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Standardising Audio Description(1)

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Most creative activities are described by the freedom and audacity of their expression. Audio description, a creative writing modality to make audiovisual content accessible for all, has been the subject of standardisation from its origins. The present article will trace a history of the development of Audio Description in the academic realm, following standardisation measures and existing protocols.

Key words: Audio description, standardisation, multilingualism, audio subtitles

Introduction

Audio description (AD) is the descriptive technique of inserting audio narrations, explanations and descriptions of the settings, characters, and actions taking place in a variety of audiovisual media, when such information about these visual elements is not offered in the regular audio presentation. This ad hoc narrative can be created for any media representation: dynamic or static, i.e. from a guided city tour of Barcelona or a 3D film, to a Picasso painting. Its function is to make audiovisual content available to all.

There is a vision underpinning access services, such as AD: e-inclusiveness. E-inclusiveness is more than just assistive technologies in the form of access services in programmes produced specifically for those with

disabilities. The vision has its basis in various treaties and legislation across the world[2] recognising the right to access media content as a human right, as already stated in the Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities by United Nations, which came into force in 2003.

From Article 1: "Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others".

From Article 9: "To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and rural areas."

It is based on the tenet that, in a society where individuals are diverse in nature, we share a collective responsibility to be socially inclusive. Access services are a means of doing this, and AD is one of these services.

The technique of AD has been around for centuries (Benecke 2004, Pujol & Orero 2007), both for blind people and for those who could not access the visual content due for example to lack of culture or education. This is the case in the Medieval Ages where pilgrims needed oral explanations to read and enjoy the visual narrative in the glass windows of churches and cathedrals. In the 20th century, with the development of silent cinema, narrators where hired by cinema owners to explain the film, and to read intertitles. In those years literacy in both film language and reading texts were not a common occurrence. In the 21st century where culture and society has

2 For US see http://www.ada.gov/cguide.htm for US Disability Right Laws. For Europe see European Accessibility Act
http://ec.europa.eu/governance/impact/planned_ia/docs/2012_just_025_europ ean_accessibiliy_act_en.pdf

moved from paper to audiovisual formats, the need for access to content is more poignant.

Audio description: special features

Audio description is the general concept which includes many variants and possibilities. The most basic traits which can be applied to all forms of audio description are:

a) Audio description is an intersemiotic process, from a visual text to an oral text --which sometimes has to be written and recorded, and sometimes is delivered live (Matamala 2007).

b) Audio description, may, but is not necessarily, between two different languages. Hence translation in the sense of languages may not be present.

c) Audio description should be produced when there is a gap in the oral channel of the audiovisual text.

d) There is a general convention amongst ADs around the world, that the narrative antecedes the action.

The content that lends itself to be audio described varies, but the following list of possible scenarios could be drafted:

- Scenic arts such as theatre, opera, circus, ballet, etc., which are generally performed live, although they can be later broadcast on television.

- Films and TV programmes, included in broadcast media such as television, cinema, DVD, which are generally recorded.

- Museums and galleries, parks and heritage sites which exhibit art: abstract and figurative (painting, sculpture, photography, videos, etc.)

Sports, political gatherings, and in fact any situation where a visual element is an essential part.

Standards, Norms, and Regulations

Academic studies on AD are now growing exponentially within the field of Translation Studies (Kruger & Orero 2010, Igareda & Matamala 2012). Two of the issues which have caught academic attention are the analysis of existing guidelines (Vercauteren 2007, Orero 2012) and the research needed towards drafting new and scientifically proven guidelines or standards (Orero & Wharton 2007, Braun 2008). Some studies go further in trying to reach a pan European Standard on AD (Yeung 2007, Orero 2008). There is an ongoing EU project which is working in this direction: ADLAB3. This three-year (2011-2014) project on audio description is financed by the European Union under the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) with the aim of funding higher education courses to train AD specialists and to design reliable and consistent guidelines for the practice of AD across Europe, taking into consideration different languages, language combination, and cultural backgrounds.

Every country which offers AD has drafted, or is currently drafting their guidelines. Guidelines may go under different names such as standards, protocols, rules or norms, among others. In some cases they are issued by public organisms, such as Ofcom [4] in the UK where standards are in accordance with the Communications Act 2003, the Broadcasting Act 1996, or the Broadcasting Act 1990 (OfCom 2010). The document, published in 2010, establishes a code which sets out the requirements on various access services such as AD. Concerning AD, it provides a definition, potential users, it advises on how to select the programmes to be audio described and gives recommendations on best practices. A longer document (ITC 2000) with more concrete notes on AD was previously published, indicating how to prepare an AD and giving specific examples.

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[3] www.adlab.net

[4] Ofcom is "the independent regulator and competition authority for the UK communications industries, with responsibilities across television, radio, telecommunications and wireless communications services" http://www.ofcom.org.uk/

A similar case is that of Spain, where the National Standard UNE 153020 was issued by the national standard agency AENOR (2005)[5]. The norm makes reference to the purpose and scope of applicability, gives definitions and sets forth the end users and requirements. It also describes in detail the AD process and makes specific remarks about live productions and audio guides.

More recently, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland launched the Access Rules in 2012, in accordance with the Broadcasting Act 2009, and developed the BAI Guildelines- Audio Description document (BAI 2012), which outlines general and technical standards related to AD. In a brief four-page document, it provides a definition and indicates what to describe, when to described and what not to describe, and adds some remarks on the sound level, recording, grammar and language, and information prioritasion, among some other aspects.

Regarding France, Gonant and Morisset (2008) drafted "La charte de l'audiodescription", published by the French Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, presenting as the other guidelines generally do a definition and the target audience. Respect to the work, objectivity and respect to the hearer are mentioned as three key aspects before listing the main elements to be described and when they should be voiced. Recommendations on the language and style, voicing and recording, and budget are also included.

Other guidelines are written and published within broadcasting corporations which offer the service of AD such as Bayerischer Rundfunk (Benecke & Dosch 2004). Some are written as unpublished internal documents for in-house training activities, such as those produced by Veronica Hyks for IMS-Media[6] or James O'Hara for itfc[7].

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[5] AENOR develops standardisation and certification (S + C) in all industrial and service sectors. It is the Spanish representative in international standard bodies such as ISO and CEN.

[6] http://www.ims-media.com/

[7] http://www.itfc.com/

We can find guidelines written to train at education centres such as universities, an example of these are Aline Remael (2005) guidelines written for her courses at University College Antwerp in Belgium. And also protocol proposals derived from university research (Puigdomènech, Matamala and Orero 2010). This document was initially written as a report for a project developed in 2005 by Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and Roehampton University ("Audio Description Protocols", Catalan Government funded project # 2006PBR10023) and it identified the key issues in AD and the various approaches found mainly in the UK, Germany and Spain. Its aim was to be used as the basis for a future protocol in Catalan AD.

Associations and non-profit organisations have also been active in promoting best practices in Audio Description. The US National Association of the Deaf and The American Foundation for the Blind, supported by the Described and Captioned Media Program (funded by the US Departament of Education), has developed the Description Key (http://www.descriptionkey.org/), which gives recommendations on how to prepare an AD (what to describe/how to describe) and technical aspects.

The American Council of the Blind, previously AD International, has also developed The Audio Description project (ADI 2002), giving guidelines for "good describing". Their web also includes other standards (http://www.acb.org/adp/ad.html).

Media Access Australia, a non-for-profit media access organisation, has prepared and "Audio Description Background Paper" (Mikul 2010), defining this practice and indicating how to deliver AD, as well as costs and turnaround times. Although they do not establish standards as such in the text of the document, they make reference to overseas standards and indicate the minimum elements a future standard should cover, which are developed in 22 points included as an appendix to the document (MMA's draft audio description guidelines).

RNIB (Rai et al 2010) carried out a comparison of various of the abovementioned standards, namely the Spanish Standard, the German AD guildelines, the French AD charter, ADI proposed guidelines, a working document for Greek (Georgakopoulou 2008) and the *Ofcom Draft Guidelines from Television Access Services. Review of the Code and Guidance 2006*.

Within this varied context there is a double fold need: first of all, to carry out an updated comparison of all guidelines and practices at international level to identify local specificities and shared approaches; and secondly, to observe the results of experimental research with end users carried out by research centers to identify best practices and user preferences. Based on that, international standards can be put forward and can be used not only as a framework which recommends best practices at international level to countries which already have implemented audio description but also as a roadmap for countries with emerging access services who will undoubtedly benefit from clear recommendations. ISO (International Standard Organisation) and ITU (International Telecommunication Union) are currently working on such international standards, which are at the time of writing this article within a Working Group, and it is expected to have their published work in the very near future.

Conclusions

While audio description is a creative activity, it is considered as an accessible service, and as any service it should be possible to standarise and evaluate its quality. The number and type of audio description standarisation efforts are remarkable, as it is the overall perspective which points at atomised maps both in geography and agency. There is no doubt that audio description should have minimum requirements to fulfil quality standards, but looking at the dynamism in the standardisation process it seems as if different audio description agencies are doomed to agree in one basic issue: they disagree – even in the name of the service: audio description or video description?

This paper has tried to offer an overall perspective of the state of the art in audio description.

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