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Audio description of Films: State of the Art and a Protocol Proposal

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In the new Ofcom guidelines (2006) on the provision of television access services, audio description is defined as “a service primarily aimed at enhancing meaning and enjoyment of television services for blind or partially sighted viewers. It comprises a commentary woven around the soundtrack, exploiting pauses to explain on-screen action, describe characters, locations, costumes, body language and facial expressions.” This latest guideline, as with most of the existing guidelines, may be considered as a draft since they all share the wish to standardize and advise in the process of writing an AD, though they still remain vague leaving much to personal decision and taste. This type of intersemiotic transfer is the object of study in this article, where we analyze some of the many existing AD guidelines for films. After the comparative work, we shall focus on the areas which will need further research giving rise to a proposed protocol or guidelines which may be useful for future research and work.

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1. Introduction

Spain is to date the only country in the world which has a written standard for audio description (AENOR 2005). While countries such as the US or UK have enjoyed Broadcasting Acts² which have enforced the inclusion of subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing, sign language, and audio description for many years now, none of them have a standard guideline which must be observed. They only have recommendations such as ITC (2000) from Ofcom in the UK³, which serves as “guidance as to the how digital programme services should promote the understanding and enjoyment of programmes by sensory impaired people including those who are blind and partially-sighted”. If we look at the Spanish law – Ley General del Audiovisual – which is supposed to regulate media accessibility implementation, we find it does not have any sanctioning power. Nevertheless, the mere fact that the Spanish government -and a good number of people- formed a working group to draft some guidelines and passed a national Standard is an important social achievement and a step forward for media accessibility and social integration in a country where people with sight problems have been enjoying a segregation promoted in part by some of its own users association.

The draft of the Spanish Standard UNE did not have any academic nor scientific basis, and its content does not help when writing an audio description (Orero 2005 C, Orero & Wharton 2007). With the experience of having to write an AD script and the lax information offered by the Spanish Standard, it has been thought convenient to start a research project which aims at creating an AD protocol for Catalonia, which is the geographical area where we are based and where we have obtained funding.⁴ The first steps in the study and the approach to drafting the Catalan protocol are the two issues which will be discussed in this article.

² Go to http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1990/Ukpga_19900042_en_1.htm [14/3/2007] for the whole text of the UK Broadcasting Act.

³ For the text go to http://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv/ifi/guidance/tv_access_serv/archive/audio_description_stnds/ [14/3/2007].

⁴ A state of the art of AD in Catalonia can be found in Matamala (forthcoming b)

2. Reception of film AD

Before entering into a more detailed analysis of the different existing guidelines for AD, one of the issues which should be taken into consideration are the two different modalities of AD: live AD and recorded AD.

a) Live Audio Description of Films

Though live audio description of films is not a common occurrence, we should take into consideration this possibility (Matamala 2005, Orero 2006). If the describer had time to prepare the AD, the process of writing and preparing the AD does not change from the work entailed in a recorded AD because in both cases the describer will work from a videotaped or digital copy of the film. The only difference residing in the delivery: the describer (or an independent voice-artist) will read aloud the AD. Nevertheless, reality always beats fiction and the fact is that in the few live representations we have witnessed, the main challenge is to get the timing right. The describer is in the dark cinema and the screen has no time code to be able to follow the annotated descriptions. Hence the voice-artist or describer relies on memory to read aloud the script, and is not given a second chance to achieve synchronisation.

If the describer has never seen the film and has to provide an AD live and for the whole audience, the process of creating an AD is similar to the AD of live events with no previous planning (Matamala, forthcoming a), with the risk of the AD treading on some dialogues, and some instances of possible places where an AD could have been delivered but nothing is said: the thrill of live performances. Luckily, films are usually available beforehand and the describer rarely has to confront situations such as the aforementioned.

b) Recorded AD of films

This will be the normal process of creating an AD and the one we shall focus in this article and in the protocol. This is the situation where the client needs the script of an AD and one or several describers set up to work on it. Once the written script is finished, and depending on the tradition of each country, either the describer himself or a voice artist reads the AD in the silent slots available and the technicians make the final adjustments so as to deliver a finished and recorded product to be included in a DVD, to be broadcast on television or shown in cinemas.

3. Only one?

One of the first features we have found in most AD guidelines is that they only take into consideration AD for films, or that little attention has been taken on other forms of AD (opera, live events, ballet, etc.). To put one example of a different type of material to be audio described let's think of an extreme case such as the AD of an abstract painting, i.e. Rothko's abstract expressionist (Gratacós 2006, De Coster & Volkmar forthcoming) picture no. 317



Fig 1. Mark Rothko 317

When we are faced with such image, how can it be AD? Should emotions be AD? Is there a certain protocol such as: frame, dimensions, technique, etc.?

We believe (Puigdomènech, Matamala & Orero 2007) there can be a general AD protocol with very basic guidelines such as the use of verb tenses or not saying “we see”, but we think that different protocols should be drafted since it

is not the same to AD a Picasso painting hung at the Tate, as a Cirque du Soleil representation or Woody Allen's latest movie. At this early stage of the research we feel that it may be possible to have at least three separate AD protocols, grouped under a general umbrella:

- 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 contemplates art: abstract and figurative (painting, sculpture, photography, videos, etc.)

4. The most representative guidelines

For our research we have gathered four European guidelines: the Spanish Standard; "Audio description for recorded TV; Cinema and DVD Experimental Stylesheet" by Aline Remael (2005); Independent Television Commission (ITC) Guidance on Standards for Audio Description (2000), and Bernd Benecke⁵ and Elmar Dosch's *Wenn aus Bildern Worte werden. Durch Audio-Description zum Hörfilm* (2004). The choice of these four European ADs is made with the hope that in the near future a common European protocol will be a reality, fostering the exchange of works which have followed common guidelines within the European audiovisual and broadcasting industries.

Let's summarise the main points of each of the previous guidelines.

a) The Spanish Standard

The Spanish Standard is divided in to three sections: the first looks at the object of the standard and its field of application, such as the many programmes offered on TV or recorded in any format, mentioning the possibility of offering AD for museums, exhibitions, natural parks, etc.; the second part provides definitions of the terms which are related to the production of an AD; and it is in the third section where we find the guidelines for the process of creating an AD and the task of the voice talent is described. In our opinion, the text of the

⁵ Special thanks to Bernd Benecke for his help and assistance with the translation and comments of his guidelines.

Spanish Standard lacks clarity, and the guidelines are far too general to be of any use.

b) Remael's proposal

This short guideline from Belgium deals –along with the next two guidelines– with films, and TV series'. It has been drafted as a starting point to be used by students when learning to write ADs and its main difference from other guidelines is the section: "Important constitutive elements of the film story-structure".

c) ITC Guidance

The British guideline is drafted for films and TV, differentiating the many genres found within TV. Many real life examples are offered, with detailed analysis of ADs, and it includes five sections:

- Introduction: the basis for the drafting of the guideline is explained and a short history of AD and the audience for which it's aimed is also given.
- Preparation of script: where the process of a script of an AD writing is explained.
- Principles of AD: different linguistic features are explained such as use of present tense, use of adverbs, correct use of names and pronouns and the adjectival descriptions.
- Programmes: it presents twelve types of broadcasting possibilities and it describes the main features for each type.
- Broadcasting and copyrights for AD.

d) The German guidelines

The German guide looks at film and TV series. It develops the following issues: what to AD, how much to AD, how to describe the first AD (short period of time for too much information: characters, plot, credits, etc.), how to name the characters, the language to be used, guidelines for the voice artist. The guideline finishes by saying that there seems to be no film which may not lend itself to be AD.

5. The thorny issues

Analysing the guidelines and putting them into practice when describing some films we have met the following issues where we think more research will be needed:⁶

5. 1 Vocabulary

Though all the guidelines touch upon this issue, when looking at them in detail we find some unresolved areas. According to the Spanish Standard AD (AENOR 2005: 7) the recommendation regarding vocabulary is “The describer has to consult the documentation regarding the work to be AD and the theme which is described, so it is guaranteed that adequate vocabulary is used”⁷. This means that a similar vocabulary and expressions to those used in the film should be used, which as a consequence implies that that if we are watching a film by Quentin Tarantino where swearing and slang is readily available the AD should also follow that style. However, common sense says that the use of such marked vocabulary should be avoided, which was confirmed in some of the abovementioned guidelines. Remael, for example, recommends that “the language should not draw attention to itself”, whereas Benecke & Dosch’s section “What words do I use to describe?” (2004: 24), which deals with vocabulary, style and terminology, says⁸ that the vocabulary chosen should match the tone of the film and that you have to avoid a formal, written language as this hinders a lively description following the motion and action of the movie. However, no mention is made to the use of slang or dialects, though after a personal email consultation Benecke mentioned “We normally do not use slang or dialects but you will for example find more comic-style-language in a comedy (A Fish called Wanda, Chicken Run) and we sometimes use regional expressions like the south German “Bub” instead of “Junge” – both for boy – in films which take place in Bavaria or Austria.” The English ITC guidelines when dealing with sex or violence scenes (2000: 33, 34) recommends: “Describing sexually explicit material has to be sensitively handled. [...] The describer has to

⁶ An initial version of these issues can be found in Orero&Wharton (2007), an article on the AD of the Spanish film *Torrente*.

⁷ El audiodescriptor debe consultar la documentación referente al entorno y la temática de la obra que se describe, de forma que se garantice la utilización del vocabulario adecuado. All translations from the Spanish Norm are our own.

⁸ Die Sprache bzw. die Wortwahl der Beschreibung muss natürlich dem Ton des Films angemessen sein. Das Schriftdeutsch ist meist wenig hilfreich, Film bedeutet Bewegung und wirkliches Leben. Jeder Text, der zu formal oder zu trocken ist, behindert da.

convey the atmosphere and the feeling without descending into crudeness, clinical coldness or undue sentimentality. [...] Scenes of violence require the same level of sensitive consideration.” ITC gives the example given in *The Silence of Lambs*

Lieutenant Boyle hangs crucified on the cage bars, his stomach cut open, his insides removed

Which can be compared to *Torrente 3* when the character goes to his grandmother’s house, and enters through a corridor with no electric light holding a lighter saying:

- *Fuck, this is greatly improved thanks to the PP, ha, ha, Christ. I’ve just trod in a puddle. Or a rat. Fucking hell...*⁹

In fact, in this scene “the images are gruesome enough without verbal embellishment” (ITC 2000: 33) so we have agreed that in the new Catalan protocol the vocabulary used for the AD should not be part of the film. This is a key point since the language of AD should be a neutral discourse written to be read aloud and narrated, rather than a description of the film which by its very similitude to the filmic discourse appears at that point of that film. The AD narrative is not an intrinsic part of the film, its plot or characters, and should therefore stand distant from it all.

5.2 Language and Audience

We find some guidelines which recommend a language which should be adequate to the audience. In the Spanish Standard we also found the following recommendation (2005: 7): “the information offered must be made to match the audience: children, youth, adults, etc.¹⁰” As for ITC (2000: 29), it makes reference to children’s programmes pointing out that “where a description is

⁹ *Joder!! Como ha mejorao esto con los del PP, jeje, coño! Ya he pisao un charco! O si no una rata! Me cago en.....* (Our attempted translation)

¹⁰ La información debe ser adecuada al tipo de obra y a las necesidades del público al que se dirige (por ejemplo público infantil, juvenil, adulto).

being written specifically for children's programmes the vocabulary and sentence construction should be suited to the age group for which the programmes is intended", adding that "the tone of the narration should also reflect the tone of the programme". Hence at this moment in our research we can say that when doing the AD for children it should be with a very basic vocabulary, register and grammatical complexity. What is not yet clear is if there will be other different ADs for an audience which is not formed by children.

5.3 Terminology

Linked to the issue of the choice of vocabulary is that of terminology. In Benecke & Dosch's second chapter *Filmbeschreibung in der Praxis* (2004:13) ("The Practice of AD"), the authors very briefly mention that when looking at the programme for the first time, you should take notes of the advanced knowledge you will need for specific scenes (e.g. on mountaineering) and that you have to start your research based on this summary. The Spanish Standard recommends: "The terminology should be adequate to the genre"¹¹. Following this recommendation when describing a film such as *The Merchant of Venice* (2005) directed by Michael Radford, we should use the same terminology of that used by Shakespeare. Bourne & Jiménez (forthcoming) have made a contrastive analysis of the use of vocabulary in a Spanish and British AD of Stephen Daldry's *The Hours* (2002) with the following example and its comment:

'Virginia vierte agua de un aguamanil en una jofaina y se contempla en el espejo.'

[Virginia pours water from a jug into a basin and contemplates herself in the mirror.]

Here the nouns 'aguamanil' and 'jofaina' seem markedly old-fashioned against the more familiar *jarro* and *vasija*, while the verb 'contemplarse' may be regarded as a somewhat elevated alternative to *mirarse*. As a general rule, however, the lexical resources deployed in the Spanish text suggest a concern

¹¹ Debe utilizarse la terminología específica apropiada para cada obra que se describa.

to avoid placing excessive cognitive demands on the receiver, whereas the English text seems at times positively challenging in this respect.

They offer another example:

The woman's body, face down, is carried by the swift current through swaying reeds along the murky river bed, her gold wedding band glinting on her finger, a shoe slipping off her foot.

El cuerpo sumergido de Virginia es arrastrado por la corriente.

[The submerged body of Virginia is swept away by the current.]

So for drafting the Catalan protocol, other similar contrastive analysis will be undertaken before arriving at a conclusion which may be also aimed at advertisements similar to those produced for a British audience.

5.4 Music

The issue of music begins to appear as soon as the film starts. Credits are usually accompanied by songs with meaningful lyrics. While it is difficult to get any help through the guidelines, Benecke commented in a personal consultation: "We always try to find a middle way, which means leave some parts of the music or the song and use instrumental parts or some lines in between to describe what happens." Take as example the James Bond theme song in *Live and Let Die* (1973). Some reference to music can also be found in ITC (2000: 24) in section 4.2, which deals with Musicals and where reads:

The main challenge for the describer is where to place the description. Many film songs came from stage shows and are well known and viewers want to listen to them without the describer talking over them. The describer must either try to pre-empt a song with a brief description of a dance or costumes, or, must judge carefully when to intervene and when to stay silent during a song, to cause least offence. The third option is to let the music play and say nothing at all.

Further issues related to music that should be taken into account are the following:

- What should be done when a song is heard?

- And when the song is in a different language?
- And when the song is in a different language and subtitles appear in the screen offering the translation?
- And finally when the music is for background and the lyrics have no link to the film, is it simply considered as background noise?

The complexity of these issues requires further research before establishing some recommendations, which will have to be taken into account since music is one of the most important elements of a film. This is why we leave the matter open and move into the AD of credits, an issue intimately linked with music.

5.5 Credits

Benecke and Dosch do not really go into details about opening titles or credits. They only mention them in passing saying that the beginning of a film is often the hardest part to describe as you have to get a lot of information across¹². Often, more recent movies start with an intensive action scene so there even is no time to describe the characters. With older films, they say, you can use part of the opening titles to already start the description (2004: 22). Benecke's personal comments to this point were "with credits it's the same as with music, we try to find the middle way. This means that we must first get the description of what happens and then try to say what is possible of the credits, combine the names of the actors with their names in the film etc. Sometimes it's not possible to achieve everything and you have to hope for the end." More information on credits, logos, opening titles, are given in the ITC guidelines (2004: 22):

Some opening titles using computer-generated text can move too rapidly for any helpful description to be given. A popular alternative is to provide the viewer with some useful information about the programme, for which there might not be time later. In other cases, the musical theme tune can be enjoyed for its own merit, without any description over it. But with

¹² Die Feuerprobe jeder Beschreibung ist der Anfang eines Films. ... Am Anfang muss man den Kunstgriff schaffen, alle Räume und alle Personen einzuführen, und trotzdem die Handlung nicht zu vernachlässigen. ...

Um alle Informationen unterzukriegen, kann man bei älteren Filmen vielfach den Trick nutzen, über einen Teil des Vorspanns zu sprechen. In neuen Werken werden die einführenden Titel aber oft einfach der laufenden Handlung unterlegt, da entfällt so etwas.

American programme material there may be a contractual obligation to describe the opening logo [...]. The opening credits often appear over an important action sequence and it may be necessary to compress them into a shorter space or to read them in advance of their actual appearance on screen, in order to be ready to describe the action as it begins.

After audio describing the film *Torrente 3* in Spanish, Orero & Wharton (2007) highlight that the opening credits of this film conveyed a great amount of information, as explained next, posing various challenges to the describer. The elements included in the credits comprise:

- Music, composed especially for the film opening credits: the melody was very evocative, and the lyrics formed an integral part of the film.
- Credits, the name and surname of the cast were in themselves part of the action which required a description.
- The written credits by themselves.
- The story which took place within the credits: *Torrente* and a naked lady appear on and off running against each other, hiding, etc.
- A written onomatopoeia. That is at one point a rifle shoots and out comes a little red flag with the word “bang” written on it.

Therefore, two possible approaches were feasible, taking into account all the previous elements: (a) to describe what appears on the screen in a synchronised way, alternating the images and the written credits and respecting the lyrics of the song, or (b) to describe only the images respecting the song lyrics and leaving the credits for the end, where they can be read aloud along the end credits.

After many doubts and attempts at different drafts a compromise was reached in the film *Torrente*, in the sense that short descriptions were read during instrumental parts of the song in order to leave the lyrics fully available. In the Catalan protocol we shall look at the many possibilities which we can foresee individual answers for each case.

5.6 Film terminology

With regard to film terminology, Benecke and Dosch (2004:25) say¹³ that it can be used, but that it should be restricted to those terms that are commonly known (such as 'flashback' or 'black and white'), a position shared by Remael, who suggests to "limit the use of technical film terminology" and "use only the commonly known terms, and sparingly". Sometimes, filmic techniques used can create a certain atmosphere, so then they should be mentioned. Joe Clark's agrees and in his webpage we can read: "the director uses filmic techniques with a clear purpose, so not only can they be described, in many instances they have to be described". After consultation of the ITC guidelines (2004: 6) we find not in the style guide but the introduction:

"The wide variety of backgrounds among the audience should be taken into account. Some will remember television and film quite clearly and may be familiar with cinematographic terminology. Others will have no experience of the media and may regard the describer merely as a storyteller. To many, expressions like *in close-up*, *pan across*, *mid-shot*, *crane-shot* etc, may not mean anything but it is important to try to understand why a director has chosen to film a sequence in a particular way and to describe it in terms which will be understood by the majority, if there is room to do so."

5.7 How are characters introduced, and when?

There is no agreement on this issue, and while the Spanish Standard doesn't provide any guidelines, Remael recommends to "Identify new characters early on in the film/scene, unless their identity must remain a secret" maintaining synchrony at all costs. We find the guidelines from the ITC (2000: 16) in section 3.3 Giving Additional Information: "Early identification of principle characters

¹³ Sehr sparsam umgehen sollte man ... mit filmtechnischen Begriffen. Meist kann und darf man nicht voraussetzen, dass jeder Zuschauende mit diesen Begriffen und ihrer Bedeutung vertraut ist. Außerdem ist in einem Film ja selten der technische Effekt selbst als vielmehr seine Wirkung zu sehen, die muss dann auch beschrieben werden.

Szenenwechsel ist zum Beispiel ein Wort, das man immer wieder benutzen möchte, man braucht es aber nicht. Denn einen Szenenwechsel sieht man ja streng genommen nicht, was man sieht ist ein neuer Raum, eine neue Szene, die muss man beschreiben: In der Küche, Wieder auf der Straße etc. Begriffe wie Abblende/Weißblende kann man auch ignorieren, statt dessen lieber: Das Bild wird dunkel, das Bild wird ganz hell.

Als Ausnahme von der Regel hat sich zum Beispiel der Ausdruck Zeitlupe etabliert. Nach unserer Erfahrung können auch Sehgeschädigte mit diesem Begriff gut umgehen, zudem lässt sich diese rein filmische Besonderheit auch schwierig umschreiben. Gerne geben wir auch die Information "in schwarz-weiß", weil sich viele nicht von Geburt an Blinde meist noch gut an diese Art Film erinnern und damit ja auch eine bestimmte Atmosphäre erzeugt wird.

allows the viewer¹⁴ to concentrate on the event, but if surprises are intended then they must not be given away.”

So it seems the future protocol should have to propose the introduction of characters with names and attributes from the very beginning of the film, when there is no change in the development of plot and the enjoyment of the film, as also pointed out by Benecke & Dosch (2004: 23)¹⁵.

5.8 Should colours be described?

After some research on how to audio describe opera in Catalonia (Matamala 2005, Matamala & Orero forthcoming a, Orero forthcoming b), it was clear that blind people want to have colours audio described. This was confirmed by Benecke “Even people who were born blind know that green means nature, red means fire/emotion, and blue water/sky/freshness. Some difficulties exist with non-natural colours like purple etc. but people who saw once in their life might even know how to deal with that. So colour is important!”

However, no guidelines could be found in the Spanish Standard, so we looked at Remael, who writes “However, metaphors (‘a face like thunder’) and colours can be used: blind people live in the world of sighted people and have concepts of what the world around them looks like.” The ITC guidelines (2000: 21) also add:

Most visually impaired people have at some time seen colours and either retained the visual memory of colour or can remember the significance and impact of a particular colour. For the majority of people, colours are an important part of the description. People who are blind from birth or from an early age cannot ‘see’ colours but they do understand the significance of a particular colour by its association. They may not ‘see’

¹⁴ While at first we thought the “viewer” must have been a mistake, Benecke confirmed that “blind and visual impaired people see themselves also as “viewers” of TV or cinema. “I have seen this film with Audio-Description” is what they say and of course they say “Auf Wiedersehen”.

¹⁵ Problematisch ist auch die Einführung der Namen der Hauptfiguren. Eigentlich dürfte eine Person ihren Namen erst bekommen, wenn er im Film gefallen ist. Bis dahin bleibt jemand “Der Mann mit dem Hut“, “Die Frau mit dem Hund“ etc.

Immer wieder wird es aber Filme geben, die selbst wichtige Personen lange Zeit ohne Namen lassen. Da wird der Beschreiber eingreifen wollen, nicht zuletzt, um sich seine Arbeit für den Rest des Films zu vereinfachen.

Auch wir entscheiden uns meistens dazu, wichtigen Personen, die erst spät benannt werden, ihren Namen möglichst früh zu geben. Dafür haben wir uns (etwa in den ersten 10 Minuten des Films) eine Stelle gesucht, an der es neben der Namensnennung auch gleich möglich war, mehr Informationen über die Hauptfigur (also zu Alter, Statur, Haarfarbe etc. siehe oben) unterzubringen.

green, but the colour of flower stalks, leaves and grass, which people can touch and smell does mean something. Green is fresh, the colour of renewal and nature in spring. Red is the colour of fire and heat, exuberant and overt, blue is more reserved, yellow is the colour of the sun and ripe corn, etc. A person wearing bright colours is making a personality statement, wanting to be seen. Someone else wearing black may be being dramatic, mysterious or sad, depending on the situation. If the grass is brown, it may have been deprived of rain. And so on. Colours have a meaning and should be described.

Therefore, it seems that the future protocol will have to make an explicit reference to the description of colours and foster it.

5.9 Written information: inserts

What should be done when any extra information appears as subtitle or a text on the screen? The Spanish Standard (AENOR 2005: 8) recommends that “The script should have all the information given by the occasional subtitles, signposts, credit titles, contracting those which are excessively long for the time allowed¹⁶” There is no doubt that the future protocol will have to take into account this issue and will probably coincide with the Spanish Standard, since written information is part of the visuals of the film and the blind and visually impaired need to have access to at least the most relevant ones.

5.10 What should be done when a text appears in the screen in a different language?

For example in *Torrente 3* newspapers from Europe and US are shown. The headlines are in the original language. Should the headlines be translated and read aloud or just say what they portray: Torrente as international hero.

No guideline has been found on this topic. If the AD offers a translation of the headlines the result is that AD is more explicit than the film. After all, the person who is watching the film and does not know English cannot understand what is

¹⁶ En el guión se debe incluir la información aportada por subtítulos ocasionales, letreros, avisos y títulos de crédito, resumiendo aquellos que sean excesivamente largos cuando el hueco de mensaje sea corto para permitir su audiodescripción literal.

said. In the film analysed by Orero & Wharton (2007), the objective of these frames were to show Torrente as an internationally famous person. Given the lack of time to offer a translation of each headline and to avoid being more explicit than the original film, the solution was the following AD:

01:27:21:00 - 01:27:41:09

The whole screen is a Picture of Torrente, which turns to be the photo of a hero on first page of international papers such as The Times, The New York Times, Le Corriere de la Sera, Le Monde, El Mundo y el Metro which says “Veteran policeman saves the situation” Torrente shakes hands with Rajoy, Zapatero is in the background¹⁷. Benecke commented “We normally would read the text in that foreign language but this sounds special here. Sometimes in old films they’ve translated the text in the film, made a new shot with German text or give subtitles. That would give us the chance to use this translation. In some rare examples we really did a translation in the AD without having that in the film but that had special reasons and tells you that every rule might need some exceptions.”

A related issue is the presence of different languages in the soundtrack: ITC recommends that, if the foreign dialogue has not been subtitled, “the describer should resist the temptation to show off personal knowledge. Translating the spoken lines might be interpreted as spoon-feeding and not what the programme producers intended”. This norm can be applied both to original and dubbed films. However, foreign films subtitled in the target language open up a whole new range of difficulties, since the blind audience cannot access neither the visuals nor the dialogues, which are subtitled. A combination of audio description and audiosubtitling (Veebrom *et al.* 2002), as proposed in opera AD (Matamala & Orero forthcoming a, Orero forthcoming b), could be considered a feasible solution.

5.11 Period of sentences

¹⁷ Toda la pantalla es una foto de la cara de Torrente, que se convierte en la foto de la primera plana de periódicos internacionales como héroe: El Times, New York Times, El Corriere de la Sera, Le Monde, El Mundo, y el Metro que dice “Policía veterano salva la situación”. Torrente le da la mano a Rajoy, Zapatero está en el fondo.

Another question is that of the duration of the period in a sentence. Bourne & Jiménez (forthcoming) as already mentioned before have made a contrastive analysis into Spanish and British AD of the same film arriving at this conclusion for the period:

In a noticeably high proportion of sentences in the English AD, the report of an action is accompanied by one or more subordinate clauses whose function is to describe another action taking place at the same time. This way of expressing simultaneity relies heavily on connecting words such as *as* or *while*: 'As he starts up the car, she bites her lip.' Alternatively, if the two actions are carried out by the same person, subordination may be achieved through the use of the present participle: 'Clarissa, putting ice into a glass, turns away self-consciously.'

The same seems to be the case for Spanish AD where it is quite normal to have very long sentences. While this style is for written language, it is not the case for a colloquial setting in which short sentences are used following Grice's maxims. Even though writing very long sentences could be viewed as an excellent way to reduce time and get as much information as possible in AD, the language of AD should be both simple and grammatically correct, given the fact that it will be read aloud and the audience will have to understand it at once. This simple style is recommended by both the Spanish Standard and by Benecke and Dosch (2004: 24)¹⁸, who summarise it in two points: 1) avoid complex sentences even though they might give you the impression you are telling a lot and 2) give only one piece of information per sentence.

6. The structure of the protocol for film

¹⁸ Da alle Beschreibungen in die oft sehr kurzen Dialogpausen passen sollen, ist klar, dass auch die Sätze, mit denen beschrieben wird, möglichst kurz sind. Sie müssen aber trotzdem verständlich sein, als goldene Regel gilt hier: Nicht mehr als eine Information pro Satz. Komplizierte Konstruktionen, mit denen man vermeintlich viel überkriegt, verwirren nur uns sind auch schlechter zu sprechen.

Gert Vercauteren has started researching this topic for his PhD thesis, and in his articles (Vercauteren forthcoming, and Remael & Vercauteren forthcoming) he proposes that any guideline should at least discuss the following elements to cover all the possible tasks of a describer:

- a) the creation of new audio descriptions
- b) the translation of existing audio descriptions
- c) the recording of audio descriptions by voice talents
- d) the technical aspects related to creating audio descriptions
- e) the (national) legal requirements related to making audio descriptions

At this stage we are developing the first point by analysing opera AD (Puigdomènech, Matamala & Orero, 2007) and film AD, although in the future other scenic arts such as ballet, circus or theatre and other art forms will also be taken into consideration. As for film AD, which is the focus of this article, different questions should be tackled following Vercauteren (forthcoming):

1) What should be described?

We should describe all the elements present in a film production, which to a certain extent are similar to those in an opera. We have looked at Greg York's article (forthcoming) and his guidelines where there is a solid departing point to create a protocol to describe: characters, stage production, props, costumes, make up, lighting, credits, etc. In fact, everything which is present in a film production.

2) When should it be described?

In the intervals when there is no dialogue and always trying to anticipate the action.

3) How should it be described?

There is a universal agreement in describing certain attributes such as colour, size and texture. Much debate is still continuing regarding the ethnic origin of characters, given the fact that most characters are white and that is a fact. But when this issue gets really muddled is when we have to deal with emotions due to the fact that different traditions adopt different approaches: whilst AD in the USA tend towards an objective depiction of the emotion (for instance, "tears

pouring out of the eyes”), others prefer its interpretation (for instance”, “crying” or “sad”).

Here we also find the use of language, which although may appear to be a tricky issue, is in fact one problem which could be tackled. While all existing guidelines go for the woolly recommendation that AD should be adapted to the type of representation and audience, we believe ADs are not an integral part of the representation, and we should take into consideration the following issues regarding language:

- use of standard language/use of dialects?
- syntactic constructions: written language to be read aloud
- syntactic order to promote clarity of reception: simple sentences vs. subordinate clauses
- logic development of a sentence: (CC) + S + V + (CC) vs. shifting complements
- verbal style vs. nominal style
- active vs. passive construction
- verbal tenses
- richness in vocabulary
- anaphoric reference: avoidance of ambiguity/clear reference
- clear and precise use of language
- articles
- take into consideration age of audience: children, adolescent, etc.
- specific terminology regarding a theme
- when reading, how to pronounce foreign words and names
- when having to translate, shall names, titles, etc. be translated?

As Matamala (2006) highlights, there is no doubt that the describer should have an excellent command of both language and intersemiotic translation.

4) How much should be described?

This issue is very much related to Relevance Theory and more research is needed before any guidelines can be issued. “Not too much and not too little”,

is what most guidelines recommend, and is common sense thus setting the standard for some years. However, and in-depth research could help us devise the items that help blind and visually impaired people get a better understanding of operas.

Finally, we would like to add to these four sections a fifth:

5) What is suitable to be described?

Not every audiovisual production can be described. As ITC (2000) comments, “quiz programmes and game shows with tight-worded, almost continuous scripts leave little room for AD. News programmes using constant statistics or text that scrolls across the screen whilst there is no break in speech from presenters also leave no room for AD. An experienced audio describer is best placed to assess whether a particular programme or episode is suitable for AD.” Therefore, regarding opera AD, the describer should assess whether a particular opera is suitable for AD or maybe an audio-introduction would satisfy the blind and visually impaired patrons’ needs.

7. Conclusions

While being at a departing point in the creation of an AD protocol for Catalan, some starting points have been established along a variety of areas which will develop alongside ongoing debate and research. We believe that the possible comprehensive approach for films will mean a financially feasible exercise and a reception which will please those with sight problems. We hope that sharing our research we can engage a public awareness and debate which will be beneficial for us all.

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