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Easy audios for easy audiovisuals: a proposal

Anna Matamala

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

anna.matamala@uab.cat

Abstract

Easy-to-understand language refers to different types of simplified language varieties, ranging from Easy-to-Read (or Easy Language) to Plain Language. Much of the focus has been put on the written text, but this article aims to research easy audiovisual content simplification has been addressed in the literature and what role audiovisual translation can have in producing easy content. Special emphasis will be put on the concept of easy audios and how they can contribute to make audiovisual content accessible for all.

Keywords: easy-to-understand language, Plain Language, Easy Language, audiovisual translation, media accessibility.

Resumen

El lenguaje fácil de comprender engloba distintos tipos de variedades lingüísticas simplificadas, desde la Lectura Fácil (o Lenguaje Fácil) hasta el Lenguaje Llano. En este ámbito, de modo general, se ha prestado más atención a los textos escritos, pero este artículo tiene como objetivo estudiar cómo se ha abordado la simplificación del contenido audiovisual en la bibliografía y qué papel puede tener la traducción audiovisual en la producción de contenido fácil. Se prestará especial atención al concepto de “audiofácil” y en cómo estos audiofáciles pueden contribuir a crear contenidos audiovisuales para todos

Palabras clave: lenguaje fácil de comprender, lenguaje llano, lectura fácil, traducción audiovisual, accesibilidad a los medios.

1. INTRODUCTION

Easy-to-understand (E2U) language is an umbrella term that refers to different types of simplified language varieties. Using the definition provided by ISO/IEC DIS 23859-1—inspired by the EASIT project (Matamala and Orero, 2018) and by the works of Maaß (2020)—, E2U language refers to “any language variety which enhances comprehensibility” (p. 1). These language varieties range from Easy-to-Read—also referred to as Easy Language to account not only for written texts but also for oral texts—to Plain Language, with intermediate varieties being suggested such as Easy Language Plus (Maaß, 2020). In this article I will use the terms “Easy Language” (EL) and “Plain Language” (PL), although I will keep the reference to Easy-

to-Read (ER) in direct quotations or when referring to the terminology used by certain authors.

Following ISO/IEC DIS 23859-1, EL is a “language variety in which a set of recommendations regarding wording, structure, design, and evaluation are applied to make information accessible to persons with reading comprehension difficulties for any reason” (p. 2). PL, following the same ISO/IEC DIS 23859-1 standard, is a “language variety whose wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information” (p. 2). The ISO standard dedicated to PL only (ISO-WD34495-1:2020(E)), now under development, refers to PL as a “communication”, rather than as a “language variety” but the rest of the definition stays the same.

Some recommendations for EL and for PL are shared, but some recommendations are specific to EL, which is the variety which aims at maximum comprehensibility through higher simplification. The reason for this is that Easy Language generally targets persons with reading comprehension difficulties, whereas PL generally targets lay audiences or citizens. “Reading comprehension difficulties” do not need to be related to a disability but can be due to other factors such as a) the context or the circumstances in which the communication takes place, b) the different individual abilities, and c) the individual’s previous knowledge or interest for a topic.

The status of both EL and PL varies across countries: Lindholm and Vantahalo (2021) provide a wide overview of current practices and research across Europe, which highlights the fuzziness of the terminology used in many countries.

Easy-to-understand language recommendations have generally focused on written texts, with limited references to audiovisual content. In this chapter I will provide an overview of how audiovisual content has been addressed in relevant E2U language standards and recommendations (section 2). I will then discuss how easy-to-understand audiovisual content could be produced, using easy news as a case study (section 3). Next, I will discuss how easy audiovisual transfer modes and access services could be added to audiovisual content to make it easier to understand (section 4), and will pay special attention to easy audios by looking at the state of the art (section 5) and making a proposal (section 6), inspired by the works of the EASIT project. The chapter will conclude with some thoughts on future research possibilities.

2. EASY-TO-UNDERSTAND LANGUAGE BEYOND WRITTEN DOCUMENTS: GUIDELINES AND STANDARDS

References to audio and audiovisual content is found in some guidelines and standards. This section will focus on some of the most relevant ones in English. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions published a series of guidelines in 1997 which were updated in 2010 (IFLA, 2010). These guidelines acknowledge that different types of electronic media can benefit persons with limited reading and refer to audio formats (talking books and papers), television, electronic supports (CD, DVD, MP3) and accessible multimedia presentation formats such as DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System). They see these elements as a support or an alternative to written texts but do not explain how they could be made easier to understand, as the focus is on written materials.

The guidelines published in 1998 by the International League of Societies for Persons with Mental Handicap-European Association (ILSMH, 1998)—Inclusion Europe since 2000—also acknowledge that EL information “in printed form may not be the best solution for everyone. It may be necessary to consider the use of other formats, like audio-tapes, video or interactive media” (p. 7), in combination with EL texts. They also provide limited advice on these other formats. Regarding audio-tapes, they recommend:

when structuring the content it is important to group similar items together. The speaker should read at a measured pace, neither too fast nor too slow, and pause briefly between sentences. For longer tapes it is best to use more than one voice and to alternate the text with music breaks or sound effects. (p. 18)

As for videos, they consider that “the most important aspects in the production of a video are that it has a clear and logical script and that the text and pictures do not change too rapidly” (p. 18). Finally, they consider that interactive media “can be easily adjusted to the functional level of the user” (p. 18).

In *Information for all. European standards for making information easy to read and understand* (Inclusion Europe, 2009), standards are divided into: a) standards for written information, b) standards for electronic information—referring mainly to accessible websites—, c) standards for video information, and d) standards for audio information. As far as videos are concerned, the general advice reads:

1. Your video must be simple. It must focus on making difficult ideas easy to understand.
2. Do not be in a hurry. Do not speak too fast. People must have enough time to understand what you are telling them.
3. Avoid confusing things, like slow or fast motion. (p. 32)

Recommendations are provided on the DVD case and on the background voice, as follows:

A background voice should be slow and very clear.

A background voice should only be speaking about things that people can see on the screen.

If you use a background voice, it can be helpful to present the person first before he or she starts talking in the background. (p. 33)

As for the screen, advice reads it should not be “too light or too dark”, it should be “high quality and clear”, and for “videos to be played on a computer, buttons for sound and full screen should be easy to find” (p. 33-34). Regarding the film itself, the recommendations are to “stick as much as possible to reality”, keep videos short (“no more than 20 or 30 minutes”) and explain new places to avoid people getting confused (p. 34).

There are also recommendations about subtitles, which according to the guidelines “can be confusing for people with intellectual disabilities” (p. 34) but can be useful for other user groups. If subtitles are used, they recommend that: a) they are easy to read and follow standards for written information, using for instance larger writing than usual; b) they are on screen long enough for people to read them, which can be challenging for persons who are slow readers, c) there is a strong contrast between the subtitles and the background; d) there is a consistent position, ideally at the

bottom. They consider that users should be given the possibility to hide subtitles and the recommendations suggest offering a transcript of the video.

There are also recommendations on audio description (AD), which is viewed as potentially “confusing” for those who are not blind. Therefore, they stress that there should be clear instructions on how to switch the AD off. The only recommendation they provide is to “make sure the audio description uses easy to understand words” (p. 36).

Finally, regarding audio information, they provide some tips while acknowledging that this topic was not dealt with in detail in the project. The tips are to check the standards for written information, but also to pay attention to: good pronunciation, clear articulation and clear voice (“not too low, not too high”), good volume (“not too loud, not too quiet”), good sound (“without interference or background noise”), slow pace, and pauses “at sensible points” (p. 38). Audio information should be given with enough time for people to understand the information and, if necessary, information should be repeated as many times as necessary. The recommendations also refer to the need to “always be polite and courteous”, to avoid strong accents, to speak “one at a time”, to avoid interruptions (“for example by advertising”), to use “words which are easy to understand” and “read the text in a way that emotions can be perceived”, using voices that “match the character” (p. 38). They also recommend using a special sound to indicate that the information is in accessible format.

In *Make it easy. A guide to preparing Easy to Read information*, by the Accessible Information Working Group (2011), alternative formats are also including, referring to audio formats, Braille, large print, video, and other electronic formats, including websites. When mentioning audio versions of documents, they highlight that “audio should not be seen as a replacement for Easy to Read, as for many audiences, the difficulties is not just literacy but understanding” (p. 29). Some considerations are made, namely: a) to consider that for many people retaining too much auditory information is hard; b) to aim for good-quality audio; c) to consider from the beginning whether a text will have an audio version, to avoid having differences between the written text and the audio; d) to use low-pitched voices, as higher pitched voices can be difficult to hear for persons with hearing loss.

When mentioning video formats, they recommend: a) a clear and logical script; b) avoiding quick changes of pictures and text; c) close up shots rather than long or wide shots, avoiding non-related background activity; d) including AD for persons with sight loss; e) high sound quality, avoiding music and sound effects at the same time as narration. They mention that text on screen should be used for opening titles, identifying speakers, and providing information but at the same time they advice against using graphs, charts and drawing unless the narration explains them clearly. They also recommend using AD, sign language interpreting, and transcripts or subtitling.

Key guidelines on PL such as the *Oxford Guide to Plain Language*, by Cutts (2020), first published in 1995 as *The Plain English Guide*, or the US Federal Plain Language Guidelines (PLAIN, 2011), do not refer to audiovisual content.

ISO/IEC DIS 23859-1 *Information technology – user interfaces – Part 1: Guidance on making written text easy to read and easy to understand*, adopts a broader approach and, although focusing on written text, acknowledges that written text can also be found on audiovisual formats. It can take the form of subtitles/captions but there can also be other other on-screen text such as superimposed titles, scrolling

texts, graphs, or popping-up text messages, to name a few. The standard recognises that easy-to-understand subtitles can be created, an aspect that is repeated in a section dedicated to “hybrid access services”. In this regard, the standard mentions that E2U language can be applied to existing access services and include “easy-to-understand subtitles” and “easy-to-understand ADs” as examples.

The standard also provides guidance on the audio presentation of written text, especially useful for those who cannot access the visual written content. It indicates that the audio version can be based on a human voice or on a text-to-speech system, and provides recommendations on:

- a) pronunciation, accentuation, and speech pauses: pronunciation and accentuation should be correct, with a special emphasis on numbers, proper nouns, symbols, units and times, and pauses should be able to convey sentence and text structure;
- b) narration styles: the audio versions can be read in an acted or non-acted way, including voices with different accents, as user preferences differ;
- c) reading speed: a suitable speed should be provided as default, but the user should be able to choose their settings. The standard states that the suitable reading speed can vary across user groups, languages, and reading contexts;
- d) audio quality: noises should be avoided and a good mix should guarantee comprehension and enjoyment of the content, and
- e) volume: a default acceptable volume should be provided, giving the user the possibility to adapt it to their needs.

3. EASY AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT: EXISTING PRACTICES

Easy audiovisual content has been created by some broadcasters in the form of “easy news”. As explained by Tomazyn on an EASIT project video (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1LPOowQZYI>), Austrian broadcasting corporation ORF started offering news in PL in December 2019. The news are possible thanks to the cooperation between the ORF and the Austrian Press Agency. In terms of video editing, the main features of the easy news are: “slower” cuts, fewer pictures, and no pictures in a figurative sense. The four editors producing easy news write independently and rely on feedback from the audience, although in the beginning their texts were approved by the so-called “inclusive writing team”, made up of 6 persons with learning disabilities. In terms of language features, they find it easier to use PL rather than EL.

Leskelä (2020, p. 156) explains that the Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE offers news in Easy Finnish on television, on the radio, and on the internet and also offers news in Easy Swedish on the radio and on the internet. The service started in 1992 with Easy Finnish radio news that were expanded to the internet in 2000. Since 2015 there is a five-minute TV newscast every weekday. The audiences have expanded to include immigrants learning Finnish, the elderly, and people with aphasia. The news are processed and chosen by news editors and focus mainly on domestic news. They follow principles developed originally for radio news and take special care that voice, subtitles and visual narration are congruent. As explained by Leskelä (2020, p. 169), “linguistic simplification should not lead to disregarding general journalistic principles such as providing reliable and neutral news coverage and offering the audiences news materials that follows conventional news structure”. And she adds that

YLE news “should not be equated with, for example, actual and formal Finnish language learning materials, although they may be used as such”.

Inspired by the Finish experience, in 2016 radio news in EL were launched in Latvia (Anca and Melnika, 2020, p. 316): the “news is read once a day and summarises the most significant events on the day. The same message can also be read on the lsm.lv social media portal”. Similarly, in Sweden, as explained by Bohman (2020, p. 553), EL news are broadcast every weekday on the Swedish national Radio: they are easy to understand, with a slower pace and with frequent words. The Swedish Television, also broadcasts 5-minute news in Easy Swedish every weekday.

In Germany audio tracks of written EL texts are provided by NDR (Norddeutscher Rundfunk) whereas Deutschlandfunk distributes another service via radio (Maaß, Rink & Hansen-Schirra 2020, p. 205)

EASIT IO2 report (Bernabé-Caro, 2019) presents the results of two focus group in Slovenia, involving journalists, users and EL experts, and of a series interviews. Participants agree that linguistic adaptation of easy news is feasible, but challenging because the news already provide summarised information, with some previous knowledge taken for granted. They consider daily news the most relevant genre and indicate that the selection of easy news should be carefully made and journalist principles should be followed in their creation. They recommend offering the service online, in an easy-to-find and an easy-to-user platform where users can control de multimedia player and authors can include additional features.

4. EASY ACCESS SERVICES FOR AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT

An alternative way to produce easy audiovisual content may be to add easy access services to a standard content, but this does not come without challenges. Bernabé-Caro and Orero (2019) provide a list of hybrid access services combining EL with existing access services. The list includes: easy listening, easy to listen or easy AD; easy subtitles/captions/subtitles for the deaf and hard-of-hearing (SDH); easy audio subtitles/captions/SDH; ER audio introductions; ER Braille, and ER web. Bernabé (2020) expands this categorisation and adopts the term “easy-to-understand”. She presents a taxonomy based on the semiotic nature of the access services (verbal/non verbal, intrasemiotic/intersemiotic), and lists both auditory and visual E2U access services. The list is extensive and includes, among others: E2U audio comments, AD, audio explanation, audio intertitles, audio introduction, audio subtitles, audio summaries, audio surtitles, audio remakes, audio sight translation, audio voice-over, consecutive interpreting, simultaneous interpreting, but also E2U intertitles, intralingual subtitles, real-time intralingual subbtitles, surtitles, written explanations, and written summaries.

Maaß and Hernández Garrido (2020) also research the pros and cons of the integration of E2U with AVT, considering the diverse nature of the audiovisual text (easy/standard, fictional/non-fictional, integrated/added) and the targeted audience (adults/children) as key factors. They consider that EL is challenging for AVT for many reasons: because of its limited acceptability, especially in aesthetic texts such as fictional content; because of medial restrictions, as AV texts have time restrictions, and because the translation has to match the other parts of the AV product. They look at both EL and PL and relate it to: dubbing, AD, surtitles, subtitles, SDH, voice-over, film interpreting, speech-to-text interpreting (or respeaking). They see

more potential for PL rather than EL, which they find generally inadequate for fiction formats.

Research in all the previous situations is very limited, with E2U subtitles having attracted most of the attention. “Easy subtitles” were suggested by Alba Rodríguez (2013) and have been the focus of research by Bernabé-Caro, with the first PhD on the topic (2020). Bernabé-Caro has looked at the relationship between EL guidelines SDH parameters (Bernabé-Caro and García, 2019), has proposed a list of 18 parameters (Bernabé-Caro and Cavallo, 2021) and has tested a set of subtitles with users in a validation process (Bernabé-Caro et al., 2020). These subtitles were then evaluated in a study with old participants (Oncins et al., 2020; Matamala, 2021). Marmit (2021) and Marsano (2019) have also researched the topic in German and Italian, respectively, and Eugeni and Rotz (2017) have transferred the concept of PL to live subtitling. Some research is also available in relation to easy ADs (Bernabé-Caro and Orero, 2021; Taylor and Perego, 2021; Arias-Badia and Matamala, 2020, 2021). They are dealt with in more detail in the next section, where we put the emphasis on easy audio services.

5. EASY AUDIOS: STATE OF THE ART

References on the topic of easy audio services are scarce and practical experiences are even more limited. In her taxonomy of E2U services, Bernabé-Caro (2020) proposes a list of auditory E2U access services which include E2U audio comment, AD, audio explanation, audio intertitles, audio introduction, audio subtitles, audio summary, audio surtitles, audio remake, audio sight translation, and voice-over, as well as E2U consecutive and simultaneous interpreting. She also considers that pictograms can be adapted to E2U audio access services. In her article the focus is to analyse the semiotic identity of the E2U access services in comparison with standard access services, but she does not delve further in how these access services could be developed.

Bernabé and Orero (2021) explore the potential of EL principles in creating simplified ADs. The two departing points for easier AD are text simplification through EL principles and sound aspects. The authors consider that existing AD, EL and sound mix guidelines together with WCAG 2.1. can set the framework for easy-to-understand ADs. Taylor and Perego (2021) focus on museum AD and consider that less complex AD could make information available to a wider target group. This easier ADs would imply a “reduction in the volume and complexity of information and language materials, in order to produce an immediate, clear, empathetic and concise communication” (p. 50).

Arias-Badia and Matamala (2020) held a focus group within the context of the EASIT project (Matamala and Fernández-Torné, forthcoming) in which both professional audio describers and EL experts were involved. The aim was to explore whether easy ADs could be a useful service. Results show that there are similarities in the way these experts create their texts (short simple sentences, using the same word for the same referent), but they also highlight the difficulty of integrating easy ADs in content including complex dialogues. Experts think that rather than AD, we could talk about “audio adaptation”, which could be like a second track. Focus groups participants also thought that implementing E2U AD would be easier for certain products, such as opera, theatre or dance. They suggest audio introductions and

extended AD, in which the user can pause the content, as two possible solutions to include E2U AD.

A step further is taken by Arias-Badia and Matamala (2021), who carry out a corpus-based study of ADs in Catalan to assess how easy they are. Using a corpus of 9 ADs in Catalan, and comparing it to existing EL texts in Catalan, they observe that many aspects are already shared in terms of how the texts are structured, namely: the preference for simple clauses, a neuter syntactic order, a use of general lexicon, and clarity in the identification of characters and objects as a priority. No literary tropes or figurative language is used in the AD corpus, nor neology or foreign words. Gunning Fog index ranges from 3.8 to 6.87, which indicates low complexity.

Finally, Maaß and Hernández-Garrido (2021) explore different audiovisual transfer modes but here I will report only on those generating an audio input:

- As far as dubbing is concerned, they consider that dubbing a dialogue which is not in EL or PL into EL or PL would affect the credibility of the dialogues, the characterization of the speakers and would most probably impact on synchronization, raising acceptability issues.
- As for voice-over, they consider that using an easy-to-understand language would attribute to the original speaker a language variety which is not the one being used, with similar constraints as in dubbing. If a content is produced in PL from the beginning, it would be possible to use voice-over.
- As for film interpreting, they consider PL to be more appropriate although there are no experiences in the field.
- As far as AD is concerned, they highlight that producing an easy AD for original dialogues which are not adapted would not be useful as there would be a product with different linguistic complexities. They consider that EL/PL ADs are only feasible when the rest of the audio track is in the same variety and there are enough gaps.

When looking at existing practices related to easy audio version, these experiences are very limited, and mostly related to interpreting. Interpreting into an easy-to-understand language exists in Germany: Schulz et al (2020) consider it is an intralingual interpreting whose aim is to “make orally represented content in a standard language or specialized language accessible to people who do not or only insufficiently understand it” (p. 167). They acknowledge that not all rules from written EL can be implemented in oral language, an aspect currently being researched. They also indicate that “although practical experience so far shows that the result of the interpretation is more similar to PL, it is called EL interpreting as people with cognitive impairments are often considered the target group” (p. 168). In this type of interpreting, as explained by the authors, the interpret is empowered to intervene in the source text and leave out less relevant content, an approach closer to community interpreting, in which. The interpreters become “clarifiers”, i.e. “they add (more detailed) explanations in order to guarantee comprehension” (p. 169). Schulz et al. (2020) report on a first experience in 2013 at an international and inclusive “No Limits” theatre festival and on a conference on inclusion held by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in 2019. The authors consider that the oral form of EL interpreting fulfills the participatory function of EL, as “the objective is to enhance participation by making orally presented information more accessible”. This form of interpreting is rather unknown, although a small-scale survey with 9 respondents shows an increase in the provision of this service.

Closely related to this, simultaneous simplification is a concept put forward by Nahón Guillén (2020, online), who defines it as follows: “a new modality of interpreting through which we make conference speeches and presentations to persons with intellectual disabilities. This might involve giving a simplified version of a speech in the speaker’s own language or providing an interpretation from one language into a simplified second language”. She reports on the experience developed between Israiiic and the Cognitive Accessibility Institute of Israel and researchers from Ono Academic Collegues. They have provided this service at conferences but also at the Eurovision Broadcast in Israel in 2019 and on public TV broadcast related to Coronavirus news, among other events. They provide some interesting examples, which we reproduce literally:

Original: Welcome to the most fabulous room in the arena. This is the beating heart of the Eurovision contest and I think I can hear... beating from here. When this contest was launched 64 years ago, it was in the hope of brining people together through the power of music.

Simplified: Welcome to this wonderful room. This room is called the green room. The green room is like the heart of the Eurovision contest. Can you feel your heart beating? The Eurovision contest was created many years ago. This contest hoped to make people feel together with the help of music.

Yalon-Chamovit and Avidan-Ziv (2016) provide further details into this practice and consider that language simplification “refers to the structured process of processing and editing information so as to make it clear, simple and readily understood by people with cognitive disabilities” (p. 1). They consider simultaneous simplification a “novel practice based on theoretical and practical knowledge stemming from both language simplification and simultaneous interpretation. It entails real-time content editing, interpretation and translation into PL, which enables people with cognitive disabilities to fully participate in a learning community”. Yalon-Chamovitz et al. (2019) proved the usefulness of this approach by conducting semi-structured interviews with conference participants with disabilities and staff members. Results show that participants enjoyed understanding the content and offered some suggestions: there is a preference for slow edited translations, and some previous training on the interpreter’s voice and equipment may be useful.

Somewhere in between easy interpreting and easy AD we find “audio explanations” or “easy audios”. A video from the EASIT project (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YK4k7fatmCY&feature=youtu.be>) includes an interview by Ana Pereira with Javier Jiménez Dorado, director and founding member of Spanish access service provider Aptent. He defines easy audios or audio explanations as a cognitive accessibility service based on the concept of EL with many similarities with AD. In this regard the Spanish AD standard 153020 is used as a reference for many aspects. He provides further information: easy audios are recordings created using EL methodologies and validated by users with cognitive disabilities, and they are included in the silent gaps. They explain the meaning of difficult words, they clarify what happens, remind of important past events. When needed, they try to include an audio introduction. He also acknowledges that a new approach could be adopted for certain content and an adapted version could be created, editing the original content where needed to have more silent gaps or having a totally new dubbed version. Jiménez Dorado also acknowledges the diversity of users within the

cognitive accessibility spectrum, hence the challenge to create easy audios that fulfill everybody's needs.

In Argentina, the Audiovisual Communication Services Act (26.522), passed in 2009, requires in its Article 66 to include different access services and refer to the needs of persons who may have difficulties accessing the content. The regulation defines "audio description for persons with intellectual disability" (ADI for short) as an audio track whose content is transferred into simplified language (language with a basic grammar structure, not long and without technical terms). It establishes that institutional, public service and information content should be audio described using this method. The ADI service produced so far respond to the requirements of the different TV channels: when there is no original audio, the voice artists explains in a simplified language what is said and what happens in the video; when there is already an audio, the silent gaps are used for this simplified audio. There is limited knowledge on this service and the method that is being used, which may result in different approaches depending on the voice talent (Gutiérrez 2021, personal communication). An example can be found online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pm0WaWOblAA&t=36s>. The effect is that of a television commentary at a slower pace.

Based on the previous theoretical proposals and actual experiences, we put forward a proposal focusing only in audio components which will need to be tested experimentally.

6. EASY AUDIOS FOR EASY AUDIOVISUALS: A PRELIMINARY PROPOSAL

Inspired by all the existing bibliography mentioned before, my proposal concerns the production of simplified audios which can contribute to make audiovisual content easier to understand. Rather than taking a medical approach and associating access services with disabilities, I adopt an approach in which access services can fulfil the needs of a wide variety of users.

The production of easy audios can occur in three main situations: a) they can be part of an easy-to-understand content, which has been created following a born accessible approach (Orero, 2020). In other words, the content has been planned from the beginning to be easy-to-understand and the audios are an oral rendering of a text which has already been planned as such, considering it needs to be voiced; b) they can be a simplified version of an access service, either created ex novo or adapted from an existing one, and c) they can be a specific audio track created specifically to make the audiovisual content easy to understand.

If they are a simplified version of an access service which is delivered orally, I see most of the potential in audio description, audio introductions, audio subtitling, interpreting, voice-over and off-screen dubbing. Voice-over and off-screen dubbing are audiovisual transfer modes (Matamala, 2019) generally used for non-fictional content: whereas in voice-over the translated audio overlaps with the original audio, in off-screen dubbing the translation replaces the original. Very often off-screen dubbing is used to revoice off-screen narrators and voice-over is used for the interviewees in a documentary.

I describe next the previous easy oral access services, highlighting the possibilities and the main challenges. I acknowledge that applying EL would be more challenging than applying PL, but each situation would need to be carefully considered.

Easy AD: AD which uses easy-to-understand language features both when creating or adapting (translating) the AD script and when voicing it. Its main aim is to translate the visuals into words which in this case will be easier. It remains to be seen to what extent existing AD in different languages are already easy and which specific prosodic features enhance comprehensibility. It also remains to be seen how end users in different languages would welcome simplified versions, especially when they are used to rich and vivid audio descriptions. Finally, a key problem may be that the easy AD may clash with complex dialogues, so maybe easy audios or easy explanations (see below) may be a more suitable approach for certain users. Some AD variations proposed in the literature may be an alternative solution for easy AD: for instance, extended audio descriptions (Matamala, 2021), in which the visuals stop and an additional audio track is activated by the user, could be applied in certain contexts (videogames, virtual reality, video on demand) to provide clarifications and may lead to wider acceptance among users.

Easy audio introductions and easy audio guides: audio introductions or audio guides which use easy-to-understand language features both in the script and in the delivery. An interesting aspect to be explored for recorded audio introductions—and also for museum audio guides—is the possibility for users to customise different information layers depending on their needs, while controlling automatically audio reproduction features such as speed. Additionally, an aspect that could be explored in certain context is the creation of easy audio introductions or audio guides in the form of a video, enhancing multimodal redundancy. For instance, an opera easy audio introduction could be available on the opera house website and, while describing the characters or the settings, images of these characters and settings could be shown.

Easy audio subtitles: when users cannot read the subtitles and do not understand the source language, audio subtitles are the solution. Subtitles can be read aloud either by a human voice or by a text-to-speech system. To make audio subtitles easier to understand, they could be based on existing easy subtitles or they could be edited so that they are easier. In fact, Matamala (forthcoming) already acknowledges editing subtitles to produce audio alternatives is an existing practice, but this editing generally aims to include oral features which have been lost in the written subtitle. In this case, the editing would aim at simplifying the oral rendering. The final effect of an easy audio subtitle would be very close to that of an easy voice-over or an easy interpreting, as described next, because the source text and the translation would overlap. Although some register features would be lost in the process, there may be other gains in visual processing and enjoyment as the cognitive load would be reduced. Again, this is a proposal that remains to be researched.

Easy voice-over: a simplified version of the voice-over could be produced, keeping a first-person voice-over (i.e. if the speaker says “I think”, the translation keeps the same person). However, a potentially interesting approach could be to produce a third-person voice-over (Matamala 2019, 2020). This reported speech would transfer the content of the source text—typically an interview—in third person, in an easier to understand version. Easy voice-over would be planned and pre-recorded, contrary to easy interpreting below. The main issue would be that the specificities of the source language would not be kept, but the fact that a third-person voice-over is used already shows some distance from the original. Moreover, very often the key element

in non-fictional content translated by means of voice-over is transferring content, rather than linguistic form.

Easy off-screen dubbing: in this audiovisual transfer mode the source audio track would be replaced by a target language track. Although the translation is expected to reproduce the language register of the source content, an easy version could be produced. This would not be that different from other types of adaptations that are made when localising content for certain audiences.

Easy interpreting: it implies producing a simplified interpreting of the source content. It could be both simultaneous or consecutive, but in both cases it would be live. This modality has been thoroughly explained above, as it has already been implemented in conferences but not specifically in audiovisual content such as films, be it pre-recorded or live.

All the proposals before are adaptations of existing access services which are generally intersemiotic (translation of visuals into words) or interlinguistic (translation from a language B into a language A). Easy interpreting, easy voice-over or easy off-screen dubbing in the same language would also be possible, being the translation or interpreting into a simplified version of the same language. However, a more holistic approach could be taken by producing easy audios or easy explanations.

Easy audios or easy explanations: these audios would contribute to make audiovisual content easier to understand by providing relevant explanations that contribute to the comprehension of the content, both in terms of what is happening and what people are saying. They should be ideally planned during the production of the audiovisual content, following a “born accessible” approach. When not possible, they could be added in a postproduction process. Kruger (2010) suggested a continuum from explicitly descriptive AD (as in a documentary) to audio narration, which moves away from an objective description of what is seen on screen in favour of a coherent audio narration. Whereas Kruger took into account users with no or limited access to the visuals, the easy audios would be addressed to users who may have access to the visuals but cannot fully make sense of the audiovisual content. To overcome this challenge, an off-screen narration or commentary could be developed (as in off-screen dubbing), mostly in the silent gaps (as in AD), but also overlapping where relevant (as in a voice-over and interpreting), to guarantee a better understanding. Linguistic features, sound mix and prosody would be central. Easy audios could be combined with an easy audio introduction that provides some contextual information, maybe in an audiovisual format.

All the previous suggestions, inspired by the many authors quoted in this paper, stay at a theoretical level and focus only on audio modes—not written services such as subtitling or visual-gestural services such as sign language interpreting. However, they can be the basis to move forward in developing actual easy audio access services that make audiovisual content easier to understand. Experimental research with users is needed to confirm or reject their usefulness.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Easy-to-understand language has put the emphasis on written text, but audiovisual content is ubiquitous in our society. It is therefore timely and relevant to research how audiovisual content can be made easier to understand. The article has provided

an overview of the current state of the art, addressing what some of the main guidelines and standards propose. Special emphasis has been put on the creation of easy audiovisual content, using easy news as a case study, and on the creation of easy access services to be added in audiovisual content. The last part of the article has focused mainly on audio components.

This article has stayed at a theoretical level to establish the basis from which to build experimental research. There are still many open questions that need to be addressed and which can be the object of future research: how easy are existing access services? Are audiences willing to receive easy access services? What role should personalization and customization have in the current technological scenario? What specific linguistic features yield better comprehension results in diverse audiences, considering not only grammar and vocabulary but also structure, prosody and paralinguistic elements? What differences are to be found depending on the language and on the end user profile? The questions are manifold, showing the potential of this field of study.

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