Audio Description Behaviour: Universals, Regularities and Guidelines[i]

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Abstract

As the ad hoc narrative created for any media representation, dynamic or static, from a guided city tour of Barcelona to a Picasso painting, audio description is considered a form of semiotic translation; hence, some patterns and regularities should be observable both in its intermodal creation and its interlinguistic translation. While there is still only a small body of literature on audio description, audio-description guidelines seem to be one of the topics which have captured the interest of both academia and the professional world. There are now documents available for a number of countries which are concerned with the production and quality of audio-description scripts. Starting from the premise that audio description exhibits certain patterns or regularities, this article will look first at the concept of universals in Translation Studies, and how this concept can be extended to audio description. It then catalogues the many existing guidelines, which, if followed, should mark clear regularities in the audio description within a country – or language. After looking at some examples from existing norms and standards, we will explore some possible ways to define audio description universals for both theory and practical application, opening up the possibility of many avenues of research. One such avenue is the reception of the same visual input by different cultures; in this context, an international research project will be outlined: The Pear Tree Project. The article will finish by describing this project, its objectives and possible outcomes.

Keywords: Audio description, universals, guidelines, accessibility, standards

1. *Audio description: guidelines and standards*

The academic study of audio description (AD) is now growing exponentially within Translation Studies. Audio description has been, and probably still is in many situations, a job performed by well-meaning volunteers, with few professionals[ii] engaged in the commercial production of ADs in many countries. At present the market demand for AD products is not high enough to warrant many more trained professionals, although optimism grows when new access legislation is passed in different EU countries.

When AD started as a research topic within Audiovisual Translation, there were three main sources of data:

- public guidelines – such as Ofcom (2006) or Benecke & Dosch (2004)
- company/training guidelines – such as those drafted by describers such as James O'Hara for itfc and Veronika Hyks for IMS, and Aline Remael (Remael 2005) at University College Antwerp in Belgium – and
- commercially available AD material in DVD format.

Every country which offers AD has drafted, or is currently drafting, their guidelines – as in the case of France[iii] and Greece[iv] at the time of writing this chapter. Guidelines appear under different names such as standards, protocols, and norms. In some cases they are issued by public bodies, such as Ofcom[v] in the UK, where standards are in accordance with the Communications Act 2003, the Broadcasting Act 1996, or the Broadcasting Act 1990. A similar case is that of Spain, where the National Standard UNE 053020 was issued by the national standard agency AENOR[vi]. Other guidelines are written and published within a broadcasting corporation which offers the service of audio description such as Bayerischer Rundfunk (see Benecke & Dosch 2004). Others are written as unpublished internal documents for in-house training activities, such as those produced by Veronica Hyks or James O'Hara mentioned above – both in the UK. We can also find guidelines written for training purposes at education centres such as universities (see Remael 2005). And finally a new European project ADLAB started in 2011 to study the possibility of drafting a paneuropean Guidelines[vii].

The appearance of audio description in the open commercial market has been the result of the sole effort of users' associations. They strove for a service to be made public and fully available, a demand which has been acknowledged by some governments and their public broadcasting services. Nevertheless, quality has been sacrificed to quantity since targets are set in the form of the percentage of broadcast programmes which are audio described. Regulatory bodies – such as Ofcom in the UK or AENOR in Spain – have taken the responsibility to draft guidelines which promote the practice of audio description, but they have not taken on board studies to evaluate existing products which were the sole inspiration for these guidelines: neither Ofcom nor AENOR have a role in assessing quality in audio description.

It is not therefore surprising that in academic circles, the issue which has attracted the most attention is the analysis of existing guidelines, focusing on the research needed to draft new research-based guidelines or standards, with an eye to using them for training at university level. Some studies (Vercauteren 2007, Orero 2008) go further by aspiring to achieve a European standard on AD, but the point of departure has been existing guidelines and norms. These, rather than being prescriptive – as standards are by definition – can be descriptive and vague (Orero 2005, Orero & Wharton 2007), sometimes going no further than truisms (as with the Spanish Standard UNE), sometimes even containing contradictions. This comes as no surprise, since guidelines to date have been drafted from a very wide perspective based on experience and examples rather than research and reflection. The many and complex elements which interact in any cultural representation in general, and let us say in a film in particular, are therefore not taken into account. Language, genre (e.g. comedy versus action), period, vocabulary, topic, characters and so on are neglected: a film by Almodovar cannot be handled in the same way as a film by the Coen brothers, or Woody Allen.

Given the fact that some guidelines are so generic, it is hardly possible to determine whether they have any degree of impact on either the style or the quality of AD scripts. This is clearly the case for the Spanish standard, in which almost the only prescription is to use the spaces between sections of dialogue to insert the AD (Orero 2005, Wharton & Orero 2007). Other guidelines are more elaborated, as can be seen by the example given here (Ofcom 2006) on how to present the characters in an audiovisual text:

> Characters: identifying and describing characters is vital to effective audio description. Key features should be identified as soon as practicable, to help identify the person in the listener's mind's eye and avoid the need for long-winded and confusing descriptions, e.g. '*the tall man', 'district attorney Lopez'.* But do not give the name away if the plot requires the character's identity to be revealed at a later date. When describing characters, aspects such as dress, physical characteristics, facial expression, body language, ethnicity and age may be significant. Don't shy away from using colours or describing a character as pretty, or handsome, where relevant to the story. Generally names (rather than 'he' or 'she') are used more often than in normal speech, so as to avoid confusing the audience, particularly when there are several people taking part in a dialogue.

Whatever the level of specificity of the guidelines, looking closely at some recent audio-described films in Spanish or English as well as some audio-described English TV programmes[viii], –we can observe how in both the UK and in Spain, guidelines do not have any regular impact on the production of AD scripts. For example, despite the Ofcom recommendation to identify and describe characters (see above), an analysis of recent films such as *Monsters Inc.* (2001), *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), *Marie Antoinette* (2006) and *Casino Royale* (2006), it reveals how characters are introduced at different moments, and assigned names, ethnicity, and so on following different styles. This is an important point since we can start from the premise that any common patterns which emerge are unlikely to have been created as a result of compliance with external guidance: namely standards or guidelines. While it is true that British AD tends towards a detailed AD script that usually fills all the available space between conversations – compared for example to Spanish ADs – this style has not been developed following the Ofcom guidelines. Hence, we can proceed to analyse audio-described films in most languages to see if there are some regularities, or recurring phenomena which are unlikely to be due to the influence of existing guidelines.

Analysing existing audio descriptions as a basis for revising guidelines has been the most common research methodology employed to date; a less traditional approach, incorporating a thorough study of the constitutive elements and functions may be of greater benefit in the production of audio description in the longer term. This new and scientific approach opens up all existing practice to challenge and is therefore generally not popular with standardisation bodies and practitioners.

The starting point for such research has been the field of Translation Studies, in which the study of universals (see following section) as linguistic features common to translations in any language pair has developed as an important branch of translation research. A possible line of enquiry in the search for research-based non-language specific guidelines in audio description would be to follow a similar path, i.e. to search for possible universal features – independent of the particular language – arising in the process of intermodal translation, in our case, AD. Such features could then form the basis for the next stage of developing guidelines for future practice, e.g. at a European level.

2.   *Universals?*

Within Translation Studies, universals of translation are a thorny issue which has enjoyed much attention since the 1990s. From the many articles published at that time which focused on corpus linguistics as a research methodology to whole monographs such as Mauranen and Kujamäki 2004), the study of translation universals has managed to capture the attention of some of the most distinguished Translation Studies scholars, amongst them Baker 1993, Chesterman 2004, Gerzymisch-Arbogast 2007, House 2004 a, b & c, 2006, 2008, Toury 2004. In an early definition by Shuttleworth & Cowie (1997: 193), translation universals are seen as "features of TT which are posited by some as being the almost inevitable by-products of the process of translation, irrespective of the specific language pair involved". Though much has been written since then, we can group most studies into one of two types.

The first is the large body of studies which through the analysis of electronic corpora has tried to find empirical explanation for the many trends and tendencies in the linguistic transformation of texts through translation (Laviosa-Braithwaite 2009, Mauranen 2008). Through this methodology, and thanks to the technical possibilities of corpus processing, according to these scholars translation universals such as explicitation, simplification, disambiguation, conventionalisation, standardisation, have been identified.

The second type includes those studies in which the methodology follows a top-down approach, looking not at case studies, or language pairs, but at theoretical claims and explanations. These studies share a sceptical common point of departure, which is summarised bluntly by House (2008: 11) as follows: "the quest for translation universals is in essence futile, i.e. [...] there are no, and there can be no, translation universals". Though not all the scholars in this group express themselves in such black and white terms, the elaborate theories expounded in the literature on universals, including levels of universality, laws, tendencies, and so on, lead to House's sceptical position.

Though approaches may be different, all research on universals and translation – including the sceptical camp – focuses on understanding, discovering or explaining general trends in translation, which mainly involves a linguistic transaction between written texts. However, translation universals – such as explicitation or compensation – cannot be directly applied to AD since audiovisual as well as written text is involved – moving from the audiovisual in the source text to the written in the target text (i.e. the audio description script) which will in turn be delivered as an audio text. This is therefore a more complex intersemiotic transaction which needs to be studied by taking into consideration all the additional features which characterise the technique of audio description, the genre, and the product which is audio described. A first attempt is made in the following section.

3.   *Laws of audio description?*

In the search for audio description trends or tendencies, "laws" such as those proposed by Toury (2004) could be considered. His concept of universals – a term which he eschews – is that of laws in the form of probabilities of occurrence for certain behaviours where translation is considered as a shift, not restricted to linguistic shifts. Toury's broad description of the process of translation as a shift could therefore be extended from the written to the audiovisual realm with a possible application to audio description.

The need to locate a "level" at which laws can be found should be taken into account here. At one extreme could be the analysis of anecdotes which may lead to trivial conclusions and endless exceptions. At the other extreme are abstract observations which will tend to lead to oversimplification.. The in-between level, should, according to Toury, be the key to finding the base ground for universals and can be attained by searching for potentialities rather than behaviour. He goes on to say that this in-between level could be achieved through linking different modes of behaviour and the vast array of heterogeneous factors:

> The appropriate format of any candidate for universality should be both *conditional* and *probabilistic* […] the aim should be to turn translation theory into a system of interconnected, even interdependent, laws of such a format.

(Toury 2004: 21, *emphasis in the original*)

Toury's approach fits well with AD through its linking of different modes of behaviour and the vast array of heterogeneous factors influencing the final outcome. It would therefore help to formulate some laws from which to depart in the search for possible universals in AD in order to create a comprehensive description as a prelude to formulating more effective regulatory guidelines.

4.   From law to system

While Toury's proposal is worth taking into account, much research will be needed before we can formulate any meaningful laws, particularly since Toury's arguments do not lend themselves easily to immediate application. How to go about gathering data and performing research on AD universals is what Gerzymisch-Arbogast (2007) proposes for translation in order to 'open a discussion rather than provide answers' (2007: 2). She proposes[ix] two possible stances in relation to research: that of the "participant" and that of the "observer" in order to bridge "the seemingly irreconcilable gap between theory and practice" (2007: 4). She further recommends that if the research we undertake has to be useful for practitioners, we should opt for the "participant's views". Accordingly, research

- [proceeds] from the phenomenon, the translation problem and
- chooses a principle or a model/theory that can solve the problem, and
- applies the model and its methodology to solve an identified problem in a systematic, transparent, to some extent repeatable procedure, i.e. a translation-specific methodology.

(Ibid.)

As first step, Gerzymisch-Arbogast proposes describing the phenomenon, the basic point of departure for the whole process which she calls the ICS descriptive model. The model has "three general description levels when looking at phenomena and assumes that research questions are formulated, objects and data are analyzed and theoretical models are drafted and their adequacy tested" (Ibid.).

The three levels in the ICS model are:

- An individual level (I-Level)
- A collective level (C-Level)
- A system level (S-Level)

The strength of this model for our present purposes lies in the fact that it has been drafted not from observation but from the potentiality of practice, covering all possible fields of application, not just language, as Gerzymisch-Arbogast points out. Since we are dealing with such an arbitrary "system", it allows for interrelationships between levels, called "transitions" (Ibid.). As we had previously seen, most studies of and proposals for translation universals are language-based, which leaves our field of research – audio description – beyond their scope. The ICS model starts from an analysis of phenomena at the individual level. After individual analysis, it can move to the higher level of description by a transition, collectivising individual objects of identical value. At this level statistical analysis must be carried out with resulting data offering statistical frequency for given parameters, hence offering data which can be analysed and produce quantitative results for AD. The system level will not be discussed here.

5. *Starting the search for universals in AD*

Two basic research methodologies have been used at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in order to gather data to identify possible universals or laws relating to audio description. The first uses eye-tracking technology where the hypothesis is that as viewers we share similar "areas of interest" (AOI) when reading audiovisual texts; hence – if we move from the description of "regularities" of behaviour by sighted viewers to the formulation of guidelines for AD – those AOI are the clues which should be provided as audio information in the accompanying audio description text.

The second avenue of research seeks to move beyond the culturally specific, departing from the basic assumption that translations of all kinds are situated within a cultural context. Our starting point for the study described below is what Gerzymisch-Arbogast (2007) according to her ICS methodology would consider as the Individual level as a prelude to the Collective level, and eventually, the System level. In order to gather data for the first two levels, it was decided to set up an empirical experiment – The Pear Tree Project (see section 5) – to explore many factors involved in the reception of visual inputs: first within a particular community (I-level), and then across different European cultures (C-level). It was agreed that there was a need to evaluate the reception of audiovisual input across cultures as a first attempt at gathering some data towards possible AD trends. Only when we have identified a uniform reception of the same visual input will we be able to produce audio description scripts – in different languages – which observe similar parameters.

The hypothesis of the Pear Tree Project is that all Western cultures have a similar response to the same visual input based on the our assumption that all Western cultures in the 21st century have been exposed to similar cultural inputs. Thanks to the market dominance of audiovisual products from the USA in TV stations and cinemas across Europe, we can expect to have a homogeneous European audience. It may be the case that there are still major differences in the representation of local culture, but according to our hypothesis, the reception is standardised. An example here is Halloween, which was unknown to most Spaniards 10 years ago, while it is now the case that in the last week of October supermarkets across Spain sell pumpkins with stickers showing eyes and smiles. Christmas trees or Valentines are similar examples.

We also started from the premise that in 2009 people in Europe have become used to audiovisual input: they are accustomed to viewing films and TV programmes. Moreover, the production of audiovisual content by the audience – the idea behind the Web 2.0 – through sites such as *YouTube* is now a real threat to synchronic TV broadcasting. People in Western cultures produce and consume audiovisual content, and they are aware that what takes place in a film is fiction. Audiences are also conscious of the distance and relationship between spectator and characters.

6. The Pear Tree Project

In the mid-1970s Professor Wallace Chafe, a specialist in Native American languages at the University of California, Santa Barbara, set up an experiment (described in Chafe 2002) in order to test the reception of a visual story in different languages. The film was deliberately made in a simple manner in order to elicit stories from speakers around the world. The idea was to create a visual narrative which would show experiences that were common across a wide range of cultures: a man picking some pears, a boy riding a bicycle carrying pears in a basket, the bicycle tripping on a stone, the boy falling off, and some other boys helping him to gather the pears and the boy finally getting back on his bike. The film is six minutes long, in colour, with sound effects but no words. It was filmed in northern California, near the University of California, Berkeley. The story line was designed avoiding the use of any marked cultural or historical information.

On a general level, the main features of the film, i.e. those which make it relevant for our analysis and which can be the parameters within which data can be gathered in order to describe reception by sighted viewers on the community-specific Individual level, are as follows:

- A set of events, some taking place simultaneously and others in a sequence, some showing a high degree of codification which the audience needs to understand and others proving trivial or quite marked for the development of the plot.
- A set of characters with different features which might elicit culture-specific interpretation.
- A set of sounds which accompany the narrative, but no verbal sounds. The sounds should provide an auditory experience to be explored across cultures.
- The visual images which will at a later stage be associated with the visual language and rhetoric used in the film: description or narration, with the range of vocabulary, syntax, and grammar choices. That is, preference for certain verbal tenses, references to "the screen", use of adverbs, etc.

The study started modestly, with one example in Catalonia in 2007 (Orero 2008) which can be considered as a step towards drafting the parameters for the Individual level, as indicated above. The results were presented at an international seminar on audio description organized by the University of Surrey in June 2007[x].

The findings of the Catalan test interested scholars from different European countries, triggering a common international research project[xi]. The project is designed to proceed as follows:

> **Analysis of local data – I-level**
> Local reception data are being gathered in Belgium, Catalonia, Greece, Italy, Poland and the UK and analysed locally.
> **Analysis of European data – C-level**
> Local data will be analysed using a comparative methodology to try and reach the next level of systematization.

The Project has been set up with strict considerations. In each local study, the research design is the same: 20 participants – the viewers of the film – are female students of translation, consistent with the fact that in most translation faculties across Europe the percentage of female students is higher. In addition to this homogeneous gender profile, a homogeneous age profile has also been built into the research design (18 to 23 years) for all institutions involved (in Belgium, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Poland, UK and the USA[xii]). General data have already been presented at the Antwerp Media for All International Conference (Chmiel and Mazur , 2009).

The task set for each Subject is to watch the film once and then to write down what they have seen. No other instructions were provided. Scripts are written in long hand, then typed into a Word document and then translated into English. Different templates have been created in order to gather relevant information.

7. The expected results

The full data set has yet to be analysed in a more detailed way. It is anticipated that further analysis – such as that carried out by corpus linguists – of the data gathered through the experiment, will be supplemented by other methodological approaches. The aim is to show some possible universals, or laws, or regularities in the reception of visual input across cultures. This would have implications for the formulation of harmonised guidelines for AD scriptwriting across Europe, thereby opening up the possibility of more effective translations of source audio-description texts. The study may, on the other hand, show that while from a top-down perspective, a uniform society and culture had been assumed, we Europeans are still different and need more time before we go in search of a common cultural behaviour.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

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[ii] These volunteers usually perform their job with no previous training. Consequently, when audiovisual translation academics began to show an interest in this type of intersemiotic translation they had turn to the few existing professional audio describers: namely Bernd Benecke, Andrew Holland, Veronica Hyks, James O'Hara, Joel Snyder, and Greg York. These willing experts plus the inexhaustible RNIB accessibility officer – Joan Greening – have been, and still are, always ready to offer information in order to study: guidelines, materials, working practice, etc. to start any new research in AD from a scientific perspective.

[iii] I am grateful to Laure Morisset, who has been in charge of drafting the French guidelines, for her constant feedback and information.

[iv] I am grateful to Yota Georgakopoulou, who has been in charge of drafting the Greek guidelines, for her constant feedback and information.

[v] Ofcom is "the independent regulator and competition authority for the UK communications industries, with responsibilities across television, radio, telecommunications and wireless communications services". From the Ofcom webpage: http://www.ofcom.org.uk/

[vi] AENOR develops standardisation and certification (S + C) in all industrial and service sectors. It is the Spanish representative in international standards bodies such as ISO and CEN.

[vii] http://www.adlabproject.eu/ [consulted on 22.03.2012]

[viii] Films: *Alatriste* (2006), *Casanova* (2005), *El Laberinto del Fauno* (2006), *Frida* (2002), *Match Point* (2005), *REC* (2007), *Girl with the Pearl Earring* (2003), *Torrente* (2005), *Volver (2006)*, *Marie Antoniette* (2006), *Casino Royale* (2006): TV programmes: *Balamory, Dr Who*, *Fanny Hill*, *East Enders*, *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*.

[ix] This binomy (participant-observer) can be compared to that proposed by Toury: potentiality/observation.

[x] The 2-day international seminar (Audio Description for Visually Impaired People: Towards an Interdisciplinary Research Agenda) was funded by the Institute of Advanced Studies at the University of Surrey under its annual competition. See http://www.ias.surrey.ac.uk/reports/AUDIO-report.html for more details. Last visited 13 January 2010.

[xi] The European project DTV4ALL http://www.psp-dtv4all.org/ ref. 224994 of the ICT Policy Support Programme of CIP-ICT-PSP-2007-1 as Pilot Type B.

[xii] The reason for including the USA is to be able to take into account all the results provided by the 1980 experiment set up by Chafe (Chafe 2002).