

Watch your language

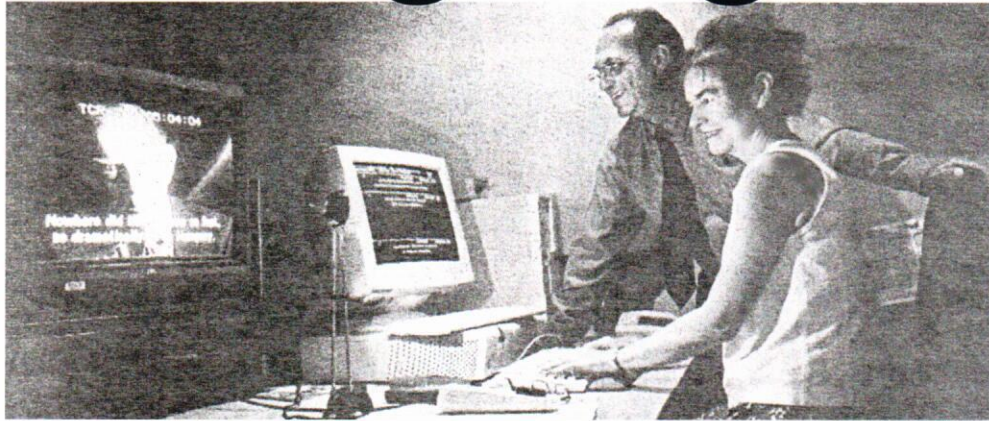


Photo: Quentin Jones

Mary Coupe and subtitling manager Gilbert Sant.

No dialect is too obscure for the hard-working staff at SBS's subtitling department. Michael Bradley reports.

Every profession has the potential to impact negatively upon your life away from the workplace. A firefighter might get nervous at a backyard barbecue, while a comedian might get sick of being expected to provide limitless entertainment. For Mary Coupe, her working life has left her unable to watch television.

"It's definitely not a priority when I go home," she says. "Even going to the cinema is too much like going to work for me; I just don't do it anymore."

For the past 21 years, Coupe has worked for the subtitling department at multicultural broadcaster SBS. As it is quite normal for a subtitler to spend days and weeks watching, translating and captioning everything from Italian opera to Chilean mini-series, it is hardly surprising that Coupe no longer has any interest in television.

For most Australian viewers (at least if they are to appreciate much of the material presented on SBS), subtitles* are essential, yet their creation is

a task that requires far more time and effort than most viewers would ever realise. For SBS to show a 90 minute foreign language film, a subtitler has to spend 40 hours – an entire week's work – watching and rewatching the material, before writing an average of 900 subtitles. Italian films, however, tend to require far more subtitles.

It is a huge amount of work, which keeps SBS's 47 full-time and part-time subtitlers busy. Between them, they are capable of working in 67 different languages. While the relentless stream of material in Italian, French, German, Mandarin, Portuguese and Spanish presents no problems, Coupe says that every now and then even this talented pool of translators is insufficient.

Most of Coupe's subtitling colleagues have, like herself, worked at SBS since the station was launched. Coupe believes it's hard for people who are passionate about language to find the perfect job, so when they do they tend to stick with it.

*Subtitles – words on the TV screen that translate the language being spoken into another language.