Audio Description and Social Acceptability*

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Audio description (AD) is the accessibility service and modality which has developed most in academia in recent years (Maszerowska *et al.*, 2014). This development can be measured in different areas beyond output quantity, such as specific research topics, funded research projects, approaches, and research methodologies. This Special Issue is a good example of the cutting-edge research on audio description, and shows its direction and intentionality. This collection of articles is also representative of the geographical distribution of research and researchers, and the areas where international financing has been provided.

Audio description as an academic field started shyly – or perhaps cautiously – following closely the directions pointed by practitioners (Benecke, 2004; Snyder, 2008). This docile attitude changed fast when audio description was adopted as a **modality** in the field of Translation Studies (Orero 2005) and more accurately in Audiovisual Translation (AVT) (Gambier, 2008; Matamala, 2006; Matamala and Orero, 2007; Bernabé and Orero, forthcoming). Audio description moved from being a **service**, where the focus was on meeting the user expectations and needs following a clinical approach. End users were considered – and are still considered – people with sight impairments. The first academic studies on media accessibility services always departed from a superficial study on a clinical description and classification of the physiological features. This clinical approach has been changing gradually, and the reason was the declaration by the Committee on the

Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) by the United Nations (UN). This is slowly moving research from the clinical approach to a human rights perspective (Greco, 2016). The CRPD (GA resolution A/RES/61/106) is an international human rights treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 13th December 2006; it opened to signatures on 30th March 2007 and came into force on 3rd May 2008 following ratification by the 20th State Party. As of February 2011, the Convention had 98 State Parties and was the first Human Rights Treaty to be ratified by a regional integration organization, the European Union and it has 147 signatories[1]. This offered a legal context and a new framework for research, since other human features beyond physiological determination are now taken into consideration.

The move of audio description from a service to a modality also offered the possibility of understanding and studying audio description away from the user. Audio description became of age, and theoretical discussions, analytical studies, technological research and user-based experiments found their place in this rich object of study. Since academics dealing with AD were mainly from the field of AVT, the research topic which captured attention at the moment was quickly dismissed: the dilemma between subjectivity versus objectivity. AD as a creative and artistic human activity is subjective by definition. This opened the door to much research, which has been regularly presented at the international seminar on audio description ARSAD, one of the most relevant events for those working on and researching audio description; in various academic journals and fora, and now as part of this RIIT Special Issue.

If we agree that AD is an artistic cultural product, this can be studied from a sociological perspective, since "culture and art can be systematically transformed into instruments of social distinction" (Robbins, 1991:121). This helps the search from AVT to understand common patterns of AD perception at society level, away from individual taste, which in turn will help to draft a wider and more socially accepted AD, and legitimise it since "[l]egitimacy is a product not of individual determinacy but of social acceptability … patterns of [cultural] consumption need to create corresponding patterns of perception in order to generate successful patterns of legitimisation… there is no cultural empathy without social legitimacy" (Susen, 2012:183). Looking at patterns of perception is the aim of the first articles in the Special Issue. Audio description should provide a continuum in the experience perceived while consuming the cultural good. Audio description should avoid breaking the suspension of disbelief created by the empathy of consuming art. This empathy may be measured by looking at engagement or immersion.

Nazaret Fresno, who prefers to talk about the users' willingness to participate rather than suspension of disbelief, approaches the concept of engagement

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1   http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRPD/Pages/QuestionsAnswers.aspx (last accessed 07/09/2017).

in audio description in the first paper ("Approaching Engagement in Audio Description"). Her theoretical paper draws from studies from Psychology and Media Studies to offer a theoretical account of immersion and comprehension as facilitators of engagement in the AD context. Fresno refers to concepts such as transportation, flow, and presence to discuss immersion, and uses the Mental Model Theory (Johnson-Laird, 1983) to elaborate on the concept of comprehension. Special attention is paid to the receiver's involvement with the characters. Fresno reports on recent research carried out in audio description on these topics, and suggests several strategies that could improve engagement in audio described content.

Closely related to the first paper, immersion is the central topic of the second article, "Measuring immersion in audio description with Polish blind and visually impaired audiences", by **Agnieszka Walczak**. Whilst the previous article addressed theoretical aspects, Walczak's paper reports on two experimental research studies with end users in Poland. The first experiment analyses the reception of two AD styles: standard and creative. The second studies the reception of two AD voice types, human and synthetic, in two genres: fiction and documentary. The focus is on presence, and to that end Walczak uses the ITC-SOPI questionnaire to obtain data from the participants.

Also related to the issue of engagement, and looking to add the emotional dimension to audio description, **Gert Vercauteren** after a theoretical revision proposes a framework and tests it with an example from the movie *In Time* (Niccol, 2011). In his article "Audio describing the extradiegetic emotive dimension of film", Vercauteren makes an analysis of the emotive dimension of films, and suggests a model that helps describers when facing a description. His model helps to determine the various emotive triggers and markers which in turn will be included in their script.

The next paper is related to reception research in audio description and also deals with AD styles but with a different approach. **Floriane Bardini**, in the article "Interpretation in Audio Description and the Film Experience of Blind and Partially Sighted Spectators: Design of a Reception Study", reports on the methodological aspects of a reception study in which three different types of audio description styles are tested: denotative, cinematic, and narrative. The article describes the material used for the experiment and how the three different versions were created following a functionalist framework. Details about the experimental design, and preliminary findings about the interaction of comprehension, enjoyment and emotion in the reception of the different AD versions are put forward.

The next paper related to reception research in audio description is authored by **Jan-Louis Kruger, Stephen Doherty and Ronny Ibrahim**. In "Electroencephalografic beta coherence as an objective measure of psychological immersion in film", the authors put forward the potential electroencephalography (EEG) has as an online measure for AVT research in general and AD in particular. They discuss

a pilot study in which EEG beta coherence between the prefrontal and posterior parietal cortices was used to test to what extent audiences get immersed in a story. Although the experiment is related to subtitling, the authors put the focus on how this type of measures could be implemented in audio description research and pave the way for future research in the field.

Moving away from reception studies, but providing data that could undoubtedly be useful in designing user tests, **Anna Jankowska, Bartosz Ziółko, Magdalena Igras-Cybulska, and Agata Psiuk** analyse "Reading speed in audio description". As part of the project AudioMovie – Cinema for All, the authors carry out an analysis of the audio description delivery rate of three Polish fiction films. The paper draws from literature from phonetics on speech rate and puts the emphasis on pauses, while discussing the most adequate measures to be implemented when calculating reading speed in audio described content.

Also in Poland but with another team of researchers, **Anna Jankowska, Agnieszka Szarkowska, Krzysztof Krejtz, Anita Fidyka, Jarosław Kowalski, and Marcin Wichrowski** work on a project on museum accessibility which is presented in the following paper: "Smartphone app as a museum guide. Testing the Open Art application with blind, deaf, and sighted users". The Open Art application contains descriptions of selected Polish art works in the form of short videos which include visual material accompanied by a narration, subtitles and sign language. The paper reports on the results of a study that assessed how the Open Art application is used in a museum space, more specifically how the app meets the needs of diverse users. This was achieved by means of questionnaires, observations during the art exhibition visit, and post-visit semi-structured qualitative interviews.

The special issue closes with two papers on European projects funded under the Erasmus + scheme and related to accessibility and training. **Elisa Perego** presents the ADLAB PRO project in the paper "Audio Description: A Laboratory for the Development of a New Professional Profile". ADLAB PRO is a three-year (2016-2019) project coordinated by the University of Trieste, Italy, that aims to define the AD professional profile and created flexible training materials. The paper presents the project background, the project priorities, the partners, and the activities that are carried out to achieve the project aims.

Pilar Orero closes the special issue with an article on "The professional profile of the expert in media accessibility for the scenic arts", in which the ACT (Accessible Culture and Training) project is presented. ACT is an Erasmus + funded project led by Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (2015-2018). Orero describes the rationale behind the project, contextualising it within the framework of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The article reports on the results of the first two steps in the project: on the one hand, questionnaires, interviews and focus groups with art venues managers allowed to gather data on how accessibility is understood, how it is provided, and how much it is needed by end users. On the other hand, departing from the previous

data, the skills and competences of the professionals managing accessibility in cultural venues were defined.

This special issue offers a wide overview of the current state of the art of audio description research, with theoretical, empirical, descriptive, and technological approaches. Despite diverging specific interests and methodologies, there seems to be always an ultimate aim in all these investigations: a willingness to improve audio description provision so that it becomes mainstream.

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