

Reader Question: How do I handle characters speaking in a foreign language?

[Scott Myers](#)

Indicate the foreign language, but use English instead.

A question from Matt:

I am crafting a story, and the outline is pretty solid. I have fleshed out the characters, and I'm ready to start developing dialogue (and actually putting pen to paper on this script). Something keeps confusing me, however. My characters in early scenes should be speaking in Hungarian, and I don't know how to handle this. Should I be writing the English translations in the dialogue and mention in the scene setting what language they are speaking? Should I be writing the dialogue in Hungarian (if so, do I provide a translation)? Is it the director who should determine what language they actually speak? I am very confused.

To my knowledge, there's no absolutely right way to handle foreign language in a screenplay. In your case, Matt, chances are probably 99.9999% that anyone who reads your script in the U.S. is *not* going to know Hungarian. Logic dictates, therefore, you don't write the dialogue in the character's native language. Rather, you indicate the use of

a foreign language, but use English instead. Here's an example from *The Bourne Identity* written by Tony Gilroy:

INT. FISHING BOAT HEAD -- NIGHT Or
standing before a pitted, tarnished, cata
Staring at himself. And then he sp

 (in perfect French)
 (I don't know who I am. Do yo
 know who I am? Do have any ic
 who I am?) And then he
just beading on his forehead.

 (in perfect Dutch)
 (Tell me who I am. If you kno
 I am, please stop fucking arou
 and tell me.) No answer

Specify the language the character will actually be speaking in the movie, but use the English to get across the content with the assumption that the film will use subtitles.



Gilroy uses parenthesis. I prefer italics. For example, here is an excerpt from my proposed sequel to the franchise "The

Bourne Invasion":

INT. FISHING BOAT HEAD -- NIGHT On
standing before a pitted, tarnished, cat-
Staring at himself. And a really yucky te
emerges from his nostrils. And the

(in perfect Martian)

*Holy crap! I'm an alien! From
And I'm invading the Earth! I
courageous gendarme stops me!.*



Apart from understanding why the studio would prefer to hire Tony Gilroy instead of me, I like the italics because you

see it, you get it: Italics = Foreign Language. Whereas a parenthesis can get lost in the shuffle, especially when using parentethicals.

Speaking of which, if your characters use a foreign language for an entire scene, you can handle that by indicating it with the first character, then italics the rest of the way:

INT. POLICE STATION -- NIGHT [PARIS]
his nostril tentacle.

(in French)

*Bourne an alien from Mars. Who
And such a distasteful looking
tentacle!*

Whatever your approach, the goal is to clarity: Make sure the reader knows who's saying what in what language. And make it easy for them to read.

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