Introduction

From Source Text to Target Text: The Art of Audio Description

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1. The project

Three years ago Christopher Taylor and Elisa Perego from Università di Trieste (Italy) set up a project named ADLAB (Audio Description: Lifelong Access for the Blind). It was submitted to the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) and it struck lucky securing funds for three years (2011-2014). While funding did not match enthusiasm and productivity, it did secure two very important working conditions: regular meetings and a tight agenda with identified deliverables.

The basic motivation for the launching of ADLAB was the need to define and create, in cooperation with industrial partners and service providers, a series of effective and reliable, practical and educational guidelines for the practice of audio description (AD),

usable throughout Europe. Their aim is to make most audiovisual products (e.g. films, television programmes, documentaries, advertisements, but also such audiovisual phenomena like art galleries, museums, dance performances, city tours, live events) available to the blind and visually impaired community.

Today, audio description in Europe is a media access practice still lacking critical mass in terms of terminology, practice and training, especially when considered in conjunction with the number of people in Europe who (would) benefit from this service. It has proved difficult to obtain current and reliable figures about blind and visually impaired people (B/VIP) in Europe, but the ADLAB project research results point to 1.5% to 3.5% B/VIP (amounting to over five million B/VIP) in the ADLAB countries alone (Belgium, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Spain).[1] Hence, the demand for audio description is significant and likely to rise in the future, as two major demographic trends impact on access to visual media: the increasing longevity of the European population with the consequent rise in age-related impairments, and the increasing expectancy of the baby-boomer generation, now entering old age. Access to service provision is a right, not a privilege. As the number of people needing

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[1] The data provided are based on the ADLAB report on user needs analysis available online (http://www.adlabproject.eu), and cover the UK and the countries participating in the ADLAB project – Belgium, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Spain.

varying degrees of assistance in gaining access to audiovisual material rises, the provision of audio description should evolve from being a pioneering, amateurish venture, into a mainstream, professional service everywhere.

In light of this, a significant effort has been made with regard to audio description in Europe over the past two decades. Television is the area where most progress has been made and according to an ADLAB survey, it is the most sought-after mode for audio description. It is most often the public broadcasters who provide audio description services, while the commercial channels seem to be more reticent. Also, the volume of televised minutes with audio description differs greatly in each country. Germany, Spain and the UK lead the field, while the smaller subtitling countries such as Belgium (Flanders) and Portugal are still in the developing stages. The number of DVDs and/or Blu-Rays commercially available with audio description, in contrast, is disappointing in most European countries, with the exception of the UK and to a lesser extent Germany. What is more, in none of the ADLAB countries there is a cinema offering audio description on a general basis, a state of affairs that stands in stark contrast to the situation in the UK, where more than 300 cinemas have facilities to screen films with audio description. Audio description for the performing arts, museums and other live events seems to have developed at a much slower pace

than audio description for film and television, and in many parts of Europe it is still an anecdotal service that is rarely professionalised. In all ADLAB countries, occasional events are provided with audio description. Mostly for theatre and opera, but also for museum exhibitions, religious events, sports events, ceremonies, dance and ballet performances, concerts, parades and processions. However, the kinds of services provided differ considerably from one country to another, both in number and in the way they are organised. Accessibility to museums, for instance, varies from live scripted or unscripted audio description by a curator or museum worker to forms of recorded audio description.

Clearly, the studied European countries are at very different stages of development. How can this be explained? Apart from the varying lobbying power of user associations, countries have different audiovisual cultures and traditions and therefore face different challenges. Subtitling countries like Belgium (Flanders) and Portugal, for instance, have to develop audio subtitling (AST) techniques for foreign language productions, and therefore focus on locally produced broadcasts for the time being. Another factor in the development of professional audio description services is the implementation of laws and guidelines. With regard to laws, most European countries have some form of official regulation with regard to accessibility to culture or media services for the B/VIP, but

these have varying degrees of enforceability and mandate different volumes of audio description. There are laws at the national and/or local levels, applying to both public and private broadcasters, such as in the UK, Germany, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Flanders (Belgium), France, Ireland and Sweden. Other countries have sector-driven laws, such as specific agreements with public broadcasters, or local measures to promote audio description in other areas beyond film and television. With regard to guidelines, the picture is no less fragmented. Several European countries have local guidelines, but they are not homogenous, lack recognition, are controversial or are drawn-up for specific modalities only. Universities show a burgeoning interest in audiovisual texts and in audiovisual translation, resulting in the provision of a number of courses in their curricula and in those offered by other institutes of higher education. But there are practically no courses available at higher education level leading to major qualifications in audio description.

In brief, audio description still fails to receive the attention it deserves at industry, government and educational levels. However, various countries in Europe have different strengths and competences in respect of audio description types. It is thus recommended that European countries exchange experience and share their best practices to shape audio description practice in Europe and bridge the gap between individual countries.

What the ADLAB project aimed to do was precisely to pool existing competences and work towards a more standardised set of criteria that can be utilised, to fill in some of the many gaps that exist even in those countries that are further ahead in the provision of assistance, from an educational, practical and legislative point of view.

2. The partners

The partners for the project were chosen from across Europe to represent different languages and language situations: from monolingual countries such as Germany, Italy, Poland or Portugal, to bilingual countries such as Belgium or Catalonia; from widely spoken languages such as Portuguese to minority languages such as Catalan or Flemish. Partners also cover the three main audiovisual translation techniques present across Europe: dubbing (Germany, Italy and Catalonia), subtitling (Belgium and Portugal) and voice-over in Poland. The development of audio description in different EU countries was also uneven, with countries with a long tradition in audio description such as Germany, and countries with a recent past such as Italy, all following the same EU directives. Finally, the three main actors in the production of audio descriptions are also

represented amongst project partners: users and user associations, researchers and trainers, and broadcasters.

3. The book

This book has its origin in the ADLAB project but does not simply aim to report on the experience of a joint project. The idea behind this book is to analyse a film in detail in terms of the many issues that impact on audio description, and then to suggest guidelines and strategies based on this analysis. Our aim is to offer a comprehensive book on audio description departing from a film, which acts as a powerful union among the various chapters.

While most studies on audiovisual translation in general (Perego 2005; Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007; Franco, Matamala and Orero 2010; Romero-Fresco 2011) were drafted from a top-down approach, this book has been researched and written following a bottom-up methodology. This approach was chosen because we wanted to test if prescriptive research issues held water and, as Horowitz (2012, xi) explains, whether:

> [it] gives a more intimate understanding of the *umwelt*, the world built from your senses […] this gives one brain a better chance of

understanding the deep processes of another brain in the context of the
ever-changing world in which we are embedded.

The aim of the research at this stage was to draft a common list of issues affecting audio description writing, and several options were presented to gather a corpus for analysis. One possibility was to depart from a conceptual categorisation and analyse key issues such as who, what, when, as pointed out by Vercauteren (2007), which may be considered a top-down methodology. Another suggestion was to gather a corpus of audiovisual content from different sources and genres: cinema, theatre, opera, museums, etc., which can be termed as a comparative approach. In both cases we were facing far too many variables to make a valid study, and time was also a factor that determined the complexity of the proposed analysis. The project settled therefore for a bottom-up methodology in one single movie. In other words, we departed from one common input (Quentin Tarantino's film *Inglourious Basterds* 2009) to list the most challenging aspects when audio describing to go later into studying them in detail. The fact that many genres and audio description issues can be contained in a film, as well as the possibility of working with one multilingual film available in many languages and translation modalities, were some of the decisive factors. The choice

of film was due to the many difficulties it presents which could be extrapolated to other films and genres.

Nowadays, with the need to specialise academic subjects, there is a tendency to isolate objects of study. While this offers great opportunity to focus on pertinent issues, it leaves aside crucial contexts. This is the case of audio subtitling or audiointroduction, usually missing from research on audio description when in fact they are complementary. This is why Louise Fryer and Pablo Romero-Fresco, experts on audiointroductions, were asked to contribute a chapter in the book. The reasons for this request are threefold. First, because there is a need to take into consideration this complementary service. Second, because very soon technology will make it possible to listen to a closed audiointroduction. Perhaps, as an exception, theory can advance technological developments. Even the latency of academic publications will in this case foresee a service which is still unavailable. The Hybrid Broadcast Television will offer the possibility of turning on the audiointroduction track at any time while a programme is being broadcast. This track may be sent on demand, or be part of the programme. The third reason is a practical one: in its preliminary shape, the book counted with some frames from the movie. When asked for copyright permission for their reproduction, the Weinstein Company volunteered the rights attached with a Hollywood price. There occurred a need to offer a

synopsis of the movie and so avoid repetitions through the chapters. If the chapter on audiointroduction served the same function in this book as it does in a movie, the problem was solved.

The book was thought of as a jigsaw, each chapter fitting closely with the rest forming a picture. The many pieces were designed by one theme but with diverging research methodologies, so as to fit best the specific topic under analysis: from descriptive, to experimental and contrastive, always trying to depart from the audiovisual text itself. It was also important to write from a multidisciplinary perspective, drawing information from adjacent fields such as Film Studies, Translation Studies, Psychology, Cultural Studies, Linguistics, and Semiotics. Each chapter in the book departs from a similar initial structure: an introduction, an analysis of examples which leads to some theoretical posits, a review of the literature and a discussion of the possible audio description strategies.[2] However, this structure was viewed as a departing point flexible enough to adapt to the specificities of each topic. This approach was meant to offer homogeneity, continuity and balanced content across the many topics but, at the same time, autonomy, so that the chapters can stand on their own and the authors' voice can be clearly heard.

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[2] At this point, *Inglourious Basterds* is not yet available with commercial audio description in English. The project did not develop one either. Therefore, the AD proposals made in each chapter are only hypothetical.

4. The film

Inglourious Basterds was chosen for many reasons. The combination of languages spoken by the characters, and the direct implication thereof for the translation and audio description was perhaps the first reason to suggest this title. The various languages spoken and the impact of both cultural references and nonverbal features on key turning points in the film development were important to test the different audiovisual translation modes and the corresponding audio description possibilities and strategies.

Inglourious Basterds was also chosen because it encompasses many film genres, from Western to James Bond (von Dassanowsky 2012b), while echoing many film directors. As Srinivasan (2012, 1) points out, "[i]f there is any filmmaker whose single film could evoke comparisons raging from *Happy Gilmore* (1996) to *La Dolce Vita* (1960) it would have to be Quentin Tarantino". The choice of film was important not only because we could analyse different film genres, but also many styles. It is the richness of the many layers of *Inglourious Basterds* that heralded it as one of the most important films of the decade, and there is a rich bibliography analysing the film from different perspectives, offering erudite information which helps when drafting audio descriptions and prioritising information which may be related to both the cause

or the effect of the action. At times it was important to portray what was seen and heard on the screen, while on other occasions the focus had to be placed on the emotions evoked, but the allusions and references were also important and had to be taken into consideration.

The craft of editing in filmmaking is another of the reasons why the film was chosen. We have not only the many shots and camera movements, whose language is reflected in the narrative, we also have black and white footage of the film *Nation's Pride* within the film *Inglourious Basterds*. The clear intention to create a film where filmmaking in itself is one of the many running narratives yields a complex but great opportunity to reflect on the different languages coexisting in a film and its narrative. The film was narrating an emotionally and historically potent story where clear emotions are present both in the film characters and awoken in the audience, since "Tarantino is the fantasist doubling as Greek chorus. Embracing the extremes of human deed and emotion" (von Dassanowsky 2012a, viii). Catharsis is manoeuvred in the film through intense instances of violence: visual, audio, and narrative. A close analysis is required when offering audio description since there is the need to prioritise and disambiguate information.

The music of *Inglourious Basterds* offers a wealth of references and effects for its audio description. Given the many

genres, allusions and implication in the narrative, this was yet another reason for choosing this film. The sounds and silences of the film pushed the boundaries of the traditional interaction between sound and image.

Finally, the film cast also deserves a mention, since intertextuality is created in a convoluted way. It is crucial to know the real identity of some film stars, since they play the role of a character, with a direct link to films where they had a role. This is for example the case of Mike Myers as British General Ed Fenech, reminding us Peter Sellers of the 1990s while reminiscing his role in *Austin Powers* (1997). The complexity of *Inglourious Basterds* offers a challenge for the audio describer. How to capture the many layers of information and discriminate to create a cohesive and meaningful audio description, has been the focus of our study.

5. The chapters

The book starts with what it preaches: audiointroductions (AIs). Louise Fryer and Pablo Romero-Fresco argue how AIs for film may be a good solution to immerse and contextualise the movie. They include not only information about the style of a film, but also about other elements that audio description users have traditionally

demanded, such as characters, settings, cast and production details. They can be tailored to enhance the existing audio description or they can stand alone if no audio description is available.

Christopher Taylor in Chapters 2 and 3 shows how the film is structured, and how different devices are used to offer a cohesive narrative and how the director wants the audience to trace its development. The describer should pay attention, consciously or unconsciously, to these cohesive and intertextual elements in order to provide continuity and cohesion to the description, in both verbal and visual terms. The concepts of textual cohesion and intertextuality with reference to *Inglourious Basterds* can be seen as a crucial aspect of textuality that impact on audio description as on any other form of text.

In Chapter 4 Gert Vercauteren and Aline Remael give an overview of the challenges involved in describing the spatio-temporal settings of narrative fiction films. They begin by looking at insights generated by narratology that are helpful in determining first what and subsequently how audio description should tackle this issue. Spatio-temporal settings can be rendered in very general terms or in great detail, and either approach has its own purpose and effect. This chapter follows both a top-down and a bottom-up analysis. In a second stage, the chapter considers the audience perspective in order to analyse how they use the cues offered by the author to create their

own mental models of the settings presented to them. The analysis of how the combination of these top-down and bottom-up movements works, allows to identify which spatio-temporal components and relations the audio describer should be aware of when painting the spatio-temporal setting of a scene.

Cinematic terms are shorthand for longer and descriptive phrases that give an account of crucial aspects of filmmaking such as composition and editing. Elisa Perego's analysis of *Inglourious Basterds* in Chapter 5 shows us that there are two ways of portraying visual composition and editing techniques in audio descriptions. Both can be referred to with technical terms (e.g. "close-up") or via descriptive language (e.g. "the subject is framed tightly", or "the camera is very close to..."). Technical terms are short and time-saving; descriptions are long and might not always fit in between dialogues. Technical terms might be opaque to some users; descriptions are more accessible and understandable. However, since film techniques are often new or unintelligible to many sighted filmgoers till they get acquainted with them via repeated exposition and conscious focus on the language of film, we can assume that also blind users might first need to learn them in order to then appreciate them.

Anna Matamala in Chapter 6 looks at text on screen. In this movie, texts appear in various forms: logos and both opening and

final credits, superimposed titles and intertitles, words written on various objects (ledger, rifle, newspaper, etc.), and subtitles. Through examples and their possible audio description strategies, the chapter shows how text on screen often conveys meaning, helping audiences to make sense of the film. Therefore, it has to be carefully considered and integrated in the accessible version of the movie. The strategies to successfully accomplish accessibility are varied, as previously described, but only thorough film analysis by describers and continuous testing with blind and visually impaired audiences by researchers will provide the best answer.

Agnieszka Szarkowska and Pilar Orero in Chapter 7 look at sound in the many representations, meanings, effects and functions. *Inglourious Basterds* is a good example for understanding the need to audio describe sound. The film-in-film convention resulting in a blend of sounds from the story worlds of the two films further complicates the soundscape and needs to be explicated to the visually impaired audience. The presence of multiple languages and the significant role they have for the plot has to be signalled in audio description through different means, starting from the choice of the translation modality (subtitling, dubbing, voice-over) through the quality of sound mixing. While audio description seems to be interested only in the visual, sound should be analysed and considered as an element of image, and choosing the right audio

description strategy will have a direct effect on the reception of the film.

In Chapter 8, Bernd Benecke looks at naming and describing the main characters. A Diagram of Fixation is proposed to help in the decision-making process which has a direct implication on the way an audio description is drafted.

Anna Maszerowska and Carme Mangiron look in Chapter 9 at cultural references and their importance to the plot. An attempt is made to group cultural references found in *Inglourious Basterds* in order to provide a comprehensive analysis. Examples range from military emblems and insignia, through body language and gestures to religious icons, to name but a few. The chapter aims at offering possible strategies for the inclusion of culturally marked features in an audio description script. In the case of *Inglourious Basterds*, these turn out to be varied, the choice often being dictated not only by the structure of the dialogues, but also by the composition of the scene.

Chapter 10 delves further into interpretative description, since it analyses facial expressions and gestures associated to emotions. Iwona Mazur looks at how gestures and facial expressions are significant elements of both the filmic narrative and its aesthetic dimension: they bring the story forward and are turning points in the narrative. The main dilemma in audio describing gestures and facial expressions concerns whether to interpret the emotion which they

convey and name the emotion in audio description, or whether to describe them and let the blind viewers infer the meaning they convey on their own. Although the second solution seems preferable so as not to impose one's own interpretation and spoon-feed the sense to the blind, in reality it may turn out that shorter, interpretative descriptions are preferred because of time constraints or to ease the processing load of the blind viewer.

The last chapter in the book, Chapter 11, analyses secondary elements. Pilar Orero and Anna Vilaró follow a different methodology in order to provide a representative example of a research approach to audio description beyond descriptive analysis. An experiment was set up to check why not everyone understands and appreciates the same movie, hence the interpretative nature of audio description. This diversity makes audio description a dynamic decision process, where its evaluation will never be easy to check for quality.

For those following the Universal Design approach where authors' intentions are taken into account, it must be said that the book was studied and written considering Quentin Tarantino's film script with his indications. While it may be a good idea to consult the film script, in the case of *Inglourious Basterds* it turned out that the script was useful to a limited extent, as certain essential elements

were not mentioned there at all, while others were changed when transferring the script onto the screen.

The book was written and has been published in record time, and this is not a coincidence. All authors closely followed instructions and met deadlines. John Benjamins editor Isja Conen took care of the safe delivery, for which we are very grateful. There is a special mention we want to make to the anonymous referees of the manuscript. The comments were very pertinent, the tone always positive and constructive, and we all feel deep gratitude for the intellectual generosity and also for the time spent. We also know how unfair this work is, and in the existing scientific rat race scenario, this unsung work gets no line in the CV nor impact. We will never know who you are, but we want to show here our gratitude.

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