Naming and Describing Characters in Audio Description of Documentary Films

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Abstract

This study is based on my Master's thesis, which aimed to identify strategies to name and describe characters in audio description (AD) of documentaries. Since existing AD guidelines were mainly designed for feature films (Jekat and Oláh 2016: 76), my thesis examined whether those guidelines can be successfully applied to AD of documentaries. Firstly, the AD of trust WHO (Franck 2017) was analysed and strategies to name and describe characters were identified. A test was then carried out in order to assess the consumers' understanding of the film as well as the adequacy of AD. The test was attended by persons both with and without visual impairments. The results showed no significant differences between the two groups' reception of the film. Participants with visual impairments rated the AD as positive. Hence, the strategies used to name and describe characters can be evaluated as suitable for trust WHO. However, given the complexity of the film genre under investigation, the application of existing AD guidelines to documentaries requires further research.

1   Introduction

This paper [38] represents a summary of my Master's thesis, which deals with audio description (AD). In AD, visual elements of films, theatre plays, operas and other events are verbally described in order to make them accessible for blind or visually impaired people (VIP) (Benecke 2014b: 109).

AD is becoming increasingly important. On the one hand, due to legal and political advances, such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006), on the other hand, because of the demographic development, i.e. a steadily increasing ageing population (Habekuss 2017).

According to Jekat and Oláh (2016: 69), existing AD guidelines in German-speaking countries (cf. NDR 2015) were mainly designed for fiction films. Similarly, AD guidelines in other countries set a stronger focus on fiction and tend to neglect non-fiction films (Cámara and Espasa 2011: 418). The British ITC guidelines point out that documentary films benefit less from AD than fiction films as information in non-fiction films is mainly conveyed through the auditory channel (ITC 2000: 6). However, this rather generalising statement can be brought into question considering the numerous and various forms of documentary films currently available (cf. Wulff and von Keitz 2016: n.p.). In addition, fiction films and documentaries differ in various aspects (cf. Sponsel and Sebening 2009) and thus, according to Jekat and Oláh (2016: 71), it still has to be examined whether the existing AD guidelines can be successfully applied to AD of documentaries. One example that can be mentioned is the different role that film characters play in fiction and non-fiction productions (Eder 2008: 64). While fiction films characters are narrative or fictional, non-fiction films primarily document real people (cf. Fryer 2016: 112). It can be assumed that this and other differences have to be taken into account when audio describing documentaries.

Benecke (2014c: 141) states that audio describers have to consider two aspects pertaining to film characters: "how and when to name the characters and how and when to give

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a longer description of the appearance of a person". According to AD standards in German-speaking countries, the name of a character should be mentioned in AD only if it has been mentioned in the film beforehand; this standard aims to provide VIP the same film experience as sighted people (Dosch and Benecke 2004: 23). As long as the name of a character in the film is unknown, Benecke (2014a: 56) suggests the Interim Character Fixation for AD, whereby characters are "tagged" with significant attributes (e.g. physical attributes, e.g. the man with the beard). By contrast, in Great Britain, the characters are usually introduced in AD with their names right from their first appearance in the film (Benecke 2014c: 141f.). According to Benecke (2014c: 141) the naming of characters in AD "is still quite a controversial issue in the existing AD guidelines". Character descriptions, however, are considered "vital to effective AD" (Benecke 2014c: 142) in most guidelines. Regarding the AD of documentary films, however, Fryer (2016: 112) states that the physical appearance of characters in documentaries "is likely to have little bearing on our understanding of the subject matter" and should thus be regarded as less important. Similarly, the Interim Character Fixation, as proposed by Benecke (2014a: 56), could also be regarded as rather irrelevant to AD of documentaries.

In view of the above-mentioned considerations, the aim of my Master's thesis was to examine whether the existing AD guidelines in the German-speaking countries – as pertaining to the naming and describing of characters – can be successfully applied to AD of documentary films.

2 Methods

In order to answer the research question, three methods were applied. This methodological triangulation made it possible, on the one hand, to identify strategies for naming and describing characters in AD of documentaries and, on the other hand, to assess the adequacy of the applied strategies. First, the object of investigation, i.e. the documentary film *trust WHO* (Franck 2017), was analysed. Second, an analysis of the AD in terms of naming and describing characters was conducted. And third, a written test was carried out to assess the recipients' understanding of the film as well as the adequacy of the AD. For this

study, the AD script, the AD as audio file and the original film without AD were available.

2.1 Analysis of the source material

In a first step, the source material (i.e. the documentary *trust WHO*) was analysed in order to create a holistic understanding of the film, which seemed to be an important basis for the contextualisation of the following analysis. Since AD is mainly considered a product of translation (cf. e.g. Benecke 2014a: 43), the analysis of the film was based on a model from translation studies: Nord's model of source text analysis (Nord 2009). The analysis was restricted to the extratextual factors proposed by Nord (2009: 40) as they provide information about the communicative function of the source material. Due to time and scope restrictions, no detailed analysis of the source text material could be conducted, which is why the analysis is based on a statement by the film's director as well as on various film reviews.

2.2 Analysis of the AD

The analysis of the AD was based on an existing scientific analysis of the linguistic means used in the naming and describing characters in the AD of a feature film (cf. Hämmer 2005). The analysis aimed to identify the linguistic means and, secondly, to systemise them according to their semantic features (Hämmer 2005: 88). Following Hämmer's analysis, all persons appearing or acting in *trust WHO* were identified. Then, all persons who appear in the AD, along with the linguistic means by which the persons are named or described, were identified and classified according to their semantic features (based on Hämmer 2005). In addition, all linguistic means used for the first introduction of the persons in the AD were filtered out. In doing so, the strategy of how persons were introduced in the AD of *trust WHO* could be determined.

2.3 Test

Finally, a test was carried out in order to examine the object of investigation from a VIP's perspective. The test aimed to examine the participants' understanding of the film and to assess the adequacy of the AD of *trust WHO*. The test was carried out with four VIP (hereafter group 1), one participant (PN) being congenital blind, two PNs being late blind and one PN with visual impairment and four people without visual impairment (hereafter group 2). This pool

of participants allowed me to make a comparison between the understanding of the film of the two groups and to draw conclusions about the adequacy of the AD of *trust WHO*.

Group 1 was shown the audio described version of the film, whereas group 2 was shown the original film without AD. Successively, the PNs were asked to fill out the written test. For each of the two groups, a different questionnaire was designed. Both questionnaires contained questions on the objective and subjective understanding of the film as well as questions on the personal opinions of selected persons appearing in the film. Both closed and open-ended questions were asked. As mentioned above, the questionnaire for group 1 contained additional questions on the AD of *trust WHO*.

3 Results

A summary of the results is presented below and discussed under Section 4 (complete analyses and results are presented in Lintner 2018).

3.1 Analysis of the source material

The analysis of the source material has shown that director Lilian Franck aims to shed light on the acting of the World Health Organization (WHO) and thus intends to inform her audience. On the other hand, in the film Franck assumes the role of a responsible mother who is worried about her daughter's future. This personal element can, for instance, be identified through numerous images of playing children shown in the film, including her daughter. This suggests that Franck's goal is not only to raise awareness but also to reach her audience on an emotional level.

3.2 Analysis of the AD

Ninety-three persons appearing in *trust WHO* were identified, 76 of whom are also mentioned in the AD. Compared to the analysis conducted by Hämmer (2005: 89), which identified 25 characters, this is a relatively high figure.

The majority of the persons in the AD (46 out of 76) are introduced in the AD by the Interim Character Fixation suggested by Benecke (2014a: 56); 23 persons are introduced in the AD with their name right from their first appearance in the film; 17 of these persons were also previously introduced by name in the film (original soundtrack or fade-in). The remaining 6 persons who were not previously introduced

by name in the film are exclusively public figures (e.g. Angela Merkel, Barack Obama).

The remaining 7 persons were introduced indirectly, e.g. Ed Miliband to David Cameron: "in the British House of Commons:…".

A look at the determined semantic features (based on Hämmer 2005) shows that the persons in the film are described in a very differentiated way. The linguistic means for the Interim Character Fixation mainly contained personal information about the people (sex, age, etc.) but also information about their physical appearance (hair colour, clothing, etc.).

3.3 Test

As far as the film comprehension is concerned, group 1 (VIP) performed slightly better than group 2, although group 2 considered their subjective understanding of the film to be better. However, a comprehensive assessment of the PNs' understanding of the film requires a more extensive and detailed study.

With regard to the personal opinion of the selected persons appearing in the film, no differences could be found between the two groups. Moreover, no statements can be made as to whether the assessments of group 1 can be traced back to the descriptions in the AD; this could also be the object of further research.

All PNs from group 1 (VIP) evaluated the AD of *trust WHO* positively. However, it was noted from one PN that the complexity of the film makes it impossible to produce what the PN considers a "very good AD" for *trust WHO*. Aspects mentioned with respect to the complexity of the film were, for instance, the large amount of people, some of whom appear only very briefly and speak different languages, the resulting high number of different voices as well as the fast and frequent scene changes. Nevertheless, all PNs in group 1 stated that they were able to follow the audio described film well. However, all PNs stated that throughout the film it was not always clear for them which person was talking. Only one PN stated though that he or she could have followed the audio described film better if the persons had been named in the AD at their first appearance in the film. One PN expressed the wish for more detailed character descriptions.

4 Discussion

The analysis of the AD showed that the persons appearing in the film are introduced and described in the AD using strategies that correspond to the AD standards in the German-speaking countries (see Section 3.2). The persons in the AD are mainly introduced by the Interim Character Fixation proposed by Benecke (2014a: 56). It can be assumed that large numbers of characters could pose a challenge for the production of AD scripts, as numerous characteristics should be worked out in order to enable the recipients to clearly differentiate between the characters. In the test carried out, some PNs noted that the large number of persons and the resulting high number of different voices had a negative impact on their understanding of the film.

The semantic classification of the linguistic means used to introduce and describe the persons in the AD, showed that the latter are described in a rather differentiated way. This observation contradicts Fryer's statement (2016: 95) that descriptions of characters in documentary films seem less important (see Section 1).

Following Fryer's argument, it could also be argued that the descriptions of the children who repeatedly appear in *trust WHO* are not relevant, since they do not contribute to the conveyance of information. However, if we consider that the director not only intends to inform but also to reach her audience on an emotional level (see 3.1), the descriptions do seem to be important. Hence, if a documentary film aims to reach its audience on an emotional level, the description of the characters can make a significant contribution to this purpose. It is therefore to be concluded that descriptions of persons appearing in documentary films are more or less important depending on the film's dramaturgical elements.

It was also noted that the PNs from group 1 (VIP) referred more frequently and in more detail to the children appearing in the film than the PNs from group 2 (people without visual impairment). Whether this can be attributed to the numerous descriptions of the children in the AD cannot be assessed. However, if this is the case, it could also be concluded that consumers of audio described films comprehend films in more detail.

This was also noticed when analysing answers on the film comprehension. There were no significant differences in the results between the two groups. However, group 1 performed slightly better than group 2 and group 1 also answered some of the open-ended questions in more detail.

5 Conclusion

Based on the positive feedback on the AD from PNs with visual impairment, it can be assumed that the strategies used to introduce and describe persons in the AD of *trust WHO* – which correspond to the German AD standards and which were mainly designed for the description of feature films – have proved to be suited for the film under investigation. This could be due to the presence of the above-mentioned dramaturgical elements of *trust WHO*. No statements can be made as to whether such differentiated descriptions of the characters are also suitable for AD of other forms of documentaries – e.g. for documentaries which clearly focus on information transfer or for documentaries with only few dramaturgical elements. If this were to be confirmed in further research, it could be considered that documentary films are classified on the basis of their dramaturgical elements. Depending on them, the production of the AD script could be oriented more or less strongly to the AD guidelines, which are mainly designed for feature films. The strategies for naming persons in AD could be redefined for documentaries with a strong focus on the transfer of information.

In addition, more detailed research on the linguistic means used to introduce and describe persons could provide insights into the extent to which linguistic means influence the film perception of the audience.

The large number of people appearing in the film has proved to be problematic both in the AD analysis and in the test. The analysis of the AD has shown that due to the numerous conversations held in the film, only few or short pauses were available for descriptions. Therefore, not all persons appearing in the film could be introduced in the AD. In this respect, a closer cooperation with filmmakers could facilitate the production of AD scripts, for instance by including as much visual information as possible in the original

soundtrack (e.g. for fade-ins), as suggested by Jekat and Oláh (2016: 76).

In view of the increasing number of audio described documentaries (cf. e.g. DOK Leipzig 2017; Linder n.d.; ORF n.d.), the development of specific guidelines for documentary films would be desirable. These are essential for quality assurance as well as for the development of training courses for film describers. As Cámara and Espasa (2011: 417) state: "AD has been addressed in non-fiction documents only as an exceptional case". However, as I tried to demonstrate in this paper (cf. Lintner 2018), documentaries as a film genre are very complex and pose numerous specific challenges for AD.

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