Vital Xposure

Creative Captioning Short Guide

Centred in bi / multi-lingual plays

How does captioning enhance the live experience of theatre for audiences that use captions for access or to access performances?

Quickfire Guide 3
Introduction 5
Captioning Versus Creative Captioning 6
The Problems With Creative Captioning 6
Creative Captioning: How Can You Do It?.....9
The Benefits Of Creative Captioning 11
The (Creative) Nuances Of Creative Captioning.....13
Useful Data 14
Useful Links.....15
Acknowledgments.....15
Find Out More.....16

Quickfire Guide

Captioning matters! For many people!

Captions enhance theatre for everyone in addition to deaf/hard of hearing audiences: multilingual audiences, those who like subtitles, people for whom English is not their first language, learning disabled people, Neurodivergent people.

Bi or multi-lingual captions open access to cultural understanding

Bi-lingual captions enable access and greater understanding of other languages, worlds and people in the show.

Creative Captions are part of the world of the play

Creative captions are an artistic component of a show and the overall audience experience. They function just like the show's set or sound design, and the characters, by adding a parallel voice.

Bi / multi-lingual captioning: cultural translation choices matter

Creative captioning in dual languages brings (creative) nuances around artistic decisions and cultural translation.

The Creative Captioner should be part of the creative team early on

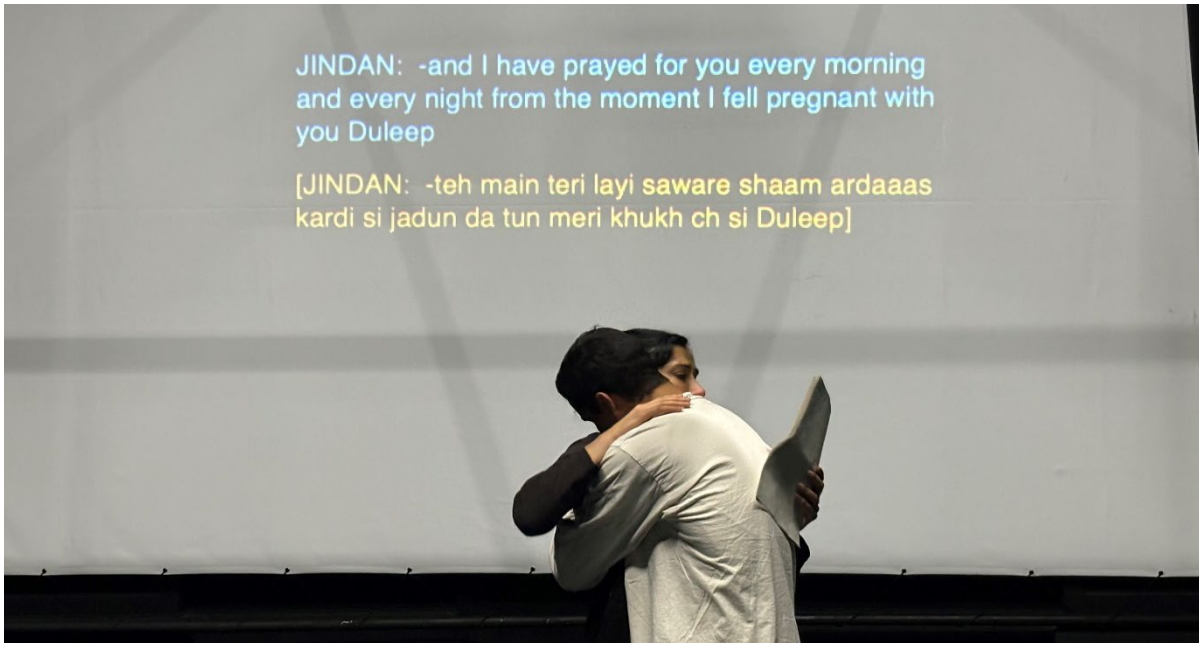
Captioning should be embedded from the start as a core design element working alongside all the other designers in the production.

Budget planning!

Costs for creative captioning should be included in your budget from the outset, including software, equipment (in rehearsals and on tour), people's fees and translation.

Creative Captions have the power to transform the theatrical experience for all audiences.

They are a creative, cultural, access and political force that can shape meaning, identity, access, and emotional resonance.



VX Lab – Creative Captioning, 2024

Exploring bi-lingual captions in Punjabi and English

Introduction

About the VX Labs

VX Labs is Vital Xposure's cutting-edge research programme supported through Arts Council England. The programme is delivered in partnership with sector peers and regional theatres.

VX Labs aim 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 artists to push at the boundaries of possibility in a practical, safe, experimental space without the pressure for concrete outputs at the end.

About this guide

This guide is based on the **VX Lab – Creative Captioning** which took place throughout autumn / winter 2024 - 25. We worked with three playwrights and their plays: *Dial 1 for UK,* by Mohit Mathur (Hindi and English), *The Pride of Punjab,* by Gavi Singh Chera (Punjabi and English) and *10 Nights,* by Shahid Iqbal Khan (Urdu and English).

A detailed report about the process and research findings is available on Vital Xposure's website. This guide can be a practical toolkit for artists, producers and organisations. Besides, for true change to come, these cannot be separated.

About the VX Lab – Creative Captioning

Captioning in theatre has grown over the past decade. However, the larger picture shows that provision remains limited compared to audiences who need them: one in three people are d/Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing. There are more people who can benefit from captions, such as learning disabled people. Still, many performances do not provide captions. Often, when there are captions, they can be distracting from or preventing real enjoyment of theatre.

Why we wanted to deliver this Lab:

Captions have become reductive rather than creative. Their use was limited and not helpful to storytelling.

There is a lack of recognition that captions have an equally powerful role to play in enhancing people's experience of theatre.

Captioning Versus Creative Captioning

What are captions?

A transcription of the spoken words.

Captions are similar to subtitles, which have been widely used in television and cinema for non-English films for many decades.

They do not include words to refer to or describe the music or sound effects, or any other visual element on stage. They are usually displayed on a separate screen.

What are creative captions?

Creative Captions are more than text

Creative Captions show in written format words or dialogue spoken, sounds or music effects heard on the stage. The projection of captions is integrated into the show's set.

They are often enriched with additional visuals: using a variety of fonts, colours, icons and animations to match the show's atmosphere and characters

Creative Captions are part of a show's creative design.

Just like designing set, lighting and sound and integrating them into the show.

The Problems With Creative Captioning

There are no fixed rules for creative captioning

The use of creative captioning in theatre has grown over the recent years. However there are no fixed rules about how they should be made. There is no official guidance either, such as from a government or an accredited body.

Existing guidance has largely been developed through trial and error, alongside shared learning within the arts and theatre. These resources offer an invaluable starting point, alongside learning from peers and seeing creatively captioned performances.

Many audiences are not used to captioning or creative captioning in theatre

Sometimes audiences are not familiar with captioning or creative captioning. They may therefore find them challenging, distracting or alienating and like seeing them in the show. This is about personal preferences, experiences and expectations.

It is completely valid. Like any part of the theatre experience, creative captions are put the test of audiences' tastes. If they do not like seeing the captions,

they may think twice before spreading a good word about the work or returning to see another show. However, no theatre company or venue wants to deter current and potential audiences from attending a future production.

Bi/Multi-lingual captioning can be lost in translation

The translation process in bi / multi-lingual plays reveals not only linguistic difference between the languages, but deeper cultural or historical differences.

These can be broadly summarised in four areas:

- **Cultural background**: different connotations of words and selecting the most suitable cultural associations of the translated script
- **Scripture**: there are visual differences between characters and alphabet, font shapes and positioning.
- **Pace and complexity**: some languages may be denser, faster, more or less expressive than others. Therefore, the vocabulary needed may require shorter or longer sentences.
- **Speaker identification:** it is harder for audiences to know who is speaking the non-English parts unless this is clearly indicated. It can be even more challenging for audiences who rely on or are aided by lip reading.

English is faster. You need less words to express, whereas Hindi is a bit more expressive. We need more time to write those words and for them to be read as well.

VX Creative Captioning Lab: Hindi and English

These differences will influence artistic and literary choices during the translation process such as about the font types, words and phrases to translate into.

Can creative captions be both an artistic component and an access tool?

There is an identified tension between captions for creativity and captions for access, the divide between *beautiful* versus *functional.*

This raises a deeper question:

What is the purpose of captions?

When the answer to the question starts drifting away from the original point of access for deaf and hard of hearing audiences, the focus shifts to treating the

captions as purely an additional visual of the show that must be aesthetically pleasant.

- In bi-lingual captioning, different colours, symbols, fonts – with their cultural meaning - and personal tastes can affect readability
- Sole focus on creativity of the captions may actually compromise overall accessibility.

Creative Captioning work happens too late

Last minute addition of creative captioning can feel like an imposition, an afterthought that risks generating a low-quality result or captions that artistically do not suit the story.

The technical stage alone requires substantial time, attention to detail and testing.

There is little time for the captioner to really embed the play and receive artistic guidance about the design of the captions that matches the feel of the show. This includes the font, colours, size, shape as well as use of other symbols or visuals and positioning of the projection on stage.

There is unconscious bias and power dynamics

A power structure emerges in the process of designing creative captions, particularly in bi / multi-lingual captioning.

There is a risk of an unconscious acceptance of the coloniser's dominance which can reinforce power imbalances.

For instance, it might be about deciding which language to show first or at the top of the bi-lingual captions.

"Super appreciated the discussion of power in language and captioning. Access is always (often) about power."

VX Creative Captioning Lab: Punjabi and English

Audiences cannot read the non-English captions

In bi / multi-lingual captioning, the translation and script decisions do not always match what audiences who speak this language can actually read. This can vary because of different educational backgrounds and the evolvement of the language in its 'origin' country versus in communities in the UK.

"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."

VX Creative Captioning Lab: Hindi and English

Creative Captioning: How Can You Do It?

Your starting point

- The moment a script is considered for a future production.
- Include it in any conversation and development stage thereafter
- Treat it as a show design component on a par with set, lighting and sound

Be clear about the key question underpinning any subsequent creative and practical choice: Who are your captions for?

Think about the audiences who will experience your show:

- What are their access requirements?
- What is their linguistic and cultural profile?

Consider any political and historical context that is significant to the story, the communities it represents and therefore to different audiences as well.

It is essentially a question about audience development and the intention of the production, with the added element of creative 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."

VX Lab Sharing Event Attendee

How to plan?

- Ensure your core creative team, such as the writer and/or the director agree with and adopt the inclusion of creative captions.
- Include it as a separate budget line in your access costs for audiences.
- Make the case in fundraising applications of its importance both for access and a wider, richer theatre experience for all.

- Consider the practical implications of captioning for touring, such as each venue's technical provision and whether you need to source a projector or software.
- Speak with peers who are already doing creative captions.
- Aim to go see theatre that includes creative captions.

What does a creative captioner do?

- They work on the script and with the creative team, in the same way that actors, set/light/sound designers do and are guided by the director
- They attend pre-rehearsal conversations and rehearsals
- They explore:
    - what the creative captions: could – or should – look like
    - what symbols or icons can complement words and sentences
    - how they can better reflect the characters of the play
    - how they fit with the developing set, light and sound design
    - where the captions can be projected
    - how the captions will be projected
    - what technical elements are needed, such as projectors
- They design the creative captions using video software
- They synchronise them to the dialogue
- They create a video file with the final captioning projections which is included in the show's technical set up: the sound and lighting cues

How can you find a creative captioner?

- Check credits in theatre productions that include creative captioning. The captioner may also be credited as video or visuals designer because roles require similar skills to creative captioning
- Conduct a sector research and connect with captioning professionals. See 'Useful Links' at the end of this guide.
- Ask for recommendations from peers and networks you are part of
- Ask your playwright and/or director if they know anyone
- Create a job brief for the captioner, in collaboration with your playwright and/or director.

What do you need to do differently for bi/multi-lingual plays?

- Plan for the literary translation needed prior to or in conjunction with the creative captioning design.
- Research a suitable professional to be involved.
- Involve the playwright and the director.
- Include the translator's work in budget planning and the timeline
- Consider involving them from the R&D stages.

- Discuss working arrangements: how and when they will work with the writer, the captioner and the creative team.

What should you expect during rehearsals?

- The creative captioner should spend sufficient time in the rehearsal room.
- Ensure job briefs for the creative team factor in creative captioning. For instance, the set designer needs to know if they are expected to create surfaces suitable for the projection of captions.
- Allow time for technical testing and cast familiarisation with the creative captions.
- Make sure that the stage manager(s) are informed and involved in the process, not least because they will be responsible for looking after the show when it tours.

How will captions be designed?

- The design parameters are informed by artistic, creative and access decisions in the team.
- Establish the design parameters (*caption conventions)*, such as font size, colour coding, positioning, animation and use of icons.
- Consider the projection software and equipment, in the rehearsal room and at different touring locations.
- Remember the key question that underpins the design: *who are your captions for?*

How much does it cost?

- Costs depend on the scale and the scope of the creative captioning.
- Potential expenses to consider are the following:
- Fees for the creative captioner and the translator
- Involving captioning consultants and/or user testing at a work-in-progress sharing
- Hiring or purchasing a projector, particularly for a touring production

The Benefits Of Creative Captioning

There is great potential for captioning to be more than a tool but integral to enable both access, and audience engagement and enjoyment.

As a creative component of the play, they add a new layer of engagement for audiences just like the lights and the sound. In fact, in some cases captions can almost become an additional character. Treating captions as *storytellers* can reveal more artistic possibilities to enhance the audience experience.

“Captioning isn't just access - it's art. It should sit alongside light, sound, costume, and set as a creative opportunity for theatre-makers of all stripes.”

Josh Elliott, VX Artistic Director

When they are embedded in the play, they are part of every performance no matter where the show is presented.

People who need captions are not forced to book a ticket only on the dates when captioning is available.

Audiences for whom English is not the first language will also benefit from this expanded provision.

Similarly, captions can meet access requirements of a wider range of audiences, such as Neurodivergent or learning-disabled people.

The use of subtitles in TV and online content has grown significantly in recent years. There are many more individuals accustomed to consuming and engaging with a cultural experience through subtitles. Through creative captioning the theatre sector can do the same, whilst preserving the immersive nature of the experience for audiences.

The (Creative) Nuances Of Creative Captioning

The creative nuances are opportunities for your work but they also require careful thinking and specific artistic decisions. In the same way that a playwright or a director has to make any artistic decision about the play.

"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."

VX Lab Creative Captioning attendee

Below is a checklist of those nuances. Make it your compass when you start embedding creative captioning in your work:

- **Creative Captions:** Creative use of images, colour, movement, and formatting (adds emotional depth and accessibility.
- **Captions as Creative Work:** Captioners are **creative collaborators**, not technicians.
- **Creativity versus Access**: Captions can be both aesthetically pleasant and functional access features at the same time.
- **Captions Conventions**: Establish clear rules about format, style and scripture choices.
- **Creative Captions as storytellers**: Captions can become an active narrative device, almost like a "third character". They can help audiences empathise with characters and deepen cultural understanding.
- **Communication**: Inform audiences about the creative captions in the show. Clarify that these are available in every performance.

The added (creative) nuances in bi/multi-lingual creative captioning:

- Literal translations may lose emotion / humour, while interpretive translations risk misrepresenting the original intent.
- The language order in how captions are presented can reinforce power dynamics and the colonial past.
- Decisions on translation and presentation should consider cultural sensitivity and history.

Useful Data

- 1 in 3 people in the UK are deaf, have hearing loss or tinnitus (RNID)
- Over 50% of the population aged 55 or more have hearing loss (RNID)
- 24% of people use subtitles and captions for live performances (Stagetext)
- 50% of theatres in the UK present shows with integrated access (such as captioning), but captions are not included in every single performance or show they present
- 42% of people use subtitles to help with concentration when watching content online or on TV
- 18% of people in the UK belong to the Global Majority

English is not the first language for many people, although there is no precise data available.

“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.”

VX Lab – Creative Captioning (Punjabi and English)

“My father is losing his hearing. He can read Hindi languages as well and English. It’s a really good way …to create a personal sense of belonging for him and to be able to access spaces like this.”

VX Lab – Creative Captioning (Hindi and English)

People may choose which theatre show to see based on the access needs of someone else: friends or family. This means that the impact of lack of access can be much wider than you think.

They are all audiences who may need and benefit from creative captions.

If you do not think about them, they will not think about you either: they will not buy a ticket to see your show.

Access shapes who feels invited into your theatre and can become part of your audience.

Useful Links

Vital Xposure: VX Lab Creative Captioning full report

Creative Captioning
Examples, resources, creatives captioners and software suggestions

Theatre Design – What are creative captions
Creative Captioning reflections by the Society of British Theatre Designers

Transperfect Blog: Best Practices in Multilingual Closed Captioning
Reflections on bi-lingual creative captioning in *The Reckoning,* 2025

See more examples: There are many creatively captioned shows by companies and independent artists (such as by Deafinitely Theatre and Graeae Theatre). It is also worth checking shows at theatre venues of your choice or where you plan to tour your work

Acknowledgments

This short guide captures the key learning from our VX Labs – Creative Captioning.

It could be applied by artists and organisations who create and produce theatre, particularly when presenting bi / multi-lingual plays.

The full research report is available via the website: www.vitalxposure.co.uk

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Find Out More

VX Labs webpage

Vital Xposure website

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