A Reception Study of Descriptive vs. Interpretative Audio Description

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Abstract

In the German-speaking world, guidelines for Audio Description (AD) of feature films vary, often in a contradictory fashion. In this study, [34] a test was carried out to compare the audience's reception of two AD styles, i.e. descriptive vs. interpretative. Respondents (n=25) were asked to evaluate two different AD scripts of the short feature film "Wie immer" (Sethna 2010). The test results suggest that descriptive AD was not unequivocally preferred by recipients. On the other hand, interpretative AD facilitated the transfer of information and allowed for the audience's better participation in the filmic experience. These results seem particularly significant in the German-speaking world, where the public broadcasting stations of ARD, ORF, SRF, ZDF have committed themselves to descriptive AD. These preliminary results need to be further investigated, ideally in collaboration with heterogeneous target groups.

1 Definition

Audio Description (AD) transfers the visual images and sound effects of feature films and other visual media into spoken language. Together with the original soundtrack, an audio described film or programme provides an additional voice-over narration track intended primarily for blind and visually impaired people. The combination of the two soundtracks generates the audio film (or *Hörfilm*, cf. Jekat and Oláh 2016), i.e. a verbal version of the visual content.

2 Guidelines for AD

In the German-speaking world, guidelines and methods for Audio Description of feature films are based on specifications derived from practical experience (Dosch and Benecke 2004; Benecke 2014, which were incorporated into ARD et al. 2015). Benecke (2014) argues that no interpretations should be provided in AD and that audio description should rather allow visually impaired consumers to interpret for themselves. For instance, when describing characters, interpretative segments should be avoided (e.g. "she is beautiful") and objective descriptions of the characters' features should be used instead (e.g. "she has long shiny black hair and big brown eyes").

In contrast to Benecke's recommendations (2014), Fix (2005) and Fryer (2016) advocate a subjective or interpretative AD, which, they argue, is legitimate and no longer to be regarded as subjective if it is provided by the film's scriptwriter ("auteur description", Fryer 2016: 54). Interpretation in AD is, in fact, a long-standing contentious issue in Europe as well as across the Atlantic, which may never be fully resolved (Mazur and Chmiel 2012). Mazur and Chmiel (2012) propose that instead of the binary opposition of objective versus subjective, AD practitioners and researchers should rather be working within a continuum between objectivity and subjectivity.

3 The AD dilemma

AD should be provided only during speech pauses and should not interfere with the original soundtrack of the film. This requirement alone illustrates the so-called audio description dilemma (Benecke 2014). Often, descriptive ADs may not be succinct enough to fit into relevant sound breaks. Furthermore, it is

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essential that the AD script should not interfere with the film script (SBV 2017).

Recent research on AD concerns itself with the question of how essential information can be effectively audio described in documentaries and educational films despite the AD dilemma (Gzara, forthcoming; Lintner 2018; Cámara and Espasa 2011). A crucial issue to be investigated is, therefore, what AD style may facilitate the target audience's comprehension of the content of a film.

4   The study

Our reception study aimed to examine the influence of two AD styles, i.e. descriptive vs. interpretative, on the recipients' comprehension of the short film "Wie immer" (English title "The usual", Sethna 2010). In addition, the study also aimed to elicit feedback about the recipients' AD preferences. This analysis served as the basis for identifying strategies that (a) may facilitate the acquisition and understanding of factual information by visually impaired recipients, and (b) can potentially be applied to AD of documentaries and educational films.

"Wie immer" is a short film that featured at numerous film festivals and was rated "wertvoll" (lit. valuable) by the German Film and Media Evaluation Board (FBW). [35] "Wie immer" has also been labelled as an educational film, for instance by the Goethe Institute. The film addresses the issue of early-stage dementia: Gerda Beckert, a cheerful old lady, leads an independent life but is daily confronted with her gaining memory loss.

A descriptive AD based on Benecke (2014) was first created and produced. This was successively enriched with evaluative adjectives, more complex syntax and subjective descriptions of, for instance, facial expressions to develop an alternative AD, i.e. an AD script with a higher degree of subjectivity. This level of interpretation required a closer analysis of the original film and, in particular, of the characters' physical and behavioural properties (cf. Margolin 2007, in Vercauteren 2014). The requirement that AD should not interfere with

the original film soundtrack was observed for both versions.

Table 1 shows our translation from German of two AD segments describing the opening scene of the film and compares a descriptive style (left column) with an interpretative one (right column):

Descriptive AD	Interpretative AD
Outside the front door of a house. An old lady locks the door.	The film begins at the door of a brick house. Mrs. Beckert, an old lady with beautiful brown eyes, locks up.

Table 1. Descriptive vs. interpretative AD of the opening scene of "Wie immer" (Sethna 2010).

The test was attended by 24 persons without visual impairments and by 1 blind person – all recruited via the ZHAW (Zurich University of Applied Sciences). All respondents were highly educated and between 20 and 40 years of age. They were divided into four groups:

a) Group 1 (7 respondents) listened to and answered questions on the descriptive AD of "Wie immer";

b) Group 2 (6 respondents) listened to and answered questions on the interpretative AD of "Wie immer";

c) Group 3 (5 respondents) listened to both ADs of "Wie immer" (first descriptive AD, then interpretative AD) and was asked to make a comparison between the two;

d) Group 4 (7 respondents, of whom 1 was blind) listened to both ADs of "Wie immer" in reversed order (first interpretative AD, then descriptive AD) and was asked to make a comparison between the two.

In order to test the effectiveness of either style on the respondents' comprehension of the film, study participants in Groups 1 and 2 were asked to answer eight open-ended questions (e.g. Question 4 of Questionnaire 1: "How would you describe Gerda Beckert, the main character of the film? Please consider appearance, clothing, character, etc."). Additionally, respondents in these two groups were presented with three true/false questions. For instance, Question 9 of Questionnaire 1 asked them to

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[35] Cf. https://www.fbw-filmbewertung.com. Accessed July 12, 2018.

decide whether the following statements were true or false:

	true	false
Gerda Beckert has a hairdresser's appointment at 11.40 am.		
Gerda Beckert arrives at the appointment on time.		
Gerda Beckert has made a note of the date.		
Hairdresser Martina takes care of Gerda Beckert right away.		

Table 2. Question 9 of Questionnaire 1.

Respondents in Groups 3 and 4, on the other hand, were asked to compare the two ADs through a set of five open-ended questions aimed at eliciting feedback about user preferences (e.g. Question 2 of Questionnaire 2: "Which AD made you feel closer to the film, and why?"). Two out of five questions referred to tangible differences between descriptive and interpretative AD, and to the use of filmic language in AD (e.g. Question 4 of Questionnaire 2: "Do you think that the camera perspectives should be included in the AD script (e.g. *The water is heading towards us* or *The camera is panning towards the house*)?".

5 Results

The evidence drawn from our study confirms earlier conclusions by Jekat et al. (2015), who show that visually impaired people's perception of character traits, as conveyed through a strongly interpretative audio described film – i.e. AD presenting interpretative elements in a syntactically prominent position (e.g. *Blissfully she bikes away*) – is virtually congruent with the perception of the same character traits by people without visual impairments who watch the original film. Similarly, our study suggests that the information transfer is indeed enhanced through the interpretative AD (28 correct, 5 incorrect and 3 blank answers in Group 2, as opposed to 21 correct, 6 incorrect and 15 blank answers in Group 1). Although Group 2 has one fewer respondent, it has a higher number of correct answers, and significantly fewer incorrect and blank answers (8 in total) than Group 1 (21 in total). This trend is also evident in the answers given by the blind respondent. Although s/he emphasises that s/he prefers the descriptive AD, s/he states that the transfer of information is far better conveyed by the interpretative version of the AD (e.g. "The choice of words leads to crucial information").

As far as the open comprehension questions are concerned – since they cannot be considered as plainly "right" or "wrong" – Group 1 gives fewer or partially inaccurate details of Gerda Beckert's physical appearance (e.g. "brown hair" instead of *brown-grey hair* in the AD, "long hair" instead of *chin-length hair* in the AD). Furthermore, two test questions were aimed to elicit descriptive responses on Gerda's early signs of dementia (i.e. "Why does Gerda Beckert take her garbage bag to the hairdresser's?" and "Why is Gerda Beckert walking back to the hairdresser's?"). Only one respondent in Group 1 places his or her answers in the right context (i.e. "Maybe because she's confused"). On the other hand, the terms "Alzheimer/Dementia" are explicitly mentioned by one respondent in Group 2.

The direct comparison between descriptive and interpretative AD in Groups 3 and 4 confirms the above-reported trend. All respondents in Group 3 feel closer to the interpretative AD and believe that the information is better transferred through the interpretative version of the AD. Answers are not as clear-cut for Group 4 respondents, who consistently point out the advantages of both descriptive and interpretative ADs.

Overall, these results suggest that interpretative AD does facilitate the transfer of information and may allow for the audience's better participation in the filmic experience. These findings are also in line with earlier studies (cf. Walczak and Fryer 2017; Jekat et al. 2015; Mälzer-Semlinger 2012) which argue against strict objectivity in AD and advocate a more complex syntax that takes better account of the narrative and aesthetic elements of the original film. Finally, these results seem all the more significant in the German-speaking world, where the public broadcasting stations of ARD, ORF, SRF, ZDF, as well as Deutsche Hörfilm gGmbH, Hörfilm e.V. and audioskript, have committed themselves to descriptive AD (cf. standard 4 in ARD et al. 2015).

6 Discussion

We fully acknowledge the limitations of this small-scale reception study. Visually impaired people, who are regularly exposed to audio described visual content and can compensate

for their lack of sight with enhanced hearing or other sensory abilities, may process scripts very differently than people without visual impairments. This study presents, therefore, preliminary results that need to be confirmed in further studies, ideally in collaboration with heterogeneous target groups (including congenitally blind and late-blind people, and people with various forms of visual impairments and different levels of education, age, gender, etc.).

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