HOW CAN IMAGES BE TRANSLATED? AUDIO DESCRIPTION, A CHALLENGING AUDIOVISUAL AND SOCIAL GAP-FILLER

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1.- AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION AND THE DISABLED COMMUNITY

Audiovisual Translation (AVT) Studies have been enjoying a flourishing period since the mid-1990s. As a result of this effervescence, research has shown a spectacular increase in this field, as is evident in the increasing quantity and quality of specialised articles, monographs, PhD theses, and conferences with their corresponding proceedings. Just to mention some references, Bravo (2005:124-125), Chaume (2004:40-52) and Díaz Cintas (2003:296-305) offer a comprehensible review of the history of AVT literature and academic meetings.

Notwithstanding this great expansion, AVT is still at an early stage. That is why there is a number of emerging or developing research lines which have relatively recently begun to be explored. Some of those lines are directly linked to the idea of translation for specific purposes or for groups with special needs. Such is the case, for instance, of audio description (AD) and subtitling for the deaf and hard-of-hearing (SDH). Either case can only be properly understood taking into account the paramount importance of the concept of 'audience design'. Remarkably, Gambier's coinage of 'narrowcasting' perfectly reflects this evolution in AVT from a "*diffusion universelle ou broadcasting*" towards a "*diffusion locale ou narrowcasting*" (2004:7). However, that special diversification is not guided by geographical criteria, but it is rather purpose-oriented or audience-oriented. To put it in Gambier's words (2004:7):

> [...] cette localisation ne se comprenant pas seulement au plan géographique, mais aussi en fonction des groupes avec des besoins et des intérêts communs... quelle que soit alors la distance entre leurs membres.

Gambier's standpoint is not an exception. In fact, there seems to be a consensus amongst the academic community in this respect, since many other scholars share this approach. For instance, Neves (in press) has recently referred to this type of AVT's itemization: "audiovisual translation now finds itself focusing on the needs of smaller distinct audiences in order to respond to them in a more adequate manner." Thus, the audience appears to be no longer considered as a whole, but it is now regarded as differentiated parts. Such an approach is responsible for the suggested term 'transadaptation' (Gambier 2003:178), which has evinced the extreme importance of audience design studies, especially in matters concerning audiovisual accessibility. As a matter of fact, this particular interest dates back at least to 1998, when Chas Donaldson publicly drew attention to SDH, as Orero claims (2005:183).

However, today's state of the art is far from 1998's. Indeed, Orero herself concludes that media accessibility is currently present both at research and at teaching level (2005:183). Admittedly, the commencement of the 21st century may have attracted greater attention from politicians, lawmakers and the academia. As a result, many important international related events have taken place in recent years. At a European level, the EU declared 2003 'European Year of People with Disabilities', and multiple activities were scheduled throughout the year while major legal decisions were taken. In 2004, various conferences held in England (London) and Spain (Vitoria, Granada, Madrid, Deusto) provided the opportunity to discuss at length audiovisual translation modes for the disabled community. Another milestone took place in 2005, when the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) celebrated the tenth anniversary of its home video service. Amongst the attendants to the event were representatives of the film, DVD, video and broadcasting industry, as well as regulators, producers and users of audio description (RNIB 2005a). In other countries, like Spain, for instance, many universities have research groups devoted to investigating different issues related to media accessibility (Orero 2005:182). Further, in October 2005 a new master's degree in subtitling and audio description started at the University of Las Palmas, a university specialist course at the University of Granada, or in 2006 a specialised conference in Soria (University of Valladolid), just to highlight some examples.

Up to now, the question of media accessibility has typically been related to either AD or SDH. Incidentally, there seems to be more literature on SDH than on AD, and since De Linde and Kay (1999), many works have been published (Neves 2005, Robson 2004). In contrast, up to 2004 the only academic references to AD were limited to a few paragraphs outlining this promising new research line within AVT (Bravo 2005:139-140, Chaume 2004:149, Gambier 2003:176-7). In order to continue trying to bridge the research gap (Hernández and Mendiluce 2004), we will proceed to present an overview of the concept, the purposes, the history, and the technical process of AD, focussing particularly on its linguistic process and its language.

2.- THE CONCEPT OF AUDIO DESCRIPTION: DEFINITION, USERS AND PURPOSES

AD has received a variety of denominations, such as 'video description', 'descriptive video service' (DVS), 'audio captioning', 'descriptive narration' and 'audio vision' (Navarrete 2003, Clark 2001). We will use 'audio description', since it seems to be the most widely spread term and some of the other denominations have been qualified as misnomers (Clark 2001).

There are many definitions of AD from different points of view. However, as an introduction, AD may be briefly presented as a narration that provides a verbal description of the visual content in audiovisual works. In short, AD verbalises images. Obviously, such a simple definition sums up the concept, but raises a number of important issues: What is the purpose of AD? Whom is it addressed to? Can it be applied to any audiovisual work? How can images be turned into words? Throughout this paper we will attempt to answer those questions by developing the notion of AD and explaining some of its linguistic and technical aspects.

When we think of AD, we typically identify its target audience with blind people. However correct, this idea is not accurate because it is incomplete. In fact, the variety of prospective addressees of AD is far larger, as we will immediately see.

'The blind' is an abused terminological label under which a complex conceptual reality resides. To begin with, a distinction should be made between individuals suffering from total blindness and partially sighted individuals, also known as visually impaired people. Obviously, the needs of these two groups are not exactly the same, as their percentage of sight varies. But there are even more distinctions to be made: visual problems may be congenital (that is, since birth) or they may be acquired, which would imply people who were once sighted. Therefore, some people are likely to rely heavily on AD, whereas others only use it as a guide.

The so-called 'blind people' may be composed of such a complex and diverse community as people with hearing problems. Thus, it is neither accurate nor functional to think of 'the average blind person'; we should rather think of all the possible variables, since their needs greatly differ. Now, the question is: how can AD fulfil these various necessities? Audio describers attempt to accomplish this goal by taking totally blind people's needs as the standard, so the rest of visually impaired people are favoured (UNE 2005). In any case, two main advantages of AD for partially-sighted people are to be remarked: 1) it allows 'viewers' to feel independent, as visually impaired people do not need to rely on others to accompany them, and so they do not feel a burden to other viewers; and consequently, they feel that they are socially connected to the general audience (Packer 1996); and 2) 'viewers' enjoy the programme in depth, because they receive the information on the spot and not after having been enjoyed by the sighted people (Navarrete 2003).

However, there are more social sectors which may benefit from AD. People with perception or cognition problems can also take advantage of audio described material in order to better understand the information they receive. The same can be true of children or elderly people, who may find some of those audiovisual comments useful for drawing their attention to meaningful facts about the film which otherwise might have gone unnoticed, or for teaching or reminding them relevant aspects about culture, art, literature or society.

But most interestingly, the potential target audience of AD is not limited to those minority groups –however big they are–. Surprisingly as it may be, AD is believed to be enjoyed by the whole society in the near future. Ideally, AD will allow all of us to 'follow' films while we are behind the wheel or doing the ironing, for example (RNIB 2002).

Hence, two purposes different in nature can be distinguished in AD: social and cognitive. On the one hand, AD aims at social integration, particularly of visually impaired people, but also of other social groups; on the other hand, audio described material may help people broaden their minds, as describers apprise viewers or listeners of some cultural references certain programmes sometimes contain. In any case, the enjoyable element is crucial.

Due to today's increasing importance of mass media and globalisation, it is necessary for the average citizen to keep up with the news. And considering how rapidly our world is changing, audio described programmes may be a very helpful tool in order to become knowledgeable about specific aspects of our own reality, even if the listener is performing other tasks simultaneously. As a matter of fact, there is already some evidence of this. For example, as early as 1995, the BBC conducted some research on the benefits of AD in general population. The results indicated that 40% of general population consider AD useful, this percentage increasing to 58% after enjoying some AD excerpts. The reasons argued were as follows (RNIB 2005b:9):

The respondents felt that described programmes would allow them to follow a programme whilst they were doing something else. They also felt that audio description would provide more information about what was happening on the screen, so making material easier to follow. Finally, they stated that audio description would enable the recording of a described programme for use when there was no access to a television —for playback in a car, for instance.

However, we consider social integration the major objective of AD, at least for the time being. Several surveys and trials —carried out by several television channels, projects and organisations, such as the BBC, Audetel and RNIB— clearly show the great benefit that blind and partially sighted people obtain from AD (Pettitt, Katherine and Cooper 1995, Taylor Nelson Sofres 2003, Slater 2003, as cited in RNIB 2005b). But to better understand the impact of AD on this community, we had better first state their attitudes towards television. According to a survey undertaken by the RNIB (1991), as much as 94% of English blind and partially sighted people "watch" television. In Germany, the percentage is estimated to be about 80%, which is still statistically significant (Hernández and Montes 2002:24). Albeit surprising, this means that audiovisual products are extremely important for the visually impaired. They are aware that we are all living in an audiovisual society, so they do their utmost to get adapted, but AD plays a crucial role in that integrating process.

Let us imagine what it is like for blind people to enjoy a non-audio described film or television show. Even though the film were commented 'on the spot' by their family, there are so many things that would go unnoticed that it is certainly very difficult for them to follow the broadcasting. Figures may be even more revealing: whereas 96% of people with sight problems are reckoned to watch television, 70% of them admit having difficulties in following the programmes (Hadi 2005). With this data in mind, it is easy to understand why AD completely changes the watching experience. This has been reported by numerous disabled viewers when they were asked for feedback on AD on television, video, DVD and cinema. With respect to the latter, we find Tim Gebbel's words (2005) are particularly enlightening:

> I can go and see 'Troy' with my partner and a friend and on leaving the cinema, I can talk with them as animatedly and as enthusiastically or as critically as them about the movie. What AD and the availability of AD means now is that people like me can sit down to watch a movie and know that by the end of it we will have been given the experience —we will have got it. Of course it's been a different experience for me. It hasn't been the same experience but it has been an equal experience.

3.- THE LINGUISTIC PROCESS: TYPES OF TRANSLATION IN AUDIO DESCRIPTION

The audio describer's work could seem but a drop in the ocean when compared to the complete technical process; on the contrary, the linguistic step is the cornerstone of the entire process. And it is the describer who is responsible for the linguistic process, particularly the intersemiotic transfer. But let us get back to the introduction of this paper, when we labelled AD as a AVT mode.

Included within AVT Studies, AD deals with audiovisual texts, which are complex semiotic entities. In audiovisual texts various components combine to generate one single meaning. These components are, on the one hand, the channels through which the information is conveyed; and on

the other hand, the codes in which that information is presented. Such semiotic complexity has led scholars to consider audiovisual products, like films or even plays, 'macro-signs' (Delabastita 1989:197).

As the adjective itself indicates, in audio-visual texts there are two different channels: the acoustic and the visual channels. Each one transmits different bits of information, but both must be perfectly synchronised so that the heterogeneous components make up a meaningful homogeneous whole. The same is true of the codes. Actually, the channels are the codes' vehicle. According to Delabastita (1989:196-7), in the average film there is a multitude of sign systems, among which some of the major ones are the following: the verbal code, i.e. the language used and its associated stylistic, diatopic, diastratic, and diaphasic variations; the literary and theatrical codes, i.e. the plot, the dialogues, narrative techniques...; the non-verbal code, i.e. costume and make-up, moral attitudes, politeness, proxemic and kinesic elements...; and the cinematic code, i.e. cinematographic conventions and techniques.

All this means that the understanding of an audiovisual product depends on a huge number of components, all of which are received through sight and hearing. Therefore, two conclusions can be reached:

   a) When the sight is partially or totally eliminated, a substantial part of the information in the work – and hence, of its meaning– is also suppressed. This is what makes a film difficult to understand for a person with sight problems.

   b) However, there is another available channel through which the missing information can be conveyed. And this is what makes AD possible: its exclusive use of the acoustic channel to make up for the visual channel.

Therefore, AD implies a semiotic rendering of images into words. But AD is far more complex than that, as it implies further renderings (Hernández and Mendiluce 2005). More specifically, there may be three different types of translation involved in audio described works: interlinguistic, intersemiotic and intralinguistic, drawing on Jakobson's terminology (1971:261).

   1) Firstly, in dubbing and subtitling countries there is usually an interlinguistic translation prior to AD itself. Especially in the case of films, the original product is mostly in English. In Spain, for instance, over 70% of the exhibited films come from Hollywood, so they need to be translated and dubbed in Spanish before being exhibited in movie theatres.

   2) After translating from one language into another –in case it is necessary–, the next step is making the visual verbal, that is to say, an intersemiotic translation. This involves any kind of non-verbal information related to any of the aforementioned codes, such as the costume, the gestures, the colours, the body language, etc. In other words, any piece of information that is not transmitted by means of words, music or other sounds should be taken into consideration. The great importance of this issue was evinced by a survey according to which American visually disabled people watching a film are mostly interested in the costume (Navarrete 2003). Obviously, it is not possible to communicate every single visual aspect, so only relevant visual information is narrated. Importantly, this task must be fulfilled so that dialogues and AD comments may not overlap and flow cohesively. We have stated so far that AD implies two transfers: a) from one language into another, and b) from one sign system into another. That is why AD has been described as "a kind of double dubbing" (Gambier 2003:176).

3) A further stage may be present before the user can enjoy an audio described product. Sometimes it is necessary to include some additional comments or explanations to make verbally explicit certain implicit visual information. For instance, if in a film a picture of a relatively well-known person is shown, it might be important to inform the listener about that detail which may otherwise go unnoticed. In these cases an intralinguistic translation may take place.

It might be tempting to consider AD a kind of description for specific purposes rather than a type of translation. In fact, its name itself evinces such a descriptive nature. What makes AD different from a mere description then? Further, what makes AD a type of translation? Actually, AD can be presented from various approaches, as Bourne and Jiménez Hurtado claim (2007:175-176). From a semiotic viewpoint, AD is a type of intersemiotic translation, as it always implies the transfer of images into words. In turn, this intersemiotic translation may subsume two subordinate modalities: intralinguistic and interlinguistic. In the first case, these images are turned into an AD written script, and then, to its corresponding spoken rendition. In the latter, the images are worded in one language and then, transferred into another.

Moreover, and as a consequence of that multisemiotic transfer, AD falls into the category of AV translation, understood as "all translations –or multisemiotic transfer– for production or postproduction in any media or format, and also the new areas of media accessibility" (Orero 2004:viii). More particularly, AD –insofar as it is a substitute for the iconic information– must attempt not only to interact properly with dialogue and sound, but also to fit the audio described text into the predetermined time/space pauses. Space, time and images are then typically AVT constraints AD must deal with.

Thus, AD is an extremely complex phenomenon from the translation point of view: it may only resort to intersemiotic transfers, but it could be so complex so as to involve the three types of translation. The interlinguistic render will make the product available for those filmgoers who cannot understand the original language; the intersemiotic one will satisfy the demand of the visually impaired audience; and the intralinguistic one will explain particular details to this target audience.

4.- THE LANGUAGE OF AUDIO DESCRIPTION

Though it may seem obvious, AD resorts to the language we use everyday, and so, it does not differ from the general one, contrary to sign language. This language design may be due to the varied audience we have drawn before, which partially explains this situation: blind and visually impaired people are not the only addressees of AD, and consequently, it cannot comprise a type of language per se. With this in mind, we will not commit the following expectation error: sign language is addressed to a determined group, the deaf and hard of hearing people; thus, blind and visually impaired groups might be expected to communicate in their own language, and this might be reflected on AD. However, this deduction is not true: partially sighted people do not need a special language. In fact, the situation is quite different: it is the general language which resorts to its versatility and variability in range to allow the communication of the entire speaking community. In the case of AD, the language used highlights its descriptive charge; that is to say, language deepens in objects, colours, shapes, gestures... because it is the iconic information which needs to be conveyed into words to allow the understanding of the audiovisual work. We cannot say it is a

'special use' of the general language, nor even a 'special function', but a particular 'activation' of some intrinsic characteristics of general language. Thus, the main objective of AD is to make integration easier for a social group and permeate into other cultures and traditions.

In order to achieve this permeability, the language used in AD must be meticulously revised. The educative aim which underlies AD limits certain linguistic features. The different visual nature of the audience pushes AD to a certain degree of 'teaching resource'. That is the reason why vocabulary and grammar should not be carelessly revised: syntax should be grammatical; vocabulary, rich and precise; and descriptions, next to literary excellence. But do not let these features mislead us: AD should not be poetic or lyrical, but realistic and objective, and as such, personal values and interpretations are to be avoided.

Linguistic features in AD may be divided into two different stages –the written and the oral one– which are performed by different professionals.

1) At the first stage the language involved is written, as it deals with script transferences. Depending on the nature of the product, this written stage may be subdivided into two different substages:

a) In cases of foreign language products, the job of the audiovisual translator is required. This professional will be in charge of the interlinguistic transfer. When the product is to be translated, the language should also be thoroughly revised in order to present a neutral and standard dialect. More particularly, attention should be paid to avoid non-desirable linguistic interferences, such as syntactic calques or barbarisms (usually Anglicisms). This means that translators do not provide the audio described script, and it is the audio describer who usually works after the audiovisual translators' task.

b) The second written step is common to any audio described product. The person responsible for the intersemiotic –and potentially intralinguistic– transfer is known as audio describer, describer or scriptwriter (UNE 2005). Audio describers are likely to be creative and accurate in the vocabulary choice, and quick when describing images. They should also be able to conduct a proper research on whatever the topic (Navarrete 1997b:72). As regards the language in the intersemiotic and intralinguistic phases, terms are selected in order to show a wide and varied standard vocabulary, with no presence of regionalisms, localisms or idiolectal features. This may be one of the most important tasks in AD, because the understanding of the product is of much influence in the failure or success of the audio described work.

2) The second linguistic stage corresponds to the oral speech. This oral part is not performed by an audio describer, but by a narrator. This job is usually conveyed by professional dubbing actors and actresses. Male and female voices are equally suitable, and they are selected depending on the tone of the product. With respect to their selection, it greatly depends on the actors and the type of product. A couple of regularities can be pointed out, though: a) children-oriented products are usually narrated by children, and b) to avoid confusion, a female voice is preferred to narrate films with a majority of male characters and vice versa. As regards the oral language, the main targets are neutral style and correct diction, so that any speaker of the selected language can follow the film. Likewise, emotional intonation is usually avoided because AD should not provide other connotations different from those in the original work. The ideal situation is achieved when the narrator's voice becomes part of the film, both in tone and mood.

One of the most difficult tasks AD needs to accomplish is to be as alike as possible to the filmic narration in tone, time, style, etc. Therefore, it should not release information prior to the iconic image, nor sum up or provide further details than those shown on screen or on stage. Nevertheless, an exception is to be made: when the data provided in the product is rather inaccessible to the blind audience, details should be explained. In these cases, a brief explanation is provided prior to the show; this way, the audience may easily grasp the details of the work, as well as the work is not overloaded with information. To take a case in point, in *Jurassic Park* dinosaurs are described paying particular attention to their physical appearance, height and weight, because these details are crucial for the understanding of the film (Navarrete 1997b:73).

The audio descriptive language may be roughly characterised as follows (Navarrete 1997b:72-74, ITC 2000:11-22):

— If the sound gap in which the AD is to be inserted is too short, the story line of the dramatic plot will be favoured, so background sounds and iconic references will become secondary; this is because the general understanding of the film prevails over the details. Furthermore, pronouns and articles may be even dropped for the sake of brevity.

— The style of the audio described script should be simple and fluid. Active sentences and grammatical and complete utterances should prevail in the text, as well as accurate and correct terminology; moreover, it should avoid cacophonies and lack of basic idiomatic resources, so as to comprise a correct speech. Traditional AVT enjoys more freedom than this particular mode; however, we should bear in mind that its writing is not as free as it may seem, and it is consequently called "prefabricated orality" (Chaume 2004:168-170). Clarity is the main goal and, consequently, AD weeds out unessential information. This is also due to the fact that AD can be exhausting and even irritating when too abundant, to the extent that it can even dilute the mood of a scene.

— Adjectivation should be as abundant as needed in order to convey the film tone. This does not mean that the audio describer can invent, but that adjectivation should emerge from the image to communicate as much data as possible. Nevertheless, adjectives are recommended to be concrete to prevent indefinite interpretations. Furthermore, audio descriptive language should be varied in range, and avoid repetitive words that may distract the audience. This rich vocabulary, though, should not prevent AD from being accessible and coherent.

— As opposed to this need to describe images, AD does not verbalise facts that may be inferred from the film itself, and as such, it tends to get away from repetitions and obvious details —a trend also present in other AVT modes, such as subtitling—. However, proper names are usually repeated to avoid ambiguous situations and clarify who is speaking.

— The action narrated in AD is present, and it is also reflected in the verbal tense.

— Due to copyright duties, titles, credits and AD technical information are recorded.

To sum up, AD is transmitted via the general language, where certain patterns –particularly, the descriptive ones– are more prominent than others. As a matter of fact, the language present in AD is meticulously revised, so it finally lacks non-standard patterns or low- register vocabulary.

5.- THE TECHNICAL PROCESS

As can be guessed, audio described products undergo several complex stages before broadcasting or being sold through the different media. In fact, completing the entire AD process

for the average film in terms of length and difficulty is estimated to take about 60 hours, that is, a working week and a half (ITC 2000:11). Generally speaking, the steps involved in the technical process of a film are the following: work analysis, script writing, script revision, narration, editing, and final revision. Drawing on Navarrete (1997b:72-3) and ITC (2000:7-11), we will briefly comment on each of them.

5.1.- CHOOSING SUITABLE WORKS

Strange though it may be, not any audiovisual work is appropriate to be audio described: image and/or sound quality may make some products ineligible. Virtually every film nowadays is suitable for AD, and the criterion for selection is both audience preferences and cultural interests. However, the beginnings of AD were limited by technical disadvantages. For example, sound constraints were present in *The Wizard of Oz* or *Star Wars*, whereas visual constraints –due to a dark image– were present in *Cyrano de Bergerac* or *Dangerous Liaisons*. Fortunately, these drawbacks were solved by digitally remastering the sound and image quality.

Yet, for an audiovisual work to be audio describable, it must contain enough 'sound gaps' so that: a) the dialogues and the inserted comments may not overlap, and b) the listener may not be overwhelmed by too many (long) inserted comments. Therefore, the describer must first watch the audiovisual product to determine whether it meets the aforementioned criteria.

5.2.- PREPARING A DRAFT SCRIPT

The script purports to clearly state what, who, when, where and how for any audio described situation. Thus, the script must inform the recipient only about relevant facts, so subjective information and redundancy should be avoided. This informative task is accomplished by inserting comments in the sound gaps of the audio described track. Importantly, the describer must write those comments very carefully, always keeping in mind the audience's needs and expectations. Audiovisual genres also play a key role in this respect. Let us think, for instance, about the huge descriptive differences between a cartoon and a wildlife documentary.

5.3.- SCRIPT REVISION

Once the script is finished, it must subsequently be revised. In order to guarantee the maximum objectivity, a person other than the describer reads the script to detect any possible mistakes and improve the text. Also at this stage, synchronisation must be perfect between the sound gaps and the AD inserts. However, this is hardly ever achieved, so for practical purposes AD is usually displayed two seconds ahead of the image, like in voice-over.

5.4.- NARRATION

Again, this step in AD may be likened to the process of voice-over in documentaries, so narrators must not only vocalise clearly, but they must also avoid any kind of affected intonation, since they are not supposed to be performing but informing.

5.5.- EDITING

This is the most technical part of the process. It is now when the AD track and the original dialogue track (or the dubbed one) are adjusted or synchronised. Therefore, sound levels — including incidental music, for instance— are also equalised and levelled at this stage. The average film typically contains 400-500 takes, which usually makes a 4-5 hour AD recording time.

5.6.- FINAL REVISION

Finally, the product is checked to make sure it meets all the quality standards. Therefore, any possible mistake or omission must be corrected to achieve a high-quality product which accounts for every intersemiotic nuance and respects the aesthetic value of the original audiovisual work.

5.7.- DISTRIBUTION

Institutions such as the RNIB in the UK, ONCE in Spain or DVS in the US make audio described films available for their members. Thanks to home video services, visually impaired people can borrow different videotapes and DVDs to enjoy them at home. There is a rich variety of audiovisual material embracing any style, genre, theme and time (Hernández and Mendiluce 2004:269). Presently, the British RNIB offers more than 225 films, while its Spanish counterpart offers over 320, and the American DVS over 200.

Of course, all the former seven steps needn't be present in every audio described product. Moreover, when AD is live, like in plays, the process is shorter, since the digital editing does not take place, and distribution is replaced by live performance. Thus, in those cases, AD is accomplished in a similar way to live interpreting, as we have previously mentioned.

The technical process is not carried out by one professional, but many are involved. Since we are mostly interested in linguistic matters, the audio describer is only concerned with writing a draft script, and another describer will be in charge of the script revision. The other steps will be in the hands of other non-linguistic professionals, as it occurs in other AVT modes, such as dubbing.

6.- BRIEF HISTORY AND CURRENT APPLICATIONS

Despite its advantages, AD is one of the latest AVT modes to be developed. Its essence, though, is as old as sighted people telling visually impaired ones what can be seen on stage or on screen. Thus, the purpose is old, but the techniques are new. As a result, the degree of development varies from country to country, the US and the UK being the most outstanding centres.

AD is believed to have first appeared in 1981, when the Pfanstiehl family developed a system at the Arena Stage in Washington DC applied to Shaw's *Major Barbara*. This date was the point of departure of the AD Service, which had already promoted AD in over 50 theatres by the end of the 1980s (ITC 2000:3). From theatre houses and cinema theatres, AD widened its media to home development with videotapes in the 1990s, and later to television broadcast.

Europe had to wait a few years longer than the US, and it was in the mid-1980s when the first audio described performances appeared. Theatres were the first to be equipped, too: the Robin Hood Theatre (Averham, UK) is considered to be the starting point, which quickly spread to the Theatre Royal in Windsor. As well as in the US, the cinema was the following medium, particularly the British Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff with live script readers and the portable service of the French Association Valentin Haüy (ITC 2000:3). Finally, it also reached television and cultural spaces. Legislation on audio described television has been of great help to promote its development, which is now regulated by the Communications Act (NRIB 2005b:2).

Europe's most productive era started in the 1990s, when three main AD projects took place: Audetel in the UK, *Audiovision* in France, and *Audesc* in Spain (Navarrete 1997b:70). More projects and national legislations have been created since that moment, and this has led to the present prominent situation of AD. Just to mention the Spanish situation, legislation on AD programmes took place in 2005, around fifteen years after its implementation in Spain.

AD has greatly developed from the early 1980s. Nowadays, the degree of development not only differs from country to country, but also from application to application. Despite AD being first applied to theatrical and cinematographic products, it has now spread to videotapes, DVDs, television programmes, museums, technological exhibitions, etc. with slight differences regarding the technology adopted, as we are going to see.

6.1.- THEATRES

As we have already mentioned, AD in the theatre has been the forerunner of the other media, and as such, it is nowadays the oldest running service. AD in the theatre is determined by the live nature of performances (though rehearsed), and the linguistic dependency of plays (as backgrounds are not as changeable as in movies) (Navarrete 1997a:27). Consequently, theatres require less information than movies, due to their linguistic nature, but gaps will not be so exactly spotted.As regards technology, theatre services are quite alike live interpreting. Audio describers work in a soundproof box, where they perform the script live. However, it has been previously prepared taking an updated video or a booklet as a point of departure to spot out the silent periods. The AD is transmitted to a single headphone, so recipients can listen to the original performance with one ear,

the other one being kept open for the narration. Fortunately, the service is being installed on a regular basis in the most important theatres of every country, due to the fact that blind organisations have signed agreements with cultural organisations. For instance, in 2001 ONCE (the Spanish Organisation for the Blind) and INAEM (the Spanish Institute for the Stage Arts and Music) agreed to equip three important theatres in Madrid (Teatro de la Comedia, María Guerrero, and La Zarzuela) (INAEM 2001).

6.2.- CINEMAS

As to cinematographic grounds, AD is applied to much of the work done but on a "postproduction" basis, that is to say, AD is attached to the film when merchandised as videotapes or, nowadays, DVDs. Lately, AD is being widespread and is becoming common in blockbuster films, such as *Harry Potter's* and *The Lord of the Rings'* sagas. However, AD has been present in film festivals since the year 2000, such as the Cannes Film Festival in France and the Valladolid International Film Festival in Spain.

The transmission of AD in the cinema is quite similar to that of the theatre because it also involves the use of single headphones and wireless equipment. Nevertheless, the production system is different. The informative sequences are recorded and synchronised, but not inserted in the film. Instead, they remain as parallel soundtracks. Two trademarks, Dolby and DTS, have established their standards and provide regular services via Dolby Screen Talk, and DTS-CSS and DTS-10, respectively (Barrado 2004:71).

6.3.- DVDs AND VIDEOTAPES

As regards DVDs and videotapes, home video services were pioneered by the American DVS in 1990. In Europe, they were launched about four or five years later. For example, the English RNIB service and the Spanish Audesc service first started in 1994. At the beginning AD was only available via VHS, but the tendency has clearly changed to DVD formats.

Videotapes had a manifest disadvantage when compared to DVDs: the AD track was already attached to the film and could not be separated. DVDs have overcome this drawback; however, there is still a claim to be fully achieved in this field: audio describers and disabled groups are still fighting for audio described or talking menus, because their absence clearly limits the partially sighted group.

The process followed is quite alike the one in cinemas, except for the display of the AD: home viewers do not need headphones and AD can be displayed or elided whenever desired.

6.4.- TELEVISION

AD started in a trial version at the beginning of the 1990s with the Audetel project, but the service has really become available over the last decade. In the UK, for example, all public service networks have been broadcasting description on terrestrial television since December 2003. However, digital cable television has not provided this service yet. This situation is likely to change, as the 1996 Broadcasting Act covered only digital terrestrial television, but the 2003 Communication Act widened the field to cover all platforms. As a result, several prime broadcasters — such as BBC, ITV or Channel 4 in the UK— are now offering audio described services for 4% of their programmes, and the legislation foresees to increase this percentage to 10% by 2013 (Benecke 2003:2).

In the case of television programmes, AD is usually displayed through the systems developed by Dolby or DTS, as in cinemas. The way AD is received in the television set has also been modernised. In the US an additional audio channel on cable television —known as the Secondary Audio Programme— allows open broadcasting, that is, AD is heard by all viewers. In Europe, though, the closed method has been chosen —either via an external device or the dual channel— because it allows more flexibility to the users interacting with other sighted viewers, as the latter are not forced to listen to it.

The new legislation on AD seems to widen the programme array, both in number and genres. Since this situation was not so favourable in the early 1990s, several surveys were carried out in order to determine the audience expectations and needs. The results evinced that movies and drama —including soap operas and comedies— were the genres to benefit the most from AD, followed by wildlife programmes and documentaries. This may be due to the fact that this type of programmes offers longer and potentially richer description gaps than others. On the other hand, news, game shows and chat shows had sufficient spoken content to be easily followed by the audience. Finally, we find particularly interesting the case of sport commentaries: according to the surveys, they seem to be unhelpful to blind people because they are intended to complement the visual action. That is why this audience prefers the radio to get the sports information (ITC 2000:5).

6.5.- CULTURAL SPACES

These settings were involved in AD later than other media. Generally speaking, they are constituted by museums, technological exhibitions, natural parks, etc. They meet the blind needs by providing them with audio guides. These guides consist of a hand-free digital player device, adapted with Braille or reading instructions. Consequently, the visually impaired can follow the instructions or read the touchpad and touch the cultural items at the same time. Natural parks, as well as theme parks and museums, are usually equipped with 'Visitor's Centres' where items can be touched. Where audiovisual material is available, AD is more suitable than audio guides, and so is applied. However, new lines are being sought in this respect. For instance, the I-Map online or the guidePORT by Sennheiser make use of sensors to automatically display the information with no need for the users to interact with the keypad (Barrado 2004:73-74). On the other hand, completely live AD is being used in some situations, such as the US presidential inaugurations (WGBH 2005).

6.6.- E-RESOURCES

This is the latest media to be covered by AD. In fact, the world first ever e-premiere available with AD and subtitles took place in 2003. The film *This is not a Love Song* was available on the web —either for streaming or downloading— while simultaneously projected in UK cinemas (PR Newswire 2003). Audio described e-resources are a very recent phenomenon on filmic grounds, but the possibilities the Internet may offer for disabled people have been studied over the last decade. Web media environments and CD-Rom software are being developed with different approaches depending on the media player selected (Real, QuickTime, Windows Media Player). Currently, the most adequate approach seems to be the separate selection for AD on the web site, though research and surveys are yet at an early stage (WGBH 2005).

7.- FINAL REMARKS

As a new AVT mode, the audio descriptive work needs to be developed by at least two types of professionals: audio describers and narrators. In the same way that the narrator's task is carried out by dubbing professionals, the audio describer's task could be performed by trained audiovisual translators, and thus, one possible performer —the audio describer— will be elided. Obviously, dubbing actors and audiovisual translators must adapt their abilities to AD particular requirements. For instance, the former should tone down voice inflections and adopt a neutral and objective tone; as for the latter, they should acquire describing skills. The advantage is clear in both cases: audiovisual translators and dubbers are already used to the audiovisual medium and the skills they need to develop are connected to those they already have.

As for integration, it is important that companies, public institutions, foundations and any related organisation are aware of the need of AD in our present-day society and, consequently, they should make it available. Economic problems do not seem to be an outstanding drawback in this particular case: for instance, the production of an audio described programme is estimated to cost around €1,000-1,500, that is less than the 2% of the cost of a soap opera (RNIB 2002). In addition, adapting a movie theatre for AD would imply approximately €6,000, money which would be recovered after 40 exhibitions (Villaécija 2002). Such a low cost and a high benefit are likely to boost the expansion of AD, as the advantages seem to surpass the obstacles. In this respect, it is important to highlight that the emerging legal framework favours major advances, as it has been evident in the UK with the Broadcasting and Communications Act, and it is likely to happen in Spain with Spanish Standards (UNE 153020:2005).

Yet, AD is still undergoing a nascent period, so the need for surveys and research is overriding. As we have said, some of them have already been successfully conducted. However, there is a clear gap to be filled. We could only achieve a top quality AD if, and only if, we focus on its users. No important detail should be taken for granted: whereas sighted people may think that the plot is the most important issue to be audio described, this does not seem to be true of non-sighted people –according to surveys (Navarrete 2003)– because they are more interested in other iconic aspects, like costumes or sceneries.

Thus, we believe that in the near future AD will no longer be an incipient AVT mode but will become a thriving translation type. Present approaches to AD seem to be fruitful and are likely to implement sensory disabled people's quality of life. From this standpoint, AD is far more than an AVT mode or an audiovisual gap-filler: AD is also a social gap-filler.

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