

# Introduction

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The term ‘translation’ is becoming more and more flexible to include processes that do not necessarily involve the traditional conversion from one language to another. The possibility of converting one semiotic channel into another enables us to incorporate in the field of audiovisual translation practices such as the conversion of spoken language into visuals (i.e. subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing or signed language films) or of visuals into spoken language (i.e. audio description – AD – for the blind). Both processes are meant for sensorially impaired audiences and they are associated with the need to cater for their social inclusion, increasing independence, and the chance and right to enjoy media products. This volume, which deals specifically with several aspects of audio description for the blind and sight impaired, brings together varied contributions with more or less traditional approaches. These include the linguistic analysis of AD in various languages, the illustration of various strategies to overcome possible obstacles while audio describing, aspects of audio description which have only recently been dealt with (e.g. the need to depart from strict and limiting guidelines, the examination of the acceptability and the reception of text-to-speech audio description – TTS AD –) and some methodological considerations regarding reception research in AD. A chapter on environmental description offers a thought-provoking view which encompasses whatever lies beyond the audio description of films. The topics dealt with are up to date, especially in Italy,

and the publication of such a volume is propitious because it coincides with the launch of the European ADLAB (Audio Description: Lifelong Access to the Blind) project ([www.adlabproject.eu](http://www.adlabproject.eu)).

**Pilar Orero's** contribution opens the volume with a focus on the ability to interpret films, which is a too often neglected pre-requisite for effective audio description. Watching a film is not as simple an activity as one might think. Films have a grammar, quite a complex one, just as languages do. Drafting comprehensive and effective audio descriptions is made possible by a deep understanding of the language(s) and the grammar of film. After an overview on the ways of seeing and reading films based on Berger (2008) and Metz (1997), Orero focuses on the manifold interpretations films are subject to, even by the same viewer at different moments in time. Such lack of uniqueness in interpretation has to be taken into account by the describer. His/her job is to deal with film language and to translate it choosing the most adequate interpretation to convey. Since there is no correct or unique interpretation, the describer should be able to understand the language of films, recognize the different reading levels, identify the denotative and the connotative meanings and the rhetoric of the visuals, and finally grasp the intentions of the director, before drafting an audio description. Only departing from the guidelines typically calling for total objectivity (superficiality, according to Orero) will he/she be able to create a usable product. Only explicating the semantic load of the visuals will he/she be able to cater for the needs of the blind audience. This perspective is quite recent and it is shared by many scholars in the field, as recently emerged, for instance, during the Advanced Research Seminar on Audio Description held in Barcelona in March 2011. European guidelines seem quite rigorous and rigid. Following them strictly may lead to the production of objective but cold descriptions, lacking precision and real comprehensibility. This is also made clear in the volume by Nathalie Mälzer-Semlinger. In a film there is often much more going on than what is objectively being described. A man touching a woman's hand, as reported in the AD analyzed by Orero (p. 23), or the recurrent colour of a blouse, which is insistently mentioned in the AD analyzed by Mälzer-Semlinger (pp. 31-32), carry such a meaningful, irreplaceable and rich semantic load that they cannot be left out, even though explaining, explicating and interpreting are not (yet) words found in present AD guidelines. This is one of the reasons why in her contribution **Nathalie Mälzer-Semlinger** focuses explicitly on the need for more flexibility in (German) AD guidelines, which should be adapted by audio describers on the basis of the narrative strategies used in the original film. This is particularly important in feature films where the narrative is thick and intricate, allusive and ambivalent, rich in symbolic elements at the visual level. In such situations, the required objectivity and syntactic simplicity called for in the (German) guidelines might not be the proper means to deliver an effective description. When needed, the describer should feel free to offer the blind audience explicit mention of details and interpretation of the cinematographic

codes. Even though the describer might run the risk of over-emphasizing seemingly incidental details which occur in the narrative, at times they have to make the motivations of the narrative strategies explicit and available to the audience. Balancing objectivity and explanations is a complex procedure – it is difficult to name covert elements of the visual narrative, such as, for instance, the meaningful and evocative direction of a character's gaze. It is however necessary to grant the blind audience actual participation and full enjoyment of the film experience.

Leaving guidelines aside for a while, the volume moves on to a more linguistic perspective. **Vera Arma** inspires readers with a reflection on the language of audio description. Audio description is a written to be read text type, which as such tends to stand closer to the written end of the spoken-written continuum. This is particularly so as far as Italian is concerned. Although her reflections are based on a corpus-based analysis of one film only, her preliminary results suggest quite a strong tendency in Italian audio described texts to reproduce formal and written register features in the form of lexical choices (which are unusual in spoken language), word order (cf. the large number of adjectives preceding nouns) and syntax (cf. the frequent embedded structures). A comparison of the English and the Italian AD of the same film also shows that while English is more linear and straightforward, regular and simple, Italian bears a resemblance to literary language and it is more varied and complex. Differences between the two languages and the two ADs have been detected also in the selection of information to be described, with Italian being more subjective than English. A quick hint is made in the paper on the possible effect of the cognitive load of AD receivers in determining the selection of material to be audio described. Though this topic is not analyzed explicitly by Arma, it certainly is one which deserves more in-depth analysis: reception studies, which are nowadays developing, can in fact contribute to the improvement of media usability and accessibility. They are primarily concerned with discovering how viewers interact with films and their various forms of audiovisual translation, thus to be able to guide translators to the creation of ever more ergonomic products.

A paper totally devoted to reception studies is that of **Agnieszka Chmiel** and **Ivona Mazur**, who focus specifically on methodology in AD research on reception. As they claim, reception studies in AD can directly contribute to the quality of audio description because they enable researchers to identify viewers' preferences and overall feedback, which is the first step toward drafting quality and user-oriented ADs. However, conducting research in the realm of reception studies is not easy, especially if working with visually impaired people (VIP). The authors illustrate the most common difficulties in accessing and working with such a particular sample of the population, and those in building a questionnaire that takes into account VIP's real needs. In the paper methodological difficulties are described and solutions to overcome them are offered. A sample questionnaire is included as an appendix, which can function as an invaluable tool for research

in AD. A further significant step toward the production of ergonomic and quality products has been taken by **Agnieszka Szarkowska** and **Anna Jankowska**, who encourage researchers to consider the cognitive aspect of audio description and the usability issues which should always accompany the study of audiovisual translation in all its forms. In particular, the authors examine the case of audio description trying to find its place in voiced-over products and they consider the use of synthetic text-to-speech (TTS) systems as a cheaper alternative to traditionally produced audio description, and as a means to increase both the number and the range of audio described films on the market. They point out how the European audiovisual landscape is changing and offer a fresh look at the specific, complex and challenging case of Poland, with dubbing, subtitling and voice-over existing side by side. They demonstrate how TTS AD can be combined with voice-over to produce AD to foreign films and they present the results of a survey conducted among a group of blind and partially sighted subjects after watching a TTS audio described film excerpt. Contrary to what many may think, the results of the survey demonstrate that the participants are quite open to the idea of TTS AD both as an interim solution – until there are more audio described films available – and as a permanent solution. The paper shows that misconceptions about the overload of information resulting from the combination of various sources of information are starting to be adjusted. What appears to be a hindering factor (i.e. the combination of audio description with voiced-over/audio subtitled foreign programs) is not considered as an obstacle to film enjoyment by real end-users. Although still preliminary, these results might help to eradicate prejudices and reluctance to the production of an increasing number of accessibility services throughout Europe.

Besides resorting to reception studies, taking the suggestions of practitioners into account could prove to be a useful shortcut. **Bernd Benecke's** contribution, for instance, generates from his hands-on experience as a professional audio describer in Germany, which is a dubbing country. Dubbed material can be easier to audio describe if compared to subtitled material. However, dubbed films can occasionally include subtitles which need to be made available to the blind. Written subtitles are usually made available by an extra voice talent who reads them out aloud (that is, resorting to audio subtitling). The integration of audio description and audio subtitling however is not easy. Benecke shows examples of real practice and gives tips to get over possible obstacles posed by specific situations. He considers four specific cases where subtitles are needed in the product's dubbed version (i.e. when one or more characters use sign language; when a foreign language is used in documentary films; when songs in dubbed films are kept in the original language; when a blend of various foreign languages are used in the same film) and demonstrates where, why and how describers can deal with such complex but common situations.

Although the volume focuses on audio description as a tool for making films available to the blind audience, it should be remembered that (audio)

description serves a wider range of situations and people: unfortunately, sensory impairment can be quite pervasive and cover more than one disability. Subjects may have complex and multiple special needs (blind/visually impaired, Deaf/hard of hearing, Deafblind) which are difficult to cater for. In their closing contribution, **Riitta Lahtinen** and **Russ Palmer** go beyond blindness and film or TV audio description and give an account of the more general process of environmental description meant for multiple sensory impaired people. Mainly focussing on deafblindness and dual sensory impairment, the authors present various methods and techniques to describe the environment which depart from language (spoken, written or sign language) and include the wider use of the senses. In particular, they make the reader aware of haptic perception, i.e. the process of recognizing objects through touch, and of one of its branches, i.e. drawing with the index finger on the back of the receiver to convey direction-related information. Though not dealing with the core topic of the volume the overview closes it by widening the horizons on the infinite ways reality can be made accessible to an impaired audience.

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