Audio Description from a Catalan Perspective

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Abstract

After some years of research and teaching activities at UAB in audiovisual translation, the TransMedia Catalonia research group was officially created in 2004. Previously we had started the pioneer audiovisual MA in Audiovisual Translation and had organized some conferences. The article looks back at the activities related to audio description within the TransMedia Catalonia research group. The first part of the article reviews the activities while the second part looks at research: its methodological approach, topics and trends. The last part shows how research outcomes have been transferred to society.

1.   Introduction

Audio description (AD) is a technique of inserting audio narration, 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, both dynamic (for instance, a guided city tour of London) and static (for instance, a Miró painting), both live (an opera performance) or recorded (a 3D film). Its function is to make audiovisual texts available to all in order to avoid the risks of

excluding a large sector of society to palliate their sensorial difficulties for reasons of health or age.

As pointed out by Benecke (2004: 78), the origins of AD are "as old as sighted people telling visually impaired people about visual events happening in the world around them". Pujol and Orero (2007) traced the technique back to ancient times, and suggested that AD was closely related to the rhetorical figure of *ekphrasis*. According to most academic articles, AD as a professional practice dates back to around the 80's and the USA is indicated as its place of birth (Snyder 2014).

2.   Teaching Audio Description

AD as a separate audiovisual translation modality in its own right is taught within the Universitat Autònoma MA in Audiovisual Translation since 2006. Having to prepare MA courses is the background for our first AD publications. The first research papers (Matamala 2005, Orero 2005a and b) tried to answer basic questions, which at that time lacked scientific bibliography: what is AD, who writes AD and how, when, and what to describe. We were looking for answers to these queries within the field of Audiovisual Translation (AVT), since we consider AD a translation modality where two channels – audio and visual – are translated into a single channel: written, to be read aloud, and to be received auditorily. It was the affinity of AD to existing revoicing modalities that interested us, and we tried to locate the new AVT modality within the existing taxonomies (Matamala 2007b). Comparative analysis was the approach taken to write articles profiling the professional describer and the skills required for the specialized training (Matamala 2007a, Matamala and Orero 2007, Orero 2005a and b). Mapping AD and the delivery possibilities (Matamala 2005, 2007b, Orero 2008, 2011a) were also analysed in an attempt to define technical and skill requirements for both training describers and teaching AD as an object of study (Matamala and Orero 2008b).

3. International cooperation: the Advanced Research Seminar in Audio Description (ARSAD)

One of the TransMedia Catalonia research traits is to work in a collaborative way, looking at our research as complementary to other experts who bring in

their expertise. Collaboration has many forms, and we established the strategy of organizing a biannual seminar on AD, which is now established as the main conference on AD: ARSAD (jornades.uab.cat/arsad). It was created to serve as a platform to bring together practitioners and researchers in order to advance the knowledge of AD practices and research. The seminar is now in its fifth edition, and its contents allow us to map the evolution of AD research. The first ARSAD took place in February 2007 and its approach was very applied: two intensive four-day workshops dedicated to the AD of films and opera audio introductions, plus two extracurricular activities (a visit to Liceu Opera House and a film projection at Caixa Fòrum) allowed both practitioners and researchers to know how professionals work and the main challenges they encounter. The choice of topic complemented our professional experience in AD since we started to AD operas for the Catalan opera house Liceu. In following editions training was not so intensive and research became more prominent: looking at the range of topics from 2007 until the last ARSAD one can see an evolution from a purely practical approach to a combination of research and practice, and the inclusion of knowledge transfer in more recent editions. Researchers conceptualize the phenomenon of AD from various perspectives (from its creation to its reception) but are also often actively working with end-users on practical implementations so that research is translated into action. One of the main features of our research group is the willingness to involve users ("nothing for us without us") and industry stakeholders so that research can impact society.

4. **Research approaches to AD: descriptive, experimental and technological**

AD is not only strongly dependent on the technology available, but it also varies greatly according where it is used. This is why we tried to understand how AD behaves (Orero 2012a) in opera (Corral and Lladó 2011, Matamala 2005, Matamala and Orero 2007, 2008a) and cinema (Matamala and Orero 2011, Orero 2012b).

Audiovisual content has many more languages than dialogues, so we analysed spoken, written and tactile languages (Orero 2011b), gestures and facial expressions (Vercauteren and Orero 2013), and and contrast

(Maszerowska 2012, 2013). Although research in the group had a strong descriptive approach, experimental research with end-users has been central in recent research. It was Cabeza-Cáceres who began to set up tests adopting a cognitive theoretical framework. In his PhD (Cabeza-Cáceres 2013) the effect of three variables (intonation, speed and information explicitation) on film comprehension was analysed by testing a group of blind and visually impaired participants. Similarly, Fresno (2014) considers the role of memory in AD and investigates whether providing more information implies more recall or, on the contrary, produces a cognitive overload on users. Also with an experimental approach, but in this case with sighted participants and using eye-tracking, Vilaró et al (2012), Orero and Vilaró (2012), and Vilaró and Orero (2013) started looking at what users perceive.

Finally, a different research strand has dealt with technological aspects. Matamala et al. (2013) have investigated the application of text to speech systems and machine translation in AD in two language pairs (Catalan<>Spanish, English>Spanish). The reception of text to speech AD in Catalan as compared to a human voiced AD was tested with a group of 67 blind and visually impaired users. Information on user preferences and practices was gathered, showing that text-to-speech AD is "acceptable" for the most users. As for machine translation, the first exploratory research focused on error categorization but recent experiments comparing both the effort and the final output quality when creating an AD, when translating it and when post-editing a machine translation output have been carried out.

From all the information and experiences gathered, we created our own accessibility system where technology also plays a key role: UAS Universal Accessibility System (Oncins et al 2013). This system, which supports many languages and alphabets, responded to the need for an integrated way for creating and delivering media access content in different modalities: subtitling, AD and audio subtitling.

5. Three key projects: DTV4ALL, ADLAB and HBB4ALL

Although TransMedia Catalonia has participated in many funded projects, at a Catalan, Spanish and European level, a brief description of three seminal

projects related to AD will allow us to picture three different research approaches.

The European project DTVALL (http://www.psp-dtv4all.org) aimed at facilitating the provision of access services on digital television across the EU. Regarding AD, the project dealt with narrative production across languages and its three primary outcomes were (a) to analyse whether it was possible to develop common European AD standards and guidelines, (2) the possibility of translating AD across languages (Orero 2008), and 3) a usability evaluation of five different AD broadcasting scenarios (Vilaró et al 2012).

The European project ADLAB (http://www.adlabproject.eu) was born from the need to establish a series of effective and reliable, educational guidelines, usable throughout Europe, for the practice of AD. The project departed from one common input: Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). Different languages (Catalan, English, Dutch, German, Italian, Polish, Portuguese and Spanish) and countries were involved, representing the wealth of Europe regarding languages and translation traditions. After watching the film, a list of the most challenging elements was made, and a total of seven analyses from six different countries, suggesting various AD strategies strongly dependent on their particular AD tradition, cared for a multifaceted outcome, which has been further elaborated in a single volume (Maszerowska, Matamala & Orero 2014).

Finally, the European project HBB4ALL (www.hbb4all.eu) addresses media accessibility for all citizens in the new connected TV environment with the endless possibilities of broadband and broadcast offer. Providing multiplatform, multilanguage audiovisual content and making it accessible is one of the key challenges of the current audiovisual landscape. Concerning AD, the project will research new strategies to make content accessible in a faster way via technological implementations, while at the same time trying to define what a quality AD service is in various platforms and according to the different stakeholders (from industry to associations and blind users or academics). It started in 2013 and we still have two years, but we have already tested AD as a potent educational tool at schools, and also user experience quality tests for AD in secondary screens.

6. Conclusions

This article has presented an overview of TransMedia Catalonia research, and one of its main research lines: AD. Working with users, and in a multidisciplinary team has allowed us to encompass a wide research spectrum from descriptive and experimental approaches to development of technology, and finally transferring our research output and know-how both to training and standardization activities. Working in the Spanish standardization agency AENOR for the Audio Description Standard (2014), joining the UN/ITU Intersector Rapporteur Group Audiovisual Media Accessibility (IRG-AVA) and working on the forthcoming Audio Description ISO standard are three examples of our intention to always do research with applications in mind, ensuring that our research results come to the benefit of the end user.

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Bionotes

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