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This is the **accepted version** of the book part:

Matamala, Anna; Orero, Pilar. «Audio Description and Accessibility Studies : A Work in Progress. New Approaches». A: Researching Audio Description. 2016, p. 1-8. 8 pag. Palgrave Macmillan. DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-56917-2

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## **Audio Description and Accessibility Studies: Work in Progress**

*Anna Matamala and Pilar Orero*

This book is the second we edit in English focusing on audio description. Now the scope is diametrically different from the previous one (Maszerowska et al., 2014), where one film was analysed from many perspectives. While the former could be considered to have followed a bottom-up approach, this one will go from top-down. *Audio Description: New Perspectives Illustrated* looked at audio description from the many components in film language and narrative, its production and terminology. The result was an interesting in-depth analysis of eleven building blocks to take into consideration when embarking upon writing an audio description script. The aim in this book, in contrast, is to open the lens as much as possible and take a panoramic picture of current research in audio description. The idea is also to leave plenty of time of exposure, hoping the photo will not be blurred. To fully understand the resulting image, though, there is a need to know what surrounds this image, in which field it was taken.

Most researchers contributing in this volume come from audiovisual translation studies, but there are also researchers from communication studies and philosophy joining the discussion, as well as end users. For over a decade we have been working on new audiovisual translation modalities, but both the object of study and its methodology have overgrown the field where they started to be studied. Is it time to define a new field, that of accessibility studies? Building a new academic field is a humble and risky task, but very fulfilling. Articles, chapters and PhDs join together in creating the solid base required for future contributions. Mistakes, errors,

and felicities all unite in the definition of the field, its terminology, its methods and approaches. This book could be considered another stepping-stone towards building accessibility studies. It deepens into one of its modalities (audio description) from a myriad of research perspectives, but it also includes one initial contribution with a different, and wider, approach that can help us think about the need to establish the new field. Gian Maria Greco discusses whether accessibility is a human right *per se*, an issue of the utmost importance for human rights but also, as he literally says in his chapter, a crucial aspect ‘for a more mature definition and development of accessibility studies, the broad field formed by the intersection of all those disciplines whose theories and practices deal with accessibility, such as audiovisual translation, assistive technologies, audience development, Universal Design, tourism management and services, new media technologies, and so forth.’

The new research arena, still to be defined and fixed in both name and surname, would feed from previous established areas such as the ones mentioned by Greco above but also from communication, film studies or perception. All these areas would contribute with its research methods and traditions, and there would be the added complication of adapting existing methodologies to a new multidisciplinary research endeavour where everything is still to be fixed, while working at it.

Despite existing research in theoretical, descriptive and technological media accessibility related issues, an important difference for the research methodology in this new field seems to be the overwhelming focus towards the end user. However, defining the user is in itself an interesting challenge. Living as we do in a society requiring accountability for its existence, there is a need to create a list and a taxonomy of end users and their needs, regarding access to information. The standardization agency the ISO has risen to the challenge (ISO/IECTR 29138-1) in a

monumental task.<sup>1</sup> The list and groups created depend from previous standards within the ISO and other agencies such as the UN, and is in constant renewal to adapt the classification to new ICT developments and philosophical definitions. While UN classifies ‘persons with disabilities’ (PWDs) (CRPD)<sup>2</sup>, some countries or languages continue to use the term ‘handicapped’, some users prefer ‘persons with special needs’, which has recently been corrected to ‘specific needs.’ Due to the relevance of this discussion, and following Gian Maria Greco’s discourse, we have asked Gerry Ellis to contribute to this volume with a chapter on the end user and the terminology associated with him or her. Ellis discusses the history of disability-related language, and takes stock of the terms ‘disability/disabled’ and ‘impairment/impaired’, while advocating for a more accessible society.

Also talking about the end users, and focusing on South Africa as an example, Greco considers that accessibility should ‘extend to all citizens, not only those with disabilities.’ In fact, as suggested by Orero and Matamala (2007), accessibility as a means to overcome physical or sensorial barriers may be an incomplete picture: there can also be linguistic barriers to overcome, although neither the UN nor the ISO take language as a challenge to communication and access to information. Any person who does not speak or read Chinese is in need of language accessibility when in China, since neither the written nor the spoken language is accessible to non-Chinese speakers. Therefore, the new accessibility studies field should take into consideration language accessibility, in other words, (audiovisual) translation studies and all the related research in the field of language technologies.

World geographical regions, culture and traditions are also markers in this new field, and with all these ingredients we have tried to gather the latest research in one of the areas within the new field of accessibility studies: audio description,

preceded by two more general contributions on accessibility viewed from the perspectives of human rights and on accessibility viewed from the perspectives of the end user.

As already indicated, the book begins with two chapters in which we try to re-think accessibility. Gian Maria Greco deepens in what he terms the ‘Accessibility as a Human Right Divide’ Problem (AHRDP): is accessibility a human right *per se* or a tool for promoting human rights? Gerry Ellis, on the other hand, discusses in what contexts terms such as ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’ may be appropriate, advocating that disability is not just confined to those with impairments. Although the approach of both contributions is different from the rest of the book, both chapters are a necessary cornerstone with which to frame the AD-specific research contributions that follow.

The second part of the book presents different approaches to audio description, from more theoretical contributions such as the chapter by Jana Holsanova to more practical experiences such as the ones described by Phatteera Sarakornborrirak and Kulnaree Sueroj, who explain how audio description was born in Thailand – so far away from Western languages and cultures, yet still sharing so many AD traits.

Jana Holsanova approaches cognitive aspects of audio description, distinguishing between three perspectives: a production perspective focusing on the describer, a reception perspective focusing on the end user, and a ‘meeting of the minds’ perspective focusing on the exchange between the describer and the audiences. What is especially interesting in this chapter is the discussion of theories on mental imagery and embodied cognition as applied to audio description, which have been used as a theoretical framework for new research initiatives recently

developed in Sweden.

Carme Mangiron and Xiaochun Zhang present an overview of game accessibility, focusing on the situation for the blind and visually impaired. They discuss the barriers faced by users who cannot access the visual content of games and present games specifically designed to this group of users. They also explore how audio description could be implemented in video games.

Iwona Mazur and Agnieszka Chmiel analyse the way sighted viewers look at films using eye-tracking data in order to create eye-tracking based descriptions. The reception of these audio descriptions by a group of visually impaired respondents is compared to the reception of audio descriptions developed using long-established British standards. The chapter provides insights into the usefulness of using eye-tracking for audio description research, as well as interesting findings on the preferences of end users.

Brands in audio description is the topic discussed by José Dávila-Montes and Pilar Orero in a chapter in which they provide a qualitative analyses of the strategies used in three films. This analysis is framed by a thorough discussion on translation, advertising and ideology, focusing on the role of brands in movies.

With a more psychological approach, Nazaret Fresno, Judit Castellà and Olga Soler-Vilageliu deal with memory operation in AD, devoting their chapter to the reception of film characters. They analyse which physical features of audio described characters are more frequently recalled and recognized by blind and visually impaired audiences. The researchers also consider how segmentation of information impacts on user recall, and analyse the differences in terms of reception between leading and secondary characters. Their thorough analysis, based on a sound methodological design, will undoubtedly be useful in future guidelines development.

Co-speech gestures in audio description is the focus of interest of Polish researchers Monika Zabrocka and Anja Jankowska. After a short introduction on the main taxonomies of gestures, and on the strategies generally used to convey them in audio description, they analyse the audio description of co-gestures (that is, emblems, illustrators, and emotional gestures) in a corpus of Polish audio descriptions. Both quantitative and qualitative results are provided, opening the door to future research on this specific topic.

Beyond the analysis of AD features, some researchers turn their attention to possible applications of audio description. In Chapter 10, Agnieszka Walczak presents the results of a study which examines the influence of audio described films in foreign vocabulary acquisition. Walczak's research was carried out with primary school learners with and without vision impairment, and aimed to investigate whether audio description could be used as a didactic tool. The project results seem to indicate that AD can indeed be a useful educational tool and that its application in the foreign language learning class merits further research.

While audio description is well-established in some countries, in others they are taking their first steps towards providing accessible media for all. This is why it is especially enlightening to read Phatteera Sarakornborrirak and Kulnaree Sueroj's paper: their chapter presents an overview of audio description in Thailand, focusing on audio description in Thai television. A wealth of new information is provided, from a summary of Thai media regulation to a discussion of the main research projects carried out in the first years of AD.

The third and last part of the book includes five contributions on national and international projects related to audio description: Christopher Taylor presents a chapter on ADLAB (2011-14), a project funded by the European Union under the

Lifelong Learning Programme. In ADLAB eight partners from six European countries analysed current practices and norms on audio description and proposed a reliable set of guidelines, while developing training materials and sensitizing policy-makers.

In Chapter 13, Pilar Orero presents two of the main European projects in media accessibility: on the one hand, DTV4ALL, an already finished project funded by the European Commission under the CIP ICT Policy Support Programme to facilitate the provision of access services, both mature and emerging, on digital television across the EU (2008-10). On the other, she discusses HBB4ALL (2014-16), an ongoing project co-funded by the European Commission under the same CIP programme, which addresses media accessibility in the connected TV environment. Orero's contribution focuses specifically on the research related to audio description that has been carried out within both projects, which includes technological innovations and end user testing as remarkable aspects.

At a narrower scale, Anna Matamala gives an overview of the Spanish-funded project ALST (2013-15), which aimed to research the implementation of three language technologies (speech recognition, machine translation, and text-to-speech) in the field of audio description. A summary of the main tests carried out within the project and their results allow us to observe both the potential and limitations of existing technologies.

On a different note, Anna Sadowska presents a project developed by the Polish association 'De Facto' in which young sighted volunteers prepared audio description of press illustrations for visually impaired youth. The article describes the activities of the 'De Facto' Association, one of them being the e-Kiosk service, a virtual newsagent for the blind and visually impaired. It also explains how the volunteers were trained, how the work was organized, and what the project's results



were.

Finally, Agnieszka Szarkowska, Anna Jankowska, Krzysztof Krejtz and Jarosław Kowalski close the book with the Polish project Open Art, which aims to design a multimedia guide app for visitors with and without sensory impairments. Adopting a Universal Design approach, these researchers summarize the main features of the app and present three studies carried out within the project to shed some light on user needs. Information on visiting habits, attitudes towards contemporary art, and expectations regarding the description and its format and duration is discussed. They also propose what would be an optimal description of a work of art.

As we indicated at the beginning of this chapter, our aim was to open the lens as much as possible and take a panoramic picture of current research in audio description. Our final photo shows a multi-faceted field in which different concepts, methods and applications find their place: from more theoretical proposals in which cognitive models are suggested to psychological approaches in which the end user reception of characters is assessed and linked to memory; from eye-tracking studies with sighted viewers to corpus-based approaches analysing brands or gestures; from innovative didactic applications of audio description to new proposals aiming to enhance videogames accessibility; from small-scale projects to wider European projects. But all with a common aim: generating new knowledge on audio description, so that its provision can increase, in terms of quantity and quality, and can have a positive impact on all the population.

## **References**

Maszerowska, A., Matamala, A. and Orero, P. (2014) *Audio Description: New Perspectives Illustrated* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins).

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<sup>1</sup> The latest version of the user needs mapping template can be obtained from the ISO/IEC JTC1 / SWG-A, <http://www.jtc1access.org/base.htm>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>