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Translating Audio description Scripts: The Way Forward? - Tentative First Stage Project Results

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Abstract

The article presents the results of a test aiming at translating/adapting audio description scripts as a faster and more financially viable way. It will also discuss and analyze the possibility of rendering the audiovisual production process less complex.

1 What is Audio Description?

Audio description transforms visual information to words, translates the visual into spoken language, completing in this way the sounds and dialogs of films. AD has a dual function. On the one hand, it fills in that part of the audiovisual sign system of film that the blind have no access to: visual images. On the other hand, it complements the ‘whole’ with the explanation of sounds that are understandable only through their relationship with these images. Like subtitling for the hard of hearing (HoH), AD includes inter-semiotic transfer processes that go beyond linguistic or cultural definitions of traditional translation concepts. The effectiveness of audio description depends on the way in which all these different signs are connected to and among each other.

Audio description is the descriptive technique of inserting audio explanations and descriptions of the settings, characters, and actions taking place in a variety of audiovisual media, when information about these visual elements is not offered in the regular audio presentation. Or, in other words, audio description is "the art to speak in images" as Navarrete, a describer who for many years has worked for ONCE, the Spanish National Organization of the Blind² described AD in 1997 (Navarrete 1997). Although the Spanish National Organization of the Blind registered the name “sistema Audesc” (Audesc System) to designate audio description, and subsequently promoted this technique with the aforementioned remark, we can find the most up to date and complete definition of audio

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² Organización Nacional de Ciegos de España.

description in the official Spanish National Standard UNE, published by AENOR (2005: 4), as the norm “Audio Description for People with Visual Impairment: Requirements, for AD and Development of Audioguides”:

“Audio description is an assistive service consisting of a set of techniques and abilities, whose main objective is to compensate for the lack of perception of the visual component in any audiovisual message, by providing suitable sound information which translates or explains, in such a way that the visually impaired perceive the message as an harmonious work and is as similar as possible to the way is perceived by the sighted people³.”

Audio description preferably blends in when there are gaps in the dialog. Ideally, audio descriptions should not interfere with important narrative pieces of information, mood-setting music and sound-effects, although at times AD will have to be given priority over the musical score. AD should only overlap with dialog or song lyrics if these are not relevant to the plot though. Never should AD interfere with major dialog exchanges, but minor conversational features that support dialog may have to be sacrificed.

The golden rule is “what you see is what you say”. Dealing with inter-semiotic processes, of course audio descriptions visualize people, objects and events, however it is also crucial to try to convey the mood and the emotional impact of a scene. At all events though, the audience should be able to form their own opinions and draw their own conclusions. Therefore, it is very important not to edit or to interpret or to explain what is being described, but always describe only the most significant and essential features of the story line or the action. A good audio description will use vocabulary and syntactic constructions according both to the target audience and to the peculiarities of the described media material, and will try to convey, at least part if not all of the visual signs of the films. The language used for the descriptions must be precise and, at the same time, significative rather than abstract. Audio description should suggest rather than explain.

As to the question of “what is to be described”, the describer must give an answer to the five classic wh-questions in narrative creation:

- WHERE: locations and settings, including dimensions and scene or location changes.
- WHEN: time of day, light/dark, if relevant.
- WHO: Characters (depending on film/scene: dress, physical attributes, age, facial expressions, body language and ethnic background if relevant).
- WHAT: on-screen action sounds or effects that cannot easily be identified, subtitles or other text on screen, opening titles and/or end credits.
- HOW: action development.

AD history is short. It started around the 1970s in American theatres. In most European countries, AD has also been present for some decades as a practice within disability associations, such as the English Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) or the Spanish Organization of the Blind (ONCE). As an assistive service, audio description should be understood as an integrative factor in our whole society and therefore its implementation should be universal in character. That is the reason why legislation in this area plays a crucial role.

³ “Servicio de apoyo a la comunicación que consiste en el conjunto de técnicas y habilidades aplicadas, con objeto de compensar la carencia de captación de la parte visual contenida en cualquier tipo de mensaje, suministrando una adecuada información sonora que la traduce o explica, de manera que el posible receptor discapacitado visual perciba dicho mensaje como un todo armónico y de la forma más parecida a como lo percibe una persona que ve.”

In the past decades we have seen a structural transformation of the European population: The aged population in Europe is growing fast and is predicted to grow steadily each year. Media and broadcasting have tried to adapt to these changes and audio description (AD) is a good example of this trend. AD is not only attractive for those who are visually impaired, be it by birth, aging or as a result of a loss of their visual capacity during the course of their lives, but also to those who are unable to see a film due to a temporary problem situation. This means that we do not face a homogeneous public: some of the target viewers will have visual memory, some will not, some will be able to distinguish shadows, others will not. It is, therefore, impossible to create an AD adapted to all the different needs of this heterogeneous audience.

2 Audio description: Origins and legal framework

Audio description is a reality in the U.S. which is the country with a largest production of media programs for TV and cinema, etc. Audio description originates in the US, Canada and UK. In all of these countries AD began with live and open special play performances, moving to recorded AD for films to be sent internally to members of associations. This trend became soon public and professional: AD entered digital television (DTV) and commercial DVDs.

With the Telecommunication Act of 1996, the US Congress instructed the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to require video program distributors (cable operators, broadcasters, satellite distributors and other multi-channel video programming distributors) to phase in closed captioning into their television programs. In 1997, the Federal Communications Commission implemented rules to provide a transition schedule for video program distributors to follow when providing more captioned programming. The rules require that distributors provide an increasing amount of captioned programs according to a set schedule. Captioning has promoted the development of audio description.

Audio description – which in some countries is not commercially available yet – will become a legal requirement for European media broadcasting once the European “Media for All” directives are enforced in all European countries. Media accessibility – closed captioning and audio description – is yet to become a reality, but with the future shift from analog to digital TV, it will obviously be a new market trend. A new industry will thus be created to cater for the new accessibility needs.

When or how these European directives will be implemented is not defined yet. It may be by sanctioning laws – as those in the U.S or UK⁴ - or by incentive or reward, like granting tax deduction schemes to broadcasters, or it may come in the form of a prerequisite for a digital license. It may be introduced progressively as DTV technology becomes increasingly available, which will play a major role in society and will open up services to all citizens. Access to the many services offered by DTV will have to be accessible to all citizens at many levels. AD can experience greater flexibility and higher quality in the new technology. For many years universal media accessibility has already become a major topic in many European directives and actions, such as the “Television without Frontiers” directive.

This directive was adopted on October 3rd, 1989 by the Council and amended in June 1997 by the **European Parliament and the Council Directive 97/36/EC**. It is the European legal version of the US Telecommunication Act of 1996. Since that date, i.e. for almost a decade, much work has been done in this respect and CENELEC⁵ is now the institution in charge of Media Accessibility in Europe.

⁴ Communications Act 2003

⁵ <http://www.cenelec.org/Cenelec/CENELEC+in+action/Horizontal+areas/ICT/e-Accessibility+and+TV+for+All.htm>

After the Athens Conference in 2003, the European Union drew up some general guidelines for those countries which had not yet developed a national plan of accessibility.

In Spain, the First Accessibility Plan “Design for all” 2004-2012, was adopted on June 3rd 2003, the European Year of People with Disabilities, and the interest of lawmakers and the profession of audio describers was so excited about it, there was already a fixed norm on how to audio-describe. The aforementioned Standard UNE 153020 of 2005, published by the Spanish Association for Standardization and Certification AENOR, was passed on 26th January 2005. A working group of Representatives of the National Association for the Blind (ONCE), broadcasters, representatives of companies and universities was created and coordinated by the Spanish Ministry of Labor.

The main beneficiaries of the law are companies and professionals making audiovisual material accessible for those with sight impairments, but it also serves as a reference for the creation of AD scripts. In November 2005, the Framework Agreement for the creation of the Spanish Center for Subtitling and Audio description (CESyA) was signed by the Real Patronato sobre Discapacidad⁶, the CERMI (the Spanish Confederation of representatives of the disabled)⁷ and the University, Carlos III of Madrid. One of the aims of this public-institution is to promote SDHH subtitling and AD for disabled people and, in general, to encourage all mechanisms that favor accessibility in the Spanish audiovisual scene (Orero and Utray: 2005).

To provide a broader picture to the reader it may be interesting to mention that TV broadcasting of closed commercial audio description (that is to say, only for those who want to listen) began on the Andalusian TV channel, Canal Sur, on February 22nd, 1995. It was broadcast until the end of 1996 and some 76 films were aired. This was the first experience with AD in Spain, but up to now, audio described programs on Spanish TV have been rather irregularly presented.

In the UK and the US, the number of audio described hours required by the regulator is considerably below that required for subtitling. And, the forthcoming regulation in Spain will not change this trend. According to the White Paper of the Spanish Ley General del Audiovisual (Audiovisual General Law), the state owned channels will have to audio describe just 10% of the programs in 2015, whereas 100% of the aired programs must be subtitled in the same year.

Whatever the system used in any European country, once DTV has become a common service (in Spain DTV is officially operating since November 30, 2005), media accessibility will be a reality, and two important issues will influence its development: cost and time.

It must be mentioned though that the industry will not be able to comply with all these laws and norms because there are not enough experts and professionals available to implement them. This raises a new question: who will be doing the audio descriptions?

3 Cost of the implementation of AD

The economic and operative implications of media accessibility do not follow traditional economic parameters. Cost in media production has already reached its limits: the use and abuse of advertisements as a way to pay for private broadcasting is taxing on the viewer. In

⁶ i.e. the Real Council of Disabilities, an autonomous organization of the General State Administration dependent on the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs which among other functions promotes the prevention of deficiencies, and promotes rehabilitation and social inclusion as well as equal opportunities.

⁷ CERMI (Spanish Confederation of representatives of the disabled) is the representative umbrella organization for all the Spanish Associations of People with disabilities.

Spain⁸, less and less people are watching films on TV because of the many ads shown along with a film: a 90-minute film may last as long as three hours. Public broadcasting – although it is paid by subscription in some countries like the UK – is also facing a financial crisis with its reduction in programs and in human resources, which has led to a decrease in production⁹. DTV will bring a larger diversification of TV stations and services and will definitely affect and even more diversify the financial world of media production.

With this outlook the question arises of how media are going to be made accessible in the light of extra production costs for both audio-description and closed captioning? Issues related to this question were discussed at an international conference organized at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona¹⁰ in June 2005.

Another important issue is the question who will be responsible for, or how the extra funding necessary to make media accessible can be raised. As it is, the audiovisual market is working with a very tight budget and there increasing concerns about the additional work that this will cause to people who are already working above normal working hours. Moreover, the limited number of potential users does not seem to make accessibility profitable in economic terms. In traditional financial terms the possible revenue that may be gained by the number of people using the new services is not significant. Therefore, no gain (in audience or commercials) is to be expected to justify the expenditure required to make all media programs fully accessible.

In the case of audio description, the estimated average cost per hour is, according to different sources, around € 800, plus the cost of the transmission bandwidth for an audio channel. An audio-described production for the Spanish state-owned TV channel RTVE is about 1,750 euros - a considerable sum of money, especially considering the objective of only having 10% of the programs audio described.

The audiovisual industry must therefore face both the marginal costs and the technical and operative complexity involved in accessibility. Otherwise governments will have to think of possible ways of incentives or rewards, e.g. tax reductions or exemption for companies who fulfill the required number of hours of accessible broadcasting, or awarding digital licences on the condition of accessible programs.

4 Audio description and time

While the situation in other European countries may be different, in Spain time in media production and broadcast is a luxury good enjoyed by only few and selected groups. Programs are bought, produced (translated, subtitled, dubbed, etc.) and broadcast in a very short period of time. Also, how can the actual media production process be slowed down to accommodate a new step in the production process, i.e. accessibility?

Confronted with these two questions, the thought arose to make audio descriptions in countries whose first language is not English and have a high degree of imports of English-speaking media programs such as films. The fact that Spain is a “dubbing country” should not be ignored, however, because it has a direct implication on both the type of media accessibility and the professionals who will make the media accessible.

⁸ As Eduardo García Matilla, president of the Corporación Multimedia, stated in the plenary session of the International Conference 1^o Jornada sobre TV de servicio, which took place in Barcelona June 2nd 2005 and was organized by the Generalitat de Catalunya and the Corporació Catalana de Ràdio i Televisió.

⁹ The BBC personnel strike in June 2005 is a direct consequence.

¹⁰ Media for All International Conference <http://www.fti.uab.es/transmedia> which took place in Barcelona 6, 7 & 8th June 2005.

5 The new audio describer

Who can become an audio describer? In most European countries (such as Belgium, France, Germany, and Spain) and because Audio Description is usually done internally and at a social level, people who do AD are generally volunteers. Some describers have received training, but some perform AD services because they have relatives with impairments or because they have some interest in amateur theater.

The skills needed for a person to audio describe are stated by The Audio Description Association in conjunction with The Open College Network West and North Yorkshire (provided in their promotional leaflet, May 2000) in the UK:

- The ability to summarize information accurately and objectively
- A good command of the language
- A clear and pleasant speaking voice
- Good sight and hearing (whether aided or unaided)
- The ability to work as part of a team
- The commitment to access for disabled people, and the provision of quality audio description for blind and partially sighted people.

However, these skills are listed in the UK, a country with little import of media products in other languages than English. In other countries where there is a large import of audiovisual programs, as in Spain, much of the accessible work will have to be done by a translator or a person with foreign language transfer skills. It is interesting to note that a possible profile for describers is a person who translates and describes. When considering the multiple and complex combinations of possible describer profiles in Spain, we should have in mind four variables, derived from the basic concept of the describer as the person who creates the AD script:

- The describer can also be the subtitler
- The describer can also be the translator
- The describer can also be the adjuster
- The describer can also be a SDH subtitler, that is, an intralinguistic subtitler.

These possibilities could also be combined with what traditionally has been an integral part of a describer's profile (at least in the US and the UK), the narration of the script.

A describer has to work with two main media market characteristics: time and budget restrictions. Projects normally need to be accomplished under time pressure and adjusted to a fixed budget. This can easily be achieved if the same person –translator or subtitler- would also create the audio description. Furthermore, the fact that he/she is already acquainted with the plot, characters, register, cultural references, etc will facilitate the work of the description. If it was possible to find one person with the different professional skills above, the final benefit will go to the client, since he/she will not only receive the final product faster but at the same time a product with a higher quality and consistency between the different versions.

6 Hypothesis and practical test

The following is a report of an ongoing research. The hypothesis of this work is based on Veronika Hyk's (2005) and Bernd Benecke's (2004a) question "Can audio description be translated into other languages?"

In the process of subtitling and dubbing today, the translator gets the preliminary script, sometimes the continuity to work from there when rendering the different versions.

It seems feasible that in the future the translator could also work from the script for audio-description. With the sale of the film, the distributor would sell the AD script, too.

In this paper, we present the results of an experiment which tested the hypothesis of translating or adapting audio description scripts as a faster and more financially viable way to create audio described films. Adapting the audio description from a script instead of creating an AD script from scratch from the already dubbed version seems a viable alternative.

Two professional subtitlers, two dubbing translators, a university professor and a dubbing director and adjuster formed a team. It is important to note that although all of them are professionally related with the audiovisual field, none of them had previous experience in AD creation.

We proceeded from the availability of AD scripts produced in either the US or UK. Each translator worked with an electronic version of the transcription of the English AD, the English audio described DVD, and the Spanish dubbed version on DVD of the following films¹¹:

The 39 Steps, by Alfred Hitchcock (86 min, 1935), AD by David Banks.

Iris, by Richard Eyre (91 min, 2001), AD by Di Langford.

The Shipping News, by Lasse Hallstrom (111 min, 2001), AD by Di Langford.

The Man who Knew Too Much, by Alfred Hitchcock (75 min, 1934), AD by William Roberts.

Brief Encounter, by David Lean (86 min, 1945), AD by Di Langford.

The tasks were divided as follows. Each researcher had to create four AD scripts of the first ten minutes of each film, following two different procedures:

According to the first procedure, the Spanish AD corresponding to *39 steps* and *Iris* were to be created from the original version of the film, without having previously seen the English AD script. However, the participants were advised to watch the whole film in order to have a better understanding of the context. After that, they had to adapt the Spanish AD to the dubbed version of the film, and finally read the adapted script. These three phases had to be timed by the participants in order to calculate the total duration of the process.

According to the second procedure, the Spanish AD corresponding to the films *The Shipping News* and *The Man Who Knew too Much* were to be created by translating the English AD script. This is the key difference between the first and the second procedure. Besides, at this stage, the adjuster did not participate, since his role was to contribute to a subsequent stage. In this case, the participants were also advised to watch the whole film. The translated AD was also to be adapted to the Spanish dubbed version and finally to be read. As in the first procedure, the total duration of the process had to be calculated by adding up the duration of the three phases.

The aim of these two first stages was to compare the total duration of the different procedures of AD generation and to evaluate the creative process. Since, as previously said, the participants had no previous experience, the duration of these procedures needs to be taken with caution, i.e. the more experienced the describer or translator, the less time she/he will need to create or translate the AD.

In a third stage, only the two subtitlers were involved. They firstly had to create the Spanish HoH subtitles of the first ten minutes from the film 'Brief Encounter'. Based on that, they created and read the Spanish AD script. As before, the total duration of these three parts was timed. Subtitling was the only choice here because some regional TV channel in Spain

¹¹ Thanks are due to Joan Greening from RNIB and Dr Andrew Salway from the University of Surrey, who generously supplied the five AD scripts.

had already proposed to its pool of free-lance subtitlers to carry out the ADs for a minimum extra charge.

In the fourth stage, a sixth researcher, the dubbing director and adjuster, were asked to adapt the two translated AD scripts (second stage) and to calculate the time spent both on adapting and reading the Spanish AD scripts.

One of the aims of this project was to find out which profile for a commercial audio describer fits better into the future audiovisual Spanish market. This explains the variety of backgrounds of the participants. Every expert involved in this research project had to render the task from her/his professional point of view and evaluate the procedure and the results accordingly.

The results presented below were analyzed from the points of view of the translator for the translation and the adjuster for the creation.

7 Results

The project entails five stages, with the first one almost completed. Based on the provisional data of the first stage, two tentative results could be drawn:

- If we consider the average time spent in creating and adapting the first 10 minutes of audio description corresponding to the first stage, the calculation shows that for a 90-minute film, the creation of the AD from scratch and from the original version would take nearly ten hours and a half, pending the final recording by a professional voice-talent.
- For the creation of a new AD script on the basis of translating the original into English, we would have to spend a bit more than ten hours.

Therefore at this point, awaiting more comprehensive information, it is reasonable to suggest that translating the already available AD script is slightly less time-consuming than creating a new one from the film in its original version. It is true that this result might have been influenced by the fact that participants already had experience in translating but not in audio describing. However, just half of them had previous experience in adjusting. Nevertheless, it has to be underlined that it is precisely at the beginning of a film, i.e. in the first ten to fifteen minutes, that there is always more to be described, since the plot, the setting and the characters have to be introduced for the first time.

- The length of the film is not a deciding factor of the time spent in creating the AD, both new and translated. More important is the filmic structure (for instance, flash backs), action and dialog speed, number of gaps in the dialogs and so on.

As mentioned before, this is an ongoing research. Final results and conclusions are to come and will be published as soon as they are available.

8 Conclusion

This research was carried out to test the following assertions made by Veronica Hyks in *Translating Today* (2005:7): “As much as it would seem to make sense to make audio description scripts available to others, to save time, translating and reworking can sometimes take as long if not longer than starting from scratch. Audio describers and translators may well find themselves working side by side in the not so distant future.”

The question remains what would be the results if the same person did both? After all, translators are better trained to address cultural references and to adapt them to the target audience. Moreover, an original AD gives the appropriate cultural background and accordingly is more informative than the AD for the same film done from scratch. In this way, translators could avoid a significant loss of necessary cultural references and, if required e.g. by time constraints they can decide and distinguish together what is important in the original audio description and what can be left out, what must be kept and what can be sacrificed. Translators could take advantage of the original AD, adapt it and reformulate it in the time given (between dialog gaps) and in the appropriate linguistic register. It could also be argued that the translation of an original AD script could be more flexible and thus more creative than for example the translation of the DVD subtitles which are generated from a rigid master/genesis file which today is the generally accepted method of translating subtitles.

Another point to be considered is that the creation of both from the original version of the film and translating the original AD is faster than waiting until the dubbed version is ready and then start with the AD in the target language. Obviously, the two first options could only be carried out by a professional with foreign language skills.

In short, the original AD could be the basis for a more accurate, probably faster, and thus more economical version in the target language.

This research is only one of the many projects underway at university level in the hope of making accessibility to the media an easier way for social integration. To reach this goal, the translation of audio description scripts should be considered not only as the way forward, but also as a possible step forward.

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