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Audio description as a form of audiovisual translation and adaptive technique

ABSTRACT

Audio description (AD) is a verbal, auditory description of the image and visual content contained in an audiovisual program intended for people with disabilities due to vision dysfunctions, which is placed in the broadcast itself or distributed simultaneously with it. AD refers to the translation of sports, stand-up, theater, film, television, painting, dance and other performances, in which one of the basic materials is image, into another code, i.e. words (intersemiotic translation). As an adaptive technique, it allows viewers with sight dysfunction (e.g. visually impaired or the blind) to receive visual content.

KEYWORDS: audio description, art, visual impairment, communication

1. Introduction

Audio description (hereafter AD) is a type of audiovisual translation that is basically intended for individuals with vision dysfunctions. As a form of translating images into words, it can be used in different spaces of culture and social life including cinema, television, museum, theater, opera, art galleries and sports events (Snyder 2005; Orero 2005; Bolińska 2014). It is an adaptive technique thanks to which, through short, precise and objective descriptions, the blind (visually impaired) viewers are allowed to interpret visual content independently. The recording is made in the form of a script, then it is spoken aloud by, for example, a “voice-over” reader, or with the use of voice synthesizer. Audio description allows the audience to follow the evolving thread of a performance, as well as offering an opportunity to hear and understand what is happening in the presented space (see also ADI 2002).

This technique has been known since the 1970s and 1980s, which is when, in the United States, the first theoretical attempts were made to describe the content of an image to the blind. Advancement in this field is attributed, among others, to Gregory Frazier and Joel Snyder (2004, 2005, 2009). In Europe, AD has been known and used for several decades (e.g. in England, Belgium, Finland, Sweden, and Italy). Research in this area is being carried out in Spain, the Netherlands and Great Britain, and other countries. In Poland, in the early 21st century, verbal descriptions of many cultural phenomena, including films, TV series, theater performances, sports and dance events, art exhibitions, as well as scientific works appeared (e.g. Bolińska 2014; Künstler 2014; Kiser 2017; Jerzakowska 2018).

The pioneers of Polish audio description are Barbara Szymańska and Tomasz Strzymiński of Białystok, who trialed audio description in cinemas, theaters, and art galleries, offered the first training programs in the creation of audio description and developed standards for verbal description (Szymańska and Strzymiński 2010; Czerwińska 2012; Szarkowska and Jankowska 2016; Kiser 2017).

The Białystok Audio Description Foundation which they established became the medium for voicing the need to change the provisions of Polish law regarding access facilities to media and culture for those with visual disabilities. Currently, audio description is also being developed in other centers, the academic ones in particular, including Kraków, Lublin, Poznań, and Warszawa.

2. Examples of audio description in the world and in Poland

In the 1970s, Gregory Frazier of San Francisco State University laid the first theoretical basis for describing the content of the image to the blind. In 1981, in the Arena Stage in Washington, DC, Margaret Pfanstiehl (blind since childhood) and her husband Cody Pfanstiehl developed and implemented the world's first descriptive narrative system for the blind, later named audio description. It was done with sound amplifying equipment that enabled sound to be heard by the hearing impaired.

In the mid-1980s, the technique of verbal description came from across the Atlantic to the European continent. It arrived at a small British theater, The Robin Hood, in the town of Averham (Nottinghamshire). The use of mini receivers with a handset, similar to those used for simultaneous interpreting, enabled viewers in the theater to hear a verbal description of scenes in the intervals between dialogues.

In early February 1988, the Theater Windsor Royal also audio described its first play, *Stepping out*. The interest in audio descriptions meant that by the end of the 1980s, more than fifty cultural institutions had already exhibited some of the performances with descriptive narratives.

The year 1983 brought another major change. In Japan, as part of an open channel in the NTV's commercial program, audio description appeared on television for the first time in the world. Eleven years later, in 1994, verbal description service was launched in the UK on ITV and BBC, providing more than six hours of programs with audio description every week during peak viewing times. In the same year, Chapter Arts Center Cardiff in Great Britain began the first regular screenings with live audio description. Thus, the United Kingdom has become the leader of descriptive narrative in Europe in terms of the number of institutions in which verbal description for the blind is provided.

The dynamic development of the services market in the field of audio description has meant that this technique, in addition to theater, cinema and television, has also been adopted in operas, museums and art galleries, and adapted to the needs of websites and streaming media, computer games and sports shows (Ore-ro 2008). Currently in Europe, access to audio description is available in England, Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, Lithuania and Poland.

Among the selected productions with audio description in Poland, a few are worth noting on account of their diversity. In November 2006, the first film screening with audio description took place. It was Michał Kwieciński's *Statyści* [Extras] (Szymańska and Strzymiński 2010: 7-10). In June 2007, Telewizja Polska [Polish Television] aired episodes of the *Ranczo* [Ranch] series supported by audio description. At the 32nd Polish Feature Film Festival in Gdynia (September 2007), the film *Świadek koronny* [The Crown Witness] was presented. In October 2007, the first football match in Poland supported by audio description was played in Białystok (Jagiellonia Białystok vs. Zagłębie Lubin). In November that year, the Białystok Puppet Theater showed an audio description performance (*Jest królik na księżycu* [There Is a Rabbit on the Moon]).

In 2008, the first full-length movie in Poland with audio description and subtitles, Andrzej Wajda's *Katyń*, was released on DVD. In December 2009, a museum exhibition was audio described, followed by Panorama Raclawicka [The Raclawice Panorama] in July 2010. In October 2010, the film *Chopin. Pragnienie miłości* [Chopin: Desire for Love] premiered in two language versions, Polish and English. In November, the State Forests Information Center together with the Audio

Description Foundation developed audio description for three nature documentaries (Na skraju lasu [The Edge of the Woods], Moczary i uroczyska [Swamps and the Wilderness] and Rok w puszczy [A Year in the Primeval Forest]).

In June 2011, the Polish TVP1 channel aired its first series with audio description Tajemnica twierdzy szyfrów [The Secret of the Cipher Fortress], and in July, the Londyńczycy [Londoners] series. April 2013 brought the movie *Imagine* directed by Andrzej Jakimowski, which featured blind characters, at the same time being supported by audio description.

3. Sight organ disability

Visual disability may be viewed in several contexts, including psychological, pedagogical, social, medical, legal (Chrzanowska 2015: 187; Czerwińska and Kucharczyk 2019: 11-107)¹ and others. Iwona Chrzanowska (2015: 181) emphasizes that in Poland two definitions of visual disability are most commonly used. One of them talks about the basics of legal qualifications for specific groups of people with disabilities. The second one also includes those who declare eye constraints (the so-called biological disability). However, there is no one complete and completely comprehensive definition of a blind person. The same applies to scientific studies (Nizankowska 2007: 13-19) in which, due to the many factors (Majewski 1983) enabling (or disabling) seeing and visual perception, one can find accounts of various eye dysfunctions. The basic types of vision include central, peripheral, stereoscopic, color and night vision, as well as disturbances within them (Chrzanowska 2015: 167).

Agnieszka Olechowska proposes (after the World Health Organization) that “blind people are the completely blind individuals, with eye acuity of 0.00; people with visual acuity not higher than 0.05, i.e. people with moderate blindness or deep-sightedness; persons with a limited field of vision of no more than 20 degrees, regardless of visual acuity (may be higher than 0.05)” (2016: 109). The visually impaired range from 0.05 to 0.3², which also includes those with deep-sightedness (classified as blind). It is further understood that the field of vision is limited to a 20 degree area, regardless of visual acuity, which may be higher than 0.3 (Sękowska 2001: 98).

¹ See also Sękowska (1981, 1991).

² Complete loss of sight is quite rare. Visually impaired people often receive impressions of light and darkness.

Therefore, to be considered blind³, one needs to be blind from birth or to have lost one's sight, but have kept the so-called visual memory⁴. In relation to children (as well as adults) the following terms are used: blind people, people with sight loss and the visually impaired (Olechowska 2016: 109).

Vision defects may be congenital or acquired (at various periods in life). The most common causes include genetic factors, congenital malformations (e.g. maternal or fetal disease during pregnancy), birth defects or perinatal disorders, acquired defects (e.g. diseases, including glaucoma, eye or brain cancer, multiple sclerosis, hypertension), injuries (mechanical, chemical, thermal), or poisoning (e.g. fungi, botulism, methyl alcohol).

Due to the pathomechanism of the disorder, several categories of damage are distinguished, such as refractive errors (e.g. myopia, hyperopia, astigmatism); eye muscle disorders (e.g. strabismus, nystagmus); cornea, iris and lense diseases (e.g. glaucoma, aniridia/cataracts, keratoconus); retinal diseases (including spigot dystrophia/ achromatopsia/diabetic retinopathy, macular degeneration, retinopathy in premature babies, retinal detachment, retinitis pigmentosa, toxoplasmosis, and retinoblastoma); optic nerve disease (nerve atrophy); and damage to the eyes due to other reasons—e.g. viral damage to the eyesight, cortical damage to the eyesight (cf. Olechowska 2016: 110–111).

The literature of the subject highlights the fact that there are considerable differences between the blind and the visually impaired. Depending on the degree of eye damage or the type of the defect, they have a different scale. For example, there may occur the so-called telescopic vision, which allows a person to read small print in a book or newspaper, but prevents movement control (e.g. stumbling, problems with moving on the stairs). Refractive errors can be the cause of decreased visual acuity and image distortions (nearsightedness, hyperopia, or astigmatism), but they do not affect the sufferer's mobility, at the same time making it difficult to perform precision tasks (central vision). Eye disorder or adaptive disorders and disturbances in color recognition interfere with accurate perception of objects (especially those located at different distances), focusing on objects, and distinguishing objects in low or very bright light (Olechowska 2016: 112–113).

³ It happens that individuals with residual vision retain both a sense of light and the ability to see spots or shapes as well as the ability to recognize selected colors. The more functional are the remnants of sight, the greater is their use in learning about visual content.

⁴ Blind people, or those who have lost eyesight, usually retain visual memory, to which they reach when reconstructing mental concepts and visual impressions.

As has been emphasized, those blind from birth may have difficulty understanding and imagining concepts that describe the properties of phenomena and objects that are only visually perceptible. Ideas regarding concepts such as chiaroscuro, hue, shade, intensity, shining, fog, soap bubble or rainbow are not identical with the perceptions thereof by the sighted (or even partially sighted) people, although sometimes they may come close. Sometimes the blind have access to optical information from the environment⁵ as some of them may have still some residual eyesight. However, if the disorder is too extensive, this sense can no longer be used in the process of fully experiencing the reality.

The understanding of the meaning of spatial and temporal-spatial concepts may depend on the time and degree of sight loss⁶. Time and the degree of blindness, the type of defect and various experiences of the blind and the visually impaired result in different requirements for audio description. Expectations differ most often in terms of the number of details to be described and the way in which they are to be presented. Among people with vision problems, there are those with a knowledge of the theater or cinematography, and they may also remember paintings, for example from the cinema or television.

4. On the essence of the audio description phenomenon

Intended for a special group of users (mainly the blind and the visually impaired and/or blind people), verbal translation is a form of providing those with sight dysfunctions with opportunities to participate in socio-cultural life, as it is for the sighted people who want to participate more fully in culture and social life (Mróz and Rząsa 2011).

It is a technique supporting the reception of the world: it supports, but does not replace, the blind people's ability to decipher various types of phenomena. Thanks to audio description, a blind person can hear the description live or from a recording with the "voice over" (e.g. using headphones), so that he or she can participate in cinema or theater performances together with sighted people. Therefore, this description is governed by several important principles, including:

⁵ It happens that those with residual vision retain both a sense of light and the ability to see spots or shapes as well as the ability to recognize selected colors. The more functional the remnants of sight, the greater their use in learning about visual content.

⁶ Visual impairment in visually impaired persons may relate to various aspects, for example visual acuity or vertical and horizontal visual field (this may be the so-called tunnel vision, or as through a keyhole).

- respect for the soundtrack;
- unhinging of information contained in dialogues;
- non-obscuring of nature sounds or the icono-phonetic signs of characters.

Audio description, therefore, relies on providing information (without interpretation and commentary) about what is happening, for example in a film or theatrical performance, in between characters' dialogues, but also on describing sports events, monuments or works of art. Therefore, it may refer to both moving and still images; recorded live or pre-recorded; single (films or performances) or sequential (e.g. TV series).

The translation of image content into words, i.e. verbal description of the visual layer of theater performances, audiovisual productions, visual arts and public events, makes them accessible to the blind and those living with various visual disabilities. It has presumably been practiced for a long time, possibly since when the sighted first attempted to bring the world closer to the blind. In the twentieth century it was promoted in the USA. It has been known and used for several decades in Western Europe as well. In Poland, the first major attempts at audio description were made in 2006 (Bolińska 2014).

5. Audio description standards

The professional approach is to create standard-based verbal description. In Poland, such standards were developed by the pioneers of audio description: the Audio Description Foundation, established in 2008 by two blind Białystok citizens, Barbara Szymańska and Tomasz Strzymiński. The main goal of this organization is to introduce the audio description technique to many cultural institutions in the country. The Foundation, as the first non-governmental organization in Poland, embarked on activities aimed at making culture and visual arts accessible to the blind and visually impaired by means of audio description. In September 2010, the Polish Standards for the Production of Audio Description for Audiovisual Production were developed by the Audio Description Foundation (Szymańska and Strzymiński 2010: 4-40). Foundation members have created guidelines that help to unify the rules and regulations regarding the creation of audio description. The code and standards have been developed based on the experience of the founders of the Foundation, as well as recommendations from other countries, such as Great Britain, Spain and Canada. Opinions and comments were

also shared by the blind and the visually impaired as well as those active in the dissemination of audio description in Poland (see also ADI 2002).

The standards are a set of systematized rules and regulations as well as professional guidelines for audio describers creating descriptions for audiovisual productions. They continue to be supplemented with new regulations, necessitated by ongoing practice.

6. Creating audio description

The development of audio description is a long-term process. It requires cooperation of a team, including in particular an audio describer, a describer and a reader. Two to three people are needed to prepare the audio description script. In the group creating the script at least one blind person is needed. The audio describer is the person who writes and edits the content of the script and reads it, adjusting the tone and tempo of the voice to the needs of a particular audiovisual production. A describer is the person who writes and edits the content of the script. The reader/“voice-over” is the person who reads the script, adjusting the tone and tempo of the voice for audiovisual production. The script is understood as a text containing a description of the visual layer of the work. The script includes annotations and hints that allow for synchronizing of the image with the description (Orero 2008).

Cinematographic and TV works are considered as audiovisual productions when they take the form of a continuous sequence of images and sounds. In general, audio description of audiovisual production consists of describing key visual content, such as the course of action, scenery, costumes, body language and facial expressions. In audio description, emphasis is placed on three basic principles:

- describe what you see;
- do not interpret;
- do not speak during dialogues (you must not obscure them).

The only exception may be very important events taking place against the background of the characters’ utterances.

The description method differs slightly depending on whether it is a movie, a dynamic sports match or a museum picture (Jerzakowska 2016, 2018).

In audiovisual productions, i.e. in films and television programs, audio description takes the form of an additional soundtrack interspersed with dialogues. However, it does not fill every available gap. The basis for the description of the verbal visual layer is identification of the stages in the presented image, the shar-

ing of knowledge about individual sequences, and the presentation of subsequent scenes and characters. When selecting the material for audio description, the genre of the audiovisual work is of utmost significance.

Script preparation consists of the description of sequences, events and characters between the dialogues: at this point it is the most important to fill extra-sound spaces⁷. Next, there should be editing and checking whether the description does not interfere with dialogues and important sounds. Next, the reader must be given instructions on the technique or tempo of reading, so as to distinguish the text of the audio description from the dialogues (e.g. a separate color, varied text format). Finally, a recording is made (a good reader with a voice corresponding to the climate of the film is needed) and edited (publication of the AD version).

In art galleries and museums, audio description is used in the form of sound files attached to audio guides (Jerzakowska 2016). In this way, blind people can enjoy various exhibitions, paintings and photographic works, buildings, as well as sculptures and art installations. The narrative is structured from the general to the particular, given in a linear, consistent manner, which facilitates the blind person's blending of the elements of the image.

Audio description in the theater usually takes the form of live reading. Whatever happens between the actors' dialogues needs to be explained. Thus, described are visual elements such as the set design, costumes, staging, acting, colors and shades, light, and staging. In addition, modifications to scenography, costumes, acting interpretation or the cast; recording improvisations and ensuing mistakes; actions taken in the event of some mishap or unexpected situations; and failure to comply with other sounds require further consideration. The description cannot, however, fill every available gap or characterize common sounds. Members of the audience who are blind or visually impaired should be able to hear the emotions in the characters' voices, listen to the acoustic effects, to the melodic line and the music (Orero 2005; Orero and Matamala 2007).

The description of a sports event is also live. Through the headset, blind fans can listen to a description of what is happening at the stadium, on the pitch or in the sports hall (Szarkowska and Jankowska 2016). The radio coverage differs from audio description in its attention to detail, for example the placement of players, their appearance, behavior, location of the action, information on what

⁷ The equipment of an audio-desk station usually consists of a computer, a monitor, speakers, a DVD player, a text editor and software enabling the playback and editing of video files.

is happening in the stands, the results and timing of the match or competition (whether volleyball, basketball, handball, football, athletics, ski jumping, figure skating, swimming, etc.).

7. Conclusions

Audio description refers to the conversion of theatrical, film, television, painting, dance and other forms of art, in which one of the basic materials is the image, into another code, i.e. the word (intersemiotic translation). As verbal description, it includes the lapse between words. It needs to keep up with the action (live report), implement brevity (adjust the description to the sound track), without interrupting dialogues and muffling the music (sound) track. As an adaptive technique, it allows viewers with sight dysfunctions (e.g. the blind or the visually impaired) to receive visual content (APA 2019).

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