Audio description for the theatre
A research-based practice

Aline Remael and Nina Reviers

1. Introduction

1.1 Aims of the chapter

The aim of this chapter is to identify the domain-specific challenges of theatre AD while understanding that this domain is as diverse as theatre itself. Contemporary theatre spans all genres and covers a wide spectrum of performances from classical staging to quintessentially experimental post drama that challenges the very concepts of “the stage” and “theatricality” or what theatre is. Contemporary theatre’s diversity, and its intermediality, that is, the way in which it often combines at least two conventionally distinct media on stage (Rajewski, 2005), can place high demands on theatre AD and often expands its reach into the domains of film AD, dance AD, opera AD and even AD for museums and exhibitions (Taylor & Perego, Cock & Fineman, Hutchinson and Eardley in this volume). Nevertheless, a number of core features can be identified that are specific to AD for the theatre and shape the theatre AD process or workflow as well as its ultimate presentation at the time of the performance.

In section 1.2 we explain our theoretical framework, which combines multimodality studies and aspects of functional translation studies (FTS). Both paradigms are rooted in functionalist traditions in TS and Linguistics and are therefore complementary, even though their approach differs in important respects. The FTS approach, which also lies at the basis of the ADLAB AD guidelines (www.adlabproject.eu), offers a pragmatic and purposeful approach for tackling the complexity of theatrical performances and their accessible translations for varied audiences. Multimodality is fast becoming a key framework in Multimodal Translation Studies (Boria et al., 2020), including media accessibility, and is crucial for theatre AD as a multimodal and intersemiotic form of translation. However, multimodality is only marginal in FTS, including in Mazur’s (2019, 2020) FTS-based analytical model for cinema AD, which we use and adapt for the theatre in this chapter. An important feature of multimodality and its applicability to theatre is the way in which it explains the generation of meaning through the multimodal functioning of sign systems (see section 2 in this chapter). A central feature of FTS, and Mazur’s model, is the importance of source text (ST), contextual and textual analysis on a macro and micro level and the way this can guide audio describers in their decision-making process.
Section 2 covers all the more or less traditional features that characterise AD for theatrical performances with some concrete examples from Milo Rau’s challenging staging of *Compas-sie* at NTGent in Belgium in 2020. Section 3 then looks at state of the art evolutions in theatre AD research and practice. It returns to *Compas-sie* for more elaborate examples and an in-depth discussion of some core issues, focusing on contextual ST analysis with special attention to the semiotics of the theatre and macro as well as micro source text analysis in a theatrical context. This is followed by a discussion of options for determining AD strategies and target text creation. Section 4 offers some concluding remarks and section 5 rounds off the chapter with suggestions for further reading.

1.2 Theoretical/conceptual framework

1.2.1 Multimodality, multimodal translation studies and theatre AD

Many contemporary texts of different genres are increasingly multimodal – that is, they combine minimally two but often three semiotic modes or systems: the verbal, the visual and/or the aural. On the one hand, the different systems are distinct in the way they convey meaning and they are often used to communicate different types of information (Dicerto, 2018: 18–20). On the other hand, the meaning generated by multimodal texts is the result of what Baldry and Thibault call the “resource integration principle”, which means that the semiotic systems that constitute a text produce meaning in combination with each other. Multimodal meaning is “multiplicative” rather than “additive” (2005: 21), or more than the sum of its parts. Moreover, this meaning is not simply an inherent characteristic of the text, or performance, in the case of theatre. Meaning arises in social interaction and action, as has been amply demonstrated by the field of social semiotics (Van Leeuwen, 2005).

Firstly, the semiotic modes constituting any text reflect the interest or communicative purpose of the author. Their choice is motivated and determined by “. . . the potentials and limitations of the materials chosen for meaning making: their affordances” (Kress, 2020: 28); the affordances of moving filmic images projected on stage (a visual mode) are different from those of a musical score (an aural mode). This also means that the form and content of any type of purposeful communication are always linked or even indistinguishable.

Secondly, the affordances of all semiotic modes are culturally determined. Kress (2020: 29) calls them “repositories, traces of the histories of meanings shaped in one community”, which means that they may not travel or be translated easily without undergoing shifts in meaning. Thirdly, the semiotic modes employed by the author and their affordances become meaningful only when they are interpreted by a recipient, a reader or audience member, in a particular context or the context of situation (Shuqin, 2010). Indeed, any recipient is determined by the context within which they consume a text on the basis of their own world knowledge, from their own perspective and with the (sensorial) means at their disposal. The way in which a recipient understands a text will also differ each time they read or hear it as the context and ambience in which they experience the communication will have changed. In addition, the degree of interpretation the processing of a text requires will depend on the density or clarity of its multimodal functioning and the degree of implicature it employs (Fryer, 2019a).

In the case of translation, an additional participant in meaning negotiation is added. Translators, and by extension, describers, also attribute meaning to a text based on their own interpretation, experience and sociocultural background, like any other audience member. As a result, there are as many potential descriptions as there are describers. As Fryer writes in relation to theatre AD: “one type of power that the translator wields is the ability
to decide which part of a text to emphasise” (Fryer, 2018b: 176). One crucial difference between audio describers and audience members is that describers enter the process of meaning creation from a specific perspective: with a focus on the communicative goals of the source text authors and target audience members, rather than their own (see also Kaindl, 2020). Audio describers’ understanding of the source text and their processing of it for the AD therefore depend very much on their ability to grasp both the source author’s and the target audience’s motivation and abilities. Understanding these choices helps them understand the intended meaning potential of signs and gauge their salience in a given performance (see also Kress, 2020).

The current dominance of increasingly multimodal texts and performances means that the translation or audio description of such texts requires not only insight into language and its functioning, but also into “other central modalities such as music and image as well as the associated submodalities of their functions and cultural specificity” (Kaindl, 2020: 8–9), within the specific context in which they are employed. Moreover, “modes” and the culturally and socially determined meaning that they generate as they interact with each other are impacted by the medium that produces them. The visuals of a film offer a different experience from the visuals of an oil painting. They are also impacted by the genre in which they are deployed.

All of these together indicate that different modes and their concrete realisations have different affordances or potentials and convey different types of meaning. They cannot simply be substituted. As a result, theatre AD will inevitably impact the multimodal functioning of the performance it describes as it always causes a shift from some of its visual modes into a verbal/aural rendering of them, or even into their absence, since not all visuals can be described. This inevitably causes a shift in meaning as well, and one that audio describers must be aware of, as they base their AD decisions on a detailed analysis of all the signifying systems and their affordances at work in the source text. Nothing more than a form of functional equivalence can be achieved, which brings us to the functionalist approach to TS.

1.2.2 Functional translation studies and theatre AD

In the Functionalist approach to translation based on Vermeer’s general theory of translation or Skopostheorie (Reiss et al., 2014), translation is a form of communication that has a specific purpose or function. It is this communicative purpose, function or skopos of the translation that largely determines the translation method. Translators determine the function of their translation on the basis of the translation brief or translation commission they have received, a detailed source text analysis and the study of the functional hierarchy of the translation problems they encounter in the source text (Nord, 1997).

Taking her inspiration from this functionalist perspective, Mazur (2020) proposes an analytical model for cinema AD that starts from a classification of predominant AD source text functions based on Reiss’s text typology (Reiss et al., 2014) for translation more generally. AD source texts can be informative, narrative, expressive, persuasive or entertaining. However, these four functions encompass others. The expressive function, for instance, includes aesthetics and creative composition. Moreover, as Mazur concedes, many texts combine these functions, nevertheless she claims that one or two of them may be dominant and hence important for the determination of AD strategies. Likewise, in the theatre, characterised by multimodality, which combines the affordances of different semiotic modes, the dominant text functions purposefully elected by the director or artistic team will underlie their ultimate selection. Some textual functions may be dominant, but many performances will feature several at once,
probably in some hierarchical form. Identifying these ST textual functions is an important step in the functional-analytical approach that we also propose for theatre AD.

The next step in Mazur’s model requires the audio describer to ascertain which of the identified text functions must be transferred to (or recreated for) the target performance. To this end, Mazur proposes a three-tiered ST analytical model, inspired by Nord (1991, 1997) but adapted to AD, distinguishing between contextual, macro-textual and micro-textual analysis (Mazur, 2020). Considering the importance and specificity of the purposeful contextual functioning of the semiotic modes that constitute the play, this approach is quite suited to our purpose. The contextual analysis includes:

. . . the intended text function(s) of the ST which may be determined based on the text type and genre, the addressees, time and place of text production and reception, the medium via which the ST is transferred and the TT will be transferred. . . , and the purpose, i.e., why the text was produced and why it is being audio described. . . [T]he contextual analysis also includes information about the ST that can be accessed without watching the film or programme, such as its synopsis, protagonists, creators, criticism or critical acclaim.

(Mazur, 2020: 231–232)

Generally speaking, all the elements in Mazur’s proposed contextual analysis for film are relevant for the theatre as well. We have simply grouped them into three categories in this chapter: the semiotics of the theatre (3.1.1) or how theatre produces meaning, the role of the various stakeholders involved in the AD environment (3.1.2) and the technical set-up and AD delivery method provided by the venue, which also includes Audio Introductions, a service that complements AD and is less common in film (3.1.3).

The macro-textual analysis logically follows the contextual analysis and happens after the source text, in our case a performance, has been viewed, even if there is always some degree of overlap between contextual and macro-textual analysis. At this stage, Mazur distinguishes between the analysis of the tectonics (content) and texture (form) of the AV text. Here, our ways part since we feel that this distinction is difficult to maintain, considering our overall theoretical framework of Multimodal Studies, which maintains that content and form are inseparable (see section 1.2.1). Nevertheless, the questions that Mazur suggests the audio describer should ask about the source text to further determine its communicative functioning (Mazur, 2020) can be adapted and transferred to the theatre if the analysis of tectonics and texture of the semiotic modes employed are combined. The analysis usually blends the investigation of issues that can be derived from the performance itself with information gleaned from various metatexts such as interviews or reviews discussing the artistic team’s creative history as well as the concrete realisation and functions of specific thematic and stylistic issues in the performance at hand. More concretely, the analysis will now focus on:

a. the creator(s) of the performance and their creative history;
b. the title, topic or subject matter, themes and genre of the performance;
c. the protagonists and other characters and the relations between them;
d. the development of the performance over space and time, or its (suggested) temporal and spatial locations, how they are rendered and how they interact;
e. the narrative and/or thematic and/or expressive cohesion maintained throughout the performance;
f. the functioning and style of (verbal) communication or action on stage and its overall interaction with the non-verbal, aural and visual modes employed (including the use of different media) and the density of this interaction in view of the timing of the AD;  
g. the extent to which the physical staging attracts (aesthetic or other) attention to itself or mostly “serves” the development of the subject and themes of the play.

In Mazur’s model, the macro-textual analysis is followed by the micro-textual analysis of specific scenes or aspects of scenes. Such micro elements are related to the functions identified in the contextual and macro-textual analysis to determine their salience for the performance and to the main textual functions previously identified. Obviously, the findings of macro-textual analysis and micro-textual analysis are strongly connected to each other as the latter is the concrete realisation of the first. It is useful to make the distinction when preparing an AD, but it is equally important to see the connection between the two, which is why we focus on these connections in our concrete examples in section 4. Together, macro-textual analysis and micro-textual analysis form the basis of the macro and micro level AD strategies to be developed in the subsequent, creative stage of the AD process, the writing of the AD script. Moreover, in the target text creation phase, the distinction between macro and micro strategies based on macro and micro textual observations is often tenuous as well. In brief, the distinction between the analytical levels cannot always be strictly maintained, as will become clear in the examples in section 4.

1.3 Compassie: a contemporary audio described performance

*Compassie. De geschiedenis van het machinegeweer* (Compassion. The history of the machine gun) was staged at NTGent, Flanders, in 2019 and again in 2020 by Milo Rau in an adaptation of the earlier German version of the play entitled *Mitleid. Die Geschichte des Maschinengewehrs* (2016). Milo Rau is a contemporary enfant terrible of the theatre whose plays offer a wealth of material in terms of their multimodal functioning. *Compassie* has two female protagonists. One is a young Black woman, a Hutu refugee from the 1994 Rwandan genocide, whose natural parents were murdered and who was later adopted by a Black French couple. The other is a middle-aged white woman and an actor, who supposedly worked for an NGO in Rwanda during the genocide. Both actors address the audience directly in narrative monologues and through the projected images of their faces on a large screen at the back of the stage. This duality, which is sometimes synchronous and sometimes asynchronous, also reflects a duality in their characters. Their fictional traits are mixed with features of the actors as “real” persons. The white actor, for instance, also talks about her relationship with an existing Flemish director and about her supposed trip to European refugee camps with Milo Rau, by way of preparation for the present play. The Black actor’s accounts of racism that she encountered as an immigrant from the Republic of Congo in Belgium reflect the racism she encountered as a fictional teenager in France. At different stages in the performance the borders between what is fictional and what is not become blurred, both in the stories the audience is told and in the way the stories are visually presented. This feature is typical of Milo Rau’s political documentary theatre, the genre he is best known for, and in which he constantly and consciously plays with the thin line between fact and fiction (Gade, 2018). The play was audio described by two students of the University of Antwerp, Jolien Lambert and Daisy Van der Vorst, under the supervision of Nina Reviers and Sabien Hanoulle. The AD was recorded and presented semi-live during the performance on 4th March 2020.
2. Traditional practices and guidelines for theatre AD

This section provides an overview of the current state of affairs regarding theatre AD. We discuss the main differences with pre-recorded AD for film and television and describe the common stages in the creation process of AD for theatre performances according to current guidelines, including the technical setup, delivery and workflow.

2.1 Theatre AD versus film AD

The European ADLAB AD guidelines approach the audio description of theatre in the same way as film and television audio description, namely from a narrative angle. The guidelines state that theatre AD resembles AD for film and television, since theatre performances also “tell stories and audiences recreate those stories in their minds based on cues from the performance about its content, characters and spatio-temporal setting” (Remael et al., 2014). However, the guidelines also identify three main differences. First, theatre has its own range of theatrical techniques for presenting a story. Second, AD for theatre is most often delivered live, as opposed to AD for film and television, which is pre-recorded. Third, live AD for the theatre is often combined with an audio introduction (AI) or a touch tour which is presented before the start of the performance (see Chapters 36 and 37 in this volume for more on AIs and touch tours).

In her book “An introduction to audio description”, Fryer (2016) expands on these basic differences and lists a series of additional practical and theoretical features typical of theatre AD. First, the live nature of AD for theatre requires theatre describers to be able to deal with improvisation. It is impossible to determine in advance not only when describers will be able to insert descriptions, but also how they will have to formulate them. A theatre describer therefore has to be adaptable and capable of modifying the AD script to an unexpected turn of events at any point. Second, the live aspect of theatre also entails the presence of the audience in the space where the performance is taking place. Audiences sometimes react to and even participate in a performance, which can influence audio description choices. Another important difference is that in film the camera determines the point of view and directs audiences’ focus of attention. In theatre, by contrast, audience members can choose what to focus on more freely. As a result, there are potentially as many viewpoints as there are audience members. Finally, Fryer (2016) underlines that theatre AD is less regulated than film in most countries around the world, since there are fewer guidelines, norms or legislation for this type of AD. As a result, theatre describers usually enjoy more creative freedom.

2.2 Live delivery and technical setup

The live nature of theatre AD impacts on how the AD is delivered and the technical setup required to achieve a live delivery. Theatre AD has traditionally been transmitted wireless, via infra-red or FM radio systems. The audio describers sit in a soundproof booth or a separate room from which they have a view of the stage, either through a glass screen or via a monitor. The audio describers speak into a microphone, which sends a wireless signal to the headsets the audiences in the venue are wearing. As technology is advancing rapidly, the technology for the delivery of live AD is also evolving quickly. Various technology and media companies are currently developing and perfecting live delivery systems that can be used with dedicated smartphone apps. These systems allow audiences to bring their own devices and headphones and they are therefore no longer dependent on the technical resources of the venue. Examples
are the Applaudi app, Earcatch, Startit and Spectitular, to name but a few (see also Oncins et al., 2013).¹

2.3 Traditional theatre AD workflow

Even if audio description for the theatre is most often delivered live, it is prepared in advance, usually in the form of a written AD script. This script draws on information obtained from the performance script (if one is available), a video recording of the performance/rehearsals and on one or more live rehearsals/performances. Describers in theatre commonly work in teams of two, because of the intensity of the preparation process, which involves several rewrites based on the different rehearsals and usually the dress rehearsal, one day before the show. Fryer (2016) even states that the preparation of a live AD script often requires more time than film AD scriptwriting, as its preparation extends over a longer period of time. Today, AD for theatre performances are usually prepared by independent, freelance AD professionals who are hired by the venue or the theatre company (Fryer, 2016).

As mentioned earlier, theatre AD is far less regulated than film AD and only a limited number of AD guidelines have been specifically developed for theatre. The main, established guidelines that mention the scenic arts are the Spanish official standard UNE 153020 (AENOR, 2005), recommendations proposed by the American Council of the Blind (ACB) (Snyder, 2010) and the European ADLAB guidelines (Remael et al., 2014) cited previously. More recently, VocalEyes (UK), has published a report “Describing Diversity. An exploration of the description of human characteristics and appearance within the practice of theatre audio description” (Hutchinson et al., 2020), which also contains concrete guidelines, adding new perspectives to the existing ones.

2.4 Beyond a rule-based approach?

Traditional guidelines mostly discuss the conventional, live delivered approach for theatre presented so far. However, many scholars and practitioners indicate that these guidelines do not reflect more recent developments in theatre AD practice and research. Further, they do not always provide adequate answers to the challenging questions that arise when audio describing a live theatre performance. Scholars and practitioners alike have therefore highlighted the limits of the current, traditional, rule-based one-fits-all approach to audio description, particularly for theatre (Fryer, 2018b; Udo & Fels, 2010, 2011).

Scholars like Fryer (2018b, 2019a, 2019b) and Reviers et al. (2020) are exploring the complex decision-making process that underlies theatre AD and they demonstrate that strategies need to be developed anew for each situation. In their view, theatre AD is not only a form of translation and accessibility but can become a form of artistic creation in itself. In other words, traditional AD for theatre as described in the previous section represents “one extreme of a theoretical spectrum . . . and is unlikely to reflect AD as it is practiced in the real world” (Fryer, 2018b). New approaches and strategies are constantly being tested. They aim to adapt to both new developments in the scenic arts and the ever-shifting AD environment and its specific context of situation. This view resonates with the way in which translation is conceptualised by multimodality scholars, such as Kress (2020) and Kaindl (2020), who see translators as text designers who create a text based on a specific set of resources with a specific communicative goal in mind (see section 1.2).

This change will be illustrated in the following sections, where we consider specific examples of the main steps in the decision-making process for theatre AD, paying attention to the
many parameters that impact this complex process and the wide range of options for dealing with them. We provide references to recent research, draw inspiration for our framework from Multimodal Translation Studies and Functional Translation Studies and provide examples from our case study, *Compassie*.

3. State of the art

3.1 Contextual features of theatre AD

A key element in our theoretical framework is the importance of context for the way in which texts generate meaning and hence influence their translations. Three relevant contextual elements feature prominently in current theatre AD research: the semiotics of theatre, the stakeholders involved in the AD creation process as well as the technological environment.

3.1.1 The semiotics of theatre

The ADLAB guidelines (Remael et al., 2014) state that the specific set of theatrical techniques used to create a performance contribute to the essence of what theatre is. They must therefore be considered in theatre AD (see section 2.1). Likewise, multimodality scholars underline that the purpose, medium and genre of a given communication shape the “affordances” of the signs used (see section 1.2.). As a result, theatre describers need to develop a sensitivity for the semiotic potential of theatre performances (see also Fryer, 2018b).

Theatrical performances are fundamentally multimodal and multisemiotic. The combination of word, action, image, music and sometimes even smell and touch also make theatre an interdisciplinary art form. Leading theatre scholar Kattenbelt (2008) describes theatre as a “hypermedium”, a complex construction built on a layering of different meanings (Reviers et al., 2020: 70). Theatrical signs acquire meaning only when they are interpreted by the recipient in a particular communicative situation. Theatre, also in its most classical form, therefore requires the active participation of the audience in the meaning-making process. It may expect the audience to see a bare stage with a sofa and a sideboard as a living-room, for instance. Theatre is thus more obviously a form of “representation” rather than a “presentation” of reality. As Fryer (2019a: 438) says: “this use of non-realistic elements to represent realistic locations is typical of theatrical illusion where the audience (sighted or otherwise) is expected to suspend disbelief and be transported by the power of imagination”.

In *Compassie*, this can be illustrated by the stage design. The stage is covered in piles of debris: old chairs, plastic bottles, papers, garbage. Visually, the set resembles a dump but none of the actions takes place in a dump nor is there any reference to a dump in the monologues. The debris seems to have a symbolic function, conveying a sense of chaos or decline, or suggestive of the debris left in the streets of Kigali after the genocide.

The visuals offer indicators that are open to interpretation and meaning generation whereas the AD through its choice of words may disambiguate this meaning, steering its users in a particular direction. It may also bring about a shift in meaning due to the different “affordances” of the visual and the verbal modes. Like translators, audio describers never merely transfer “static” meaning. They are instead active meaning-makers (see section 1.2). Audio describers must be constantly aware of this as they develop different strategies to ensure that the communicative purpose(s) or function(s) of the target text to be received by the audience remains relevant and functions in the target socio-semiotic and artistic context. In *Compassie*, audio describers certainly face a challenge when providing an aural-verbal description that expresses
the visual representation of the debris on stage and yet keeps the many possible interpretations and the symbolic function of the visual mode intact.

In addition to the effect of multimodal shifts, genre conventions and the way the director and artistic team handle them will obviously also greatly impact the perspective and semiotic functioning of any given play. While some more traditional performances still aim to tell a story (i.e., they have a “narrative function” in Mazur’s terms) much contemporary theatre aims to create a theatrical “experience” and is organised aesthetically, thematically or even emotionally, rather than (mostly) narratively. Such theatre has a primarily “expressive” function. This impacts on the entire multimodal functioning of the play and therefore on the choices to be made by the audio describer as well as on the way in which the AD is to be incorporated. Clearly, the largely narrative approach to audio description which underlines many current guidelines, such as the ADLAB guidelines (discussed earlier), is often inadequate.

The impact of genre conventions is very outspoken in Compassie. One of the features of Milo Rau’s documentary theatre mentioned in the introduction is that it mixes fictional and non-fictional elements, which is reflected in some of the anecdotes told by the actors. This often complex mixture produced by the double narrative must be somehow disambiguated by the AD without turning the narrative into a straightforward story. Making “the” story accessible does not suffice since there is more than one story and the boundaries between them are tenuous.

3.1.2 The stakeholders involved in the AD environment

The functional approach in translation studies and the multimodal approach to translation both underline the importance of considering all the relevant stakeholders that may impact the translation process. As mentioned in section 2, theatre describers are usually independent freelance professionals. For a long time they enjoyed relative freedom in the way they approached their AD and made decisions about its creation independently (Fryer, 2016, 2018b). Today, interest in AD is growing. This also means describers have to take varying viewpoints into account, which makes the AD creation process more complex but can also lead to forms of co-creation or collaborative approaches (Fryer, 2018b; Hutchinson et al., 2020) (see also section 4). In relation to theatre AD specifically, Fryer (2018b) mentions eight important stakeholders: AD users, the performance venue, legislation, the venue’s funders, the description agency, the describer (student or professional), guidelines and/or training courses, the source text (ST) creator(s). Much current research focuses on the involvement of users and ST authors – the artistic team – which we will discuss in greater detail in sections 3 and 4.

Here, we consider the impact of these different stakeholders on the AD of Compassie in general terms. The AD produced for Compassie was an experimental one in the sense that it was one of the first pre-recorded ADs for the stage in Flanders. As a result, audiences were not familiar with the setup, the technology used or the type of AD that resulted from the entire process. User expectations were uncertain and yet needed to be taken into account. In addition, the AD team did not only work closely with staff members from the theatre company, both the front office staff who initiated the project and some of the artistic staff, such as the director’s assistant, but also with the company that developed the new AD equipment. All collaborations were initiated at the start of the project, which allowed the audio describers to take into account and discuss the perspectives of different members of the artistic team as well as the expectations of the audience, the lay-out of the theatre venue and the technical requirements.
of a pre-recorded theatre AD. The possibilities and limitations of the technical setup and the feedback of the director’s assistant, who was also responsible for the synchronisation of the AD, had a direct influence on the way the AD was written (Reviers, 2021).

3.1.3 Technical setup and delivery

Technology is another important agent in the translation process that is currently gaining much attention in research in translation and media accessibility. Technological advances are changing both the AD creation process and especially how it is delivered. Section 2 discussed how AD is traditionally delivered live via wireless headsets or apps. This is known as “closed AD”; it is only available to those who choose to listen to the description via headsets. To date this is the most common form of delivery for AD – even when newer, app-based technologies are used. However, experiments with open theatre AD, where the AD is delivered to all audience members, usually as integrated audio, are also being conducted (see, for instance, Whitefield & Fels, 2013), as are performances with fully integrated artistic audio description where the AD is embedded into the creative process (Fryer, 2018a and see 3.2.2).

Apart from the choice between open or closed AD, there is also the option of live, semi-live or automated AD. The venue itself often makes the decisions on these, but their choice greatly influences the describers’ work, for instance, the extent to which they can improvise or what they must take into account when writing the script and hence the amount of text that can be included.

In semi-live AD, the script is subdivided into units (as happens in live AD) to ensure it can be slotted into the performance at appropriate times. However, these AD units are then pre-recorded, saved as audio files and synchronised live during the performance by a technician or other staff member, much in the same way that surtitles are cued (Secara, 2018). This method is gaining popularity and is regularly used, for instance, in the Teatro Real opera house in Madrid, at the Macerata Opera festival in Italy (Di Giovanni, 2018) or in France, where it is the prevalent method of the Accès Culture association to provide AD for opera, theatre and dance shows (Fryer, 2016; Resche, 2015; Oncins et al., 2013).

Compassie was one of the first experiments with semi-live, pre-recorded AD for the theatre in Flanders. What made the project unique was the way in which the AD was synchronised: the pre-recorded AD units were linked to the delivery of the English surtitles, which were already an integral part of the performance. Thus, they could be timed automatically, based on the cues provided by the director’s assistant, who was cueing the English surtitles. As a result, no additional personnel was needed to cue the AD on the night of the performance, but no last-minute changes could be made to the script either.

To conclude, some organisations are developing fully automated audio description systems for the theatre which link up the synchronisation of the AD with sound or lighting cues. Research into this type of AD was limited at the time of writing. However, it is being trialed with the stage-sync technology of the Softlab group at Carlos III University, for instance.² Obviously, this method strongly regiments the timing of the AD, which makes it suitable mainly for specific types of performances with little to no improvisation, such as operas or musicals. Nevertheless, as automated AD systems gain ground, their requirements or even their “affordances” will potentially influence the entire AD creation process. As in the case of semi-live AD, pre-recorded and automatically timed AD scripts can only include information that will almost certainly not be changed. Needless to say, many of its other challenges remain to be researched.
3.2 Macro and micro textual features of theatre AD

Our discussion of technical set-up and delivery concluded the discussion of the contextual factors impacting theatre AD. The next step in the AD decision-making process is that of understanding the source text. Traditional approaches to AD as discussed in section 2 put emphasis on source text analysis as the basis for understanding texts and their meaning. It is also the reason why guidelines and traditional approaches (such as ADLAB, but also Reviers, 2012) focus on understanding the specificities of the semiotics of theatre (as discussed in section 3.1.1.). While this obviously remains a crucial step, it has become clear that theatrical performances leave much to the imagination and that the meaning of signs is often ambiguous. As discussed in the introduction, meaning is not seen as an inherent feature that can be extracted from the text itself, but one that is negotiated between the source text authors, the target text audience and the describer, who all bring their own background to the text. This means that the source text of theatre AD is inherently unstable and that audio describers’ understanding of it depends not only on textual analysis but also on their ability to grasp both the source authors’ and the target audience’s motivation for creating, or respectively, enjoying the performance. This will help them understand the intended meaning potential of its ambiguous sign systems.

In the example from Compassie in section 3.1.1. we discussed the issue of the stage that looks like a dump and the fact that this can be interpreted in many different ways. When reading about the intentions of the director in interviews and reviews, the symbolic function of the stage becomes more tangible: it can be seen to symbolise the troubled mental well-being of the white protagonist but can just as well be interpreted as a physical representation of the debilitating traumas of refugees in camps or wartime situations. In this case, the AD resorted to describing the debris rather objectively allowing audiences to make the connection with its possible symbolic meanings themselves by combining the description with various references to refugee camps and the chaos that reigns in them in the dialogue.

Against this background, the next sections look at identifying issues related to the source text, the intentions and involvement of the source text authors, that of the target audience and how theatre describers position themselves in this constellation.

3.2.1 The instability of the source text in theatre

The first question to be addressed when audio describing a theatre play is: what constitutes the source text? As Reviers et al. (2020) highlight and as discussed in section 3.1.1., theatre is unstable by nature. Theatre scholar Chapple and Kattenbelt (2006: 33) write: “unlike film and television, theatre always takes place in the absolute presence of here and now. The performer and the spectator are physically present at the same time in the same space”. As a result, no two performances of the same production are alike, nor are two interpretations by different visitors. This is obviously one of the main challenges of theatre AD.

For this reason, theatre describers ideally attend several rehearsals or performances – as guidelines advise (see section 2) – to understand the extent to which a performance changes from one night to another, which allows them to anticipate this unstable nature. For the same reason, theatre describers often take into account a wide range of “metatexts” to complement the actual performance and expand the set of semiotic resources on which their translation is based, much like translators in many other contexts (Marais, 2018). In a theatrical context, resources such as the programme booklet, online information about the production or reviews of the performance in (printed or digital) media support the understanding of the intentions of the author and the possible interpretations by audience members. In the case of theatre AD
these additional resources constitute an equally important source for the translation as the performance itself (Reviers et al., 2020).

In the case of Compassie, such metatexts played an important role for two reasons. Firstly, simply because a lot of metatexts were available: newspaper interviews and reviews as well as documentation provided on the NTGent website. These were valuable resources for understanding the intended meaning(s) of the director that were also available to the non-blind audience. Secondly, these additional sources of information were valuable due to the lack of rehearsal time available for the AD. Compassie was a repeat of a piece that had been performed by the same team in 2019, which meant that few rehearsals were required. As a result, the description team could only rely on one video recording from 2019 and one final rehearsal.

Under such circumstances, attempting to respect the traditional sanctity of “the” source text becomes difficult and even undesirable, as is also being highlighted by scholars in different areas of TS. In our context, Fryer (2018b: 177) says:

given that parts of the original can only be accessed by AD users via the translation, IAD [Integrated Audio Description] aims to make that translation as engaging, stimulating or enjoyable as is the original for those who can access it directly. This marks a step change from regarding the original as sacred and not to be tampered with, to regarding the original as setting the standard and type of experience to be achieved.

Today this shifting attitude towards the source text and its meaning is paving the way for creative and experimental approaches to AD that blur the boundaries between translation and creation (see sections 3.2.2. and 4).

3.2.2 The source author(s) intention and motivation

Shifting views on what constitutes the source text and its status and what constitutes translation resonate with recent trends in theatre AD, particularly in relation to the level of involvement of the source text authors and target audiences in the creation of accessible performances.

A clear trend is apparent towards greater involvement of the artistic team in the AD creation process in the hope of doing justice to the artistic intention(s) behind the performance (Reviers et al., 2020; Roofthooft et al., 2018; Fryer, 2018b; Romero-Fresco, 2018). This approach is often referred to as Integrated Audio Description (IAD). In reality, it is a process that comes in many shapes and forms with varying levels of artistic involvement. At one end of the spectrum, this collaboration amounts to no more than describers attending production meetings and interviewing members of the artistic team to ask about their intentions behind various aspects of the performance, including ambiguous scenes or the use of the correct terminology. This was the procedure for Compassie and it is common practice in many theatres today.

In the middle of the spectrum we find a form of collaboration that requires stronger involvement on the part of the artistic team. A member of the artistic team may provide feedback on the first draft of the AD script (see Reviers et al., 2020), or perhaps the director’s assistant may actually take on the role of the describer. This is what Whitfield and Fels (2013) call a “hybrid” approach. At the far end of the scale, the AD is fully integrated in the creation process of the performance itself. In this case, the AD is artist-led rather than describer-led and it is considered a “catalyst for creativity” (Romero-Fresco, 2018; Greyson, 2020).

While the advantages of an integrated approach are evident, Fryer (2018b) also warns about its downsides. IAD risks prioritising art over access and losing sight of target audience needs.
She says that even in artist-led approaches, the describers’ expertise is essential to keeping art and access in balance:

... while the appetite for AD is strong, the role of the describer is changing. No longer is the describer autonomous and left to their own devices, with the power to decide on the purpose and style of their translation, aiming for neutrality, taking guidelines into account. Instead, the description is one more creative aspect of the product, to be determined by the creative team with the impact on user experience uppermost in their minds.

(Fryer, 2018b: 183)

This brings us to the final point of this section: the role of audiences and audience needs.

3.2.3 The role of audiences in meaning creation

By now, the active role of audiences in meaning-making in theatre and how this contributes to the text’s instability and the difficulty of its interpretation has become clear. As the ADLAB guidelines (Remael et al., 2014) already pointed out, inference by the audience plays an important role in theatre. The theatrical experience is not only about the explicit meaning of a performance, but also the full range of implicatures inserted by the author of the text. Such implicatures are very much genre and context bound and this poses specific challenges for AD.

As Fryer says (Fryer, 2019a: 431):

it is the task of the describer to convey visual meaning (both implicit and explicit) verbally to users, some of whom see only partially, some of whom no longer see and may have only a limited visual memory and a small percentage of whom have never seen.

She further specifies that

the heterogeneity of any audience, in terms of experience and cultural knowledge, is exacerbated by the many types of visual impairment giving the describer little control over how their translation will be received. This may lead the describer to add extra explicitation to ensure their audience appreciates the full range of implicature.

(Fryer, 2019a: 437)

Fryer even goes as far as to conclude that “[t]he best the describer can do is to sow seeds of implicature that may or may not be harvested” by the target audience.

This is exemplified by the use of sound effects in Compassie. At several moments during the performance, the sound of raindrops falling on a roof can be heard. The context or source of the rain is never mentioned in the monologues nor visualised on stage and yet the rain occurs in settings where one wouldn’t expect it. It constitutes an incongruity that is clear to the non-blind audience, but that might puzzle the VIP. The AD therefore identifies the sound as rain but leaves it up to (all) audiences to interpret it. Is the rain simply meant to evoke a mood? Is it an implicit reference to the rain in Kigali that one of the actors mentions later on? The wording of the AD and the level of explicitation of the source of the sound (or lack thereof) can clearly guide audiences towards one or other interpretation. This example illustrates that the assumptions describers have about their target audience guide their decisions directly or indirectly (as also underlined by Mazur, 2020). Conjectures about how well the target audience of Compassie is acquainted with Milo Rau’s specific style and the extent to which they...
have accessed interviews or reviews directly impacts the level of explicitation describers will deem necessary or appropriate.

Against this background, two shifts in the attitudes towards AD audiences merit closer attention: the broadening target audience of AD and the shifting attitudes towards disability. First, accessibility is increasingly moving towards inclusivity, which recognises that accessibility services often benefit audiences far beyond those who have traditionally been considered to have disabilities. Seen from this perspective, media products and stage performances should be inclusive from inception and cater to the needs of all, which would put paid to the need for additional and separate services for the visually impaired or hard of hearing. Scholars adhering to this view point out that the traditional notion of Media Accessibility concerning only (or mainly) people with hearing or visual loss poses problems. As Romero-Fresco (2018) writes:

Neither the current and prevailing narrow consideration of MA as concerning only people with sensory impairments nor one that extends its scope to foreign audiences seem to be a true reflection of who is using these access services or who is concerned by the new legislation in this area. Based on the idea of accessibility as an instrument for the human rights of all, this article supports a wider view of MA, one that encompasses both people with disabilities and people without disabilities who may need access to audiovisual content. This shift involves not only epistemological (is MA part of AVT or vice versa?) and terminological considerations (is it accurate to refer to SDH when this service is mainly consumed by hearing viewers?) that merit their own separate discussions, but it can also help to unleash the enormous potential that MA has for social change.

In relation to AD more specifically, the traditional approach to AD is criticised for being too “occularcentric” (Fryer, 2018b). It focuses extensively on what audiences cannot see, rather than starting from an ability-driven approach with a larger focus on other senses that audiences can utilise fully. This view is another major underlying principle of Integrated Audio Description, mentioned in the previous subsection. Whitfield and Fels (2013) discuss the key role music can play in an inclusive design approach to AD, for instance, by using musical motifs to support the audience’s interpretation of the performance. Another example is Enhanced AD, which refers to the manipulation of the soundtrack of a media product in order to highlight sound elements that can complement the AD or even replace the AD altogether (Lopez, forthcoming).

In this context, it is worth mentioning collaborative approaches to AD that involve target audiences in the creation process. Not only the artistic team (3.2.2.) but also audiences are being involved in the AD creation process to varying degrees. User participation has always been an important issue in AD and theatre AD in particular, but is usually limited to asking for feedback through questionnaires after the performance or involving user associations in the organisation of an audio described performance. In some countries a visually impaired describer is also part of the AD team, offering immediate feedback during the scripting process. Today, initiatives are expanding collaboration by involving target users more actively in the AD creation process itself. Di Giovanni (2018), for instance, reports on an experiment where an opera AD was created in collaboration with blind and non-blind children. This approach further expands the notion of accessibility beyond access to content into access to creation (see also Romero-Fresco, 2018).

Such approaches are still in their infancy and may be the exception rather than the rule, but as Di Giovanni (2018: 156) writes: “today we seem to be increasingly moving towards the end-users’ active participation, with a positive reshuffling of the production-to-consumption cycle”; a process that resonates with trends in AVT more generally, where consumers are
also more actively taking part in the AVT creation process as prosumers (see, for instance, Remael & Reviers, 2019).

As mentioned in section 1.2.3, the previously discussed elements will impact the analysis at both the macro- and micro-textual levels at different levels. An extensive analysis of specific scenes of Compassie at a micro-textual level is not only beyond the scope of the present article, but in reality it often coincides with target text creation. Therefore, the next section will exemplify how the parameters impact on target text creation, providing examples at a macro as well as micro level.

### 3.3 Target text creation for theatre AD

Having discussed the contextual and textual challenges surrounding source text analysis, we now turn to the next crucial step in the AD process, following the functional translation studies approach: target text creation. This section aims to demonstrate how the (con)textual analysis of Compassie, following our theoretical framework, shaped the choices describers made at a macro and micro textual level. The examples highlight the issues for theatre AD discussed so far and are structured around the seven key questions that describers should ask themselves, listed in section 1.2.3. These questions guide describers in determining the global target text functions. As Mazur (2020) states “. . . this [target text function] will then help guide the describer’s choices as regards both the content and the style of AD”, which forms the basis for the development of AD strategies at the macro and micro levels.

#### 3.3.1 The target text function

The analysis of Compassie revealed the performance’s three main themes (Van der Vorst, 2020) and provided an answer to questions a., b. and c. (see section 1.2.3). These themes have to be communicated to the audience in order to maintain the performance’s main text functions: the expression of power relations between the West and the South, as reflected in the relation and interaction between the two actors on stage, documentary theatre as a genre, reflected in the factual style of the dialogues and the filmic use of sound and video and the way people deal with trauma and violence. In addition, the analysis showed that in Compassie the varying text functions as mentioned by Functional Translation Studies (see section 1.2.) are combined. The text resembles an informative text in some ways, as it is presented as “documentary” theatre, even though fact and fiction are mixed deliberately. The level of “informativity” therefore remains ambiguous. The text also has a clear narrative thread, as the actors’ dialogue revolves around their life stories. However, the stories cannot be separated from the form in which they are presented, as it is the form that highlights the themes to be inferred from the stories and anecdotes, namely trauma, violence and racism. The form, such as the use of camera and close-ups to render emotions, as well as explicit visuals, such as the use of a machine gun pointed at the audience, has a clear expressive function as well, going beyond the informative and narrative, aiming to elicit strong emotional reactions from the audience. Finally, the text can also be considered a persuasive text to some extent. One of Milo Rau’s motivations is that he wants to “change the world with his theatre”; he wants to influence people and make them (re)consider their ideas about certain topics, which he achieves by eliciting emotional reactions and sometimes even by shocking audiences.

The analysis of Compassie also showed that the translation of these themes and the way in which they were told was impacted by the following contextual elements: (a) the semiotic composition of the performance, in particular its multilingual component and the density of
the verbal component (as the piece consists of two monologues); (b) the pre-recorded conditions, which limited improvisation and timing and (c) assumptions about the audience, more in particular in relation to their familiarity with the director and with documentary theatre as a genre. This context also determined the describer’s choices regarding how to transfer the text functions to AD. In the next section, we look at some examples.

### 3.3.2 AD macro strategies

The macro- and micro-textual analyses first resulted in AD strategies related to the Audio Introduction and the method chosen for Audio Subtitling. The audio introduction in particular aims to provide a framework that the audience can use to infer implicatures during the performance, to shape audience expectations and complement their background knowledge where necessary. A discussion of these access modalities, however, is beyond the scope of this chapter (see Romero-Fresco and Matamala in this volume respectively). Nevertheless, as the audio introduction and AD of a theatre performance are intricately linked, a brief discussion of at least a few examples from the audio introduction is required as they illustrate how it anticipates the AD examples discussed later on.

#### EXAMPLE 1

This example illustrates questions c., f. and g. respectively: the relations between characters, the density of the interaction between modes in view of the timing of the AD and the impact of the physical staging in relation to the themes of the text (see section 1.2.3). The Audio Introduction of *Compassie* consciously anticipated certain information (foreshadowing) due to the limited time for AD during the performance itself and because the AD was pre-recorded, preventing the describers from making any last-minute changes to the description. For instance, the audio introduction sowed seeds of implicature related to the theme of power relations between the West and the South which was represented on stage by the power dynamics between both actors but remained ambiguous. Some of the semiotic signs that underpinned this theme were highlighted in the AI to pave the way for its interpretation in the AD. The formulation, however, remained fairly implicit:

> Het contrast tussen de leefwerelden van de twee personages is merkbaar in hun kledij. Olga, 28 jaar, is casual gekleed. Haar afro zit strak in een dotje en ze draagt een zwartrode trainingsvest en een grijs T-shirt. Els, 55 jaar, draagt haar kort, sluiik, bruin haar los. Ze oogt ten opzichte van Olga eerder opgekleed met een groene jurk tot net boven de knie en beige hakken [The contrast between the worlds of the two characters is noticeable in their clothing. Olga, 28 years old, is dressed casually. Her afro is pulled back in a bun and she is wearing a black-red training jacket over a grey T-shirt. Els, 55 years old, wears her short, sleek, brown hair loose. Compared to Olga, she looks more dressed up in a green dress to just above her knees and beige heels]

> Vervolgens komt Els het podium op, waardoor Olga naar de achtergrond verdwijnt [Next, Els enters the stage, relegating Olga’s presence to the background]
how they are rendered and how they interact. The choices in the audio introduction were in addition impacted by the assumptions made about the target audience in relation to their background knowledge. The audio introduction shaped the audience’s cognitive environment regarding the genre of “documentary theatre” and explained Rau’s specific theatrical style. For example, the semi-fictionalised nature of the characters was explicated in the AI:

In Compassie nemen Els Dottermans en Olga Mouak, die een gefictionaliseerde versie van zichzelf spelen, ons mee naar de politieke hotspots van onze tijd en vermengen hun persoonlijke levensverhaal met de brute realiteit. Anekdotes uit het leven van de actrices worden afgewisseld met sterke verhalen [In Compassie, Els Dottermans and Olga Mouak, who play a fictionalised version of themselves, take us to the political hotspots of our time and mix their personal life stories with brutal reality. Anecdotes from the lives of the actors are interspersed with strong stories]

Finally, the audio introduction also set out to anticipate user expectations about the pre-recorded setting. As mentioned earlier, pre-recorded AD was new to the target audience. In addition, the combination with audio subtitling is still uncommon in theatre AD. Therefore, the describers wanted to shape audiences’ expectations accordingly:

Wat is er anders aan deze beschrijving? Voor het eerst werden de beschrijvingen op voorhand opgenomen en niet live ingesproken. Dat vergt een heel andere werkwijze en we kijken dan ook uit naar jullie feedback na de voorstelling [What is different about this description? For the first time, the descriptions were recorded in advance and will not be performed live. This requires a completely different working method and we look forward to your feedback after the performance]

De voorstelling is in het Nederlands met uitzondering van de Franse proloog en epiloog. De vertaling hiervan zal tijdens de voorstelling in de audiobeschrijving verwerkt worden [The performance is in Dutch with the exception of the French prologue and epilogue. The translation will be incorporated into the audio description during the performance]

3.3.3 AD micro strategies

The examples provided in this section illustrate the way in which the three themes mentioned earlier were transferred by the AD at the micro-textual level in very specific scenes of the performance. The examples illustrate the tension discussed in this chapter between what is presented on stage and the meaning potentials (affordances) this can have. Traditional guidelines usually advocate the “describe what you see” approach to AD. The ICT guidance on standards for audio description, for instance, claims that “The description should only provide information about what can be seen on the screen. Information unavailable to the sighted audiences should not be added”. However, as Holland (2009: 184) points out:

I have tried to argue that in order to write a meaningful description, an audio describer has to do more than “say what he sees”, that this phrase is a nonsense which attempts erroneously to divorce “seeing” from “understanding” and that in this process of understanding the other senses are involved alongside sight.

The importance of “understanding” over simply “seeing” has been clearly illustrated in the discussion in this chapter. Subsequently we show how certain (con)textual elements inspired
the use of specific AD strategies. The examples are organised on the basis of key concepts introduced at various stages in the previous sections.

EXAMPLE 4: MAINTAINING A MULTIMODAL SIGN’S AFFORDANCES

Example 4 is a good example of how describers aim to maintain the different “affordances” of a given sign and deal with question e. with reference to the thematic cohesion throughout the performance. A striking visual element that contributed to the theme of personal trauma is the main character continuously drinking from a bottle during the performance. The pace at which she drinks seems to increase as her mental state deteriorates and her emotions start to take over, which might prompt audiences to think the plastic bottle is filled with an alcoholic drink rather than water. Moreover, the character refers to how aid workers tend to drink excessively to numb their feelings when they are confronted with human suffering. However, the connection between this behaviour and the physical bottle from which the protagonist drinks is never made explicit nor discussed in the metatexts that were consulted. As a result, the describers decided to refer to the bottle as “a bottle” rather than a “bottle of water” (which is what it actually looks like) and to consciously describe this seemingly mundane action of drinking almost every time it happens throughout the performance.

The description of the debris on stage, which has been mentioned several times, can serve as another example. It was described briefly at the beginning of the performance, rendering its effect somewhat explicit with the adjective “chaos”:

Kletterende regen. Het is donker, maar een schemerlicht onthult wijdverspreide rommel. Uiterst links aan de rand van de chaos staat een keurige bureau [Heavy rain. It’s dark, but a gentle light reveals widespread clutter. On the far left at the edge of the chaos stands a neat desk]

Later in the AD, the contrast between the outlook and authority of the white protagonist and the debris on stage is mentioned once in a while to remind audiences of its presence and relevance. This choice was inspired by question g., namely the extent to which the physical staging attracts attention and serves the development of the theme:

De keurige jurk en de pupiter waarachter ze plaats neemt doen bijna vergeten dat ze zich in het midden van een stort bevindt. Ze wordt geflankeerd door een witte heldere spot [Her elegant dress and the lectern behind which she stands almost make you forget that she is in the middle of a dump. She is encased by a white bright spotlight]

EXAMPLE 5: THE IMPACT OF GENRE

Compassie is a clear example of the specific genre “documentary theatre” (see section 1.3.), an observation related to question b. about the impact of the genre of the text. This is reflected in how it is staged, in the use of camera projections, the mixing of fictional anecdotes and factual events from the actors’ lives and the use of props referring to current affairs such as iconic newspaper photos. This was recreated in the AD in the following ways.

First, a conscious decision was made to remain relatively neutral in terms of word choice throughout the AD. The describers considered a more objective register and factual style most appropriate to the genre. Second, the genre also motivated the describers to use technical terms to describe theatre techniques, such as the use of video and sound effects. The example that
follows, for instance, employs terms such as “close-up” and “screen”. According to guidelines (by e.g., VocalEyes, see Holland, 2009), technical terms should be avoided as they break the theatrical illusion. In this specific case, however, the theatrical signs were deliberately used to break the theatrical illusion and create ambiguity between reality and fiction, visually and also verbally. At one point one of the actors says: “Ik kan nu direct in een rol stappen. Van het ene op het andere moment” [I can step into a role immediately. From one moment to the next]. It was important for the AD to continuously provide a frame of reference for such utterances.

A final example is the use of a technique from documentary theatre which is called “allegoric duplication” (allegorische verdubbeling). This means that the characters are filmed live on stage and this recording is simultaneously projected in close-up on the background. The effect of this technique is significant and had to be verbalised without rendering the idea behind it explicit. This is how that was done:

Van rechts achteren verschijnt een gifgroene gedaante, het is Els. Haar close-up verschijnt vaag op het scherm. De keurige jurk en de pupiter waarachter ze plaats neemt doen bijna vergeten dat ze zich in het midden van een stort bevindt. Ze wordt geflankeerd door een witte heldere spot. De regen verstomt en de close-up van Els verscherpt. De twee Elsen – op het scherm en achter de pupiter – stralen dezelfde nietszeggendheid uit. Hun bewegingen zijn synchroon. Ze keren ons de rug toe. Dan draait de Els op het podium zich naar het scherm, kruist haar armen en kijkt naar haar eigen close-up, die ons nog steeds onverpinkt aanstaart. Ook Olga luistert naar wat Els op het scherm te vertellen heeft [A toxic green silhouette appears from behind on the right. It is Els. Her close-up on the screen is fuzzy. Her elegant dress and the lectern behind which she stands almost make you forget that she is standing in the middle of a dump. She is encased in a bright white spotlight. The rain stops and the close-up of Els comes into focus. The two Elses – on the screen and behind the lectern – exude the same vacuity. Their movements are synchro- nous. They turn their backs on us. Then the stage Els turns towards the screen, crosses her arms and looks at her own close-up, which still stares at us with a blank stare. Olga also listens to what Els has to say on the screen]

EXAMPLE 6: MAKING THE MOST OF SEMIOTIC MODES, INTERACTION AND REDUNDANCY

This example specifically illustrates choices related to question f., namely to the interaction between modes. At several times during the performance the characters show images to the audience, from newspaper articles or their own personal stories. Most of the time, the actors refer to the pictures in their monologue, providing sufficient context to infer the presence of the picture and its content, limiting the need for AD, for instance: “En zij zien er allemaal uit als hipsters: goed gekleed, verzorgd, baardje, haar strak in de gel” [And they all look like hipsters: well dressed, groomed, small beard, gel in their hair].

In some cases, however, the use of pictures did require additional AD and even explicitation. At one point, for instance, one of the actors shows a picture of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian boy of Kurdish ethnic background, whose image made global headlines after he drowned on 2nd September 2015 in the Mediterranean Sea. The describers needed to evaluate the extent to which the picture was also part of the background knowledge of their target audience. They decided to explicitate: “Els gaat terug achter haar pupiter staan. Haar bewegingen zijn live te volgen op het scherm. Ze toont een foto van Aylan Kurdi. Het lichaampje van de Syrische kleuter ligt levenloos op het strand” [Els resumes her position behind the lectern. Her movements can be followed live on the screen. She shows a picture of Aylan Kurdi.

The
body of the Syrian toddler lies lifeless on the beach]. Note the use of the words “lifeless” and “body”. From the picture itself, it is hard to see whether the boy in the image is dead or simply lying down. This piece of information is normally inferred by the audience on the basis of their knowledge of recent events.

EXAMPLE 8: TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE PRE-RECORDED SETTING

The impact of the pre-recorded setting is felt in the way in which facial expressions were rendered explicit and named. Since the describers could not anticipate how the emotion would be expressed (sometimes the actor cried, sometimes she just looked solemn, sometimes but not always she verbalised her emotion), describing the physiology of the facial expression risked creating inconsistencies if the actor decided to do something else. As a result, emotions were named rather than described as these examples show:

Ze glimlacht bitter [She smiles bitterly.]
Ze kijkt naar Olga, die beteuterd terugblikt [She looks at Olga, who looks back with a pout]
Even lijkt het alsof ze op huilen staat. Dan trekt ze een peinzende frons [For a moment it looks like she’s about to cry. Then she frowns, deep in thought]
Pijnlijk besef. Ze laat haar hoofd hangen. Het rust op haar hand [Painful realisation. She bows her head. It rests on her hand]
Alles barst los: de urine, de schaamte, de droefenis, de haat en de pijn [Everything erupts: the urine, the shame, the sadness, the hate and the pain]

4. Concluding remarks and future directions

Making live multimodal theatrical performances accessible through AD is a challenging but rewarding undertaking that requires much specialised knowledge, creativity and flexibility. Its challenges reside in the fast-changing nature of what theatre is and its multimodal and semiotic functioning, which is determined by the combined affordances of the modes a performance deploys, its stakeholders and the contexts in which it is staged. Multimodal Translation Studies provide a conceptual framework for tackling these challenges. Functional Translation Studies can provide an inroad into mastering them through its pragmatic approach to source text analysis and target text creation: the analysis of the contextual, macro-textual and micro-textual functioning of the performance, which is then fed into the selection of AD macro- and micro-level strategies and performance recreation in a new context.

Theatre AD always entails a shift in the meaning-making process since it replaces visual modes with aural/verbal ones. Moreover, not everything can be described and the amount of description that is possible and/or required will vary greatly. Theatre AD therefore involves a selection and decision-making process in which the audio describer assumes the role of a special audience member. This also means that a degree of subjectivity is unavoidable and that every AD will be different. Likewise, all target audience members will experience performances with AD differently, depending on their own experience and background.

The hybridity of much contemporary theatre, technological innovation in AD and the changing perception of what accessibility can or should be, make it quite impossible to formulate general theatre AD guidelines. Each performance must be approached as a new challenge. However, experienced audio describers can identify the various agents at play in a given performance. They can identify their salience and the main functions they fulfil and they
know who to consult and what materials and information to request for the creation of a well-integrated and enjoyable AD.

Current multimodal and interdisciplinary research that aims to improve and expand theatre AD into the future focuses on technological innovation, the semiotic functioning of the theatre and collaboration among all the agents involved in theatrical productions of different genres, performed in very different contexts.

Notes
1 More information is available on the respective websites: Applaudi (www.applaudi.com/), Spectitular (Panthea.com), Earcatch (www.earcatch.nl/), Startit (https://aptent.es/startit/).
2 https://softlabweb.softlab.uc3m.es/softlab/What.html

5. Further reading


This collection of articles provides insight into the basic concepts and challenges of Multimodal Translation Studies, for different text types and translation forms.


This article provides an overview of the challenges related to the accessibility of live performances for audiences with a visual impairment.


In this seminal article, theatre AD pioneer Andrew Holland outlines the basic principles of theatre AD.

6. References


Aline Remael and Nina Reviers


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