



**VX LABS**

**CAPTIONING LAB 2024 - 2025**

**REPORT**

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# VX Labs Report: Captioning LAB

## Captioning Lab – Summary of Findings

**Research Question:** How does captioning enhance the live experience of theatre for audiences that use captions for access / to access performance including those from the South Asian diaspora?

**Findings from Quantitative Data:** A snapshot of captions' impact across bilingual captioning

- Captions **do enhance** the live experience, but **personal preferences vary widely**.
- The strongest positive responses were linked to **creative/visual elements** and **effective colour use**, suggesting the **form and design** of captions matter as much as language content.
- Language-specific elements (script, transliteration) were appreciated more when they reflected **cultural nuance** and emotional authenticity, rather than formality or accuracy alone.

## Findings from Qualitative Data

### 1. Bilingual Captioning/Translation

- Bilingual captions need to be integrated early in the creative process, not tacked on at the end
- Different languages process at different speeds, affecting pacing and readability
- Audiences may not always know which language is being spoken if captions don't clarify it

### 2. Captions as Creative Work

- Captioners are **creative collaborators**, not technicians
- Captioning should evolve with rehearsals and not remain static
- Not all captions will work for every audience – access is a balancing act.

### 3. Creative Captions

- Creative use of images, colour, movement, and formatting (e.g., bold, underlined) adds emotional depth and accessibility
- Cultural nuance can be expressed through style choices, not just text.

### 5. Creativity vs Access

- A core tension exists between making captions **beautiful vs functional**.

- In this Lab, access was prioritised – creativity was a secondary concern but still valued.

## 5. Caption Conventions

- Establishing **clear rules** (e.g., colour coding, font size, naming) helps audiences follow the action better
- These rules should be **communicated upfront** (e.g., in a programme or front-of-house screens).

## 6. Caption Positioning

- Poor placement (too high or away from the action) disrupts immersion
- Optimal positioning improves understanding and keeps focus on performance.

## 7. Captions as Storytellers

- Captions can become an active **narrative device**, almost like a “third character”
- They help audiences empathise with characters and deepen cultural understanding.

## 8. Colonisation and Power

- Caption language order (e.g., English before Hindi) can reinforce colonial power dynamics
- Decisions on translation and presentation should consider cultural sensitivity and history
- Literal vs interpretive translation was hotly debated, especially in Dial 1 for UK.

## 9. Translation Challenges

- Who controls the translation? Writer or translator?
- Literal translations may lose emotion/humour, while interpretive translations risk misrepresenting the original intent
- Transliteration vs script: audiences preferred a mix for fuller access
- Google Translate alone is insufficient – live, informed translation is key.

## Concluding Finding

Captions are **not just a technical tool** — they are a **creative, cultural, and political force** that can shape meaning, identity, access, and emotional resonance. When treated with intention and embedded from the start, they have the power to transform the theatrical experience for **all** audiences.

## Overview of the VX LABS

Vital Xposure (VX) are a disabled-led touring theatre company that promotes hidden voices with extraordinary stories to tell. For over a decade, VX have made disabled-led radical, political performance championing hidden, marginalised stories.

VX Labs is a cutting-edge three-year research programme supported through Arts Council England. The programme is delivered in partnership with Central School of Speech and Drama as well as regional theatres. It aims to explore disabled-led performance at the cutting edge of access and create the opportunity for learning that has the ability to make change. The research is styled in the Lab space to provide opportunities for disabled artist to push at the boundaries of possibility in a practical, experimental space.

VX Labs recognises that with theatre spaces certain provisions are created that pertain to access with captioning, audio description and signed performance now more common alongside relaxed performances. The Labs programme began with a consultation which identified that these mainstream access provisions are somewhat perfunctory, not embedded and often limited to one performance. Similarly, many of these means of accessing performance are retrofitted meaning that opportunities to be creative with them or use them more effectively to tell a story are often ignored in favour of this easier, cheaper option.

*“It’s a bit like retrofitting an old building with a lift – often they’re the shittest, clunkiest, slowest crappiest lifts, aren’t they? And I imagine that’s what it’s like if you try to retro fit BSL, or audio description. It’s not a good experience. Captioning has to be in from the start.”* VX Lab consultee

The second key area of exploration for the Labs that emerged through the consultation was a re-visiting of the political, cultural and professional barriers that people continue to be disabled by. In other words, whilst there is a recognition that the Social Model of disability is as Mike Oliver suggests ‘a practical tool, not a theory, an idea or concept.’ (2008) there is a pressing need to push this way of thinking about disabled-led work further,

*“I regard the social model as a valuable empirically grounded perspective, which has contributed greatly to changing society’s relationship with disabled people and to its understanding of disability. I argue that the strength of this model stems from the insights it provides, and that its scope does not need to be restricted to immediate practical applications.”* Leavitt, JM (2017)

In other words, whilst the social model of disability has resulted in disabled artists becoming more socially and culturally included within many theatres who are broadly willing to make reasonable adjustments – there is still a feeling among those disabled artists who were consulted as part of the VX Labs process, that limitations are set on what they can make theatre about, with whom they can do that, who their audience is and what represents a permissible budget for real, creative access. Finally, whilst there is a considerable push toward early career disabled artists across the industry, many in the middle stages of their career are left floundering with no clear pathway to fulfil their artistic ambition.

## Introduction to the Captioning LAB

**Why the Captioning LAB:** The Captioning LAB leaned into the consultation where many of those who took part felt that captions had become reductive rather than creative and that their use was limited and not helpful to storytelling. There was a consensus that whilst captions did support d/Deaf, hard of hearing or deafened people, there was a lack of recognition that captions had an equally powerful role to play in enhancing multiple people's experience of theatre. And understanding of this multiplicity of experience shaped the LAB.

d/Deaf, hard of hearing or deafened people make up some 18 million adults in the UK:

*"If you exclude deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people, you're excluding 18 million adults in the UK. That's a large part of the community and the world that are being excluded from participation. Do people set out to exclude one in three people? Of course not. There are huge benefits to engaging with deaf audiences, but there is a long way to go."*<sup>1</sup>Melanie Sharp CEO of Stagetext, interview with

We Are Creative, January 2025

There's a continued reluctance in the theatre industry to include captions within all presentations. This, however, is out of step with how Gen Z and Millennials who favour the use of captions/subtitles in the content that they consume – an audience that theatres are keen vocally keen to capture. In a YouGov study in 2023,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://diversity.wearecreative.uk/case-studies/captioned-performances-stagetext>  
-accessed 12<sup>th</sup> February

*“The findings revealed that among the 18–29-year-olds surveyed, 63% watched TV in their native language with subtitles”<sup>2</sup>*

According to Stagertext, 42%<sup>3</sup> of people in the UK used subtitles to aid their concentration. 24% used captions or subtitles at live events.

**Why Bilingual Captions (English and A N Other language):** The case for captions is clear. However, recognising that there was work on captions happening elsewhere in the business, VX’s artistic lead concluded that there was an opportunity to enrich the conversation around captioning by focusing on bilingual captioning for plays written by writers with additional languages. Some of the pieces that had emerged during VX’s Wellspring writing programme had also inspired the idea of the possibilities of bilingual captioning.

According to the 2021 UK Census approximately 18% of people in the UK belong to the Global Majority (i.e. they are black, Asian, mixed heritage etc.) Through a simple calculation, and assuming a regular distribution of d/Deaf people across this demography, some 3,240,000 people from the Global Majority are d/Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing.

9% of the UK population is Asian Heritage. The current UK population is 69,138,192 which amounts to some 6,291,575 people from an Asian Heritage background are living in the UK (Census 2021). Assuming again an even distribution of deafness this amounts to 1,132,483 people who are of Asian Heritage who are d/Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing, which is roughly the size of the population in Glasgow.

**Why studying Captions opens up access:** According to the British Deaf Association, “Around 90% of deaf children are born to hearing families and over 75% attend mainstream schools.” Many children do not therefore have access to BSL as a first language, and some “94% of eligible children receive cochlear implants” (Zarate 2021, Chapter 2, page 33). Around 58 percent of children who are deaf use hearing aids meaning that many children are ‘learning to listen.’ (Zarate, 2021)

*“Around 67% of severely and profoundly d/Deaf children use a spoken language (English or Welsh) as their only method of communication. Around 27% of severely and profoundly d/Deaf children use sign language in some form of education...”* (Zarate, 2021, Chapter 2, page 36/7)

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.captioningstar.com/blog/closed-captions-are-gaining-popularity-among-gen-z-millennials/#:~:text=Why%20is%20Gen%20Z%20increasingly,without%20the%20necessity%20for%20audio>. (this is a US based study)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.stagertext.org/news/research-shows-42-of-people-say-concentration-is-a-reason-to-use-subtitles/>

This takes the shape of spoken language with signed support in some cases. Within that 27% only 7% use sign language as their main language. Whilst the politics of sign language vs spoken language vs cochlear implants is beyond the scope of this paper, these statistics do demonstrate the need for a multifaceted approach to access within d/Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing communities, where captions become critical for full understanding. This is true of communities across all demographics in terms of ethnicity.

In addition, the use of captions for a South Asian audience could potentially open up access more widely. There is a South Asian population in the UK who speak English well but for whom English is a second language where the availability of captions in their native language is potentially helpful to enable complimentary story telling. There is a second population within the UK, approximately “863,000 people who do not speak English well or at all.”<sup>4</sup> (Stats from the UK government website accessed 16<sup>th</sup> February 2025). This stat is not specifically about people of South Asian heritage, but there is a significant population of, predominantly women, particularly those over 45 who are unable to speak English at all and for whom captions in their native tongue could open an additional audience.

*“And I was thinking like, my Grandmother can't really come to theatre often. She can't understand it. So, if this was used more than it would mean she would be able to access it.”* Follow up Discussion for the Punjabi Lab.

*“It's great, because my father himself is losing his hearing. He can read Hindi languages as well and English. So, I think it's a really good way ... to create a personal sense of belonging for him as well, to be able to access spaces like this.”* Follow up Discussion for the Hindi Lab.

**Research Question:** The thinking outlined in this introduction, thus shaped the question we proposed within the Lab:

**How does captioning enhance the live experience of theatre for audiences that use captions for access/to access performance including those from the South Asian diaspora?**

Whilst we acknowledged that some 84,000 people in the UK use BSL as their first and preferred language (they may have English as an additional language), we made the conscious decision not to include signing as part of the performance. The reasoning for this was to test the captions.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/demographics/english-language-skills/latest/>

A further note in relation to the report – within the text of the analysis bilingual captions refers to captions in both English and either Hindi, Punjabi or Urdu. However, the captions for the South Asian languages (for the Hindi and Punjabi LABs) were sometimes presented in script/scripture and/or transliteration (roman letters.) The reason for this was to further test whether these ways of presenting the language were a help or hindrance in understanding and emerged during the LAB process.

An additional point of note is that within the d/Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing community bilingual sometimes refers to people who are conversant with both BSL and English. BSL is, of course, a language in its own right, but it was not part of the Captioning LAB and is therefore excluded from the report, and analysis.

## **Preparation work for the Captioning LAB**

**LAB Structure:** The original ambition of the LAB was to work with 3 different organisations but ultimately, this morphed into 3 different plays with 3 different South Asian languages, namely plays in Hindi/English, Punjabi/English and Urdu/English.

VX led the first two parts of the Lab working alongside writers. The third part of the Lab was a partnership with Phizzical Theatre, which had in the previous year delivered *10 Nights* by Shahid Iqbal Khan with Urdu and English captions in London, with some feedback that the Urdu translation was not sufficiently accurate.

The Lab stretched across three separate weeks in October, November and December 2024, for a total 11 days (4 days, 3 days, and 4 days). Whilst this was great for the individual plays to be in the captioning from the researcher/evaluator perspective there was, in some ways, a law of diminishing return in terms of learning in regard to new findings, with the later weeks becoming more about reinforcing the learning of the first week which focused on Hindi and English.

**Reaching Out:** There was a critical need initially to understand the make-up and some relevant statistics for the d/Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing community, particularly those from South Asian backgrounds. This understanding was gained during the setting up of the LAB through connectivity to the Royal National Institute for the Deaf<sup>5</sup>, the British Deaf Association<sup>6</sup> and reaching out to Deaf

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<sup>5</sup> <https://rnid.org.uk>

<sup>6</sup> <https://bda.org.uk>

Clubs<sup>7</sup>. We particularly wanted to invite d/Deaf audiences who were able to read and understand English and either Hindi, Punjabi or Urdu. Finding potential audiences this way proved challenging even targeted calls were made to Hindi, Tamil and Urdu<sup>8</sup> speaking communities. We were fortunate to hear back from a number of organisations with advice, and some support, but were unable to connect with audiences this way but having a large-scale feedback of the work for d/Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing audiences was not available, although there was a mixed audience at each of the sharings.

## How the Research was conducted

The Captioning Lab:

Dial 1 for UK Mohit Mather, at Half Moon Theatre, London, over 4 days in October 2024 – this was a play in Hindi and English, and led by VX

The Pride of Punjab by Ravi Singh Chera, at Half Moon Theatre, London, over 3 days in November 2024 – this was a play in Punjabi and English

10 Nights by Shahid Iqbal Khan, at Attenborough Centre, Leicester, over 3 days in December 2024 – this play was in Urdu and English and led by Phizzical Theatre

Each Lab was effectively a rehearsal process – the nature of the first two plays was that the plays were working in process, so the sense of rehearsal was at an earlier stage given that for The Pride of Punjab, this was the first time that it had been put on its feet. Similarly, although Dial 1 for UK had been performed before it was still a work in progress. 10 Nights was a much more established piece that had been co-produced (by Graeae, Tamasha and Phizzical) and was returning for a second run.

Each process had present actor(s) and a director who undertook a rehearsed reading process. In addition, the captioner was present throughout working alongside the director and actor to tease out the best process for the captions. Further, a translator was present most of the time.

The research process was focused on in the room observation (non-participant observation.) This was undertaken by Dr Mandy Precious who was present in the room throughout the three separate parts of the Captioning Lab. This was supported by Professor Selina Busby who attended some of the time, and two student researchers Ryan Greenfield and Joey He.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://deafunity.org/resource/uk-deaf-clubs/>

<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, the Tamil play did not happen, which is why, quite late in the day the second part of the Lab focused on Punjabi.

At the end of each day there was a downloading of thoughts, observations and reflections among the researchers. Each day also had a reflection process by those in the room.

Each piece ended with an 'informal' sharing which was followed by a discussion that was attended by an invited audience and recorded. The discussion was transcribed and annotated.

All those who attended the sharing also completed survey. The survey was then analysed.

Mandy Precious attended a performance of 10 Nights at Lawrence Batley Theatre in Huddersfield. She observed and spoke to audience members. After the show in Huddersfield, a short survey about the captioning, although the return was very small.

Data collection was therefore both qualitative and quantitative in flavour.

Observer bias: this write-up recognises the danger of the potential for observer (even as non-participants) bias given the theatrical context of the research. However, observers sense checked one another's thinking and entered the space in a spirit of curiosity. Whilst it is true that theatrically there was multiple years of experience, the experience and preset knowledge of captioning for each of the 3 key observers was less set and none would be considered experts on captioning, so the entrance in the space was focused on the discoveries made during the process of delivery.

As the Captioning Lab was conducted as part of a rehearsal process in three very different stages of each of the three plays' evolution, there was a need to understand how meaning making exists within this space, and how the observers experience impacts on their understanding with the less experienced observers capable of 'beginner's mind.' The idea of 'aha' moments or 'it' moments were available to all participants including the researchers. James, RM (2019) doctoral thesis "Breakthrough and Discoveries in Theatre Rehearsals" which leans very much into the idea of 'aha' or 'it' moments in the rehearsal process, notes that the rehearsal is where the piece lives. The research aha or it moments also 'live' in the room. This is a recognition of the challenge of writing up live work.

All of the people in the room were also in the rehearsal process. Whilst it is impossible to say that the rehearsal was unduly influenced by the presence of the researchers, the focus of the actors, director, and writers in the space, alongside

the captioner was very much on delivering a scene on the Friday, alongside a curiosity about how captioning would enhance that performance.

The one area of concern for the actors was the discrepancy between what they were saying and the ‘visibility’ of the captions (given that all of the scenes were in rehearsed reading mode), with a fear of exposure of not ‘learning the lines properly.’ However, the focus of the survey was on the captioning specifically and not specifically about the actor’s performance. The actors were reassured that having perfect delivery was not the focus of the research process. The question most often asked (and sometimes answered!) throughout the Lab was ‘who are the captions for?’ and the answer to that is in very simple terms, not the actor.

## **Summary of each piece**

**Dial 1 for UK:** This was two short scenes from Mohit’s play Dial 1 for UK, which tracks the journey of a young Indian man, Uday Kumar, arriving in the UK as an enthusiast of the country. The play is a monologue, driven by the character Uday and plays with the idea of the view you project into the world, against the grinding reality of caring for a retired and very old ex-Major from the British who shows little appreciation of the care shown to him, partly out of being old and unable to speak, and through the implication of an undercurrent of racism.

**The Pride of Punjab:** The Pride of Punjab scene was the first scene in a play with epic potential. The scene chosen for the Lab was a two-hander which covered the reunion of a mother (Sophia Duleep Singh) and son (Jindan), which involved both English and Punjabi. Sophia was the daughter of the last Maharaja of the Sikh Empire and in the scene her son has been living in exile in the court of Queen Victoria.

**10 Nights:** Follows Yasser who somewhat foolishly decides to take part in itikaf, sleeping and fasting in the mosque for the last ten nights of Ramadan, soon regrets his decision. The Lab focused on the first 3 scenes which see Yasser cornered into undertaking itikaf, and his first experience of doing so.

## **Learning from the Captioning Lab (Quantitative)**

### **Learning 1: Survey Responses (quantitative data)**

#### **How captions enhanced the live experience**

Each Lab completed with a sharing of the piece that had been worked on. The sharing was followed by a discussion in each case. A survey was distributed at the

end of the Dial 1 for UK (Hindi Lab) and The Pride of Punjab (Punjabi Lab). Although poised to share after the 10 Nights (Urdu Lab) the survey was overlooked which can only be put down to researcher error. The surveys that were distributed asked a single question that can be quantified. 11 people responded to the Hindi survey and the results were as follows.

The question was: What enhanced Your Experience of the Sharing?

### **Hindi Lab**

**Q2: Please tick which of the following enhanced your experience of the sharing (you can tick more than one)?**

- 1. The Hindi Scripture captions: 2**
- 2. The Hindi transliteration captions: 3**
- 3. The English captions: 4**
- 4. The creative captions (pictures and visuals):8**
- 5. The English spoken word: 3**
- 6. The Hindi spoken word: 4**
- 7. Something Else: 1**

In the Hindi Lab, it is clear that most people felt that the creative captions had the most impact, with the English captions and the Hindi spoken word having the most impact. This is likely to be split across the two sharings that we had, one that was more predominantly had four Hindi speakers. Only two people felt that the Hindi scripture enhanced their experience, and only 3 identified the Hindi transliteration as enhancing their experience, which does throw some light on later discussions – about the positioning of the captions as well as the nature of the translation and who it is for.

In the Punjabi Lab 12 people responded to the survey.

**Q2: Please tick which of the following enhanced your experience of the sharing (you can tick more than one)?**

- 1. The Punjabi transliteration captions: 8**
- 2. The English captions: 6**
- 3. The different colours of the captions: 9**
- 4. The position of the captions: 6**
- 5. The English spoken word: 3**
- 6. The Punjabi spoken word: 7**
- 7. Something else: 2**

This set of results demonstrates something quite different than the Hindi lab, indeed the broad response is more positive. The Punjabi transliteration captions are much better received with 8 people feeling this enhanced their experience, with the different colours of the captions (creative captions effectively) featuring even more strongly with 9 people saying this enhanced their experience (each character was represented by a different colour, and any noises or other directions were in white). The Punjabi spoken word was very well received too, with 7 people saying hearing Punjabi enhanced their experience of the event. This is most interesting, and tallies with later learning where people indicate that they would like more Punjabi spoken even though they don't speak it, because the English captions allow understanding, and it enhances the life of the play.

## **Urdu Lab**

A similar question was asked about what enhanced the audience's experience for 10 Nights. Only 4 people answered the survey, and their answers were distributed as follows. Whilst in the Hindi and Punjabi survey, participants had been invited to the sharing and were very willing to share their ideas and thoughts, the Urdu survey was administrated by the Lawrence Batley Theatre and sent to the paying audience of 10 Nights. Many people had booked to see the show as part of a coach party so there were limited email correspondents available:

**Q2: Please tick which of the following enhanced your experience of the sharing (you can tick more than one)?**

- 1. The Urdu captions: 1**
- 2. The English captions: 2**
- 3. The creative captions (pictures and visuals): 1**
- 4. The position of the captions: 0**
- 5. The English spoken word: 0**
- 6. The Urdu spoken word: 0**
- 7. Something Else: 0**

From the results for three Labs, whilst the live experience is clearly enhanced by the captions the impact of these captions is very much personal to individual people – as the following write up indicates people extract multiple different benefits from the captions both expected and unexpected. Whilst one might imagine that for Hindi speakers, Hindi captions work to enhance their experience, but that might in fact be less important to individuals than creative captions, for example. Clearly how people receive captions is complex and unique – however

as the following sets out learning can be extracted through a deeper consideration of captioning, colonisation and translation.

## **Learning from the Captioning Lab (qualitative data)**

### **Learning 2: Bilingual captioning / Translation**

A key piece of learning from Ben Glover, the Captioner was that whilst he had been delivering both captions and supporting video content for many years –bilingual captioning was, in his experience usually imposed at the end of a process or superimposed when a particular language was required: i.e. that a tour to Germany was announced so the captions needed to be changed, meaning that captions were rarely, if ever part of the process. Ben also felt that some languages were compatible and sat well together, whilst others were more problematic. He gave the example of English and Welsh where the pace and the complexity of the language don't match up so that the sentence in English is complete long before the Welsh is read by those depending for meaning on the captions in that language which can and does affect the pace of the show potentially. This was recognised by one person post Dial 1 for UK sharing discussion.

*“English is faster. You need less words to express, whereas Hindi is a bit more expressive than English. So, we need more time to write those words. So, like for them to be read as well. It becomes like a longer process.”* From post sharing discussion Hindi Lab

The other observation from the Lab was that for a d/Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing audience members, when the caption is in both English and Hindi, the audience doesn't necessarily know which language the actor is speaking in, which impacts on their experience of the play, particularly if the audience member is focused on the captions more than the action,

*“How do we as a Deaf audience know whether this character is speaking Hindi or if they are speaking English? And so, it's like trying to decide which is the language of this thing?”* From post sharing discussion Hindi Lab

This leans into the section on establishing the rules which is discussed below, as this person went on to say,

*“Was confused about which language it was going to be in, so then I had to kind of rely on lip reading more to kind of go, oh it's spoken English, but the caption is*

*in Hindi. So, it would be nice to see one (in English), and then it changes into the other (Hindi)!”* From post sharing discussion Hindi Lab

**Learning 3: Work in Progress:** Captions were often a work in progress, throughout the Lab, and the amount of time you put into them roughly approximated with the quality of the captions. Captions are part of the creative process, and the captioner is a creative rather than a technician and should therefore be instigated at the beginning of the programme, and a key part of the creative budget and creative process. This means that captions are very like a rehearsal process possibly even going through different iterations as the play is put on its feet. There was a recognition from the Captioner, Ben Glover, that there was also the possibility that what you deliver isn't right for everyone, and that there is the potential for dislocation/discomfort for some members of the audience for whom the captions are either not useful or helpful. In the process of making decisions, creative or otherwise, some people might be excluded – balancing the needs of all was therefore a challenge. A mix of words and pictures has the potential to be more inclusive.

#### **Learning 4: Creative Decisions about Captions**

Creative captions which can be pictures or words emerging creatively (like a text appearing whilst someone is texting, like colours etc.) are almost impossible to impose at the end of the process where many other creative decisions have already been made because to project onto a screen a captioner needs to know where the actors are blocked, what the lighting is, how sounds support the play, and the emotional expression of the process. This makes a strong case for the captioner to be in at the very beginning of the captioning process. And as the following person noted, within the Labs, there was potential for more creativity,

*“Further creative exploitation. For example, the emphasis on words, names in bold or phrases underlined, etc.”* post sharing survey of Punjabi Lab

This would include a discussion on how the captions reflect the accent, background etc as indicated by this survey response:

*“In captioning, maybe a thought can be placed on cultural nuance - the live character brings accent, cultural background, and attitudes that a formal script might not represent.”* (post sharing survey of the Hindi Lab)

This observation also has the potential to provide a like for like experience, although in dealing with work in translation and English potential fraught with ethical danger.

## Learning 5: Creativity versus Access

There is an identified tension between captions for creativity and captions for access. This again centres the question, who are the captions for? As well as the question what are the captions for? Through the Lab in all three plays, the captions were quite rudimentary, having a very specific purpose of determining how the languages work in tandem to enable access, to that end creativity (which did sneak in during the Dial 1 for UK Lab) was lower down the agenda for this process than trying to enable speakers of the other languages, and specifically d/Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing audiences access to the pieces. In this research – access in the very widest sense was king, so the words held the trump card.

*“The captions were becoming creative & I could see opportunities. Time perhaps was limited. Exploration of captioning came through.”* From the survey after the Hindi Lab

Saying that, within 10 Nights there was a very clear creative set up – including a slot or text box on established slides of pictures, for the captions. The video/slides that run behind the single actor provide for a variety of not quite cartoon drawings of all the people Yasser is playing, alongside scene shifts (from his bedroom to the mosque etc.) This was recognised as brave within the discussion, noting that representation of people in cartoon form is not permissible in Islam. Nonetheless, the creativity of this scene setting made the relationship to the captions different than if the words were alone on the screen, nonetheless as Joey He points out, “I still feel like it’s a lazy way.” He also wonders how the captions can be more part of the art rather than “a footnote to it.” In the audience feedback (only 4 people) all agreed, however, that the captioning was in fact ‘effective’. The captioner also implemented movement in particular words to replicate a specific feeling.

Nonetheless, the colour of captions in 10 Nights, as well as the font and size of font that was utilised was often a matter of contention – namely, questions like ‘why this colour?’ or ‘What does that colour say?’ or ‘What does that colour say in relation to the other colour chosen?’ This also relates to the rules of captioning, which are essential. And size had almost always come with a discussion about readability – with a tension between the English and Urdu font sizes, with the Urdu invariably smaller (and which played into problems around hierarchy as discussed below in the section on colonisation.) Also, the smaller the text, the harder it was to read.

## Learning 6: Conventions of Captioning

This is about establishing rules for the audience and the rehearsal space. There were many interesting conversations about how the makers in the room didn't inadvertently reinforce specific ideas about individuals within the life of the plays. Colour coding sentences, for example, enables the audience to have some sense of who is speaking, when, or in the case of 10 Nights who the single performer is at any given moment. Once a pattern is established the audience has a better chance of following. Saying that, the complexity of the storytelling in 10 Nights did throw up some challenges,

*"I just wanted to clarify about the names, because what was happening is I was reading the captions, and I had to actually go back to the beginning to see who it was that was saying that line, because it was too sort of samey, if that makes sense....So you could say there's no distinguished visual clue or aspect of the caption of the name, so it's very easy to miss that. So, for example, Yasser is in the same font and colour as the rest, so maybe making the names bold?"* From post sharing discussion of Urdu Lab

There was some excellent feedback that suggested that what the rules are should be shared with audiences at the beginning of a show, within a programme or on front of house screens so that the conventions of the captions are understood and so that audiences can limit how much time they are focusing on trying to work what the colours mean and simply focus on the action, with the words working in tandem with that. In that way, captions can more easily reinforce the action and provide d/Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing audiences the same experience broadly speaking as a hearing audience. Further, as captions become more common, rules of engagement with captions will become more familiar, and simply be part of the architecture of all shows.

## Learning 7: Caption Positioning

This was also interesting in a range of ways across the Lab.

*"I'm curious if you've had feedback from deaf audiences. I'm probably closer to hard of hearing & it took me a little while to figure out what the colours & positioning was signifying. Could you tell the audience from the start? Or find a clever way to teach the audience."*

From post sharing discussion of Punjabi Lab

Position and style are critical to how captions are received. At the sharing for Dial 1 for UK the captions were too high, simply because of how the room was set up meaning that for the audience the captions took their eyes away from action, which impacts on the experience of the play. This was addressed in both The Pride

of Punjab and 10 Nights, and one person in the Punjabi sharing noted in their survey answer,

*“The centrality of the captions was useful, and it was clear in the discussion that captions in the rehearsal process impacts dramaturgical/styling choices”* From the survey after the Punjabi Lab

Studies around bilingual subtitles for comprehension and processing time (Wang, Q, and Pellicer Sanchez, A, 2022)<sup>9</sup>, offers insight into placing of captions specifically for learning and therefore understanding. There is something very important about readability, too. Even in 10 Nights during the show, where the captions are embedded effectively within the set, an audience member says, “I did find them distracting at times.” It was noted by a number of people that as well as positioning, the timing and pace of captions also needed to be controlled otherwise there was a potential tension between the actor, the action and the words on the screen.

There is also an interesting point that some people recognise, about the near compulsion to read what is put in front of you – meaning that captions do need to feel part of the language of the stage, and integral to the story. Otherwise, they can easily become an annoyance, for some members of the audience. Saying that, if access is the key measure of success, then inconveniencing some people who find they can’t not read, and who are distracted is significantly less important than ensuring people who need captions, get them.

### **Learning 8: Captions as a key part of the story telling**

The most interesting part of the process came up in each of the three sections of the Lab, namely how captions enhance the story telling, and how they have the potential to be a very powerful tool that can support the direction, the emotional journey and the emphasis placed on specific words and phrases. This comes up often from all researchers, and indeed, through all discussions.

In Dial 1 for UK, there was a long and interesting discussion around how the captions should reflect the journey of the protagonist who arrives as an enthusiastic and positive person mostly speaking Hindi (and in scripture, see below) but morphs into a more modern Hindi speaker (through the transliteration) which also reflects how the character of Uday starts to become ‘more British’, and curiously, more cynical. This was part of a live discussion around whether captions should reflect the journey of the performer? In Dial 1 for UK the

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<sup>9</sup><https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10160760/> accessed 26<sup>th</sup> March

decision was taken directorially that they should which provided a further way to communicate the life of the play.

Many people discuss the emotional impact of the captions, particularly after The Pride of the Punjab sharing:

*“The moment when the audience can understand her, but he can't, was incredibly powerful - you felt her pain - as an English speaker I could then identify more with the Punjabi speaker rather than the English one - the captions can guide you on who you are empathising with/seeing the story through.”* From post sharing survey of Punjabi Lab

Another person felt that the captions, “added to me gaining wider understanding of the cultural world of the piece.” (from post sharing survey of Punjabi Lab)

The idea of the captions as a character in and of itself also emerged through the process, particularly in The Pride of Punjab,

*“like how the captioning can become like a third character as well...so it's part of the whole piece and in itself as its own story teller.”* (From post sharing discussion of Punjabi Lab)

This person follows this up in the survey with a question about how the captions can be enhanced more to become that character, which asks the question what the captions can do that the characters can't, and what can be done to push the information the captions contain to support this idea. A number of people within all surveys appreciate the contribution the captions make to the emotional energy of the scene, and indeed the insight it gave into the sound, and shape of the Punjabi, or Hindi language. A typical comment is, “It definitely added an extra layer of interest in the emphasis of each phrase” (post sharing survey Punjabi Lab.)

There was less enthusiasm around the creative storytelling potential in the Hindi Lab in the post discussion survey (there was no survey in the Urdu Lab), because the positioning of the captions became quite disruptive and distracting to many of those in the room – this was true in both sharings.

### **Learning 9: Colonisation/Power**

*“Super appreciated the discussion of power in language & captioning. Access is always (often) about power.”* (From the post sharing survey of the Punjabi Lab)

Long conversations about how the languages should work in tandem were a feature of the 3 iterations of the Lab. In Dial 1 for the UK originally the English

captions came first followed by the Hindi, but the decision was made to switch these around. This was an important decision about not re-affirming the dominance of the coloniser, although making this decision explicit might have helped audiences understand. A recognition that there is a power structure in place important and asking the question why this, why now was important. Again, the question ‘Who are the captions for?’ did come up, again. And the answer to that question is that captions in languages in addition to English, make access to that piece for an audience that extends to d/Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people, but also people who know, speak or understand the additional language who maybe deaf, or not.

Many people who do not speak Hindi, Punjabi or indeed Urdu appreciated being able to read English captions for the lines spoken in those language, feeling the musicality of the language and the sense of welcome that might engender in an audience. Many also noted that they felt that there could be more of the Hindi, Punjabi or Urdu within the play, allowing for a greater authenticity of conversations.

*“Me not understanding Punjabi but seeing that caption on the screen as well as hearing it being said out loud. For me that just added to the world of the piece, and understanding the music in that language as well, and the rhythm and the culture, and just bringing it more to life.... just added to the different colours of the what the piece is trying to say, going beyond the circumstance of the stage world.”* (Post sharing discussion Punjabi Lab)

The learning around the idea of power and colonisation was very much around being aware of the level of privilege within the room and ensuring that no decision is made unconsciously. Words are loaded – they hold meaning individually and collectively and carry different weight which is not the same across cultures. Some words in Hindi and Punjabi are English, so how do you throw light onto this so that it is questioned, if only in passing: English words bring a listener up short in the midst of a Hindi line because in a spoken situation that is being captioned, they hit a note that seems out of place.

Mohit Mathur, the writer of Dial 1 for UK was impassioned about the impact of colonisation on himself and his bravery in discussing his feelings about this was really powerful. Below discusses translation and the challenges involved in that process but from Mohit’s perspective, he felt the colonial history that he had lived through and that it had shaped him and his relationship to language. This manifested in a number of key ways – firstly, “all my education is in English as an Indian.” And that in undertaking this education he had absorbed the idea that England was therefore somehow better, and that in the UK the grass *is* greener.

The play also plays with this idea, and that in fact, it's not. One thing that Mohit said many times was that in India, he was a funny guy but when he arrived in the UK, he discovered that he wasn't, "I feel English. I was educated in English but I'm not English. And I am not funny anymore" (He was funny!) This led to a very rich conversation about some of the translation that had been interpreted so that a Hindi speaker would find it funny. Mohit's view was that the translator had 'taken a few liberties' with what he had wanted to say and that he favoured a 'literal' translation because that was the most honest approach for his play.

A couple of individuals within The Pride of Punjab post sharing discussion talked about the potential of the captions to equalise the experience,

*"I'm aware it's a work in progress, but I would have liked it even more Punjabi is spoken, because the privilege of being able to understand English meant that at times, I wasn't really looking at the captions. Therefore, it means that everyone's put in that situation at some point within the play, regardless of what they can understand. I thought it was a brilliant tool."* (From the post sharing discussion Punjabi Lab)

**Learning 10: Translation:** By far the most contentious part of the Captioning Lab process was around the translation – drawing in questions about meaning, meaning making, ownership of language, colonisation and a variety of other things. Whilst the ethics of translation in its complicated depth is beyond the scope of this paper, summary blogs like Lambert's (2013)<sup>10</sup> and Ball (2018)<sup>11</sup> provide a simple insight of what is at stake. This write-up doesn't underestimate the complexity, particularly with plays in transition, and with languages that embed and have valued the language of the coloniser over the language of the colonised.

Who controls the language? Who has the final say? We used the same translator for both the Hindi and the Punjabi translation. On both occasions the translator translated in trans-literation i.e. that the Hindi and Punjabi translation were written in Roman Letters with a sense of the colloquial. In Dial 1 for UK, the writer wanted a literal translation and Hindi Scripture. This threw up a lot of questions. What is the role of the translator? Do words in translation have to be exactly the same as those that are written on the page? Is it the role of the translator to make an exact copy? How does the translator's role impact on meaning making? The writer of Dial 1 for UK felt very strongly that the translator had gone too far, and he wanted a 'literal' translation. But the question, should the translation give the audience the same feel in translation as those who experience it in the language

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<sup>10</sup> <https://jaltranslation.com/2013/11/18/translation-ethics-a-different-perspective/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://agnionline.bu.edu/blog/listening-the-ethics-of-translation/>

it is written in, and spoken in? This was debated at length on the second day of the Dial 1 for UK process and in the end, although the translator was not so enamoured of it, he removed interpretation and made the translation ‘literal’ although the translator felt this was more akin to ‘dubbing’ which he felt passionately was a disservice to the piece. We didn’t find any definitive answers to the questions; we simply found a way to achieve the captions in a way that satisfied the writer/actor of the piece in Dial 1 for UK and that fitted the story of The Pride of Punjab.

One of the actors in The Pride of Punjab had to speak in Punjabi, which she was able to do but the discussions around the use of the language was very much between this actor and the translator. Her view was that Punjabi was a very live language that often renewed itself, and that often had very family specific words that were not universally spoken. The translation within The Pride of Punjab was eventually more nuanced than Dial 1 for UK, and possibly richer for that experience.

Audience members reactions to the Hindi and Punjabi scripture was interesting. The audience response in Dial 1 was as follows,

*“The script is something that we do read in school...it’s not something that we use on a daily basis, especially when you chat with Indians...it’s not something we type out.”* From post sharing discussion of Hindi Lab

There was also a long discussion of how hard and slow the reading of the scripture was. The general consensus was that it was harder to read.

The response in The Pride of Punjab was that they’d like the captions in script, trans-literation and English,

*“Most of the captions were written in English letters, but where’s there’s a third layer written in script, would also enable access to even more people.”* From post sharing discussion, Punjabi Lab

The literature available around captioning in South Asian languages and English simultaneously is not in large supply but there are many other studies that do provide a significant insight into translation process, with a couple specifically targeted at the rehearsal process. In particular, a blog from DASH arts about a bilingual rehearsal process for The Reckoning, directed by Josephine Burton<sup>12</sup> supported a number of insights that all three Labs uncovered – that the captions in translation can’t disconnect the audience (as they did somewhat in Dial 1 for

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.dasharts.org.uk/blog/bilingual-performance-in-reckoning>

UK), and that the translation needs a level of richness that matches the meaning (this was the subject of long conversations in the Pride of Punjab. In addition, Mark Ventresca's insights into translation are also helpful.<sup>13</sup>

*"Most languages cannot be directly translated word for word and retain the original meaning. Hiring professional translators fluent in the original language who understand a scene's context in the target language for closed captioning is essential"* Mark Ventresca, Transperfect.

How the translation looked was also contentious in both Dial 1 for UK and The Pride of Punjab. What should translation look like on the screen? Should it take the trans-literation form which is how people often text one another or should it take a more traditional Hindi script? Again, who is this for? If you translate into scripture, who can read it? This came up often in the discussions and the feedback indicated that it was almost impossible to read Hindi/Punjabi Scripture and English simultaneously. Nonetheless, in both cases a 'Google' translation of the scripts in both languages were downloaded and as indicated, used as part of the captioning process: this was meticulously worked through by the translator to ensure that it was readable and correct. As discussed, in the Hindi Lab the script was used at the beginning of the scene, in part to indicate the character Uday's more traditional feelings initially and switched as he became less enamoured of England and his experience there, switched to the more modern trans-literation.

10 Nights had used Google translation in the original staging of the show, and this had not been as accurate as it might have been because those involved including the actor and the director although from Urdu speaking families did not speak Urdu and couldn't sense check it. That was in part the reason for Phizzical to join the Lab: the translator worked closely with the captioner to ensure that the translation worked, and to date there have been no complaints about the translation in this staging.

## Conclusion

The Captioning Lab was successful inasmuch as it generated lots of discussion and understanding around captioning's usage and specifically its usage in relation to more than one language. The potential captioning to be more than a tool but integral to enable both access and understanding was pretty firmly established –

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.transperfect.com/blog/best-practices-multilingual-closed-captioning>

how the captions work practically to enable the best understanding of all potential audiences is still a work in progress.

The key piece of learning throughout – and that cross cuts captioning, colonisation and translation is really a question about purpose and intent. Captioning works best when the captioner, the writer and the director have a mutual understanding of who the captioning is for, which works best when this is integral to the play. If that understanding is not clear then the captioning becomes experimental rather than purposeful.

It is also clear from across the Lab that captioning when thoughtfully and aesthetically considered, with a clear and agreed rationale for translation enhances the live experience for d/Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people alongside people from, in this case, South Asian countries. It is also clear that people who do not speak languages from the Indian sub-continent also enjoy the experience even when privilege in understanding English and that there is latitude to push this experience further. The spoken and written language enhances the experience of those who speak the language alongside those who don't. This would particularly be the case if the pacing and timing of the performance and the captions works in tandem.

### **Some recommendations for the Sector**

1. Captions are integral to the design process and should be instigated at the same time as all other design elements of the show, particularly in relation to captions in translation
2. When captioning in two languages simultaneously, particularly when actors are switching between languages, it is important that a d/Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing audience know which language is spoken when, via colour coding or similar.
3. The question 'who are the captions for?' came up repeatedly in the process. This is a question that should be answered before the design process particularly when using bilingual captioning so that effective decisions can be made around access, creativity, and attracting those for whom English is a second language.
4. Captions have conventions. These conventions need to be shared with the audience in a programme or free sheet particularly as they relate to storytelling with careful thought given ensuring everyone in the audience has the same information.
5. Translation is critical to bilingual captions – multiple issues popped up around this including around meaning which was often contentious.

Thought should also be given to unconscious decision making that potentially reinforces unhelpful bias particularly in relation to colonisation in this case.

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