Across the world, audiences have become much more relaxed about watching imported foreign-language content. The launch of Channel 4’s global drama platform Walter Presents in January this year was a particular sign of the UK’s new tolerance for subtitles.

But beyond audiences watching dramas from other countries, it is notable how many series now combine multiple languages, such as Netflix drama Narcos, which blends English and Spanish to tell the story of Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar.

Another example is Canadian series Blood and Water, which is described as a compelling, character-driven crime drama that delves into the secrets and lies of a tight-knit family. The show, which is produced by Breakthrough Entertainment for Omni Television, stands out because it was produced in English, Mandarin and Cantonese.

Natalie Rodrigues, director of original programming for Omni parent Rogers, explains: “Different characters speak in all three languages organically throughout the show. Chinese subtitles are featured when English is spoken and English subtitles appear when Chinese is spoken so the widest possible audience can watch and follow the show.”

“We wanted a cross-cultural series for Omni that would resonate with a wider multigenerational and diverse audience. The premise of exploring family secrets allowed for a very relatable and fertile story world that would attract a wider audience – drawing viewers in and keeping them there with a crime story with real twists and turns.”

One of the starting points for the spaie of TV series now blending languages was Bron/Broen (aka The Bridge), the crime drama that brought police officers Sweden and Denmark together to solve a murder after a body is found on the Øresund Bridge, which links the two countries.

“The unusual thing with The Bridge is it didn’t start out as a creative idea, it started out as a question. We had difficulties getting into the Danish market. Swedish broadcasters were airing everything Danish but the Danish broadcasters never aired anything Swedish, so we asked ourselves how we could break our way into Denmark,” recalls executive producer and Filmance MD Lars Blomgren. “We sat down with the head of (Swedish pubcaster) SVT and tried to work out a crime drama that organically moved between the two countries because it could be in Danish in Denmark and in Swedish in Sweden. That’s how it all started.”

Seizing the chance to have a drama in two languages, where viewers in Denmark had subtitles for dialogue in Swedish and vice versa, made The Bridge part of a “new era” where the acceptance of subtitles is growing around the world, Blomgren adds.

Three different versions of the script were produced – a Swedish one, a Danish copy and a mixed version. And that’s just one example of the logistical challenges that Blomgren says make cross-border productions as “very difficult.”
He continues: “The upside is the creative side. We’re all interested in our neighbours and we can relate to the differences between the cultures. That’s good for the storytelling. And it’s also good for broadcasters because instead of one broadcaster paying 60% of the budget, you can have two broadcasters paying 30% each so it’s win-win for everyone.

“But it’s also very delicate because you don’t want it to become a Europudding. You don’t want to start bringing in actors just because they’re of a nationality that would bring more money to the table. It’s quite easy to do cross-border for solely financial reasons and we’re trying to stay away from that.”

The Bridge went on to have two adaptations. The first, commissioned by US cable channel FX, transplanted the story to the US-Mexico border, using English and Spanish, and ran for two seasons. The second remake began underwater, at the midpoint of the Channel Tunnel between England and France. Produced by Endemol Shine Group-owned Filmhouse’s sister company Kudos (Humans, Broadchurch), The Tunnel was a co-production between Sky Atlantic in the UK and France’s Canal+. Season one aired in 2013 and season two, called The Tunnel 2: Sabotage, will air this year.

Having screened The Bridge before it became an international hit and inspired by the idea of exploring Anglo-French relations, Kudos picked up the format for adaptation. But once the show did become a global success, the creative team was wary of leaning too much on the original.

“It was such a good show, it was pointless trying to imitate it. It would have been very uncreative and that’s not how we make programmes,” says Kudos exec producer Manda Levin. “We tried to take the concept and the compass points of the story but, within that, we felt we had to find our own way with it.

“These days with British crime drama, whatever you make, you’re constantly told you’re aping Scandi noir. I find that really frustrating because it’s a lazy way of grouping stories that are visceral, dark and melancholy and saying they’re all borrowing from the same source. Britain’s always had a tradition of making bleak but spiky and interesting crime drama. I didn’t feel that was what we were trying to do. We wanted to make it very French in its own way and very British with the humour.

The use of language was also important for The Tunnel’s creative team, with Levin asserting that the days of actors speaking English in “funny accents” are long gone.

“Sky Atlantic and Canal+ are ambitious art house channels that you would hope have an audience that’s happy to deal with subtitles,” she says. “For me, those scenes in which the characters are slipping into French and English are the best parts. We always try to say The Tunnel was the first fundamentally bilingual series in the UK. It definitely felt pioneering when we started, although now international drama has become so accessible to audiences, it’s nice to see many more subtitles on mainstream channels than there used to be. There’s been a real shift in what drama commissioners are prepared to commission and what audiences are prepared to watch.”

Following the success of The Bridge, which has run to three seasons with the possibility of a fourth to come, Filmhouse’s Blomgren says he has been approached about other series with a cross-border dynamic: “But in so many cases you feel it’s just a construction to finance the production, and that’s not the right way to do it. One border is enough. Once you bring in too many characters from too many nations, you can’t dig deep into characters because you have too many and it’s a very difficult game.”

However, one series that did bring together characters from a number of different...
WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT: MULTILINGUAL DRAMA

One border is enough. Once you bring in too many characters from too many nations, you can't dig deep into characters because you have too many and it's a very difficult game.

Lars Blomgren, Filmince

nations is The Team, a pan-European crime drama that unites a team of police officers who fight crime throughout the continent. Created by Peter Thorshoe and Mal Brotstrom (The Eagle, Modus), the series is shot in original languages with a cast headed by Lars Mikkelsen, Jasmin Great and Veerle Baetens. It is produced by Network Movie for ZDF in association with DR and distributed by ZDF Enterprises.

Wolfgang Feint, head of series and international coproductions at ZDF, says the idea for The Team was born out of a desire to follow up The Eagle, in which an Icelandic protagonist pursues criminals across Europe.

"The unique selling point is that The Team is a truly European series in which an organic cast investigates real cases and scour all of Europe to chase the criminals," he says. "What also makes the programme unique is the use of multiple languages - the immersion in original languages, whether Finnish, Danish, German or European English, is what keeps the investigators connected to one another."

Although hurdle characters speak in their native language added to the authenticity of the series, Feint says it was not without its challenges. "The implementation of different languages was easy, the challenge for the production consisted rather of the how, when and where our protagonists encounter one another," he reveals.

"We believe there is a trend to break down all linguistic barriers. Young people today want to watch TV series in their original version. Dubbing stopped convincing them long ago. And let's face it - it is the reality of our lives that language changes. We mix English and German into 'Denglish.' We borrow words from other languages, we make up new terms. We're creating world-spanning communication in the digital age with all these new forms of language."

Another Sky-Canal+ coproduction to use multiple languages is The Last Panthers, starring Samantha Morton, John Hurt, Tahar Rahim and Goran Bogdan. The six-part series, produced by Warp Films and Haut et Court, tells a fictional story based on the notorious real-life Pink Panther jewel thieves. It opens with a daring heist before delving into the dark heart of a Europe ruled by a shadowy alliance of gangsters and bankers.

With the action taking place across the UK, France and Serbia, the script called for characters to speak in the corresponding languages. And writer Jack Thorne says this process was not simply about translating his scripts - he also sought a better understanding of the countries in which the action was set.

"The difficult thing was understanding that there are very big cultural differences in how things operate in different countries," he says. "The French legal system is one of the most complicated systems I've ever come across. I was constantly trying to work out who does what in different situations, why certain people can do certain things, and also trying to make that translatable.

"There were other differences to take on board - spending time in Serbia and understanding what Serbian nationalism means and where it comes from. That was a very alien concept to me as a British person but it's a very different country with a very different history to ours. It's a country that's been invaded by every empire that's ever existed and has had to fight for its identity, so it has a very different sense of itself."

One multilingual show that moves away from the 'neighbour' dynamic of The Bridge and The Tunnel is Jour Polaire (aka Midnight Sun), which sees a French policeman sent to Sweden to investigate the death of a French citizen.

The series' roots can be found in the partnership between Atlantique Productions' Patrick Nebout and Nico Drama's Henrik Jansson-Schweitzer, who developed the plot together more than four years ago. But it was only when writers Måns Mårlind and Björn Stein came on board that it gained traction and was subsequently commissioned by SVT and France's Canal+.

"You've seen a lot of Scandi-German coproductions but you've never seen Scandi-French coproductions," Nebout says. "We felt the timing was right; we knew Canal+ was looking for something to do with Scandinavia. We approached Canal+ and SVT with the idea and both reacted positively from the beginning."

"The mixture of languages used in the series was also important to Nebout, who wanted to keep the series "organic."

"We have a French cop in Sweden. She should be speaking English when she interacts with the Swedes but when the Swedes talk to each other, they should definitely speak their own language. And when our French cop is reporting back to Paris, she should do that in French," he explains.

"That came to us very naturally. We didn't want to do something completely in English, because that wasn't part of the story."

"There's also a fourth language in the series, Sami. Because of the show's setting in the far north of Sweden, there are many indigenous Sami characters and they speak their language. It felt very natural. Måns wanted to tell a story about Europe today and we felt it echoed well to have these different languages."

Jour Polaire also features Arabic, taking the number of languages to five.

The script began in Swedish, before it was translated into English and then French. But
why did the producers not want to film it entirely in English, as Atlantique had done previously with Borgia – the papal drama set in Italy?

"It made sense to do Borgia in English because it was a very specific and confined environment with characters that were all in the same culture and universe," Nembati explains. "When we did Transporter, that was in English because it was targeted at the English-language market. It's very international storytelling - it's an action series.

"We're now developing a series called Jungo, a western based on the spaghetti westerns from the 1960s. We are probably going to shoot that in Spain but it will be in English. You have to think very carefully about which language to shoot in. You have to look at the story and ask whether it makes sense to do it in English rather than in local languages, and why.

"A couple of years ago, English was a must if you wanted to enable global export. But at the same time we can see tolerance for subtitled shows is growing all over the place – in France, in the UK. And it seems it's coming to the US, where SundanceTV and other channels are starting to air foreign-language shows.

If there's one programme that bulked its production schedule around the use of multiple languages, it's Welsh drama Y Gwyr (aka Hinterland). The crime series, which has been renewed for a third season, airs in a Welsh-only format on commissioning broadcaster S4C.

But to maximise the opportunity for distribution sales, it was filmed back-to-back in English as well, to create an English-only version and also a bilingual edition. BBC Wales aired the bilingual version, which was also picked up by BBC4.

Gweur Martha Lloyd, S4C's drama commissioner, says there were two reasons for producing multiple versions of the same series. First, S4C wanted as many people as possible to be able to watch it and, second, bringing coproducers on board meant a bigger budget that could accommodate higher production values.

"It sounds simpler than it is," she admits. "It's quite testing for everybody involved, especially the actors because they have to learn double the words and their performance can vary depending on which language they're speaking so it's not literally exactly the same. How you would express yourself in Welsh is quite different to how you would in English. But in production terms, Hinterland isn't heavy on dialogue, so some things they don't have to film twice, like scenery or chase sequences.

But what of the process of combining Welsh and English into a single format? Lloyd says the production team first decided which characters would only speak one language.

"A lot of characters live in remote rural areas so it was easy to believe they'd all speak Welsh together in the BBC Wales/BBC4 version," she says. "They explored what was credible, what contributed to this mythical feeling that's created when you're in this setting. The protagonist is from London so had to speak English. And his colleagues speak Welsh to each other but change when he walks into the room. They had to figure all of that out and also which of the locals would speak Welsh to each other or English.

Lloyd points to BBC1's The Missing as another good example of a drama using multiple languages. The show, about a man's search for his missing son, mixed English and French, as the pair are on holiday in France when the child vanishes.

"They used language very cleverly because sometimes they used subtitles when the characters spoke French, but when they wanted the father (played by James Nesbitt) out of the conversation and to make him frustrated that he didn't know what was going on, they didn't use subtitles. That was really clever because it made viewers feel like he felt.

"It was really exciting because it added another dimension that you wouldn't have had if it was all in the same language."

S4C is now developing a number of new multilanguage dramas that Lloyd says reflect the nature of language in Wales.

"I feel a desire to do something that's multilingual. I've enjoyed multilingual dramas over the last few years and we're in a position where we can do this because of the nature of language in our country. It's definitely an ambition to get one of those away but we'll have to see which one or how many."

While this may be a relatively new path in certain territories, Israeli dramas commonly use multiple languages. Distributor Keshet International's slate includes several examples, most notably coproduction thrillers False Flag (Hebrew and English) and MICE (Russian and Hebrew), plus Arab Labour (Arabic and Hebrew), a comedy-drama that explores the Arab-Jewish cultural divide.

"It has to come naturally from the story," says Karni Ziv, head of drama for Keshet Media Group. "If either part of the story or the way the character lives is based on a foreign language or culture, it has to be part of it. MICE is about Russian immigrants who live in Israel, so they speak Russian to each other. The most important thing is it reflects real life and Israel's melting-pot society."

The use of different languages means Keshet dramas are also finding audiences abroad. "Audiences now are more open to stories from different territories," Ziv says. "Five or six years ago, language was something that made a difference. Nowadays, you don't really hear the language. When we discovered very good television from Scandinavia, I ignored the language. I don't really hear it, as I'm so focused on the story and characters. We are more open now to hearing different languages if it's part of a brilliant story."

Atlantique's Nembati notes a common plot device threading these series together – a leading character in a strange place, which puts their language at odds with their location.

"The easy thing with those shows is you have a fish out of water so you have a good argument to decide you're going to shoot in different languages," he says. "As you can see with The Tunnel and The Bridge, more and more shows are using a mixture of languages. For Europe it makes sense."

It's a sign of both broadcasters' and audiences' openness to subtitles that multilanguage dramas are now commonplace – and that can only encourage an increasingly global production sector to introduce viewers to more diverse and unfamiliar stories in the future.