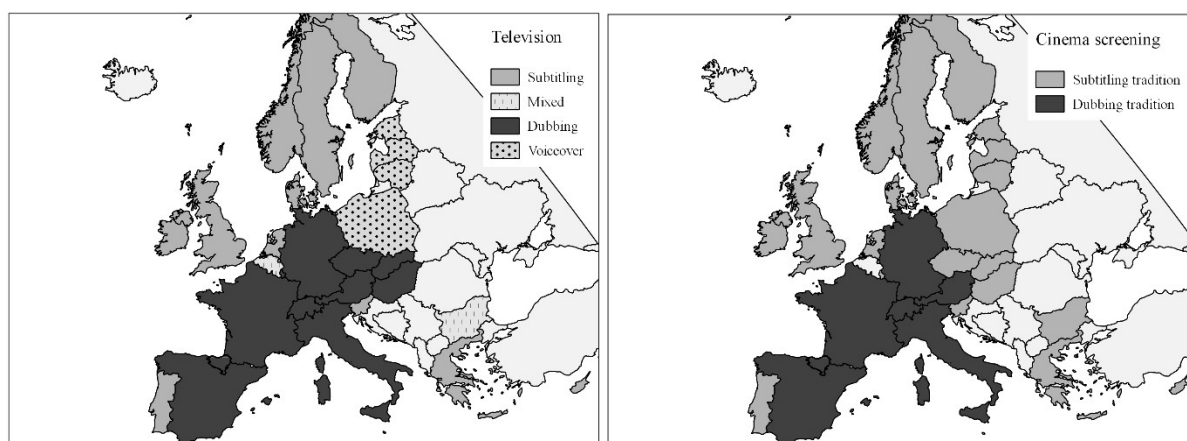
In this article the authors try to address this problem from the perspective of accessibility. This concept has been largely applied in order to ensure that people with

sensory disabilities have access to audiovisual productions. Similarly, it can be useful to deal with the issue of accessing contents in a language in which several potential viewers have not enough linguistic competence. In this case, the main difference with the paradigm of audiovisual accessibility is that, while this term has been mainly understood in one direction (i.e., how to facilitate the access to mainstream culture for the minority living with disabilities), the problem can be approached from the inverse perspective, that is to say, how to guarantee the access to the minority culture to the majority (i.e., those who cannot understand the small language). This approach addresses also one of the main problems faced by minority languages in contexts where the speakers are usually bilinguals: the impermeability of hegemonic languages towards minority –or minoritised- ones (Jones, 2013).

From this start point, in the following, firstly, the context in which some minority languages must face the issue of widening their audiences will be analysed. The focus will be on the case of Basque cinema in Spain as a good example of a country of hard dubbing tradition where some experiments are being conducted. Secondly, the concept and the practice of audiovisual accessibility will be considered, in order to find out which theoretical ground and which good practices could be implemented in the field of linguistic accessibility. The regulation of audiovisual accessibility in the European and Spanish contexts will be also focused, as well as the outcomes of such regulation. To this aim, data collected from an exhaustive account of the main Spanish television channels' practices (subtitling and audio-description, as well as second audio channels) will be presented, as well as the results of some tests conducted in cinema showings, where two films were screened in different linguistic versions and viewers were allowed to use a smartphone application in order to hear the film in the language of their choice. Finally, the results of the analysis will be discussed and some conclusions drawn.

## **DUBBING AS A PROBLEM FOR MINORITY LANGUAGES: THE CASE OF THE CINEMA IN BASQUE**

Like other European countries, Spain has a long tradition on dubbing as the preferred system to address the issue of language transfer of audiovisual productions. Figure 1 illustrates this fact. According to a report that was published in 2007 (Media Consulting Group, 2007), at the time the main traditions in Europe were dubbing, subtitling, and voice-over. Dubbing and subtitling were used in television broadcasting and cinema screening, while the technology of voice-over was not used in cinema theatres. Practices in television seemed to be more homogenous than in cinema screening, since here different techniques coexisted into the same country. Moreover, the report remarked that at that time there was already a trend to move towards subtitling in cinema screening in some countries of dubbing tradition, as it was the case of France, Germany, Hungary, and some others. Only Spain and Italy remained almost exclusively attached to dubbing, which is important to note because it affects directly the Basque case.



[Image: 1\_tv\_cinema]

Figure 1: Language transfer on TV (left) and in cinemas (right)<sup>1</sup>

It must be noted that the changes that took place in broadcasting during the last decade, especially digitalisation, have opened the door to new practices, as the spreading of optional captioning, second audio channels, and so. This means that the panorama of language transfer is even more complex now than it was a decade ago. Some data on the traditionally homogenous Spanish broadcasting will illustrate this fact in the next section.

As to the Basque case, a remarkable sociolinguistic change has taken place in the last three decades. Briefly, the percentage of people who can speak the language moved from 22% in 1981 to 31% in 2011 (Basque Government, 2012; EUSTAT, 2011; Instituto de Estadística de Navarra, 2011). More significantly for our purposes, if those who are not able to speak but can understand Basque are included, the percentages grew from 37% to 53%. This increase has been due, to a big extent, to the introduction of education in Basque (Arana, Amezaga, & Azpillaga, 2010). As a consequence of the linguistic policy in favor of the Basque language (which has recognized it as a co-official language in the Basque Autonomous Community and in some parts of the Charter Community of Navarre<sup>2</sup>), Basque has been introduced in areas and environments which have been mainly Spanish speaking in the last century. This has provoked a weakening of the boundaries between the linguistic zones and the spreading of a great amount of Basque speakers (actually, new speakers) in areas where the Spanish language is hegemonic. Thus, nowadays, half of the Basque speakers live in villages and cities where the percentage of speakers is less than 50%, that is to say, outside from those which can be considered more or less as ‘physical breathing spaces’ (Fishman, 1991: 58). On the other hand, the figure for the speakers living in villages with a density over 80% (the core breathing spaces) has declined from 15% to 7% in the last thirty years (Salces-Alcalde & Amezaga, 2016).

In this contexts of recovery of the Basque language, it must be noted that the impact of social and technological changes on minority languages is far from being homogeneous (Jones & Uribe-Jongbloed, 2013). Opposite to other situations, there is a general trend to extend the language to the whole Basque society. Indeed, some authors have remarked the existence, in other minority contexts, of tensions between native and new speakers, due to the perception by the formers of the changes that can challenge the nature of the language and the linguistic community (Sallabank, 2013); some others have noted a kind of “Fearful Archetype” towards new media and technology (Kaarst-Brown & Dolezal, 2016). Contrarily, the wish to reach new speakers and to extend the use of the Basque language in all levels of the society is shared between activists, policy makers, and a great part of the population. This

fact makes even more urgent the need to find out strategies to widen the scope of the cinema in the Basque language.

In this sense, the scattering of the Basque speakers amongst the total population becomes a challenge for the screening of films in the Basque language. Indeed, the Basque speakers are barely one million (one and a half if including those who can understand the language) and half of them live in areas where they are a minority. On the other hand, all the Basque speakers are also Spanish—or French-speakers. This means that cinema programmers and exhibitors face the dilemma, if they have the option of the two linguistic versions, of whether to project a film in the original—minority—language or in the dubbed—hegemonic—language. This often works against the minority language in those towns where there is a low density of speakers. The film is screened in the language understandable by 100% of the potential public, i.e. in the hegemonic language.

This dilemma affects not only the scheduling of films that have been originally produced in the minority or small language, but also the exhibition of films that might have a dubbed version in it. In the case of Catalonia, for example, over 770.000 showings were featured during 2013 and only 3% of them were accessible in Catalan, both dubbed or subtitled (Plataforma per la Llengua, 2014). This practice, even if it collides with the sociolinguistic reality of the country, leads to avoid the dubbing of foreign films into the Catalan, prioritising the dubbing—thus the exhibition—into Spanish. This also makes a difference with other realities of minority and regional languages in Europe (Plataforma per la Llengua, 2014). Moreover, the Spanish legislation does regulate the use of languages on screening; however, there is no specific requirement for the use of languages other than Spanish. In fact, only “any of the official languages” is mentioned in different texts, which results in the monopoly of Spanish (Cordonet & Forniès, 2013: 204) and the lack of presence of the other co-official languages, as Catalan, Galician, and Basque.

In reference to the cinema in the Basque language, apart from the dubbing of foreign films (about a dozen films every year, mainly targeting children and young audiences), there has been an increase in the original production in the 2010s. Thanks to the changes in the cinema policy in the Basque Autonomous Community (Manias, 2015), about thirty feature films have been produced in the Basque language in the last six years, including documentary, animation, and fictional. Even if this is not enough to talk of a great industry of cinema in the Basque language, undoubtedly these changes have been helpful to put together several human resources (producers, technicians, actors, etc.) who until now had no other choice than looking at the Spanish industry.

On the other hand, the quality of some of the productions has contributed to the visibility of the cinema in Basque. The last and probably main example of this visibility has been the election, by the Spanish Academy of Arts and Cinema, of the film *Loreak* (Flowers), directed in 2014 by J. Garaño and J. M. Goenaga, as the representative of Spain in the 2015 edition of the Oscar Awards. It did not gain the last filter in Hollywood, but it had a significant repercussion on the public image of the cinema in Basque.

## **FROM AUDIOVISUAL ACCESSIBILITY TO LINGUISTIC ACCESSIBILITY**

The term accessibility has traditionally been understood as the way in which an attempt is made to overcome the architectonic barriers faced by people with some motor disability (Alonso López, 2007). This need to overcome architectonic barriers served as a basis for the emergence of the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, under the auspices of the United Nations (United Nations, 2006). Article 9 of this Convention establishes that “States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with

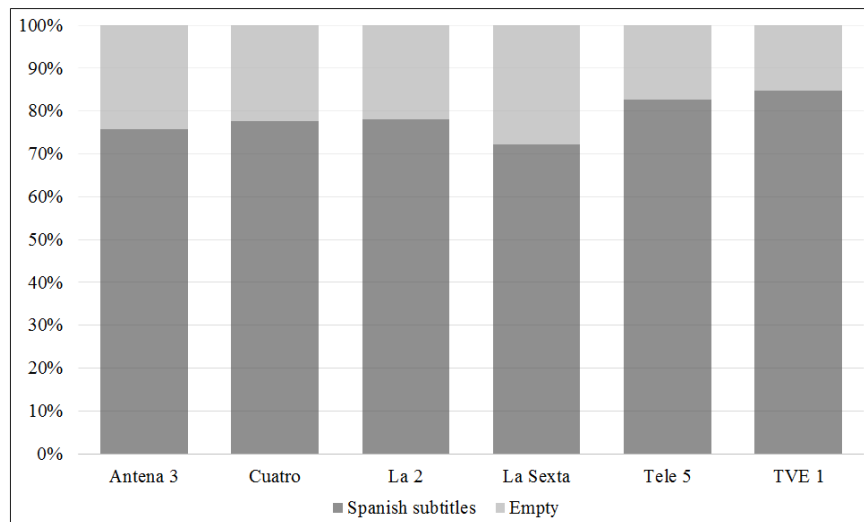
disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems”. Thus, accessibility should be interpreted in a wider way than it was originally understood (Díaz-Cintas, 2010).

Therefore, not only physical space, but also the space of information and communication has to be accessible. Accessibility, thus, becomes a basic right (Palacios & Bariffi, 2007). As a result of this proposal, in 2007 the European directive *Television without Frontiers* (Council of the European Union, 1989) recognized the right of disabled people to participate and be integrated in social and cultural life, and linked this right to the existence of accessible audiovisual media. Since then, this has resulted in a series of regulations, developed within each European state, intended to guarantee such accessibility through different systems (subtitling, audio description, sign language, etc.) to people living with some sensory disability (Orero et al. 2014).

In the case of the Spanish state, Law 7/2010 established a series of quotas and rhythms, so that within a certain period 90% of public television broadcasts and 75% of private television broadcasts should be accompanied by subtitles, and for 10 hours a week (2 hours in the case of private channels) broadcasts should also have an audio description channel.

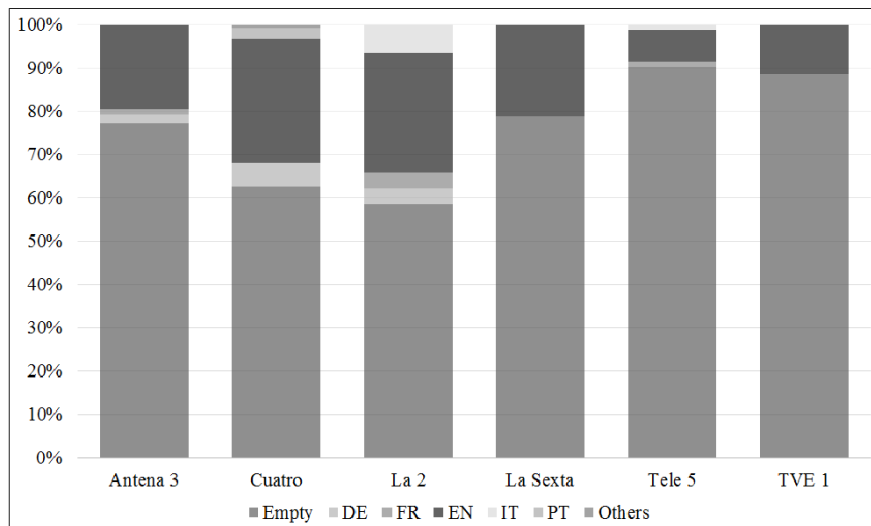
The development of this regulation coincides in time with the process of digitalisation of the TV signal. This not only facilitates the inclusion of subtitles, audio description, or even sign language windows on the screen, which are optional for the viewer, but also introduces the possibility of broadcasting programs with two or more different audio signals. This, in its turn, enables multilingual broadcasting, leaving the decision of which language to listen in to the person holding the remote control.

Thus, combining the impetus provided by legislation, on one hand and by technology, on the other, we currently find ourselves facing a panorama that is shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3, which illustrate the case of generalist television channels in Spain.



[Image: 2\_subtitles]

Figure 2. : Presence of Subtitles on the Main TV Channels in Spain (November 2014)<sup>3</sup>



[Image: 3\_2<sup>nd</sup>\_audio]

Figure 3. : Presence of the Second Audio Channel on the Main TV Channels in Spain (November 2014)<sup>4</sup>

A rapid reading of the charts enables us to draw certain conclusions. The first is that the adoption of regulatory measures combined with the introduction of digital technology has made it possible not only to significantly widen access to subtitles (with between 70 and 80% of subtitled broadcasts), but also to introduce audio channels in second languages (mainly English), reaching about 40% on some channels. A second conclusion is that access through subtitles is only guaranteed in Spanish and access to second languages does not open the door to any co-official language of Spain. This is striking in a country where, besides Spanish, nearly a third of the population speaks another co-official language (Catalan, Galician, or Basque). The conclusion that can be drawn from these data concerning television is that advances in audiovisual accessibility are altering the schema, which had been in force until now, of *one channel = one language*; however, to date these advances do not appear to have worked in favour of minority languages. In this sense, interviews that have been conducted with television managers in Spain suggest that, even though technology has opened the door to rethink the linguistic uses of television broadcasting, there is not a defined strategy regarding the role that television channels could play in the support of small and minority languages or even in the promotion of multilingualism.<sup>5</sup> The interviews evidence that, while the presence of subtitling is the consequence of applying the European and Spanish regulation in order to meet the requirements of the audiovisual accessibility, the presence of other languages on the broadcasts (apart from sign languages) is not the result of any explicit policy; it seems to be the resort to a choice given by technology and broadcasting rights that allow to include a second audio track in the programmes, with no extra cost.

In the case of cinemas, advances in accessibility are slower and have been produced exclusively by technology, as this field has not been regulated. Different applications have appeared facilitating access to audio description or subtitle files via mobile devices and Wi-Fi networks, thus allowing to follow the film that is being projected on the screen<sup>6</sup>. Several mobile applications have been designed in the last years for this purpose; some of them have been oriented to people living with sensory disabilities (Delgado, Matamala, & Serrano, 2015), as for example *WhatsCine* (University Carlos II), *ArtAccés* (Government of Catalonia), *AuDescMobile* (ONCE-Vodafone), *CinemaConnect* (Sennheiser), and many

others. The mobile applications that are intended to guarantee access to people with vision or hearing difficulties to the cinema screening usually provide connection to a server via Wi-Fi in order to download the relevant audio description or subtitle file and to reproduce it on a mobile device in a synchronised way with the live projection. In order to synchronise the reproduction of the audio or text signals with the sequence projected on the screen, some of the systems emit the signal in the projection room at the same time, while others transfer the whole file from an external server to the mobile device and synchronise the reproduction through the recognition of the voice screened. These systems allow the users to read the subtitles or to hear the audio description of the movie from their own smartphones, without any extra cost and with an affordable budget for the cinema theatre.

## TESTING THE TECHNOLOGY FOR AUDIOVISUAL ACCESSIBILITY AS A TOOL FOR LINGUISTIC ACCESSIBILITY

As a part of this study, the suitability of the systems intended for audiovisual accessibility as tools for the linguistic accessibility has been tested. In order to do so, some experiments have been conducted where a film has been screened and viewers have been given the choice to follow it in the linguistic version of their choice: one of them onscreen and the other through their smartphone. In this case, *WhatsCine* application for mobile devices, developed by the University Carlos III of Madrid (RAP, 2013) and originally designed to facilitate access by people with sensory disabilities, was used.<sup>7</sup> In this experiment, the audio description file for people with visual impairment was replaced by a second audio track of the film (in some cases the dubbed version and in others the original one), in order to allow the viewers to choose the audio version they preferred. During the showing, their behaviour was observed and after it a small questionnaire was submitted, in order to get some information about both the technical issues and the motivations that led them to hear one or another version.

Five showings were arranged with different groups of students (four at the Faculty of Social and Communication Sciences of the University of the Basque Country and the fifth at a Basque language academy for adults). Two different films were projected: *Bypass* (Mazo & Telleria, 2012) and *Loreak* (Goenaga & Garañano, 2014). Both of them are produced in Basque, with a dubbed version in Spanish intended to be screened in the Basque Country and Spain.<sup>8</sup> A total of 75 viewers had the choice to use the app, so to choose one or another sound track. Other 66 were discarded because of technical problems with the application or with the mobile device. In some of the groups the original version (Basque) was screened on the cinema theatre and the dubbed version (Spanish) was provided through the app; in the other groups it was the dubbed Spanish version which was screened, while the app was needed to follow the Basque original edition.<sup>9</sup> Taking into account that two thirds of the participants were able to understand the Basque original version and all the participants were able to understand the Spanish version, the authors of this study aimed to check which of the following factors seem to determine the option of the sound track:

- **Technical issues:** quality of the sound, accuracy of the performance of the app, comfortability of hearing with or without earphones, etc.;
- **Issues related to the experience of watching a movie:** priority given to the original version, habits of watching films in Spanish rather than in Basque, etc.;
- **Linguistic issues:** skills in both languages, preference for one or another language, etc.;
- **Other motivations:** e.g., the wish to play with the technology or with the languages, etc.

As to the results of the survey, 86% of the participants attended Basque showings and 24% Spanish showings. However, 42% followed the Spanish dubbed version, some on the direct screening in this language and some—when needed—through the app. On the other hand, 51% of the participants followed the Basque version. Finally, 7% alternated both audio tracks. This data mean that 43% of the attenders to the Basque screening sessions used the app to switch to Spanish and watch the film in the dubbed version, and that 57% of those who attended a dubbed Spanish screening session used their smartphone to have access to the original track in Basque.

As far as the motivations for the language choice are concerned, different reasons are the most mentioned in the survey: the wish to watch the film in its original version appears to be important for the wide majority (89%) of those who watched the film in Basque. On the other hand, the limited skills in Basque language are mentioned as a significant reason for two thirds (66%) who watched the film in the dubbed version. Together with these main factors, the wish to experiment and to play with the technology and even with the languages is mentioned in over half of the cases—whatever the language choice was. This last result suggests that further analysis should be conducted in order to avoid the bias that the experiment itself could cause on the collection of the data.

Finally, during the sessions different technical problems appeared: the app could not be properly installed in some devices (in most of the cases because of the low memory available in the device), it stopped due to some errors, the synchronisation was not accurate, the sound of the room and the sound of the earphones overlapped, etc. As it has already been noted, these malfunctions caused that a significant part of the originally intended participants (66 out of 141) were not able to run the experiment. However, these issues are significant because they indicate the importance of technological factors.

## **DISCUSSION**

After having analysed the evolution of the concept of accessibility, the concept of audiovisual accessibility can be understood as an outcome of the more general idea of the right to access communication and information by people living with sensory disabilities, in a society where the audiovisual culture is more and more present. At the same time, this general idea comes from a specific development of accessibility as a way to overcome architectural barriers by people with motor disabilities. In the same way, the concept of linguistic accessibility can be proposed now as useful to address the issue of access to audiovisual productions in small languages by people with low or null relevant language skills. This means that developments in regulations, technology, and social practices oriented to facilitate access by people with sensory disabilities to audiovisual are of interest for the access by people with less linguistic competence in a certain language, insofar as they suggest parallel forms of intervention. As it has been observed regarding the presence of second audio channels and subtitles on television broadcasts, technology is nowadays being used to meet the requirements of the regulators in order to ensure access to audiovisual. However, despite the same systems could be used to promote small languages, there is not any explicit policy addressing this issue. The lack of regulation in this area causes that several opportunities for small languages in the field of audiovisual (television and cinema) are being missed.

At technological level, the tests conducted with different linguistic versions of the same films suggest that the technology for audiovisual accessibility can be used also for linguistic accessibility. Mobile devices like smartphones allow a low cost solution to choose the preferred audio channel when watching a film in public spaces like cinema theatres, thus



helping overcome the linguistic barriers and opening new markets to products in small languages. However, further tests should be carried out in order to get a better understanding of the audiences' responses to these new opportunities. Similarly, technology should be improved in order to avoid the problems that arose during the tests that were conducted in this study and to provide a reliable and easy-to-use comfortable system for the users.

On the other hand, it can be concluded that promoting linguistic accessibility is of interest not only for small or minority languages—as in the case that our work focuses on—but also for the promotion of multiculturalism, insofar as it would enable access to productions in non-official languages in countries where dubbing films is the norm. Considering the great presence of foreign cinema in many European countries, as well as the increasing diversity with respect to their population's linguistic skills, advances in linguistic accessibility can open up new possibilities and promote new attitudes towards multilingualism.

Last, but not least, the fact of observing accessibility not as a need for the minority—in our study, the linguistic minority—, but precisely as a need for the majority—which is prevented from accessing broadcasts in the minority language—can serve to rethink accessibility as a two-way path, in relation to sensory disabilities as well: for example, accessibility for those with full hearing abilities to the conversations of those who can hear little or nothing. In order to paraphrase the communicologist Jesús Martín Barbero, the great virtue of the Brazilian literacy campaigns inspired by Paulo Freire was not to teach the peasant masses to read, but instead to write, that is, to tell their own story (Martín Barbero, 2004). Our work, thus, aims to apply accessibility as a path not to make small language communities be able to listen, but to make them able to speak, exploiting regulation and technological advances for this purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: adapted from the *Study on dubbing and subtitling needs and practices in the European audiovisual industry* (Media Consulting Group, 2007). The maps have been re-elaborated by the authors in order to outline the borders of the Basque Country.

<sup>2</sup> The Basque Country is divided into three different political regions. In Spain, the Basque Autonomous Community (formed by the provinces of Araba, Bizkaia, and Gipuzkoa) with 71% of the total population and the Chartered Community of Navarre (formed by the province of Nafarroa Garaia) with 21% of the population; and in France, three provinces (Lapurdi, Behe Nafarroa, and Zuberoa) with 8% of the population and embedded—without any autonomous power—into the Department of Pyrénées Atlantiques. The percentages of Basque speakers are 37%, 14%, and 21% respectively. Basque is a co-official language together with Spanish in the Basque Autonomous Community and in some parts of the north of the Chartered Community of Navarre, and lacks of any official recognition in the southern part of this region and the three provinces of France.

<sup>3</sup> *Source:* Elaborated by the authors based on a constructed week sampling (24/7).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>5</sup> Interviews were conducted in 2014 and 2015 with the heads of broadcasting of ETB (Basque public television, including the channels ETB1 in Basque and ETB2 in Spanish), RTVE (Spanish public television, including the channels TVE1 and La 2), and Mediaset (Spanish private company, owner of Tele 5 and Cuatro).

<sup>6</sup> Some of the advances in this field can be observed within the European Project HBB For All (HBB4ALL, n.d.).

<sup>7</sup> Nowadays the system is used in over 20 cinema theatres of Spain, providing subtitles and audio description to some of the regularly scheduled films.

<sup>8</sup> Even if the figures of the box office are small compared to the mainstream cinema (around 40.000 and 52.000 viewers respectively), they hold a good position in the ranking of films that were made in Spain in 2012 and 2014 (almost all of them in Spanish): 38 out of 96 for the former and 29 out of 112 for the latter.

<sup>9</sup> The showings were held during 2015/2016. The participants varied from 17 to 53 years old, however the average was 21 years. 69% of them declared they had good or very good skills in Basque (being all of them bilinguals), while 21% declared they had null or very poor skills in Basque.