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Same Language Subtitling (SLS) Recommended Quality Standards



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Contents

What is Same Language Subtitling (SLS)?	3
Origin and National Policy Impact	3
Guidelines for Implementing Effective SLS	4
Accuracy.....	4
Consistency.....	4
Synchronization	4
Complete SLS	5
Language.....	5
• Grammar and Syntax.....	5
• Numbers	5
• Date and Time.....	5
• Currency.....	6
• Dual Speakers/Multiple Events.....	6
• Punctuations.....	6
• Continuity.....	7
• Italicization.....	7
• Repetitions.....	8
Readability	8
Font & Design.....	9
Duration.....	9
Special Instructions	10



What is Same Language Subtitling (SLS)?

Same Language Subtitling (SLS) is the practice of subtitling audio-visual (AV) content in the *same* language as the audio. Unlike traditional captioning which primarily serves accessibility needs, SLS is a powerful tool for reading literacy and language exposure, especially among children and emerging readers.

With SLS, children are exposed to synchronized text that matches what they hear and see on-screen — be it cartoons, songs, or animated stories. This multi-sensory input helps reinforce word recognition, vocabulary, and fluency.

Our research demonstrates that regular exposure to SLS on TV at home over 2–3 years can double the number of functional readers compared to primary schooling alone. This insight is particularly impactful in India, where surveys like ASER 2022 highlight that nearly half of Class 5 students are unable to read a Class 2 level text.

Origin and National Policy Impact

SLS was first conceptualized as a tool for mass reading in 1996 at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (IIMA). The initiative has since evolved into the BIRD (Billion Readers) project, now hosted at IIT Delhi's School of Public Policy.

The BIRD initiative has significantly shaped Indian broadcast policy. As a result, there is now a national mandate to include SLS on at least 50% of entertainment content on television by 2025, across all languages, states, and channels.

While SLS in English is sporadically available on Indian TV, the systematic integration of SLS in Indian languages is still lacking. BIRD aims to fill this gap, addressing three major national goals:

- Enhancing reading literacy
- Promoting Indian language learning
- Supporting media access for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH)



Guidelines for Implementing Effective SLS

With nearly three decades of experience in educational subtitling, we recommend the following best practices to optimize SLS for learning:

- **Text should be fully synchronized** with the spoken audio (word or phrase level).
- **Line breaks and reading speed** should suit early readers (no more than 12–15 characters per second).
- Use **simple fonts**, bold text, and high-contrast colors to ensure readability.
- **Positioning** should not obstruct key visuals but remain close to the speaker or audio source.
- **Consistency in subtitle style** (font size, colors, placement) across content is crucial for learner comfort.

Accuracy

SLS should match accurately with the spoken words in the dialogues or the songs. Accurate SLS preserves the speaker's exact words, meaning, tone, and emotion, ensuring that viewers receive the content as intended.

Consistency

We recommend following a uniform transcription style throughout the document and adhering to specific rules or guidelines concerning spelling, formatting, and punctuation.

Synchronization

Synchronization in SLS refers to correctly aligning the SLS with the audio, ensuring that SLS appears and disappears exactly when the words are spoken. Proper synchronization is crucial for the effectiveness of SLS, as it helps viewers follow along with the spoken content without distraction or confusion. We recommend that SLS should appear just as the speaker begins or shortly before the word is spoken. The caption should disappear right after the speaker finishes the last word, giving the viewer enough time to read it. If the audio is fast or continuous, the SLS must be broken into smaller chunks to match the pace of speech.



Example: For a sentence like "यह एक बहुत सुंदर दिन है।" (This is a very beautiful day), the synchronization might look like this:

Start time: 00:00:02.00 (2 seconds after the video begins)

End time: 00:00:05.00 (3 seconds after start, based on the reading speed and length of the sentence)

Complete SLS

SLS must run from the beginning to the end of the programme.

Language

• Grammar and Syntax

- We recommend adhering to grammatical rules and spelling conventions of the language. (e.g., standard use of ता है/ती है endings in Hindi, proper verb conjugations, etc.).
- Avoid regional dialects or colloquialisms unless relevant to the context of the dialogue.
- Use transliteration for regular words.
 - E.g.: Daddy - डैडी
 - Train - ट्रेन

• Numbers

- Numbers above 10 are represented as digits to save space. Words are easier to read and integrate into sentences than digits, especially for small numbers. For numbers from 1 to 10 use number names e.g. एक, दो. Numbers above 10 must be written numerically as 11, 12, 13..., and when a number begins a sentence, it should always be spelt out.
- Numbers that are part of technical terms, addresses, or specific data (e.g. phone numbers, dates, or measurements) are also represented numerically.

• Date and Time

- Write the date fully in Devanagari script unless the context requires otherwise.

E.g. 25-01-2025 → २५-०१-२०२५, 25 January 2025 → २५ जनवरी २०२५

- **Currency**

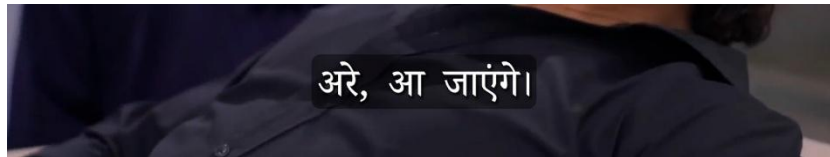
- Use Arabic numerals (0, 1, 2, etc.) for readability when mentioning foreign currencies, as this is widely recognized and avoids confusion.
- Do not convert currency in SLS. Money amounts in dialogue should remain in the original currency. E.g. If the dialogue is “We paid £50.”, SLS should be “We paid £50.”
- Use the official currency symbols (e.g., \$, €, £, ¥) for widely recognized foreign currencies like the US Dollar, Euro, Pound Sterling, or Japanese Yen.
- Write the currency's name (e.g., Dollar, Pound, Yen) in the local language script if the symbol is unavailable or the SLS is in a formal setting.

- **Dual Speakers/Multiple Events**

- Use a hyphen without a space to indicate two speakers in one caption, with a maximum of one speaker per line.
E.g. -तुम आ रहे हो?
-हाँ, बस एक मिनट।

- **Punctuations**

Use punctuation marks as per standard grammar rules of the SLS language. E.g. In Hindi, Use । (पूर्ण विराम) instead of a period (.) to mark sentence ends.



Pic: Sample Hindi SLS



- Avoid using complex punctuation which could be hard for viewers to follow. For example, avoid using colons and semi-colons and instead use simple, clear sentence structures to aid comprehension.
- There should be no spaces after text and before punctuation marks. The script should not contain lead spaces and trail spaces.

● **Continuity**

- Use ellipses to indicate a pause (2 seconds or more) or an abrupt interruption. When including ellipses in subtitles, we recommend using the single smart character (U+2026) as opposed to three dots/periods in a row.
- Do not use ellipses when a sentence is split between two continuous subtitles.
E.g. और पूछना है...
...कि वो कब आएंगे।
- Use an ellipsis without a space to indicate that a subtitle is starting mid-sentence.
E.g. ...दिन हो गए उसे गए हुए।

● **Italicization**

- Italics in SLS are used to highlight emphasis, foreign words, inner thoughts, or narration. E.g. Use italics for foreign words or phrases not part of the SLS language, especially when they are integral to the dialogue.
- Proper names, such as locations, vessel names or company names, should not be italicized.
- Dialogue that is heard through electronic media (e.g.: phone, device, television, computer, loudspeaker, AI, AI assistants, voice of a GPS, other digital devices, non-sentient robots, robotic voices, etc.)
- Only use italics when a speaker is not in the scene(s), not merely off screen, behind a door or out of shot.

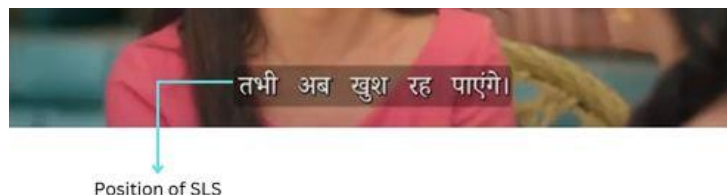
- **Repetitions**

Repetitions in SLS refer to consecutive identical dialogues or sounds. If an SLS is repeated multiple times without adding meaning, it can be omitted unless it is meaningful for emphasis, emotion, or clarity.

Readability

SLS should be clear and easy to understand. We recommend the following features for better readability.

- **Position:** SLS should always be centre-justified and placed at either the top or bottom of the screen. In addition, SLS should be positioned in such a way that they avoid overlap with the onscreen text, logos etc. If an overlap is impossible to prevent the caption should be placed wherever it is easier to read.



- **Font size:** A font size between 24px and 36px, with around 32-40 characters per line is commonly used for most SLS. This ensures readability without overwhelming the screen, especially for devices like smartphones and laptops.

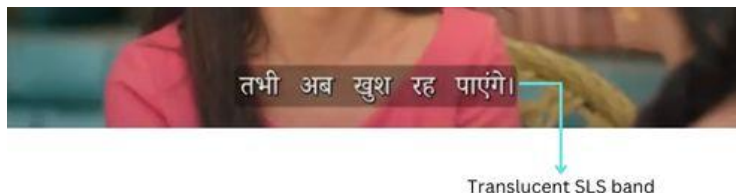


- **Spacing:** There should be sufficient space between words to ensure they are easily distinguishable. Increased spacing between words will ensure better readability.





- **SLS band:** Adding a translucent band behind the SLS will improve readability. This ensures high contrast and increased readability.



Font & Design

- **Encoding:** All SLS must be in Unicode [UTF-8 Encoding]. Using a Unicode font is essential for a consistent, accurate representation of text across diverse languages and scripts, including Indian languages. It ensures compatibility across platforms and devices and prevents issues like character corruption that occur with older encoding standards. Unicode enables easy data exchange, searchability, and accessibility, allowing content to be processed by screen readers and search engines.
- **Color:** In Same Language Subtitling (SLS), the widely used color for text is white with a black or translucent background. This combination ensures high contrast and readability, especially for viewers with varying levels of vision or in different lighting conditions.

Duration

Duration refers to the length of time a caption is displayed on the screen in sync with the corresponding audio or speech. The duration is crucial for ensuring that viewers can read the text comfortably without it disappearing too quickly or lingering too long.

We recommend displaying each line of SLS for about 1.5 to 2 seconds for every 12–15 words of speech. For slower-paced dialogue, this can be adjusted as needed.



Special Instructions

- There should be proper punctuation if the sentence requires it.
 - The Full Stop [.]
 - The Question Mark [?]
 - Quotation Marks/Speech Marks [” “]
 - The Apostrophe [']
 - The Comma [,]
 - The Hyphen [-]
 - The dash [en dash [-] em dash [—]]
 - The Exclamation Mark [!]
 - The Colon [:]
 - The Semicolon [;]
 - Parentheses [()]
 - Brackets []
 - Ellipsis [...]
 - The Slash [/]
- We recommend using *** when abusive language is spoken.
- If someone sings a song, then it is necessary to give music notes [♪] at the beginning and end. Write song lyrics with music icons [♪]. Use one music icon at the beginning and end of each caption within a song, but use two music icons at the end of the last line of a song.
- If the dialogue is continuous then at the end of the dialogue there should be three dots only and these dots will continue in the next frame with three dots and then the dialogue is written.
- ‘Recommended Tech Specifications’ – Below given Image shows the recommendations tailored specifically for the Kannada language. However, the underlying principles can be applied to every single language. It is important to note that the specific technical specifications — such as font type, size, spacing, and character limits — will vary depending on the unique script, readability needs, and viewing preferences of each language. Therefore, a language-wise customization of specs is essential for ensuring optimal legibility and user experience.

Language	Kannada
Font Name	Tunga
Font Type	Regular
Font Size	60
Word Spacing	2
Total no. of maximum characters per line including spaces	30
Line Spacing	15
No. of lines on screen	Maximum 2 lines, Recommended 1 line
Text Colour	White
Text Stroke	1 (Black)

Image showing the recommended tech specifications for the language ‘Kannada’