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**SUBTITLING THE VISUAL**  
A Relevance Theory Perspective on Translating  
Visual Narrative Elements in *Breaking Bad*

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# ABSTRACT

Ville Salakka: "Subtitling the Visual: Visual Narrative Elements in *Breaking Bad* from a Relevance Theory Perspective"

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The purpose of this thesis was to explore what types of narrative information are communicated visually in film and television and when the information requires translation or explanation for viewers of another culture to understand. These questions were approached from the perspective of Sperber and Wilson's (1995) Relevance Theory, according to which communication is guided by principles of relevance and human cognition is instinctively geared towards maximizing relevance.

The data for this research was collected from seven episodes across the first season of *Breaking Bad* and its Finnish subtitles on the streaming service Netflix. The collection of data consists of visual narrative elements that are shown on the screen to advance the show's story. The data was then categorized based on the implied purpose types of the visual elements. Examples from the data were transcribed using Taylor's (2016) multimodal transcription method.

Five main categories of visual narrative elements were identified. The visual elements in these categories communicate information about scenes, characters and their thoughts and personal histories, twists in the narrative, and comic relief. Individual visual narrative elements from the main categories were also considered realia – culture-specific items that require previous knowledge or explanation.

The visual narrative elements in the data were translated in the subtitles over half the time. Omissions were often (but not always) considered to be due to redundancy in the storytelling or the constraints of the subtitle medium. The results suggest a need for further research into the topic, as Relevance Theory proves to be an effective tool of multimodal analysis and thus translation, and the effect of the omission of visual narrative elements on relevance in a story was outside the scope of this thesis.

Keywords: relevance theory, implicatures, multimodal, subtitling, audiovisual translation, narrative

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

# TIIVISTELMÄ

Ville Salakka: "Subtitling the Visual: Visual Narrative Elements in *Breaking Bad* from a Relevance Theory Perspective"  
Kandidaatintutkielma  
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Tämän tutkielman tarkoitus oli selvittää, millaista kerronnallista tietoa elokuvat ja televisio-ohjelmat välittävät visuaalisesti ja milloin tiedon ymmärtäminen toisessa kohdekulttuurissa vaatii kääntämistä tai selittämistä. Näitä kysymyksiä lähestyttiin Sperberin ja Wilsonin (1995) relevanssiteorian näkökulmasta. Teorian mukaan kommunikaatiota ohjaavat relevanssin periaatteet ja ihmiskognitio pyrkii vaistomaisesti maksimoimaan relevanssin.

Tutkimusaineisto kerättiin *Breaking Bad* -ohjelman ensimmäisen tuotantokauden seitsemästä jaksosta sekä niiden suomenkielisistä tekstityksistä Netflix-suoratoistopalvelussa. Aineisto koostuu visuaalisen kerronnan elementeistä, joita näytetään ohjelmassa ruudulla tarinan edistämiseksi. Aineisto kategorisoitiin visuaalisten elementtien implikoitujen tarkoitustyyppien perusteella. Yksittäisiä esimerkkejä aineistosta litteroitiin Taylorin (2016) multimodaalisen transkription menetelmällä.

Visuaalisen kerronnan elementeistä tunnistettiin viisi pääkategoriaa. Näiden kategorioiden visuaaliset elementit välittävät katsojille tietoa kohtauksista, hahmoista ja heidän ajatuksistaan ja historiastaan sekä juonenkäänteistä ja koomisista kevennyksistä kohtauksissa. Yksittäiset pääkategorioihin kuuluvat visuaalisen kerronnan elementit tunnistettiin myös reaalioksi – kulttuurisidonnaisiksi asioiksi, joiden ymmärtäminen vaatii niiden aiempaa tuntemusta tai selittämistä.

Yli puolet aineiston visuaalisen kerronnan elementeistä on tekstitetty. Useissa tapauksista (muttei aina) kääntämättä jättämisen syyksi pääteltiin tarinankerronnassa tapahtuva toisto tai tekstitysten rajallisuus kommunikaatiomuotona. Tutkielman tulokset osoittavat lisätutkimustyön olevan tarpeellista, sillä relevanssiteorian huomattiin olevan toimiva multimodaalisen analyysin ja täten kääntämisen työkalu. Lisäksi visuaalisten elementtien kääntämättä jättäminen ja sen vaikutus relevanssiin kerronnassa jouduttiin rajaamaan tämän tutkielman ulkopuolelle.

Avainsanat: relevanssiteoria, multimodaalinen, tekstittäminen, audiovisuaalinen kääntäminen, kerronta

Tämän julkaisun alkuperäisyys on tarkastettu Turnitin OriginalityCheck -ohjelmalla.

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# 1 Introduction

The multimodal nature of film and television allows for complex storytelling using more than one mode of communication. Dialogue, motions, gestures, text, and music, among others, can all be used simultaneously or consecutively to tell a story. When translated to another language – by subtitling or other methods – the cohesion between the different modes is altered.

The aim of this thesis is to examine visual storytelling cues in film and television and how transferrable multimodal storytelling is from the source language and culture to a new audience: which visual cues require translation or explanation due to linguistic and cultural differences, and what gets “lost in translation?”

This thesis approaches these questions from the perspective of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s Relevance Theory (1995). Although Relevance Theory has been primarily used to analyze spoken discourse, it has also been adapted to the analysis of multimodal communication (see Forceville 2014). Its use in both the film and translation fields has previously been explored (see, e.g., Desilla 2012, 2014; Díaz-Pérez 2014), but fewer studies have examined audiovisual translation from a Relevance Theory perspective (see Xinya 2016; Sasamoto, O’Hagan, and Doherty 2017; Bogucki 2022). This latter type of research has also focused most of all on translation quality and the translation of dialogue. While subtitling visual storytelling has received *some* attention (see Liu and Jia 2014), the importance of the visual mode in multimodal communication makes it a topic worth expanding on.

This current research utilizes Relevance Theory to identify visual narrative elements in *Breaking Bad* and how they are addressed in the show’s Finnish subtitles on the streaming service Netflix. The findings are categorized and analyzed through a Relevance Theory lens to specify the roles visual narrative elements play in multimodal storytelling.

Section 2 offers a summary of Relevance Theory as the framework for this thesis. The data and methods used in the research are defined in section 3, followed by a detailed analysis of some of the examples found in the data in section 4. The findings and their implications are discussed further in relation to previous work in section 5, preceding concluding remarks.

## 2 Relevance Theory in Multimodal Communication

According to Relevance Theory, communication is governed by principles of relevance: the aim of human cognition is to maximize relevance, and each act of ostensive (purposeful and attention-grabbing) communication carries a “presumption of its own optimal relevance” (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 261). To discuss relevance in communication, however, one must first define how relevance is achieved.

Relevance, Sperber and Wilson argue, is the result of human information processing (1995, 46). Efficient information processing requires filtering out irrelevant stimuli from relevant ones. After all, processing information takes effort, and not all information is worth the effort – such as information that is already present in one’s cognition as old information, or even new information that is not connected to any old information (48). Relevance, instead, is achieved from the interaction of old and new information, from which more information – whether it be entirely new or simply strengthening or weakening prior beliefs – can be derived (48).

Information is processed from communication through inference. First, explicit information is inferred from the form of communication itself, such as the linguistic form of an utterance, with the help of reference-attribution, disambiguation, and enrichment (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 185). The inferred pieces of information, *explicatures*, consist of statements that can be judged either true or false (Forceville 2014, 4–5). For example, Tina telling Mark, “My husband will be home soon,” carries explicatures such as “Tina is married” and “Tina lives with her husband.” These explicatures can then be analyzed with *context* (situational information and prior knowledge and beliefs), to infer the *implicatures* of the utterance – what Tina is implying with the utterance and what the purpose of the utterance is (5). In the previous example situation, depending on the contextual information the two people share, an implicature Mark could draw from the utterance is that Tina wants him to leave. Or, alternatively, Tina might be informing Mark that he will not need to wait for her husband to arrive much longer. Therefore, Tina must be confident that she and Mark share enough contextual information for him to infer the correct implicature from her utterance. The less contextual information they share, the more explicit she needs to be in her communication.

According to Relevance Theory, human cognition is geared towards maximizing relevance at the lowest level of effort possible. In communication, the addressee defaults to interpretations of an utterance that require the least processing effort, and only moves onto the next possible interpretation if the first interpretation does not result in relevant information (Sperber and Wilson

1995, 185). The less explicit the communication is and the less contextual information the addressee possesses, the more effort the inference process requires. Inferring relevant information in communication, then, happens by balancing the effort of the process and the effect of the results (125–128). In this process, the interpretations that result in the largest effect for the least effort are chosen over other possible interpretations with weaker results (125).

Relevance Theory has its basis in Grice's co-operative principle and maxims, although the theories have key differences. In Grice's account, the context used for inferring the implicatures of an utterance simply aids in filtering out inappropriate interpretations, whereas Relevance Theory argues that context includes information that is necessary to infer implicatures at all (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 37). Sperber and Wilson view the search for relevance as a subconscious and rational instinct for both the addresser and the addressee, as opposed to a consciously pursued goal – which they argue Grice's principles and maxims are (271). In addition, Sperber and Wilson argue that Grice's principles are rather vaguely defined, while some of the key concepts mentioned in the maxims are left entirely undefined (35). Consequently, instead of concerning itself with each of Grice's four maxims (quantity, quality, relation, and manner), Relevance Theory focuses on the maxim of relation as the most important maxim, to which the others are subservient (Forceville 2014, 2).

In a communication situation, both the communicator and the addressee have subconscious expectations on the relevance of the communication. The communicator begins by grabbing the addressee's attention, signaling with this ostension that the communicator believes the communication will be worth processing for the addressee (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 49). The addressee, in turn, recognizes this and begins to analyze the communication, expecting it to provide relevant information at an optimal level of effort. The aim for the communicator is to alter the addressee's cognitive environment by having them accept the information as true or probably true (39–46).

In mass-communication, however, the addressee may be whoever finds the communication relevant (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 158). This lowers the level of control the communicator has on the implicatures addressees derive, although mass-media communication usually has a specific target audience. The low level of control over implicatures may be seen in film interpretation, where the variety within a group of viewers of the same film likely creates numerous different interpretations of the content, ranging from the intended interpretation to entirely opposing views (Desilla 2012,

32–33). Indeed, it is important to note that since different addressees (even in well-defined target audiences) have different backgrounds, wants, needs, and contexts in a communication situation, relevance is always individual (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 142; Forceville 2014, 6).

While Sperber and Wilson (1995, 175) and Forceville (2014, 11) all note that a communicator of mass-communication and non-verbal communication has little control over the implicatures drawn by the addressees of the communication, the pursuit of relevance has a role in these forms of communication as well. In fact, non-verbal multimodal mass-communication often includes acts of ostension, just as direct face-to-face communication does. Instead of, e.g., clearing one's throat or saying the addressee's name to get their attention, however, ostension in mass-communication can be performed by sounds like radio jingles and car horns or visual cues such as bright colors and large sizes (Forceville 2014, 13).

In addition, when inferring implicatures in search of relevance in multimodal communication, audiences lean heavily on their previous knowledge of the genre of the message (Forceville 2014, 11–12). Once a person's subconscious recognizes a specific form of communication as belonging to, e.g., the genre of comedy instead of the horror or advertisement genres, the person can reliably interpret the communicated messages using the norms of the comedy genre. Think, for instance, of the difference in information viewers could infer from a character's lost shoe being found in a stairwell in a comedy versus in a horror film.

As subtitles are a part of the analysis of this thesis, the restrictions of subtitles as a medium of communication should also be considered. While an original work of film or television has the potential of using each of the modalities available to it in communicating with its target audience, transferring that original work to be viewed by a separate audience applies many restrictions. These restrictions are not merely linguistic and cultural but also cognitive and technical. The audience's reading speed, spatiotemporal norms in subtitling, and the lacking complexity of the text mode in comparison to performed dialogue all affect the translation process (Guillot 2019, 34–36). For example, according to the Finnish subtitling quality guidelines (Käännöstekstitysten laatusuosituks<sup>2</sup> 2020, 1–7), subtitles should take one or two lines of space at the bottom of the screen for 1.8–7 seconds at a time, assuming an average adult reading speed of roughly 12–14 characters per second. At maximum, this means 98 characters of on-screen text at a time, which viewers must be able to read while also paying attention to the visuals. Netflix, however, also has its own Finnish and general subtitling style guides, according to which subtitles on the service should



remain on-screen for 0.83–7 seconds (2022b), one line of subtitles is limited to 42 characters, and the maximum reading speed for adults is considered 17 characters per second (2022a).

### 3 Research Data and Method

The data used in this thesis consists of different visual cues that are used in film and television to communicate implicatures. For the purposes of this thesis, these cues are called visual narrative elements (VNEs). Differing from just any visuals in a scene, a VNE is an object or text on the screen that a film or show ostensibly focuses on and uses to advance its story. What is important to the narrative in showing such an object is not the object itself but what implicatures the audience is expected or able to infer from it – what its relevance to the audience is. For instance, a show transitioning from one location via fade-in to a sign that reads “MOTEL” with a motel-looking building in the background behind it does not simply call the audience to accept that the building is a motel, or that the motel exists (explicatures) – it additionally and more importantly implies that the following scene takes place in or at a motel (implicature). The sign, when used this way, is not simply an item used to decorate the scene but a way to direct the narrative when transitioning between scenes, carrying the implication that the place and/or time has changed after the previous scene. Recognizing and interpreting VNEs, thus, becomes necessary to draw certain pieces of information from storytelling.

The data for this thesis was collected in spring 2020 from the American crime drama series *Breaking Bad* and its Finnish subtitles on Netflix. The show received high praise and numerous awards and nominations after becoming a global hit. The storytelling in *Breaking Bad* includes contributions from auditive and visual modes alike, which makes the show a good source of data for the purposes of this thesis.

The show follows the family of Walter White, a high school chemistry teacher who is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. To pay for his treatment and provide a wealthy life for his wife Skyler, their son Walter Jr., and their unborn daughter after his inevitable passing, Walter secretly joins drug dealer Jesse Pinkman in making and selling methamphetamine. Much of the show and its visual storytelling centers on the duo’s illegal business, the police working to catch them, and Walter hiding the dark side of his life from his family.

To provide the thesis with a diverse pool of data, data was collected from the entire first season of the show, which consists of seven episodes – each roughly 48 minutes long. This process included

watching several episodes of the show to gain an overview of the show's narrative and visual style. The episodes were then viewed again, this time with close attention paid to each VNE. The data collected included each found VNE, the way the VNE was presented to the audience, explicatures the VNE communicated, implicatures inferred from the VNE, and whether the VNE (or the proposed implicature) was subtitled. If the VNE was not subtitled (either in full or at all), possible reasons for this were also considered.

After the data was collected, five categories emerged from the apparent narrative purposes of the VNEs. These categories are, in order of most to fewest VNEs: (1) *Setting the Scene*, (2) *Inner Thought*, (3) *Character Profile*, (4) *Twist*, and (5) *Comic Relief*. Once the VNEs were divided into their respective categories, the categories were checked for any trends and differences in the numbers of translated/not translated VNEs.

Finally, a selection of VNEs was transcribed for the thesis to demonstrate and analyze the functions of VNEs. The examples of VNEs in context were transcribed using Taylor's multimodal transcription method (2016), which includes the visual frame (courtesy of Sony Pictures Television), a description of the visual frame, a description of the sounds in the scene, and the subtitle shown on-screen as well as its direct English equivalent or literal translation back into English in parentheses (author translated).

## **4 Visual Narrative Elements in *Breaking Bad***

A total of 42 VNEs were found in season one of *Breaking Bad*. Out of these 42 cases, 23 received a subtitle translation, while three were translated partially and 16 were left entirely without a subtitle. A vast majority (39) of the VNEs are fully or mostly text-based. In addition to dividing the VNEs into the five categories mentioned in the previous section, six cases could be considered realia – culture-specific items, which may be difficult to understand for viewers outside the specific culture without previous knowledge of the items.

The next sections will discuss each of the five main categories and the extra Realia category with examples of how VNEs are used to progress the narrative of the show.

### **4.1 Setting the Scene**


Setting the Scene is the largest category of VNEs. The elements in this category may be seen in film and television often, and they are used to give the audience information about a scene. This

information often consists of a change in time and/or space, while it can also signal a change in actions or attitudes. On each occasion of these VNEs in season one of *Breaking Bad*, the VNE opens a new scene and immediately lets the audience know what is currently happening. Consider the difference between setting a scene in film versus improvised theater: the audience cannot see through the eyes of a theater performer’s imagination, so the performer must set the scene explicitly, e.g., by stating out loud, “here we are at the farmer’s market.” Film and television, however, have the advantage of using visuals and other modes of communication to pass similar information to the audience more implicitly.

Twelve VNEs of the Setting the Scene variety were found in the data. All twelve are text-based. Seven of them were included in the subtitles, while four were not. One case was partially translated.

Table 1 shows a very common use of a Setting the Scene VNE.

*Table 1: Multimodal transcription of Breaking Bad S01E01 “Pilot” (04:07–04:11)*

Visual frame	Visual image + kinesic action	Soundtrack	Subtitle
	Fade-in from black. A white house with a white car parked in the driveway. The text “THREE WEEKS EARLIER” fades in.	Silence.	“KOLME VIIKKOA AIEMMIN”  (THREE WEEKS EARLIER)

*Freeze frame: Breaking Bad courtesy of Sony Pictures Television*

The explicatures of the VNE in Table 1 are clear: the VNE signals a change in both time and space. Based on the VNE, the context it is presented in, and most viewers previous experience of films and television, the implicatures of this VNE are (1) that the previous scene or event is “present time” and the scenes following the VNE are in the past and (2) that the following scenes will explain the events that lead to the present situation. The previous scene was the show’s opening scene, where we see Walter driving an RV in the desert during daytime, while wearing nothing but underwear and a gas mask, with three unconscious or dead bodies in the vehicle. Walter crashes the vehicle in a ditch and hears sirens, and after filming a goodbye to his family with a video camera, he walks into the middle of the road and raises a handgun towards who he thinks will be the police. The “THREE WEEKS EARLIER” VNE promises the audience an answer to the exact question on their minds: how did this man get into this situation?

Table 2 displays an example of a simultaneous change in time, space, and action.

Table 2: Multimodal transcription of *Breaking Bad* S01E01 “Pilot” (35:12–35:26)

Visual frame	Visual image + kinesic action	Soundtrack	Subtitle
	Jesse looks at Walter, smiling.	Jesse speaks. “But a mobile meth lab – that’d be the bomb.”	“Liikkuva huumelabra. Se vasta olisi jotain.”  (A moving meth lab. Now that would be something.)
	The camera switches back and forth between Walter and Jesse. Walter looks at Jesse and away, in turns, and nods.	Jesse speaks. “Drive way out in the boonies. Be all evasive.”	”Voisimme ajaa landelle.” ”Vältellä poliiseja.”  (We could drive to the countryside.) (Avoid the police.)
	Cut to MESA Credit Union. The sliding door opens. Walter walks out, putting something in his jacket’s breast pocket.	Sound of sliding door opening. Music plays in the background.	“LUOTTOYHTIÖ”  (CREDIT COMPANY)

Freeze frames: *Breaking Bad* courtesy of Sony Pictures Television

The VNE in Table 2 is the MESA CREDIT UNION sign in the background. In the previous scene (first two rows), Walter and Jesse discuss their need to buy an RV to cook methamphetamine in. The scene then cuts into another scene (third row) with the credit union sign. Two explicatures may be drawn from this: (1) the setting has changed and (2) the time has likely also changed. The sign showing the exact location, preceded by the conversation about needing an RV, gives the audience the implicature: Walter withdrew money for the RV. VNEs such as the sign are important to translate because they involve text. A viewer is expected to infer a specific implicature from the text and the context of the story around it, which may be impossible for viewers who do not understand English.

## 4.2 Inner Thought

Visual narrative elements that express characters’ inner thoughts can be used as substitutes for spoken lines of dialogue. They could be considered a more subtle manner of expression than

speech; rather than having a character state out loud, “I feel sad,” filmmakers might prefer showing the character longingly looking at a picture of a loved one who has passed away.

A total of ten VNEs in the data implicate a character’s inner thoughts. The VNEs in this category were translated roughly as often as those in the Setting the Scene category, with seven of them translated and three omitted.

In Table 3, we see a change in Walter’s thinking through an Inner Thought VNE.


Table 3: Multimodal transcription of *Breaking Bad* S01E05 “Gray Matter” (39:43–39:47)

Visual frame	Visual image + kinesic action	Soundtrack	Subtitle
	Walter looks over to Skyler’s nightstand and touches the books on it. The two clearest titles read: “HEALING Gourmet – Eat to Fight Cancer” “Taking Care of Your Child – A Parent’s Guide to Medical Care”	Melancholy music plays in the background.	“Parantava gourmet: ruoalla syöpää vastaan” ”Näin hoidat lastasi”  (Healing gourmet: against cancer with food)  (How to take care of your child)

Freeze frame: *Breaking Bad* courtesy of Sony Pictures Television

The context of the previous scene is an intervention. Walter’s family tries to make him understand that him refusing to get fully paid cancer treatment is hurting the family. Walter then explains that he does not wish to prolong death and spend the rest of his days too weak to do anything. The scene ends with him choosing not to get the treatment. The episode then transitions into the next scene, where Walter wakes up alone in bed. Missing his wife, Skyler, he hugs her pillow and stares at the books on her nightstand – this scene’s VNEs. Some of the title fonts may be too small to read in this shot, but a later close-up (Table 4) shows the book titles a second time with each of the titles clearly visible.

Table 4: Multimodal transcription of *Breaking Bad* S01E05 “Gray Matter” (40:06–40:11)



Visual frame	Visual image + kinesic action	Soundtrack	Subtitle
	<p>Walter puts a tub of lotion back on top of the books. The three other books’ titles are now clearly visible:</p> <p>“How Babies Talk”</p> <p>“THE VERY BEST BABY NAME BOOK”</p> <p>“While Waiting”</p>	<p>Melancholy music plays in the background.</p>	<p>“Kuinka vauvat puhuvat”</p> <p>(How babies speak)</p>

Freeze frame: *Breaking Bad* courtesy of Sony Pictures Television

The books’ titles reveal that one of them is about fighting cancer with a diet, while the other four are books on childcare and pregnancy. This could signal that Walter reconsiders the treatment because of his unborn child – the four-to-one ratio of childcare versus cancer treatment books possibly gives Walter a perspective of the baby being even more meaningful to his family than his illness. The ratio is represented in the subtitles only as two-to-one, which is likely due to the time and space restraints of subtitles: the subtitles in Table 3 take up the maximum number of characters at a reading speed of 14 characters per second (although Table 4 shows the titles for longer and the subtitle includes only one book title). Although the books being shown twice in the scene offered the possibility for a different approach with the subtitles (e.g., emphasizing the childcare books in the second shot), the translator may also simply have considered three translated titles to be enough. Finally (in dialogue that occurs after Table 4), Walter tells Skyler that he will get the treatment after all. The purpose of the VNEs, then, could be interpreted as giving the viewer Walter’s reasoning for changing his decision: he does it for his family, not for himself.

The example of an Inner Thought VNE in Table 5 shows a change of mind similar to Tables 3 and 4.

Table 5: Multimodal transcription of *Breaking Bad* S01E05 “Gray Matter” (03:32–03:40)

Visual frame	Visual image + kinesic action	Soundtrack	Subtitle
	Jesse picks up a newspaper. There are red circles in the classifieds section. Badger waves a sign in the background.	Badger speaks to passersby. “This way to savings!” Music plays in the background.	-
	Jesse sighs and leans his head back, looking up and then out of the window.	Jesse sighs. Badger speaks to passersby. “C’mon! Save some money!”	“Tulkaa säästämään rahaa!”  (Come save money!)

Freeze frames: *Breaking Bad* courtesy of Sony Pictures Television

The VNE in the first row of Table 5 is the newspaper’s classifieds section and the red circles drawn in it. In this shot, Jesse has just finished an interview for a job that he thought would include sales but was instead a degrading advertisement job. He then spoke to his friend, Badger, who tried to convince Jesse to start cooking methamphetamine with him. Returning to his car, Jesse picks up a newspaper where he has circled jobs that he wants to get. The purpose of the newspaper in this shot is likely to imply that the job interview that was just shown is not the only one Jesse had considered, but he is in fact desperately searching for any decent job he is able to get. It is this VNE, together with the previous job interview scene and the clear frustration in Jesse’s facial expression (second row), that express his struggle with trying to live a normal, law-abiding life. Jesse exiting the car after these shots indicates that staring at the job listings after an embarrassing interview finally changed his mind about Badger’s offer.

Unlike the previous examples, this VNE was left out of the subtitle, even though the name of the section is (partially) shown. What makes this problematic for Finnish, non-English speaking viewers is that (a) the name is in English and (b) the role of classifieds sections in Finnish newspapers has reduced over the years, which could cause unfamiliarity with the concept. If viewers are well-versed in the English language or American cinema, they may be able to catch this detail and its implicature, but for others it is an impossible task.



### 4.3 Character Profile

The Character Profile category consists of VNEs that give the audience information about a character’s personality or personal history. The role of these VNEs is to add depth to characters outside of dialogue or other scenes. By using VNEs, the audience can be left hints about characters along the storyline instead of focusing on the character and giving the audience all information about the character explicitly.


VNEs in this category are as numerous as those in the Inner Thought category – a total of ten instances. Unlike the Setting the Scene or Inner Thought categories, however, Character Profile VNEs were translated as many times as they were omitted; four cases were translated, four were omitted, and one instance was partially translated.

The first example of a Character profile VNE in Table 6 is one that is important to the story in *Breaking Bad*.

Table 6: Multimodal transcription of *Breaking Bad* S01E01 “Pilot” (04:54–05:03)

Visual frame	Visual image + kinesic action	Soundtrack	Subtitle
	<p>A dark room. Walter slowly pedals a stair-stepper. Walter stops, staring forward.</p>	<p>Stair-stepper squeaks. Walter coughs. Squeaking stops.</p> <p>Ominous music plays in the background.</p>	<p>-</p>
	<p>Cut to a plaque on the wall. The plaque reads:</p> <p>“SCIENCE RESEARCH CENTER LOS ALAMOS, NEW MEXICO</p> <p>Hereby recognizes WALTER H. WHITE</p> <p>CRYSTALLOGRAPHY PROJECT LEADER FOR PROTON RADIOGRAPHY</p> <p>1985</p> <p>CONTRIBUTOR TO RESEARCH AWARDED THE NOBEL PRIZE”</p>	<p>Ominous music plays in the background.</p>	<p>-</p>



	<p>Extreme close-up of the plaque, highlighting the words “PROTON RADIOGRAPHY,” “1985,” “RESEARCH,” and “NOBEL PRIZE.”</p>	<p>Ominous music plays in the background.</p>	<p>“NOBEL-PALKINTO RADIOGRAFIASTA”  (NOBEL PRIZE FOR RADIOGRAPHY)</p>
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*Freeze frames: Breaking Bad courtesy of Sony Pictures Television*

The shots in Table 6 are shown at the start of the show, soon after the opening scene and the “THREE WEEKS EARLIER” Setting the Scene VNE. The audience now begins to learn more about Walter, who seems unable to sleep and is instead using a stair-stepper in the middle of the night (first row). The scene then cuts to an award plaque (second row). The plaque is shown clearly, and its text gives the audience the explicature that Walter has been recognized for his contribution to Nobel Prize-winning research. The implicature to be inferred from this VNE appears to be that Walter is an accomplished scientist – or rather that he *was* an accomplished scientist, as the plaque is dated over two decades prior to the events of the show. Walter’s past accomplishments are later also juxtaposed by the knowledge that Walter now works as a high school teacher.

The translation of the VNE described in Table 6 is somewhat lacking. When the entire plaque is shown (second row), the text is not subtitled. This, however, seems to be because the scene then transitions to an extreme close-up of the plaque (third row), which shows arguably the most important part of the text, which is then subtitled in short. Finnish viewers ultimately are expected to recognize that the plaque is some kind of award from 1985, notice that the name on it is Walter’s, and the subtitle then fills in (albeit incorrectly) the most important information: Walter was awarded the Nobel Prize for his work in radiography in 1985, which the audience may expect to have been long ago. While the translation of the main points of the VNE is flawed, it could still be considered to give the Finnish audience enough information to arrive at the same or similar implicature as an American audience would.

Table 7 shows an example of how a character’s personality type is implied in the show through a visual cue.

Table 7: Multimodal transcription of *Breaking Bad* S01E04 “Cancer Man” (22:54–22:56)

Visual frame	Visual image + kinesic action	Soundtrack	Subtitle
	<p>The car is parked, unmoving. Focused on the license plate, which reads “KEN WINS.”</p>	<p>Walter’s car’s engine hums in the background.</p>	<p>“KEN VOITTA”  (KEN WINS)</p>

Freeze frame: *Breaking Bad* courtesy of Sony Pictures Television

Context, as always, is important for the VNE presented in Table 7. In the scene, Walter arrives at a bank parking lot. He patiently waits for another customer to reverse a car out of a parking spot when another person suddenly speeds in to take the spot away from him. The driver then leaves the car, talking on his phone. Then, the audience is shown the shot in Table 7. The license plate reading “KEN WINS” implies the driver’s personality, namely that the driver is (overly) confident and competitive. The audience most likely will find the text an annoying character detail in addition to the character’s behavior, and the implicature of the license plate seems to be that Ken (the driver) is an obnoxious jerk. This interpretation of the VNE is confirmed by the following scene, where Ken continues talking on the phone and using very rude and misogynistic language.

The Character Profile VNEs, therefore, can be viewed as information about characters that is communicated implicitly by means of visual cues. The same information could just as well be presented in dialogue, but this is unlikely for every character or all information about one character in a large role, as this would clutter a show with dialogue.


#### 4.4 Twist

Five VNEs in the data were categorized as Twist VNEs. Three out of the five received subtitles, while the remaining two did not.

Although VNEs from each of the previously discussed categories could be used for indicating some type of change, the Twist VNEs arguably have the most direct effect on the narrative. Instead of a change in the setting or time of a scene, or one in a character’s thoughts, or in the audience’s knowledge of a character, the Twist category of VNEs involves a change in the plot itself. It juxtaposes the previous direction of the story, or it changes the audience’s awareness of the events of the story in a meaningful way.

An example in Table 8 demonstrates a VNE that directly impacts the direction of the story in an episode.

Table 8: Multimodal transcription of *Breaking Bad* S01E01 “Pilot” (26:52–26:53)

Visual frame	Visual image + kinesic action	Soundtrack	Subtitle
	<p>A red car is parked. Focused on the license plate, which reads “THE CAPN.”</p> <p>The car begins driving away.</p>	<p>Upbeat acoustic guitar music plays.</p> <p>Car tires squeal, engine roars.</p>	<p>“KAPU”</p> <p>(CAP’N)</p>


Freeze frame: *Breaking Bad* courtesy of Sony Pictures Television

The VNE in Table 8 is shown at the end of a scene that begins with Walter in a car with two DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) agents. While the DEA raids a house with the suspected meth lab of a person known as Captain Cook, Walter waits in the car before being allowed inside. Sitting in the car, Walter sees a man getting dressed and climbing down a window on the second floor of the house. He recognizes the man as Jesse Pinkman and gets out of the car to watch Jesse leave the area. The scene ends with Walter seeing the back of Jesse’s car (Table 8) and the license plate and repeating the text quietly to himself.

Interpreting this VNE less than 27 minutes into the first episode of the show relies entirely on three pieces of information presented in the scene: (1) the DEA is searching for a methamphetamine dealer known as Captain Cook, (2) Walter recognizes the escaping man, who has not been introduced to the audience yet, as Jesse, and (3) Jesse drives a car with the license plate, “THE CAPN.” Together, these pieces of information act as the explicatures and the context for two implicatures that become central to the story: Jesse is Captain Cook, and Walter knows a person who makes and sells methamphetamine.

Table 9 stems from much later in the story, where the VNE described in the table juxtaposes the events that preceded it.

Table 9: Multimodal transcription of *Breaking Bad* S01E07 “A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal” (35:00–35:05)

Visual frame	Visual image + kinesic action	Soundtrack	Subtitle
	<p>A woman in a yellow suit attaches a rope of pennant flags to a sign.</p> <p>The sign reads, “SUNNY REALTY – Today! FOR SALE OPEN HOUSE”</p>	<p>Steps on grass.</p> <p>Birds caw in the background.</p>	<p>“SUNNY REALTY Tänään!”</p> <p>”MYYTÄVÄNÄ ESITTELY”</p> <p>(SUNNY REALTY Today!)</p> <p>(FOR SALE SHOWING)</p>

Freeze frame: *Breaking Bad* courtesy of Sony Pictures Television

In the scene prior to the VNE in Table 9, after their mobile meth lab RV is revealed to be broken, Walter and Jesse decide to make methamphetamine in the basement of Jesse’s house. As they begin, Jesse tries to call the realty company he hired to sell the house to make sure no one tries to enter the house while they work. However, the scene transitions to the realty agent’s phone inside a car, while the agent is decorating the front yard of the house with pennant flags and an open house sign.

The context of the previous scene and the VNE are crucial for understanding the implicatures of the scene in Table 9. Not only is it revealed that the realty agent herself is already outside the house, but the VNE suggests that even more people are potentially going to come inside. The twist, then, is communicated in the form of the VNE and its implicatures, which present an opposition to the main characters’ wishes and promises an incoming conflict and tension in the story.

## 4.5 Comic Relief

The Comic Relief category of VNEs differs from the other four categories in its role in the show. While the other four categories describe the scenes, characters and their thoughts, and twists in the narrative, the Comic Relief VNEs rather break up the narrative. Writers often utilize moments of humor to relieve tension and to prevent a serious scene from becoming overwhelming (Literary Terms, n.d.). For example, instead of Walter’s cancer treatment intervention scene being entirely serious, the scene involves each person in the room speaking in turn, but only while holding a

pillow with the text, “Find Joy in the Little Things.” So, while these VNEs do not directly add to the narrative in the way of the other categories, they are narrative tools, nonetheless.

Four VNEs were found in season one of *Breaking Bad* that were categorized as Comic Relief VNEs. Only one was translated in full, while another was partially translated, and two were not translated at all.

Table 10 describes a VNE that was interpreted as partially translated.

Table 10: Multimodal transcription of *Breaking Bad* S01E02 “The Cat’s in the Bag” (14:52–14:54)

Visual frame	Visual image + kinesic action	Soundtrack	Subtitle
	<p>Jesse’s website. Focused on a section on his interests and educational background.</p> <p>Text, “MILF’s, MILF’s, MILF’s, MILF’s!” boldened at the bottom of the interests.</p>	<p>Rap music plays in the background.</p>	<p>“KIINNOSTUKSEN KOHTEET: MILF”</p> <p>(TARGETS OF INTEREST: MILF)</p>

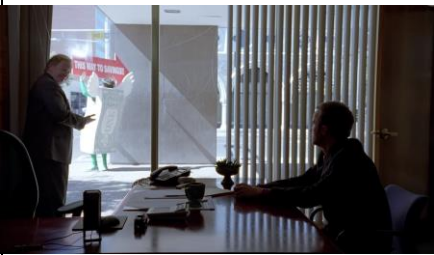
Freeze frame: *Breaking Bad* courtesy of Sony Pictures Television

The scene Table 10 describes shows Skyler searching for information on a person she heard Walter having a phone conversation with, which he lied about. She finds the person’s (Jesse’s) website, which includes pictures and information on him, much of it related to drugs and his sex life. Skyler stops to read a section on his general interests, which includes the Comic Relief VNE. While the text (“MILF’S, MILF’s, MILF’s, MILF’s!!”) might not need to be focused on for the story, that specific text is highlighted from the rest of the section with bolded font, as well as Skyler reading “MILF’s” out loud and wondering what it means. The implicated humorous aspect here being that she, a mother, wonders what Jesse’s interest in MILF’s (“mothers I would like to have sex with,” to put it in milder terms) means.

The VNE in Table 10 is technically translated, but the problem for parts of the audience may be that they, like Skyler, do not necessarily know what the acronym, MILF, means. When the acronym is left unopened, viewers without knowledge of its meaning are left without the effect of the implicated comic relief.

In Table 11, we see an example of a Comic Relief VNE that is only partly text-based.

Table 11: Multimodal transcription of *Breaking Bad* S01E05 “Gray Matter” (01:10–01:15)

Visual frame	Visual image + kinesic action	Soundtrack	Subtitle
	<p>Jesse sits at a desk at a job interview. The interviewer draws back the window blinds.</p> <p>Outside the window, a man dances in a dollar bill costume with wings on it. The man waves a “THIS WAY TO SAVINGS!!” sign at a passerby.</p> <p>The interviewer smiles at Jesse. Jesse sighs and lowers his head.</p>	<p>The window blinds rattle.</p> <p>Jesse sighs.</p>	<p>-</p>

*Freeze frame: Breaking Bad courtesy of Sony Pictures Television*

Episode five of the season opens with the job interview that leads to the scene described earlier in Table 5. At the end of the job interview, it is revealed that Jesse was mistaken on the nature of the job opening. The interviewer calls it an “advertising” job and demonstrates this by opening the window blinds (Table 11). Outside the window is Badger in a dollar costume, waving a sign at passersby to direct them to the business.

The VNE in Table 11 is the costume and the sign, which act as comic relief after the tension and Jesse’s apparent desperation in the job interview. It both relieves the tension and shows the audience the difficulty of Jesse’s situation.

While the costume itself is purely visual and untranslatable as such (outside of “ONE” in a large font and other smaller text normally found on a one-dollar bill), the text on the sign is fully visible in the shot in Table 11 as well as in the next scene but is not translated in either. This does not appear to be due to technical reasons, as there are no other subtitles in the shot, which is five seconds long and thus easily long enough for subtitles. It could be that the translator considered the text irrelevant (as it is a form of redundancy in combination with the costume and the interviewer saying “marketing” out loud) or because subtitles might distract the viewer from the visual.

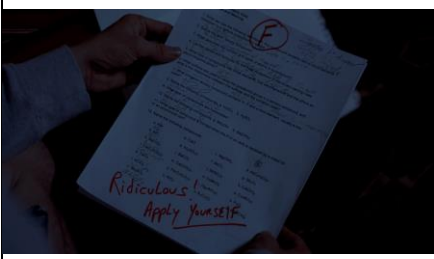
## 4.6 Realia

As most VNEs found in season one of *Breaking Bad* are text-based, the main obstacles for inferring implicatures for viewers outside the United States appear to be linguistic, cognitive, and technical. However, cultural differences between target audiences should also be considered.

Six VNEs from the main categories were additionally classified as Realia VNEs. The group consists of VNEs whose implicatures may only be inferred with knowledge of the American culture. Two of the VNEs belong to the Character Profile category, two to the Twist category, one to Inner Thought, and one to Comic Relief.

Interestingly, while more VNEs were subtitled in four of the five main categories than not, five of the six cases of Realia VNEs were left entirely without a translation. The only one of the six that was partially translated is shown in Table 12.

Table 12: Multimodal transcription of *Breaking Bad* S01E04 “Cancer Man” (34:33–34:42)

Visual frame	Visual image + kinesic action	Soundtrack	Subtitle
	Jesse holds an old chemistry exam. An F grade is marked at the top in red marker. At the bottom the text, “Ridiculous! Apply yourself” is underlined. Jesse sighs and looks thoughtful. Close-up of the text at the bottom.	Slow melancholic music plays in the background. Jesse sighs.	“Naurettavaa! Yrittäisit edes”  (Ridiculous! I wish you at least tried)

Freeze frame: *Breaking Bad* courtesy of Sony Pictures Television

Table 12 describes a part of a scene where Jesse browses through his childhood drawings at his parents’ house. Amongst the drawings he finds a caricature of Walter he drew on the back of a chemistry exam when Walter was his teacher. While Walter’s comment at the bottom of the exam paper is translated in the subtitles, the grade “F” is not. The grade here is considered a Realia VNE, as school grades in the United States span from A, the highest grade, to F, the lowest and failing grade (skipping E). School grades in Finland, however, use a numbered system, and knowing the American alphabetical system requires exposure to American culture through, e.g., film and television.




The VNE in Table 12 also serves as an example of how Relevance Theory aids in categorizing VNEs when they appear to overlap more than one category: in addition to being a Realia VNE, the VNE in Table 12 belongs to the Character Profile category, although it could also be considered an Inner Thought VNE. The VNE, Jesse’s facial expressions while reading it, and the relationship between Walter and adult Jesse give the audience information on the two characters’ history together. The scene enriches Jesse’s character, while also hinting at him reconsidering asking his judgmental old chemistry teacher to keep making methamphetamine with him. The VNE is considered Character Profile rather than Inner Thought because of the difference in explicitness: the caricature and Walter’s comments are much more explicit in revealing the characters’ past personalities and relationship to one another than Jesse’s facial expressions are in revealing his thought process. This difference in explicitness also results in a difference in information processing effort, as it takes the audience less work to infer the implicatures of the characters’ relationship than it does to infer the implicatures of a change in Jesse’s thinking.

Most of the VNEs in the Realia category, however, do not involve text. The example in Table 11, for instance, in addition to being a Comic Relief VNE, involves the Realia VNE of the advertising costume. These costumes may often be seen in American film and television, but they are perhaps less typical in Finnish advertising.

Table 13 describes one of the five Realia VNEs that were not translated at all.

Table 13: Multimodal transcription of *Breaking Bad* S01E05 “Gray Matter” (21:49)

Visual frame	Visual image + kinesic action	Soundtrack	Subtitle
	<p>Walter Jr. stands in front of the doors of a convenience store, his back to the camera.</p> <p>Two of Walter Jr.’s friends stand further back.</p> <p>A man stands in front of Walter Jr. The man takes his police badge from his pocket, opens it, and shows it to Walter Jr.</p>	<p>The man speaks.</p> <p>“Yea, it is.”</p>	<p>“Kyllä on.”</p> <p>(Yes, it is.)</p>

Freeze frame: *Breaking Bad* courtesy of Sony Pictures Television

In this scene, Walter Jr. is outside a convenience store, trying to trick a passerby to buy him and his other underage friends beer. The man Walter Jr. asks to do it, however, is a police officer in civilian



clothing. The officer communicates this information only by showing Walter Jr. his police badge, the scene's VNE.

VNEs of this type are generally not subtitled, as there is no text involved. However, to infer the correct implicature, the audience also requires the cultural knowledge of what an American police badge looks like. At minimum, the audience is expected to have seen similar scenes in other American films and shows, where officers can be seen showing their badges as a sign of their role. In Table 13's scene, it is never made explicit otherwise that the person is an officer, and the only signals to the audience that Walter Jr. is in trouble are that (1) his friends run away when the officer shows his badge, and (2) he receives a stern talking-to by the officer, his uncle, Hank, and his parents in the following scenes.

## 5 Discussion

The data for this thesis showcases different types of VNE uses in *Breaking Bad*, as well as how much the show emphasizes certain types of use over others. Most notably, VNEs appear to be used for communicating the audience information about the scene or the characters, with 32 out of the total 42 VNEs in the Setting the Scene, Inner Thought, and Character Profile categories. While Twist and Comic Relief VNEs are also used in important roles, the former three categories could be considered the main usage types – at the very least in season one of *Breaking Bad*.

VNEs were used in each episode examined, although how often they are used likely depends on the direction of the episodes, as all but two of the seven episodes were directed by different people. For example, while episode five (“Gray Matter”) included a total of twelve VNEs, only one VNE was found in episode six (“Crazy Handful of Nothin”). Each of the other five episodes utilizes a minimum of three VNEs. It may therefore not be guaranteed that VNEs can be found in every instance of multimodal storytelling. However, their role across season one of *Breaking Bad* suggests that their use in multimodal narratives is certainly plentiful enough to be worth one's attention.

A vast majority (39 out of 42) of the VNEs are entirely or mostly text-based, which makes them clear candidates for subtitling. As only 23 VNEs were translated in full and three were partially translated, this leaves 13 text-based VNEs unaccounted for. As may be expected, the three non-text-based VNEs were not subtitled.

Although nearly half of the VNEs were left without subtitles, the subtitling rates were relatively high for the more dominant categories (with partial translations counting as halves). Inner Thought (70.0% subtitled), Setting the Scene (62.5%), and Twist (60.0%) VNEs were translated most often, while those in the Character Profile category were translated over half the time (55.0%). Comic Relief VNEs, however, were translated 37.5% of the time, while the Realia VNEs throughout the main categories received only one partial translation (8.0%). Many of the omissions appear to be because of redundancy, as information on characters and a scene is often also represented in other ways in and around the scene. This appears to explain most of the omissions of Character Profile VNEs, while Comic Relief and Realia VNEs include many cases of non-textual visual elements.

Other contextual factors outside the VNE pointing towards the same implicatures is consistent with Lautenbacher's argument about the use of redundancy. According to Lautenbacher, redundancy and its use in building cohesion are not only common in multimodal communication, but they are necessary for multimodal communication to work (2018, 215). In fact, it could be argued that out of the 16 times VNEs were not subtitled in the episodes, only twice the implicature could not be inferred at all from the VNE's surrounding elements. However, even though this would point towards the VNEs being a part of a net of redundancy, Lautenbacher also argues that altering this net would alter the cohesion each part builds, which could impact how a viewer interprets the information (225). Many of the VNEs omitted in the subtitles also occurred without other modes' interference, i.e., not in an otherwise busy scene or during dialogue that would have required the subtitling time and space. Translating especially text-based VNEs in these situations should, then, be encouraged.

To answer the question of what gets "lost in translation," we could then point to a loss of redundancy and cohesive elements. However, sections of the Finnish Netflix audience of *Breaking Bad* also lose information on characters and their personal stories within the main narrative, such as Jesse's struggles with employment shown in Table 5. Additionally, we could consider what it would mean if some of the VNEs translated were instead not translated. This could happen due to variety in translators or other circumstances, as might be evidenced by episode five's ("Gray Matter") low translation rate at four out of twelve VNEs translated (33.3%), while five out of the seven episodes had a translation rate of at least 62.5%. If VNEs are left unaddressed in the subtitling process, the audience may be deprived of information on the story and its characters, cohesion within and between scenes, orientation at the start of a new scene, comic relief in tense scenes, realia, etc.

In some cases, however, the complexity of multimodal communication and the restrictions of subtitling make decision-making on VNEs difficult. Especially when a VNE occurs simultaneously with dialogue, it may be difficult to account for both in the subtitles. Braun, on the other hand, argues against the idea of subtitling as a restricted form of translation and suggests that multimodal analysis and careful decision-making simply require time and effort (2016, 308). This process is where Relevance Theory can be an effective tool.

Translators act first as viewers who infer implicatures from the storytelling, and they must then attempt to communicate these same implicatures to the target audience (Lautenbacher 2018, 227). They can use relevance as a guide to make economical choices in the translation process and grant the target audience access to the relevant information with as little effort as possible, while reserving the ability to communicate wordplay, humor, and cultural factors that require extra processing effort by the viewer (Bogucki 2022, 117–118). What makes careful analysis of the multimodal content and the relevance within it necessary is Lautenbacher's argument on the cohesion built by redundancy. Translators should not simply abandon redundancy for relevance but consider inferring implicatures from all available stimulants to be a part of the viewing experience (Lautenbacher 2018, 227).

Further research into the topic is certainly needed. For instance, the scope of this thesis did not allow for a deeper look at the circumstances of each case of VNE omission in the subtitles. Studying these circumstances could reveal more about why VNEs are omitted and how this might affect the cohesion of the scene or story.

The data of this thesis also produced an outlier: boxes of cold medication in episode five ("Gray Matter"), which were clearly focused on in a scene as an ingredient for methamphetamine. The boxes were considered a VNE, although they did not fit cleanly into any of the categories formed based on the rest of the data. This specific VNE appeared to suggest two implicatures: (1) methamphetamine can be made from cold medicine, and (2) Badger likely had to scour through pharmacies for 1–2 boxes per purchase. The boxes did not open a scene, nor did they particularly reveal information about a character's personality or inner thoughts. It could be that one of the categories requires some expansion – or an additional category is required for similar instances, where the VNEs imply an action previously done by a character or information about an action about to be performed.

Additionally, studying the decision-making of translators from a Relevance Theory perspective could help us further understand the theory's applicability in the field. Relevance Theory is considered a cognitive instinct, as opposed to conscious decision-making (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 162), which would suggest that translators, as communicators between languages and cultures, instinctively search for relevance within the source text and attempt to relay the appropriate relevance in the target text. Research could help verify this, as well as point towards possible contradictions between the theory and translation practice. Could conscious consideration of relevance help translators make appropriate decisions? Would findings differ in dubbed content?

## **6 Conclusions**

This thesis aimed to discover what kind of information is communicated visually about the narrative in film and television from a Relevance Theory viewpoint. By studying the visual narrative elements in *Breaking Bad*, it was found that the show utilizes VNEs to communicate information about scenes, characters and their thoughts, twists in the story, as well as moments of comic relief.

As forms of multimodal mass-communication, film and television use each of the modes available to them to advance their stories. With visuals, this happens not only through explicit visual communication, but also by communicating viewers information that allows them to infer implied meanings on their own. As films and television shows are brought to the international market, some of the narrative elements must be altered. It is therefore important for translators to be aware of relevance and implicatures as they attempt to re-create the original communication in a new language and viewing environment.

While the majority of the VNEs in the data were addressed in the show's Finnish subtitles on Netflix, many of them were not. Although the redundancy in cinematic communication allows some of the implicatures to be inferred even if a certain VNE was not translated and thus not understood, visual storytelling is a part of the original artistic work, and translators should strive for preserving it whenever possible.

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