AD reception research: Some methodological considerations*

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ABSTRACT

AD reception research, or collection of feedback from the blind and partially sighted as the target audience of audio described films, seems to be one of the best sources of information to be applied when creating both AD standards and audio descriptions proper. This paper presents experiences gained by the authors when conducting two reception studies. The first one involved a questionnaire distributed to 18 viewers with vision dysfunctions immediately after two screenings of audio described films. The other one is a larger-scale work-in-progress, whose results will be applied in the development of Polish AD standards reflecting the preferences of the blind and visually impaired viewers in Poland, where the participants are being interviewed and presented with AD samples. The authors discuss various methodological issues, including problems with obtaining a sufficient number of participants, reflecting feedback from visually-impaired AD consultants in the surveys and discovering user preferences. It is suggested that responses concerning objectivity or subjectivity of descriptions should be elicited indirectly (implicitly) rather than directly (explicitly) and that research results are more meaningful if interviews involve comprehension questions and AD samples.

Audio description (AD) as an accessibility technique that offers access to video materials to the blind and partially sighted audiences has recently seen a boom not only in the number of audio described films and other works of art but also in the research area. The first ever periodical conference devoted fully to AD (Advanced Research Seminar on Audio Description organised by UAB in Barcelona) grew from approximately 25 participants during the first event in 2007 to over 80 four years and two seminars later. Many conferences focusing on audiovisual translation now host fully-fledged sessions on AD (to name but a few: Media For All Conference, Points of View in Kraków, Languages and the Media in Berlin). The blind audiences welcome the growing number of available audio descriptions, but is research on AD also advantageous to the ultimate audio description target group? How can the visually impaired people benefit from the growing interest of translation scholars and the rising number of scientific publications on audio description? In fact, many aspects of AD research have or may have a direct bearing on the practicalities of AD. For instance, researching the use of sound in audiovisual productions and its narrative function may bring about better and more sound-considerate audio descriptions (Van der Heijden 2007). Cognitive research focusing on memory load can make audio descriptions more acceptable and even more accessible to the target audiences by avoiding perceptual overloads identified in experimental research (cf. research project by Fresno 2011). However, in the current stage of AD practice development the greatest applicability is generated by research focusing on reception studies.

Reception studies in AD can directly contribute to the quality of audio description. They focus on the target audience of audio description and help collect feedback on various AD strategies and solutions. By learning the blind and partially sighted viewers' preferences, AD authors can more satisfactorily meet their expectations. The methodology of reception studies involves techniques that collect views and opinions of the visually impaired respondents. These might include interviews, questionnaires, online surveys, focus groups. They might be based on questions only or may include examples of audio descriptions to be evaluated by the respondents. As a result, preferences of the target groups regarding various aspects of AD are identified, which translates into recommendations, guidelines or standards for creating practical AD.

According to the ISO 9000 certificate broadly used for quality assurance in all areas of life, quality is whatever the customer requires and perceives as good quality (International Organization for Standardization). The rationale of reception studies in AD research is in line with this approach. In other words, since the blind and the partially sighted are the target audiences, or clients of audio description, let them tell audio describers what they want, what they can accept and what works best for them instead of simply presenting them with a product that is perceived as best by the AD author.

This incorporation of the visually impaired voice and opinion in the creation of AD may take various forms. As underlined above, reception studies lead to quantifiable preferences that may be later reflected in the AD preparation (this is the case with the UK's Audetel project, see below). Additionally, VIPs (visually impaired persons) may be involved in the process of creating AD from the very beginning – this is the case of Bayerischer Rundfunk in Germany where each AD team includes two sighted audio describers and one visually impaired expert (Dosch and Benecke 2004). Some AD scripts in Poland are also created by a mixed team (one sighted and one blind audio describer – Szymańska: personal communication). Both techniques have their strengths – reception studies let audio describers learn about general preferences of large target groups (including people with much and little exposure to and experience with AD) while ADs created with visually impaired team members reflect the blind expert's long-term experience with such an accessibility technique.

This paper will present some methodological considerations regarding reception research in AD gained by the authors when conducting two reception studies. It might be obvious that we need to ask the blind about their preferences in order to deliver good AD but it is much less clear how to elicit such feedback. Thus, the main question is not "if" but "how" to do it. And the latter question is the one this paper hopes to address successfully.

The section below will focus on discussing previous reception studies in the area of audio description and the methodologies employed. Subsequent sections will describe the AD-Verba project involving reception studies on AD in Poland and the difficulties experienced in the area of methodology.

AD RECEPTION STUDIES – STATE OF THE ART

The unquestionable leader in the development of AD and in reception projects is the UK that can boast two wide-ranging studies of the blind audiences' preferences: the Audetel project and "Bollywood for all". These were undertaken by the regulators and consumer associations rather than researchers themselves. We will describe them below focusing on the methodology rather than on the results. Descriptions of smaller reception studies undertaken by scholars (Cabeza-Cáceres, Mączyńska and Szarkowska, Iglesias Fernández) will follow.

The Audetel project in the UK led to the creation of the most comprehensive audio description standards to date, i.e. the ITC (Independent Television Commission) Guidance On Standards for Audio Description (2000). It was implemented in 1992-1995 by an international EU-funded consortium of regulators, consumer associations and broadcasters set up in 1991. The project aimed at collecting feedback from the visually impaired respondents regarding AD of various TV genres (feature films, musicals, soap operas, nature documentaries, etc.) and at developing a digital technology to provide AD soundtrack to every household.

Four methods were employed in the project to elicit feedback. A questionnaire about viewing habits and difficulties in following programme content was distributed by the Royal National Institute for the Blind among the visually impaired in the UK. Later, 200 respondents "of all ages and levels of visual impairment from around Britain" (ITC Guidance 2000: 3) participated in viewing sessions and expressed their opinions about examples of presented audio described programmes. Additionally, a focus group was established for in-depth critiques of the audio described content and a trial TV service was launched for a few months in 1994 for peak-time ITV and BBC programmes. 100 special set-top receivers were distributed among respondents who could watch 7-10 hours of audio described content per week and were periodically interviewed to elicit feedback about any aspect of the service.

Based on the feedback from this wide-ranging and exhaustive study, the guidelines address a plethora of issues in AD, from the most crucial principles illustrated by examples (usage of tenses, prioritising information, use of adjectives and adverbs, descriptions of logos, opening titles, cast lists and credits, etc.) to descriptions of various programme categories (including even sport and live events, sexually explicit or violent programmes and advertisements) (ITC Guidance 2000).

Another important large-scale reception study project conducted in the UK was "Bollywood for all" instigated by the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) in 2009. The study aimed at identifying the existence of potential demand for audio described Bollywood films in the UK and India and the best medium to offer accessibility to such productions and at understanding "the best ways of reaching out to this audience to create awareness about the availability of this service" (Rai 2009: 3). Being "the world's most prolific film industry" with approx. 700 new productions per year, Bollywood was chosen so that "every single person, including people of Asian origin with sight loss, get[s] that chance to sit back and enjoy a Bollywood film of their choice, independently" (Rai 2009: 3). The report from the project entitled "Bollywood for all: the demand for audio described Bollywood films" was to serve as a reference tool for the industry and AD providers by identifying key findings, conclusions and eight major recommendations pertaining to the study objectives. As mentioned above, since this paper focuses on methodology we will neither describe the results nor evaluate the project outcomes.

The project was conducted by a research team including AD activists and sociologists. It included a quantitative research study with an impressive number of 260 visually impaired respondents of Asian descent living in the UK. The sample of respondents was representative in terms of age, sight condition and exposure to Bollywood films (Rai 2009: 6). It also encompassed a qualitative research study in the form of in-depth interviews with 25 people with sight problems.

The quantitative study involved both face to face and telephone interviews conducted by 23 interviewers. The high number of interviewers and interviewees

highlights the wide scale of the project, which can rarely be achieved by scholars working individually or in small teams. In fact, one of the major hurdles in reception research including blind and partially sighted participants is getting access to them. The Bollywood project reached a high number of respondents by contacting 50 organisations (including charities, statutory organisations, eye hospitals and local authorities), of which 20 were willing to assist by identifying scheduled gatherings and meetings with the visually impaired the interviewers could attend. In fact, many respondents were identified through various "approaches to generate contacts including the use of social networks of friends and relatives as well as visiting local shops, schools, colleges, hospitals and housing estates" (sic!) (Rai 2009: 29). It is quite telling that only about 33% of interviews took place in community centres while the majority was conducted at the homes of the respondents. All this shows that reaching study participants is a difficult, time- and effort-consuming activity that requires flexibility.

The interviews in the quantitative study took approx. 10 minutes each. There were 14 questions pertaining to the respondent's age, vision dysfunction, TV/DVD/cinema viewing habits, preferences regarding Bollywood films and factors making watching such films difficult, exposure to AD and sources of information about products designed for the blind and partially sighted.

The questions about audio description were preceded by a short introduction of the topic, i.e. the interviewer defined AD and only later asked about the respondent's experience. All questions were multiple choice questions. The ones about vision dysfunction included descriptions equivalent to vision impairments (e.g. "In a room during daytime, I can tell by the light where the windows are" or "I can see the shapes of furniture in a room") rather than specific medical names of various dysfunctions (congenital blindness or Age-related Macular Degeneration) to make them more accessible to all participants. Surprisingly, the interviewers did not ask when the respondents' impairments originated (congenital or acquired dysfunctions), which is a key factor (alongside blindness vs. partial sight difference) contributing to the heterogeneous character of the AD target group and specific preferences.

The in-depth interviews conducted in the qualitative study lasted for approx. 35 minutes. The respondents were informed about confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. The questionnaire included 23 questions, many similar to those in the quantitative survey. The difference was that the respondents of this study were additionally shown three 3 minute clips from a Bollywood film – without AD, with English AD and with Hindi AD. They were then asked detailed questions about the clip (location, actions of characters, whether they found it enjoyable, whether AD improved their experience and what additional items they understood with the second audio described film). This means that each respondent saw each clip three times and the methodological weakness here is that the answers obtained after the third viewing may not have only been influenced by the Hindi AD only but also by yet another exposure to the

experimental clip (the issue of cross-balancing experimental materials and participants will be discussed further in section 4).

In general, however, the Bollywood project is impressive in its range and provides excellent contribution both to the reception research on AD and to the practice of audio description.

A small-scale reception study in AD was conducted by Cabeza-Cáceres (2011) to examine the influence of narration speed, explicitation and intonation on the comprehension of AD. This study, together with the qualitative reception study of the Audetel project constitutes another type of reception experiments. Respondents are not only simply asked about their preferences, they are also presented with examples of audio descriptions with manipulated variables (lack of AD, language of AD in Audetel; speed, explicitation and intonation in the study by Cabeza-Cáceres). The dependent variable is thus comprehension measured by a series of questions about the content of presented video clips.

Cabeza-Cáceres managed to interview 30 visually impaired respondents recruited via ONCE (Spanish Association of the Blind) and ACIC (Catalan Association for the Integration of the Blind). They were divided into groups of 10 and each group was presented with AD with a different level of the independent variable (for instance in the case of intonation: monotonous, neutral and dramatised). The study is methodologically well designed but the groups are actually quite small which may obscure the statistical analysis of the results.

It is interesting to see how Cabeza-Cáceres coped with the problem of measuring comprehension, which is yet another methodological difficulty in the studies of such type. He analysed his video material on the basis of the narrative schema comprehension model by Braningan (1992) including such stages of narration as orientation, initiating event, goal, complicating action, resolution and epilogue (Cabeza-Cáceres 2011). He then identified the following items in his clip: events (10 items), changes in the two characters (6 items) and emotional context (2 items). He decided on the relevance of these items for comprehension and assigned weights (30%/50%/20% respectively), thus arriving at a measurable index of 100%. This is an elegant method to quantify comprehension in order to plot it as a dependent variable against other data (respondents' profiles and independent variables).

According to Iglesias Fernández (2010: 216), "reception studies in AD should not stop at users' preconceived preferences but further expose them to actual AD products for assessment." She strongly supports reception studies that would, as in the case of the previously discussed studies, include samples of AD to make it easier for respondents to create their own opinions and express them directly. The visually impaired people's quality expectations regarding audio description may differ from the actual assessment of AD products and hence the usefulness of confronting these expectations with actual samples in the reception studies.

Iglesias Fernández et al. (2011) were interested in the role of paralinguistic aural stimuli in the perception and assessment of AD. They posited that more

congruent stimuli (the audio describer's voice congruent with the visual stimuli) may contribute to increased comprehension and aesthetic experience. They recruited 12 visually impaired participants affiliated to ONCE (from Madrid and Granada) to complete a set of questionnaires regarding their expectations, voice sonority assessment and AD quality quality assessment. The participants were divided into two equal groups and presented with two experimental clips with AD. The audio describer's voice was the independent variable with two levels: either congruent or incongruent with the "emotional landscape and the character's mental state" (Iglesias Fernández et al. 2011). The stimuli were counterbalanced across the participants, i.e. the first group of participants watched the first clip with the congruent voice to identify emotions and the second clip with the incongruent voice to assess quality while the second group of participants watched the first clip with the incongruent voice and the second clip with the congruent voice to perform the same tasks respectively.

The voice ratings were done by choosing appropriate sonority and emotional correlates (for instance, lax vs. tense for the former correlates and courageous vs. fearful for the latter) or by using a 5 point Likert scale. The respondents were also asked directly if the "describer's voice contribute[d] to a better and more congruent understanding of the emotional atmosphere and the character's mental state and intentions" (Iglesias Fernández et al. 2011) and which version of AD they preferred.

The sample size in this study is a serious weakness barring any statistical analysis. However, the authors offer an interesting design and ways to elicit feedback about the respondents' preferences in a structured and quantifiable way.

Yet another small-scale reception study was conducted by Mączyńska and Szarkowska to find out if the visually impaired audience would accept text-to-speech audio description (i.e. AD read out by a speech synthesizer rather than pre-recorded or delivered live by a human) to a documentary. The authors overcame the usual problem of finding participants by organising an open screening in a café and by conducting an online survey. They managed to reach 54 visually impaired respondents. In an online survey the respondents first watched a 30 minute audio described film ("La Soufriere" by Werner Herzog) and then completed an online questionnaire with 15 questions, including the usual questions about the respondent's age, visual impairment, exposure to AD and some more specific questions about the use of speech synthesis software, AD preference, the selection of voice and the acceptance of text-to-speech AD. There were three open-ended questions inviting the respondents to provide comments about text-to-speech AD and synthetic voices. The survey was a typical reception study aiming at eliciting preferences. The application of an online survey turned out to be a good solution and helped the authors reach a wider group of respondents.

The AD-Verba research project is part of a research grant awarded by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education and its aim is to develop Polish AD standards that would reflect the preferences of the visually impaired audience. Our goal is to interview approximately 100-120 VIPs in order to learn about their viewing habits and AD preferences. The end of the project is scheduled for the end of 2011. Prior to conducting the reception study discussed in this article, we also conducted a pilot study, the results of which we used to design the study concerned (we discuss some aspects of the pilot study in the Methodological considerations and hurdles section below).

Research design

The reception study discussed here was in the form of a face-to-face questionnaire-based interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. Each interview was scheduled individually with a given participant. The final version of the questionnaire (see the Appendix; also see the Methodological considerations and hurdles section below) consisted of three parts: a pre-questionnaire, the questionnaire proper and a post-questionnaire. The pre-questionnaire comprised 13 questions and was aimed at eliciting general information about the respondents, such as age, gender, education, type of visual impairment, prior experience with AD, general viewing habits and preferences (i.e. how much time they devote to watching films or television and what their preferred programmes and mass media are, how they watch films or programmes, etc.), as well as the sources of information on facilities for the blind they consult most often (for details see the Appendix; we also discuss the question on the types of visual impairment in greater detail in the Methodological considerations and hurdles section).

In the questionnaire proper we showed the respondents three clips with AD. All of the clips are from Polish films and represent various genres: the first clip is from a drama/film noir *Rewers* by Borys Lankosz (2009), the second one is from a romantic comedy *Tylko mnie kochaj* by Ryszard Zatorski and Adam Iwiński (2006), and the third one is from a comedy *Testosteron* by Andrzej Saramonowicz and Tomasz Konecki (2007). The clips last 2.19, 1.28 and 2.35 minutes, respectively. For each clip we recorded two alternative audio descriptions (versions A and B), so there were six clips altogether. The alternative AD differed in the solutions we were testing. Where necessary for comprehending a given scene, we presented a context for this scene. We also asked the participants whether they had seen a given film. Each clip was then followed by 11 comprehension and/or preference questions (for examples see The reception study proper – tested items section below). The clips were counterbalanced across participants, i.e. each participant was presented with either clip A or B, rather then with both clips, in order to

rule out the influence of the first viewing on the responses obtained for the second viewing (cf. research design of Bollywood for all study discussed in the AD reception studies – state of the art section above; see also Methodological considerations and hurdles below).

The final part of the questionnaire was a post-questionnaire in which we asked the participants questions about their general AD preferences, such as the gender of the voice talent reading AD, objective vs. subjective descriptions (e.g. 'an attractive singer' vs. 'a long-legged singer in a miniskirt'), and AD comprehension of description of gestures ('Konstanty bids farewell to Stefan with a hand gesture' vs. 'Konstanty raises his fist and spreads his fingers in a farewell gesture'). We also elicited their opinion (using a Likert-type scale) on the quality of AD delivery (e.g. overlaps with dialogues, speed, pauses) and on various descriptive elements (e.g. the use of colours, evaluative adjectives, similes, reading out credits or the name of the audio describer by the voice talent). We also asked them what they thought about AD usefulness and potential (for details of the post-questionnaire see the Appendix).

The reception study proper – tested items

In this section we discuss some of the items we tested in the reception study proper. In the first clip (*Rewers*) Sabina, the main female protagonist, is being mugged by two thugs and is saved by a handsome passer-by, Bronisław. He then walks her home, they talk a bit and decide to meet for tea some time. We then see Sabina in the lift smiling softly, her eyes dreamy.

Facial expressions pose a great challenge to audio describers and there is a heated debate underway whether such expressions should be described objectively (e.g. "She raises her eyebrows") or whether some degree of interpretation should be allowed for ease of comprehension or because of time constraints (e.g. "She looks surprised") (see e.g. Dosch and Benecke 2004: 24; Mazur and Chmiel in press; Orero and Vercauteren, manuscript in preparation). We therefore wanted to test whether our respondents would have better comprehension of the scene in the case of a more objective or rather a more subjective, interpretative description. For the scene in question we provided two alternative ADs: 'Her pupils are dilated. She squints her eyes' (objective) vs. 'She has dreamy eyes' (interpretative). We then asked a comprehension question: "What was Sabina's facial expression after meeting Bronisław, while in the lift?" Along similar lines, we tested the preference of our respondents for other objective vs. interpretative descriptions, such as: 'Her eyes are wide open. She shifts her weight from foot to foot' vs. 'She looks frightened' or 'He blows out the smoke. His hands in the pockets. His legs wide apart' vs. 'Self confident and nonchalant, he blows out the smoke' (for more examples see the Appendix).

In this clip we also tested the naming of characters. The prevailing AD standards are not unanimous when it comes to when characters should be named. For example, according to UK guidelines characters can be named the first time they appear on screen, unless their identity is to be kept secret (ITC Guidance 2000: 16), whereas in the German tradition it is preferred to name the characters when their names first appear in the film. Until that time the characters are identified by their characteristic feature(s), for example 'a man with a moustache' (Dosch and Benecke 2004: 23). As regards the latter solution, problematic may be cases where characters are named very late in the film or when there are a lot of relevant characters and the scenes change quickly (cf. Benecke 2011). In such cases more elaborate descriptions could be too time consuming and/or too taxing for the audience, and thus naming characters immediately would be preferred. In the scene at hand, the identity of the characters does not need to be kept secret, but the two main protagonists introduce themselves early on in the film. In one of the two alternative ADs for the clip we named the characters the first time they appeared on screen, and in the other the characters were named when they first introduced themselves to each other. Having shown either of the two versions we then asked our respondents which solution they preferred (naming the characters immediately vs. naming them when they are named in the film). In the case where the latter option was chosen, we asked a follow-up question: "What if the character's name is introduced as late as in the middle of the film?"

The second clip shown by us (*Tylko mnie kochaj*) featured a little girl, Michalina, and her alleged father, Michał, who takes her out on a shopping spree. We see Michalina trying on different outfits, dancing and presenting herself to Michał, who sits in an armchair and non-verbally expresses his opinion about the clothes. The scene is very much reminiscent of the famous scene in *Pretty Woman* where Julia Roberts presents herself in different outfits to Richard Gere who either approves or disapproves of them. We therefore wanted to see whether such an intertextual reference in the AD of the scene would facilitate its visualisation/ comprehension (at least for those who lost their sight later on in life and have seen the film). So one of our two descriptions read as follows: 'Michalina, just like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman,* presents to Michał her outfits: a coat and a beret, two summer dresses'. We then asked the participants whether this reference helped them visualise the scene.

Another item tested in this clip was the amount of detail in AD: one of the descriptions was very precise, describing all of Michalina's outfits in great detail, for example: 'Michalina in a beret, a red dress and a coat presents herself to Michał. (...) Michalina in a blue cotton dress (...) Michalina presents a white dress with the pattern of green apples, red cherries and strawberries, yellow lemons'. The other description was much more general: 'Michalina (...) presents to Michał her outfits: a beret and a coat, two summer dresses'. We then asked the respondents to choose their preferred option. We expect here some gender-

related differences, with women preferring more elaborate descriptions, while men going for leaner ones.

The third and final clip in our study (*Testosteron*) featured a group scene with seven men of a similar age, and thus similar-sounding voices (expect for one, the father of one of the characters, who is older). There is a lot of dialogue in the scene, the characters speak fast and their lines are quite short. One of the solutions in such a case would be to introduce each line with the name of the character saying it. We were interested whether our respondents would welcome such an option. We thus drafted and recorded two ADs for the clip: in one the dialogue in the group scene was uninterrupted, in the other each line was introduced with a character's name. We then asked the respondents about their preference.

Another item that we tested was explicitation. In the clip there is a scene where the main protagonist – in a state of shock – is giving a lecture to sheep in a pen. He addresses them as if they were humans, starting with "Ladies and Gentlemen". Although the bleating of the sheep is audible, we thought that VIPs could find the scene confusing. So in one of the versions of AD we explicitly said: 'Kornel in the pen addressing the sheep', whereas in the other we gave a regular, general description: 'Kornel in the pen'. Having presented either of the two versions of AD we then tested comprehension of the scene by asking: "Who did Kornel address his lecture in the pen to?"

With this clip we also tested comprehension of a scene audio described objectively and in a more interpretative manner. The final scene of the clip features one of the characters, Tretyn, leaning over Kornel, who is hallucinating and sees Tretyn as a werewolf. The two ADs proposed by us read: 'Tretyn's face turns bluish, his irises shine. He bares his teeth' and 'Tretyn's face appears to Kornel as a werewolf's muzzle'. We then asked how Kornel perceives Tretyn leaning over him.

Methodological considerations and hurdles

Before conducting the reception study discussed in this article, we carried out a pilot study in which we interviewed 18 participants. In principle, the questionnaire-based study was in the form of face-to-face interviews, which took place directly after two screenings of audio described films (see below). We also printed the questionnaires in large print for low vision respondents who were willing to fill them in by themselves, however later it turned out that some questions or even whole pages were left unanswered, so in our subsequent study we abandoned this method of data collection in favour of face-to-face interviews (for detailed methodology and results of the pilot study see Chmiel and Mazur 2011).

In the pilot study, in addition to the standard questions about the age, gender, education and type of visual impairment, we asked the respondents about AD usefulness, the major obstacles in AD reception and their preferences as regards

the description of places or characters. Another question concerned subjective interpretation in AD. We thought that a question on subjective interpretation in AD should be included in the survey, especially given the heated subjectivity vs. objectivity debate among AD practitioners and researchers and the prevailing opinion that VIPs generally mind subjectivity in AD (for an overview of the debate see Mazur and Chmiel in press). We therefore asked the respondents whether they considered the following descriptions to be subjective interpretation. Although in this article about methodology we refrain from presenting the results, we will make an exception in this case to justify subsequent changes in the questionnaire. The table below presents the percentages obtained for this question.

Description	Is this subjective interpretation?	
	Yes	*No*
he watches him with concern	31%	69%
elegantly dresses	23%	77%
they exchange surprised looks	31%	69%
attractive singer	46%	54%
sexy brunettes	62%	38%
worried Stefan	38%	62%
taps him on the shoulder good-naturedly	38%	62%

Table 1. Results concerning subjective interpretation in AD (pilot study).

As one can see, with the exception of 'sexy brunettes', all of the other descriptions were not considered subjective interpretation by the majority of the respondents. However, what we observed while conducting the interviews was that some of the respondents, not "tainted" with the on-going subjectivity vs. objectivity debate, were quite perplexed by this question and not sure what to answer. We thus thought that in our reception study proper it would be better to elicit responses concerning objectivity or subjectivity indirectly (implicitly) rather than directly (explicitly) as was the case in the pilot study. We then reworked this question so that instead a direct 'yes' or 'no' question, we asked the respondents to choose one of two possible descriptions (e.g. 'an attractive singer' vs. 'a long-legged singer in a miniskirt') that they found more appealing. Along similar lines, in the pilot study there was a question concerning clarity in AD ("Is this description clear to you?"), where we had descriptions such as 'a run-down house'. Again, we replaced this direct question with a preference one and the respondents were asked to choose between e.g. 'a run-down house' and 'a house with plaster peeling off the walls' (with a note that the latter is only one of the many features that make the house look run-down, but there is no time to describe them all).

Another important observation that we made during the pilot study was that while preference questions are by all means necessary, what is also needed in a

reception study (and what can perhaps tell us more about the effectiveness of a given AD solution) are comprehension questions. Given this consideration, in the reception study at hand we decided to include AD samples (clips) with some proposed AD solutions in two versions (often concerning debatable issues, such as naming of characters, explicitness vs. implicitness in AD, subjectivity vs. objectivity) and test which AD is more comprehensible by the viewers (for details see the previous section were we discussed the clips and the tested items; on methodological problems with comprehension questions see below).

Despite the fact that when drafting the questionnaire for the reception study at hand we were heavily drawing on our experience gained during the pilot study, we revised the questionnaire six times. Each time, having interviewed a batch of new respondents, sometimes following their feedback, we saw that some things needed changing, while other needed to be made more specific. We also saw the need for new questions, while we thought that other could be done away with. We would then revise the questionnaire accordingly. We are aware that the final version may be far from perfect, nonetheless it has been given a lot of thought and consideration on our part and includes on-going feedback from our respondents. Below we present some of the methodological aspects of the questionnaire as well as methodological hurdles to overcome.

In the pre-questionnaire we decided to make the question concerning the type of visual impairment more specific. In the original version of this part of the survey we had the following options for this question: a) a blind person; b) a low vision person, c) other; d) comments. It was followed by a question about the age when the impairment occurred in order to establish whether the participants had any residual visual memory. It soon turned out that such information may not be enough to interpret the obtained results, for example as regards the usefulness of AD, the use of colours or detail-orientation of description, since some of the participants reported that with their visual impairment they could notice certain things on the screen. We thus decided to make this question more specific, by asking the respondents to mark statements – which were largely based on the ones in the Bollywood for All survey (Rai 2009) – that best describe their impairment, such as "I can read a newspaper headline" or "I can see the shapes of furniture in a room" (note that questions 9 and 10 in the pre-questionnaire were also modelled on the Bollywood for all survey; see the Appendix). Also in the pre-questionnaire, we decided to move questions concerning age and education to the end, so that the participants would feel more at ease and 'warmed-up' when answering them.

When it comes to the reception study proper, the major change that we introduced was to show either of the two versions of AD of a clip to a respondent. Originally, we showed both versions (i.e. altogether six clips to one person). This turned out to be counterproductive, for example, for comprehension questions, because when answering a question after the second version of AD was shown, the participants had already been influenced by the contents of the first version,

so comparing answers in such a case is problematic to say the least (see the 'werewolf' example discussed in the section on The reception study proper – tested items). Now we simply compare answers given by respondents who saw version A with those provided by respondents who were shown version B, in which case a real comparison is possible. Irrespective of this new design, it must be noted however that it is always problematic to measure the respondent's comprehension after watching a film/clip because comprehension is difficult to quantify and because there is an important confounding variable that is difficult to rule out, i.e. memory. When exposing study participants to video clips with or without AD the experimenter is never sure to what extent the responses to clip content questions are influenced by the participants' memory span and to what extent they are aided by AD. Also, some respondents may find the very situation of an interview stressful and thus lack proper concentration. This is a major methodological limitation that has to be taken into consideration when interpreting the study results.

As for the post-questionnaire, we moved here two questions from the pre-questionnaire, namely "Do you find AD useful?" and "Do you prefer AD to be read by a male voice, a female voice or it doesn't matter?"[1] This was because some of the respondents have had very little experience with AD before or have not seen films with AD at all. Asking the first of the two questions in the post-questionnaire made more sense, as such persons have at least seen the three clips and could make some comments on AD usefulness. The same goes for the other question – once they have heard AD read out by a male and female voice, they could have an opinion as to which option they prefer.

We also introduced a number of modifications to the preference questions in the post-questionnaire. For example, we added questions concerning the use of filmic language in AD (such as 'the camera freezes'), short vs. long sentences in description as well as ones pertaining to a more technical side of AD (such as acknowledging the audio describer, the voice talent or audio describing the logo of the film studio). In the final version of the post-questionnaire we used a seven-level Likert-type scale (with 7 meaning "I strongly agree" and 1 meaning 'I strongly disagree") to elicit most of the opinions of the respondents about AD in general. The Likert scale had replaced "Yes", "No", "I don't know" answers used by us in the previous versions of the post-questionnaire, as we thought the seven-level scale would be more precise.

In addition to questionnaire-related challenges, we also faced some other, more general methodological hurdles. Everyone who has ever conducted a reception study with VIPs knows that it is quite difficult to reach such persons. Some researchers contact associations or foundations for the blind (cf. studies discussed in section on AD reception studies – state of the art), which is a very good option, as such organisations can help get in touch with quite a few respondents. We used this option for our pilot study when we contacted the Association of Friends of the Blind and Visually Impaired in Pozna . The association helped us

organise an AD screening, after which we held the interviews. Similarly, we conducted some interviews after a screening of two documentaries with AD during a film festival devoted to the topic of disability. Another good way of reaching prospective respondents is to join an event organised with VIPs in mind. In this way, one can have access to a large number of VIPs in one place and conduct the interviews in an efficient manner. For example, for the purpose of our study we met with blind participants of a dance festival in Poznań as well as of an orientation meeting organised by our university for disabled students. We are also considering conducting the survey online (cf. Mączyńska and Szarkowska 2011), though we fear that, given the substantial length of the questionnaire, the respondents will get discouraged and leave some questions unanswered (cf. large print questionnaires discussed above). A middle-of-the-road solution could be to make the questionnaire and clips available online to the VIPs and then have an interviewer conduct the interview over the phone or Skype.

Another difficulty in reaching appropriate respondents lies in the fact that in order for their feedback to be of value they should have adequate educational or even mental development level (vision dysfunctions are sometimes associated with other disabilities, including mental ones). Often it is not possible to verify such things before the interview, which can cost a lot of time and effort on the part of the researcher, as despite the time spent the data obtained are not valid. What is more, it is often the case that in a country such as Poland where AD is still quite a novelty, some of the respondents know very little about this form of audiovisual transfer and do not know yet what to expect from it (Barbara Szymańska – personal communication). Nonetheless, we believe that an opinion obtained from a blind or low vision person can be valid and valuable, despite the fact that such a person knows little about AD, as such feedback gives us better insight into how VIPs 'see' the world and visualise and comprehend what they hear.

Conclusions

If we treat visually impaired persons as customers of audio description, and quality as what the customer wants and expects, then it seems that the best way to provide quality AD is to develop standards or guidelines that would reflect the preferences of the customer. In our opinion the best way to learn about the preferences of target recipients of AD is through reception studies.

In this paper we reported on two such studies – a pilot one involving 18 participants, and an on-going research project AD-Verba aimed at development of Polish AD standards that would reflect the preferences of Polish VIPs. In the article we focused on methodological issues, without discussing the results, which will be the subject matter of a separate article. Both studies were principally in the form of questionnaire-based face-to-face interviews, and when drawing up the AD-Verba questionnaire we heavily drew on our experiences gained while

conducting the pilot study. Nonetheless, we revised the questionnaire several times in order to reflect suggestions for improvement made by the VIPs during the interviews. Other changes were the result of our observations and reflections while interviewing VIPs.

After conducting the pilot study we noted that in addition to having preference questions it would be good to test the respondents' comprehension of descriptions, as this could tell us more about the effectiveness of certain AD solutions. In AD-Verba we thus included clips followed by comprehension questions. We also learned that it was more efficient to cross balance the clips and questions across the interviewees to make their comprehension more comparable. However, a methodological difficulty that we encountered here was that some of the answers could have been influenced by the respondents' lack of concentration or stress or, as the case may be, by a confounding variable that is memory. So sometimes it was difficult to discern whether we were in fact testing comprehension or the subject's memory span. After the pilot study we also learned that it is more effective to elicit responses concerning objectivity or subjectivity of descriptions indirectly (implicitly) rather than directly (explicitly).

When conducting reception studies it is usually a challenge to access a sufficient number of VIPs that could provide valuable feedback. We believe that it is useful to contact organisations and associations for the blind as well as organisers of events for VIPs, where larger groups of respondents can be interviewed. Also, our experience shows that it is ineffective to provide low vision persons with questionnaires in large print, as some questions were left unanswered. For this reason, we think that although having the questionnaire and clips accessible online by the VIPs is an option to consider, we are quite sceptical that a fairly long questionnaire would be filled in completely without the assistance of an interviewer over the phone or Skype.

All in all, despite some criticism of the usefulness of reception studies, we believe that even in countries such as Poland where AD is still at the crawling stage and VIPs may not know what to expect from it and what it can give them, conducting such studies can give us a lot of valuable insight into how blind and low vision persons understand and visualise different descriptions and thus perceive the world. Such knowledge could then be used to create quality AD based on guidelines that reflect what the customer wants.

1 Please note that originally all of our ADs were recorded by a female voice, but given this question we decided to use a male voice as well. So in the final version of the study AD to one of the clips is recorded by a male voice.

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APPENDIX[1]

I. PRE-QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Gender	F ☐	M ☐
2. Type of visual impairment:		
a) blind	b) partially sighted	
comments:		
3. When did you lose vision? / Since when have you had vision impairment? (in the case of partially sighted respondents)		
a) I have been blind since birth / I've had vision impairment since birth	b) since I was _ _ _ _ _ _ years old	
4. Which statement best describes what you are able to see (when wearing glasses or contact lenses if you use them). You can select more than one answer. **I can see well enough to:**		
a) read a newspaper	b) read a newspaper in large print	
c) read a newspaper headline	d) recognise a friend across the road	
e) recognise a friend across a room	f) recognise a friend who is at arms length away	
g) recognise a friend if I get close to his or her face	h) see the shapes of the furniture in a room	
i) In a room during daytime, I can tell by the light where the windows are	j) I cannot see anything at all	
4. Have you heard of audio description?		
a) Yes, I have but I don't know what it is	b) Yes, I have and I know what it is	
c) Yes, I have and I have used it	d) I've never heard of it.	
5. How much audio described material have you seen? (if answer c to question 4)		
a) less than 5 hours	b) 5-10 hours	
c) 10-20 hours	d) over 20 hours	
6. How much time do you spend daily on watching TV/films?		
a) less than an hour	b) 1-3 hours	
c) more than 3 hours	d) none	
7. What films and series do you watch most often?		
a) Polish films and series	b) foreign films and series with Polish dubbing	

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1 Please note that this is one of the two versions of the questionnaire that we were using in our reception study. The other version includes some minor changes particularly as regards comprehension questions for clips with different AD.

c) foreign films and series with Polish voiceover	d) foreign films and series with Polish subtitles read by speech synthesizer
8. Where do you watch programmes or films most often?	
a) on TV	b) on DVD
c) on the Internet	d) in cinema
9. When watching TV:	
a) I do not find that I have any difficulty following what is going on the screen	b) I have difficulty seeing the picture on the TV screen
c) I have difficulty seeing details on the TV screen	d) I have difficulty seeing text on the TV screen
e) I am able to see the light of the TV screen	f) I cannot see anything
10. How do you watch programmes and films? (choose all the options that apply to you)	
a) I wear special stronger glasses	b) I get closer to the TV screen
c) I use a magnifier	d) I ask someone to assist me by explaining what happens on the screen
e) I just try to pick up as much as I can from the sound of the film or programme	f) other
11. What are your sources of information for products specially designed for the visually impaired?	
a) specialist magazines for people with disabilities	b) organisations for people with disabilities, e.g. the Polish Association of the Blind
c) the Internet	d) press, radio, TV
e) family and friends	e) other
12. Age	
a) 18-24	b) 25-34
c) 35-44	d) 45-54
e) 55-64	f) 65-74
g) 75+	
13. Education:	
a) primary	b) vocational
c) secondary	d) student
e) university degree	

II. QUESTIONNAIRE PROPER

You will watch three audio described videos. After watching them I will ask you some questions about their content or audio description.

Rewers [The reverse]
Have you seen the film? YES / NO

[REWERS A]
What was Sabina's facial expression after meeting Bronisław, while in the lift?

1. Should the characters be named immediately (*Sabina, Bronisław*) or only when they are named in the film?

Immediately		Later	

2. What if the character's name is introduced as late as in the middle of the film?

Immediately		In the middle of the film	

3. Which solutions do you prefer?

Her pupils are dilated. She squints her eyes		*She has dreamy eyes*	
Her eyes are wide open. She shifts her weight from foot to foot		*She looks frightened*	
He blows out the smoke. His hands in the pockets. His legs wide apart		*Self confident and nonchalant, he blows out the smoke*	
in a beret, loose-fitting jacket, too long skirt and flat shoes		*a modestly dressed grey mouse*	
a young dark-haired man in a suit and a trenchcoat		*handsome like a heart-throb*	

Tylko mnie kochaj [Just love me]
Have you seen the film? **YES / NO**

CONTEXT: The film is set in Warsaw. The main character is Michał, a businessman and a young bachelor. One day, seven-year old Michalina knocks on his door and claims to be his daughter. Michał thinks it's a joke but the little girl doesn't give up and moves in for five days to convince him that he can love her.

[ZAKUPY B]

1. Which solutions do you prefer?

Michalina in a beret, a red dress and a coat presents herself to Michał. She turns from side to side *Michalina in a blue cotton dress. She lowers her shoulder straps. Michał nods. Michalina presents a white dress with the pattern of green apples, red cherries and strawberries, yellow lemons. Michalina dances. She pirouettes*		*Michalina (...) presents to Michał her outfits: a beret and a coat, two summer dresses. She dances and fools around* *Michał evaluates her outfits*	

2. Has the reference to *Pretty Woman* helped you imagine the described scene? **YES / NO**

Testosteron
Have you seen this film? **YES / NO**

CONTEXT: Alicja, a bride standing before the altar tells the groom, Kornel, that she's in love with another man. She kisses one of the guests (Tretyn) in the church and runs away. Stavros, the father of the groom, Robal, Fistach, Tretyn, and groom Kornel (weakened after a fight in the church) and his brother Janis arrive at the inn at the lake where the wedding party was to take place. Waiter Tytus joins the six men.

[TESTOSTERON A]

Who did Kornel address his lecture in the pen to?

How does Kornel perceive Tretyn leaning over him?

1. Do you prefer when the names of characters are announced in a group scene?

Yes		No	

2. Which solutions do you prefer?

Tretyn's face appears to Kornel as werewolf's muzzle		*Tretyn's face turns bluish, his irises shine. He bares his teeth*	
Kornel in the pen		*Kornel in the pen addressing the sheep*	

III. POST-QUESTIONNAIRE

1. I prefer when audio description is read by:	
a) a man	b) a woman
c) depends on the film/programme	d) it doesn't matter to me

2. Which solution do you prefer?			
attractive singer		*long-legged singer in a miniskirt*	
Stefan watches the cat that continues walking on the display cases knocking off plastic ice-cream spoons		*Stefan watches the cat. The cat continues walking on the display cases. It knocks off plastic ice-cream spoons*	
a house with plaster peeling off the walls		*a run-down house [i.e. peeling plaster, destroyed roof, derelict windows and doors, but no time for such a description]*	
autumn sun		*weak sunlight*	
he winks raising his left lip corner		*he winks meaningfully*	
Robert at the railway station. He approaches the escalator. The camera freezes showing the top stairs. Red heels, black tights. The camera moves up to show a woman's face		*Robert at the railway station. He approaches the escalator. He looks at the top stairs. A woman in black clothes and red high heels goes down*	

3. Please, show the described gesture.			
Konstanty bids farewell to Stefan with a hand gesture.		*Konstanty raises his fist and spreads his fingers in a farewell gesture*	

4. To what extent do you agree with the statements below? (7 – strongly agree; 1 – strongly disagree)							
1) Audio description helps in film reception	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2) Aspects that are irrelevant to the plot should be described	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3) It bothers me in audio description when:							
a) the text is read too fast	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
b) the text is read too slowly and includes unnatural pauses	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
c) the text fills all pauses between dialogues	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
d) the text overlaps with dialogues	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
e) the text is not synchronised with the picture (is read before or after what it describes)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4) Audio description should include							
a) evaluative adjectives (e.g. beautiful, ugly)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

b) colours	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
c) similes, e.g.							
- *a building as tall as ten elephants put one on top of another*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
- *moves his lips like a fish gasping for air*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
- *bog with a colour and consistency of a tomato sauce*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
d) logo of the film studio	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
e) all opening titles, time permitting	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
f) all credits, time permitting	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
g) the audio describer's name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
h) the voice talent's name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5) I would always use audio description services if it was available on TV	1	2	3	4	5	6	7