The Routledge Handbook of Audio Description

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Museum audio description

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1. Introduction

Academic research on audio description (AD) originally focused mostly on areas where there were clear barriers to accessibility for people with sight loss (PSL). Description of screen products (film and television) and theatre have long been studied in depth (Lodge & Slater, 1992; Holland, 1999; Benecke, 2004; Hyks, 2005; Greening, 2006; Snyder, 2008; Maswerowska et al., 2014 and Valero in this volume). The ITC “Guidance on Standards for Audio Description”, published in 2000, referred exclusively to screen products, from feature films to documentaries to children’s programmes. Also in 2000, The Audio Description Association’s “Accreditation of Prior Learning in Audio Description Skills” provided training exclusively for theatre productions. Later, as audio description research moved from focusing on (dynamic) screen and stage productions into (static) fields such as museums, exhibitions, buildings and zoos, a new approach was required. The time, space and text boundaries of film and television are governed by the medium’s “self-containedness”. Museum AD researchers and practitioners, who will be the focus of this chapter, had to get to grips with more fluid parameters related to type of presentation, type of visitor, time allotted and visitor attention span, the logistics of museum premises, the planning of tour itineraries, the collaboration with PSL, the use of tactile exploration and, more recently, the exploitation of other senses. Finally, current technological advance has offered the possibility of a level of personalisation in the type of AD provided (see Orero in this volume). The first part of this chapter will cover a number of the fundamental, critical aspects of museum AD that have been analysed and tested over the years, before leading into the second part which will illustrate the achievements of the European project ADLAB PRO, which include the designing of the professional profile of the audio describer and the creation of didactic materials for the training of describers in all fields. One whole section of the project is devoted to museum AD and it is this area that will be discussed here.

2. Basic issues

2.1 Type of presentation

Given the fluidity, or flexibility, alluded to previously, museum AD can be produced and presented in more varied ways than screen AD. The type of presentation to offer to people with
sight loss who wish to visit a museum will depend on a number of factors – the number of visitors, the level of blindness, the (non) provision of accompaniment, the previous knowledge of the type of museum on the part of the visitors, their degree of “world knowledge”, the purpose of the visit (education or entertainment, or edutainment) and so on (Szarkowska et al., 2014; Neves, 2016; Hutchinson, 2016). Armed with this kind of prior knowledge, the person who actually delivers the descriptions, who may be a professional museum describer, a trained museum employee or an enthusiastic accompanier, may in the first instance opt for a pre-prepared description of exhibits or give off-the-cuff explanations inviting interactive questioning. Alternatively, a describer can prepare a series of descriptions to be delivered through a hand-held receiver, provided at the museum entrance or made available online in advance (Fineman and Cock in this volume). These latter systems are often provided for unbooked individual visitors or groups whose date or time of arrival is not known. The British Museum in London, for example, offers this service free of charge. But while it provides descriptions of the most important exhibits (e.g., the Rosetta Stone), until recently there was no guidance as to how to move around the vast and crowded museum (see Fineman and Cock in this volume). The exhibits are indicated with the symbol of an eye which has to be spotted and thus the service inevitably also requires the assistance of a sighted accompanier. A further advance on this system can be found in the prepared location of “beacons” which beep when an exhibit is reached, accompanied by directions as to the route to follow. This method has been recently introduced, for example, at the National Archeological Museum of Aquileia in Italy, and has been received with considerable acclaim.

Some museums provide an all-inclusive audio guide for both PSL and sighted visitors but these devices lack certain necessary features. Guides designed specifically for PSL require a more minute attention to itinerary planning, a more careful selection of exhibits to describe, directional assistance and indication of all safety measures provided. In the case of sculpture and other three-dimensional artefacts the methodology adopted increasingly includes the possibility of tactile exploration (touch tours). As demonstrated by the work, for example, of the Anteros Museum in Bologna, two-dimensional paintings can also be appreciated through touch as this institution specialises in the creation of plaster-cast models in relief of famous masterpieces, designed principally for the benefit of the PSL population (Secchi, 2014 and this volume).

2.2 Type of visitor

There are a number of ways of categorising the type of sight-impaired visitor to a museum or gallery. One is by degree of blindness: the totally blind from birth have had no visual conception of objects and space; the visually impaired, on the other hand, have some level of visual access; those whose sight loss came later in life, either through illness, old age or accident, have had experience of visual culture. Clearly the level of detailed explanation required in an audio description and the kind of approach to adopt will differ as one moves along the level of blindness cline.

Visitors with sight loss can also be categorised in terms of background experience. Are they seasoned museum-goers or are they what might be termed beginners, or false beginners, to borrow a term from language pedagogy. Generally speaking, the former category tend to be individuals and the latter to be members of a group, often with varying levels of disability, varying levels of background knowledge and varying levels of interest. Thus the various AD approaches alluded to in the previous paragraph often have to be abandoned in favour of a catch-all attempt to satisfy as many of the visitors as possible, while with individuals, the approach taken can be gauged to the needs of that visitor.
However, very often PSL visit museums in groups that are pre-booked. In this case the institution in question may prepare any of the aforementioned AD methods depending on the specificities of the group and of the museum. Different approaches will be required for general adults, interested patrons, children, families and so on, just as different preparations should be made for the totally blind and the merely sight-impaired. Given that many sighted museum visitors spend little time before many exhibits while strolling round a museum, especially towards the end of a tour, the describer must take into account, or gauge en route, the attention span of the group in general and pitch his/her talk accordingly. As regards the level of edutainment, the basic qualities of clarity, brevity and accuracy, common to all audio descriptions, may be supplemented by an entertainment coefficient if the audience is deemed to appreciate it.

The number of PSL in a group can be a deciding factor in determining the logistics of a museum visit. In the case of large numbers a human guide is essential. If circumstances require it, for example, in a large, crowded museum area, the describer will need the assistance of such a guide. If the describer is also the guide, then appointing a leader is useful so the other members of the group can “follow-my-leader”, and by holding on to one another if their condition requires it.

A further categorisation is that of age, principally the divide between adults and children. The latter also tend to come in groups (from special schools, institutes for the blind, etc.). Here the question of level of interest and attention span is a crucial factor and will be addressed later.

2.3 PSL involvement: “nothing about us, without us”

In all cases, whether we are dealing with the totally or partially blind, with more or less interested blind patrons, of whatever age, assistance in the producing of ADs on the part of PSL themselves should be an obligatory requirement. The slogan quoted in the subtitle – “nothing about us, without us” – is the battle-cry of the committed PSL who, quite rightly, insist that the service of audio description needs their input to have any sense. Their experience and involvement is invaluable in the choosing of museums to visit, choosing the exhibits to focus upon and how to present the description. It was invaluable also in creating European AD guidelines a few years ago within the project ADLAB² (Taylor, 2014). The following quote from the Disability Studies Quarterly (Levent et al., 2016) makes this clear.

The best access programmes, now and in the future, are those that actively seek input from blind and visually impaired patrons, artists, scholars and activists, who will press for a wider range of inclusive practices that will enrich the culture at large.

At the other end of the process, reception studies, which probe the views and assessments of blind patrons regarding their museum experience, are equally important. Information and reactions regarding time allotment, exhibit selection, voicing and logistics (see next section) gleaned from blind and sight-impaired patrons, are crucial for the planning of future visits. One aspect that emerges clearly from such studies, as it does from similar experiences with screen AD, is that the PSL wish to be treated as far as possible like sighted patrons and reject any form of what might be considered condescension. For this reason, these kind of reception studies can be seen within the wider discipline of visitor studies (see Hutchinson and Eardley in this volume). According to Dawson and Jensen (2011: 127),

Visitors’ experiences (should be placed) within a holistic and long-term framework of individual life circumstances, relationships and trajectories. Research and theory from
education, sociology and cultural studies extends existing visitor research approaches by acknowledging complexity, change over time and the interwoven and developmental nature of sociocultural variables influencing visitors’ appropriation of new ideas and experiences.

The “life circumstances”, “relationships”, “complexity” and “change over time” factors certainly impact on the blind visitors’ “appropriation of new ideas and experiences” and depend on the type of blind visitor categorised earlier. A report issued by the London-based AD provider VocalEyes identified issues such as confidence, transport, companionship, information, understanding the space, collaboration, knowledgeable and enthusiastic staff, time management, personal attention . . .

(Eardley et al., 2017)

Thus the kind of feedback provided by people with sight loss in some respects does not differ significantly from that found in surveys of sighted visitors, but in other important respects is specific to their condition.

2.4 Logistics

One aspect of museum visits that impacts solely on PSL, for example, is that regarding the logistics of moving groups of visitors around a museum, which may consist of several floors and multiple rooms, and may be very crowded. If a human guide is in charge of the group, or an accompanier is present, the group members simply follow directional instructions. However, an increasing number of institutions have prepared handset instructions for unaccompanied PSL or have prepared online instructions which can be downloaded to a smartphone or tablet. As mentioned already, the use of beacons to indicate artefacts to stop at and when to turn on the description, are a technological step forward in this sense. For example, at the aforementioned National Archeological Museum in Aquileia, the PSL visitor is first prepared for the tour with an introductory text. From this moment the whole recording is available both in Italian and in English for the foreign visitor. The Italian version (Pietracci, 2017) is provided first:


The English version that follows is found on a separate channel (it underlines information not contained in the original):

A very warm welcome to the National Archeological Museum of Aquileia. Today, this short descriptive tour will show you the rooms on the ground floor. The main items on the tour will be the statue of Augustus, the bronze applique with Boreas and the cinerary
The statue and the urn can be touched during the visit. If you are at the ticket office, go past it and leave it to your right. The first room you will go through is the introductory room of the museum. This room gives information about the city of Aquileia, its history and general characteristics.

The tour then begins and the first beacon signals the AD with the following directional and informational content (here in English):

*This introductory room gives direct access to the first room. The first two rooms of the ground floor are reserved for public buildings. Now you are in the first of them. This is the room dedicated to statuary, where our tour officially begins.*

At each move forward to the next beacon, indications of the following type are provided:

*Continue straight into the middle room, reserved for architecture...*

*Continue directly into the last room...*

*Our small tour showing the rooms of the ground floor ends here. If you want to continue your visit towards the second floor, reserved for private life, you can find the stairs on your left. Instead, the exit is on your right. It was a pleasure having you here with us today.*

Of course, this example is very basic. A more complicated case is represented by the Miramare Castle Museum in Trieste, which consists of many rooms, two floors and an outside itinerary. A complete tour guide for PSL was prepared for use through hand-sets, again in Italian and in English (Biscuola, 2018). A tour of the interior is followed by a tour of the surrounding park which contains a number of places of interest such as The Stables, The Holm-oak Avenue, Castle Square, the Round Terrace, The Amazon and another twenty or so selected elements (see Taylor & Perego, 2021). This outdoor section requires a different AD approach than that used for the part of the museum housed in the Castle. The AD described here was designed for use as an audio guide and thus as an autonomous tool for people with sight loss. It begins with the following introduction (Biscuola, 2018: 88):

*Welcome to Miramare park. This descriptive guide has been designed to talk you through your visit to the most accessible part of the park and it will last about 45 minutes. For safety reasons, only some of the outstanding features of the park will be described. Every time, indications will be given on how to find your way through the park from one stop to the next: an approximate count of the necessary steps will be provided, as well as the time required. The instructions will be given at the beginning of each track, to give you time to comfortably reach your destination. The park being an open space, please take extra care while you walk around, as the path might be wet or slippery.*

The introduction stresses the accessibility factor, pointing out that only safely accessible elements will be described and also providing warnings relating to possible weather conditions. It gives the required information in terms of orientation (find your way through the park), distance (the necessary steps) and time (overall 45 minutes and time required at each stop). As can be imagined, the creation of this outdoor guide required meticulous preparation, of a
kind that transcends that required for the more common indoor experience. The attention to
time and direction are common to both, but the dimensions involved and the planning of a
viable itinerary require a more innovative approach. These kinds of instructions are provided
throughout the tour.

Proceed on the road following the pavement to your left. Please be careful of the cars,
as they can travel on this road from both directions. You can step on the pavement if you
prefer to do so, but please be careful as there are trees on it. Keep walking until you reach
the entrance to the park, marked out by a large arch. Once you’ve stepped beyond the
arch, you will have reached a pedestrian zone, so you will be able to walk more freely. At
this point, select the next track.

Later in the tour the size of the outdoor exhibits needs to be addressed, some of which are very
large (statues, buildings, trees). As well as the expected description in terms of metres (about
a metre wide), they are also provided through comparison (as tall as a person). Similarly, short
distances (a few metres) can be easily understood but where long distances are involved we find
time references (keep walking along the avenue for about three minutes). The afore-mentioned
sonar beacons can provide assistance here in indicating when the three minutes have passed.

2.5 Multisensorality

Examples of different museum environments such as those illustrated earlier require that
research into museum AD must be geared to constantly new challenges. The whole idea of what
a museum should be has changed dramatically in the 21st century (O’Neill, 2008; Wood &
Latham, 2014; Samis & Michaelson, 2017; Mason et al., 2018). Even traditional established
museums such as the Victoria and Albert in London have modernised and adapted to the point
of holding temporary multisensory exhibitions on rock stars and fashion gurus. The hands-on
phenomenon has spread to museums far and wide. Some institutions have also introduced
elements exploiting all the senses. The concept of sound and vision has been around for some
time but exhibitions featuring the senses of touch (feel the moonrock), taste (drink a tankard of
medieval mead) and smell (the scent of flowers in the Miramare Park) are ever more frequent.

As mentioned earlier, tactile exploration is increasingly offered by museums with three-
dimensional exhibits (see Secchi in this volume) often in the form of touch tours. The follow-
ing is an example from the Revoltella Museum in Trieste (Zordan, 2017) where an itinerary is
prepared covering what are deemed the most important or attractive artefacts, particularly those
which lend themselves to tactile analysis. The sculpture Sfera n. 3 can be seen in Figure 12.1.

First an oral description and explanation of the object is given. Then the instructions for the
tactile exploration are provided:

Place your hands on the northern pole of the sphere. Now let your hands slide along the
surface, one towards the right, the other towards the left, until you reach the openings.
On the left you will find a smaller crack, while the main one is located to the right. The
surface you will feel is highly irregular, with deep grooves from which a few elements
emerge, perpendicular to one another and at different depths. Now move your hands
down towards the centre along the openings and you will find the parallelepiped.

As part of the AD research carried out at the University of Trieste, a plaster cast model of
Guido Reni’s painting “Atalanta e Ippomene”, created at the aforementioned Anteros Museum
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The sculpture Sfera n. 3

in Bologna and described for tactile exploration, has been mounted in the department entrance hall for inspection by all students and by any members of the public at any time (see Taylor & Perego, 2021). Visits by blind groups and individuals have been organised and much appreciated. Thus new ways of providing access for PSL to museum material are being constantly sought. In this sense a final word must go to the concept of personalisation, now potentially available in all sectors of AD. Already we have seen that the audio guide ADs mentioned earlier are available in two languages. The digital technology currently exploitable would allow for the insertion of any number of different languages. Similarly the user can opt for a male or a female voice, for a synopsis of the exhibits selected for description or for more detailed explanations. Answers to queries for further information regarding the exhibits or regarding the ancillary services (toilets, cafés, bookshops, notice boards, etc.) can be integrated. Musical accompaniments can be switched on or off. Further references (e.g., a history of the museum, forthcoming exhibitions, etc.) can be sought at the touch of a button. Buttons may in fact become redundant as voiced commands are preferred.

Having discussed various fundamental aspects of museum AD and mentioned a number of technical innovations which will affect future visits, it is time to look at how research has been progressing over the last few years. The European project ADLAB (2011–2014) ventured into the theoretical side of research through exhaustive text analysis and examination of the myriad aspects particularly of screen AD, but also tackling museum guides. This work resulted in the publication of a first book on the results achieved (Maswerowska et al., 2014) and a second volume containing a complete flexible and strategic manual of how to approach and create ADs (Remael et al., 2015). A second project ADLAB PRO (2016–2019), involving academic and business partners across Europe, ventured more into the practical side of research, producing a profile of the qualities and competences required of an audio describer and a complete online course of didactic material to be used for the training of future
describers. The second part of this chapter will explain how this was achieved, with particular reference to museum AD.

3. Research

3.1 The ADLAB PRO course materials

Guidelines are an invaluable tool when it comes to shifting from theory to practice and when the audiovisual translator must eventually deal with the actual AD writing process. Being able to resort to reference points in going through this process is decisive and the ADLAB guidelines are certainly effective purveyors of flexible strategies that are easy to implement, depending on different contexts and constraints (Remael et al., 2015). Guidelines, however, acquire a value if the describer already has a background in AD. The project ADLAB PRO (Perego, 2017) was launched with the aim of creating free-access, flexible, didactic materials of a modular and customisable nature for the training of the audio describer, an extremely important professional figure with a key role in the field of media accessibility (ADLAB PRO, 2018; Matamala & Orero 2007; Matamala et al., 2019). In spite of the current promotion of an inclusive society and the growing need for accessible products, the professional figures working in the field of AD are still few and not always trained. This is why the European project ADLAB PRO aimed to fill this gap. It did so working towards the design of a course curriculum and the development of training materials keeping diverse AD genres and diverse training settings in mind. As shown in Figure 12.2, the course provides a compulsory introductory module that sets the scene, and self-contained modules on screen AD (Module 2), AD of live events (Module 3), semi live AD and recorded AD for static arts and environment (Module 4). Module 5 illustrates how AD can be integrated with services such as audio subtitling, voice-over and dubbing while Module 6 tackles aspects that are closely linked to the provision of AD, such as the various applications used to consume it, technologies enabling AD to be delivered in different settings, its translation into different languages and its delivery through text-to-speech technologies.

![Figure 12.2 ADLAB PRO course structure](image-url)
The curriculum was devised to fit both academic and vocational settings. This is ensured by its modular nature (the six modules are self-sufficient and can be mixed and matched by users according to their needs, background and teaching/learning styles), by the assignment of both ECTS and ECVETS to each module (Figure 12.2) (Perego, 2019) and by the presence of a Trainer’s guide that can accompany even less experienced trainers to use the materials effectively in a classroom.

The course is divided into Modules, each comprising a number of Units grouped in relation to Learning Outcomes, in other words, “statements of what a student is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after the completion of a process of learning” (European Commission, 2015: 47). Learning Outputs were formulated in accordance with Kennedy’s (2007) guidelines. The whole course is free and available online (www.adlabpro.eu/coursematerials/). The materials offered per each unit are various and enable users to resort to what they need, based on their role (trainer, trainee, self-taught person, etc.) and their abilities (the course materials are in fact accessible, as they are subtitled and transcripts of the oral narrations are provided for text-to-speech software). Each Unit includes the same set of materials (Figure 12.3) (Matamala et al., 2019):

1) a core video, i.e., a short lecture based on a Power Point presentation, offered along with its full transcript and the PPT itself. Core videos are in English and they are subtitled in all the project languages;
2) one or more additional videos, expanding on the basic notions illustrated in the core video. While core videos have a fixed and very linear structure and comprise no images (for the sake of their accessibility), additional videos are varied and more creative and they range from simple lectures to interviews, authentic examples, or short animations. Only additional videos that were recorded in local languages were subtitled in English;
3) a wide-ranging set of hands-on tasks to be performed alone or in groups was offered to create opportunities for learners to engage with the content they have been taught. Each learning task is clearly described and designed to create the conditions for learning. Some stimulate experiential learning, others mobilise conceptual thinking, or prompt students to engage in analytical discussion;
4) a reading list of required, recommended or further reading resources. They include books, book chapters, journal articles, etc., that directly relate to the teaching of the unit and are arranged into sections that correspond with its learning activities and assessment.

Such organisation of the materials makes it easier for users to resort to the whole 30-ECTS/ECVETS course and integrate it fully or partially into an already existing training path, or to select the single item they need at a moment in time.
3.2 Semi live AD and recorded AD for static arts and environment

In this chapter, we will focus on Module 4, revolving around art AD. Table 12.1 offers a brief summary of the Module and of its ten Units.

Module 4 illustrates that the different existing AD genres have much in common, but each has specificities that must be respected when producing a script. Art AD (as we will call “Semi live AD and recorded AD for static arts and environments”) differs primarily from other types of AD based on the type of source text that needs intersemiotic translation. As suggested by Hutchinson and Eardley (2019: 42) “the notion of the “source text” for museums should be expanded beyond the visual elements of museums’ collections, encompassing the wider museum visiting experience”. Therefore, the source text of art AD is an item of static (vs. dynamic) visual art, such as a painting, a sculpture, an installation, or even a historic or heritage site such as a building, a landmark, a landscape, a site or structure that is of local, regional, or national significance. But it also comprises the environment in which the final product will be used and the impact it will have on the user. The environment where art AD is used normally is the museum – an institution devoted to the procurement, care, study and display of objects of lasting interest or value – or the historic site itself. Museums have changed dramatically over the years, with modern museums being characterised by a dynamic complexity and inspiring hybridity that have dramatically changed the way they are consumed and perceived (Black, 2005; Falk & Dierking, 2016).

Art AD has textual and linguistic features of its own (Giansante, 2015; Perego, 2018). Compared to screen AD, for instance, it can be less concise, but still has to conform to the attention span of end-users. The constraints of art ADs are therefore different and the AD script does not need to jostle to fit in between pre-existing stretches of dialogue because it co-occurs with the source text. In fact, art AD can successfully co-occur with other means of sensory access. These include the provision of Braille versions of the captions displayed by each artefact, for those who can read Braille; large letter documentation and guided or independent tactile exploration enabling the patrons to touch exhibits (or models thereof) while listening to the AD or being accompanied by a human guide. Art AD allows for more liberty in the use of appraisal and personal interpretation (cf. “these magnificent 17th century tapestries” or “the

Table 12.1 Module 4: Units

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module 4. (Semi) live AD and recorded AD for static arts and environments</th>
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<tr>
<td>Unit 1 gives a definition of static arts and offers some examples</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unit 2 focuses on museums’ history and new developments, giving examples of different types of museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 3 illustrates the main theoretical and practical notions for the description of static arts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unit 4 enumerates the main AD strategies and provides examples of professional and nonprofessional AD scripts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unit 5 outlines the main differences and shared aspects of live and recorded ADs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unit 6 shows the best practices when giving directions in a descriptive tour</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unit 7 defines tactile tours, gives you tips on their construction and focuses on the overall significance of touch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unit 8 tells you what descriptive tours are and guides you through the main practical steps to build one</td>
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<td>Unit 9 highlights the importance and role of stakeholders in the description of art and environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 10 reports on the main fields of interest in AD for the arts</td>
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</table>
walls are covered with rich, cream-coloured silk, hand painted with floral patterns to achieve a perfect oriental style (in the AD of Miramare Castle). Language wise, art AD should be informative and vivid. In English, informativity is easily achieved through high lexical density; using more lexical than grammatical words. Complex noun groups successfully address this need in English much more easily than in other languages, especially Romance languages: “a tiny lilac-coloured footprint on a newborn baby girl’s identification form" (with a lexical density of 72.73%). The fact that English allows for serial adjectives, even in their composed form, is a further linguistic feature favouring the compression of information: “he wears a dark-coloured velvet coat with a white shirt beneath and a long, curly brown wig" (with a lexical density of 58.82%). Lexical variety, which is reached via a high type/token ratio, can contribute to delivering a richer and more detailed text, where nuances are brought to light rather than hidden or overlooked. In the following English AD excerpt of the statue of Augustus 7 the very short description resorts to partial synonyms such as chipped (cut or broken from a hard material), damaged (injured in such a way as to reduce the value or usefulness of something) and broken (separated into pieces):

Not only has the statue chipped parts on the face, the body is damaged as well: the left arm is broken at the wrist and the hand, together with the right forearm and the feet, are missing.

At a closer analysis, we observe that the 34-word sentence includes 28 different words (17 if we exclude common words). This clearly ensures a dynamic, descriptive and vivid text. Its complexity and readability (Gunning Fog Index 8 = 15.88), or in a word, its usability, might be questioned, however, especially if the text is addressed to people with comprehension disability.

As mentioned earlier in the text, it is very difficult to create one text that fits for all. A short lexically varied and vivid text might be perfect for a blind or visually impaired museum-goer, or for a sighted amateur who wishes to see beyond the superficial, thanks to an AD. Catering for other population groups might require adaptations that consider content simplification (Paunović, 2017; Perego, 2020; Taylor & Perego, 2021), resorting to language comprehension enhancement varieties that range from Plain (Cutts, 2013) to Easy (Maaß, forthcoming) Language. This is precisely an aspect on which the European project EASIT 9 is working (Matamala & Orero, 2019).

4. Beyond accessibility: towards language competence expansion

AD in general originated as an accessibility service for people with sight loss (Benecke, 2004; Greening, 2006; ITC, 2000; Lodge & Slater, 1992; Neves, 2016; Remael et al., 2015; Snyder, 2008). As with many services, though, its main target has expanded and is growing. Furthermore, even within its primary beneficiaries, its advantages developed from “simply” granting access to artworks to increasing the language competence and confidence of blind and visually impaired art-lovers. An interesting example in this respect is the use of jargon in art ADs. Most guidelines recommend using only the necessary amount of art jargon, or even to avoid it, when drafting an art AD script: after all, ADs should be usable and grant comprehension. Users should not be put off by difficult terms, which are unnecessary, overwhelming and distracting. This might be true, but only partially. Resorting to specialised art language enables AD writers to convey meaning monoferrentially and precisely. Additionally, even though jargon specific to a discipline can hinder the readability or the general comprehension of a text for a non-expert, it can have positive effects on the receivers in terms of language acquisition. Based on Murray’s theory (elaborated in the realm of language acquisition) (1998: vi), we can
stress that listening to art AD involves not just access to a piece of art that would otherwise remain unknown. It also fosters the acquisition of a specialised language to talk about it and to make sense of how other professionals and other people talk about it, which ensures users become comfortable with this language. New language might seem obscure at the beginning, but is normally accepted quickly and may constitute the first step towards an understanding of the concepts that these terms encode (Murray, 1998: 3, 6). This is a clear sign that exposure to language gives one an advantage in learning (their first or second language) through owning that language terminology and feeling comfortable with consciously using or avoiding it (through a process that Fairclough, 2003 calls “inculcation”).

However, as mentioned earlier, many AD guidelines recommend avoiding jargon or difficult words in general. The acquisitional benefits of specialised language, however, should not be overlooked. Those who are in favour of a balanced use of jargon recommend introducing it and then explaining it, which, by the way, is a cardinal principle also in most Plain and Easy Language recommendations (Cutts, 2013; Maaß, forthcoming). And this is exactly what happens in most AD cases:

Originally, Augustus held a patera (a sort of bowl used to make offers during religious ceremonies) in his right hand and a cornucopia (a horn filled with fruits and flowers which symbolises abundance and wealth) in his left hand.

Recent research (McDonnell et al., 2015) interestingly suggests that introducing new concepts in a concept-first, jargon-second manner can increase student learning, as demonstrated by their ability to articulate their understanding of new concepts.

Because AD should work as a form of accessible communication, its role in empowering end-users and in granting them the linguistic competence and confidence necessary to avert communicative exclusion inside and outside the museum is crucial. Modest changes to the way art ADs are crafted should therefore be considered and exploited, to make AD a useful tool both for its primary users to reach out to its secondary beneficiaries – in particular, language learners. The impact of AD on remembering terminology is in fact known in the sector (e.g., Krejtz et al., 2012).

The AD of a 20th century painting titled Velo Azzurro by the Italian artist Glauco Cambon (Blue veil, 1907) includes the following description halfway through the text (Lopedota, 2017):

Dark and light blue brushstrokes alternate with black, giving the dress its navy blue tint.

At the end of the description proper, the technique and the background of the painter are offered:

The influence of Rietti and Veruda and impressionist painting can be seen in the rapid, confident brushstrokes, which become almost impetuous in the painting of the oriental background.

The term “brushstroke”, referring to the configuration given to paint by contact with the bristles of a brush, or the paint left on a surface by a single application of a brush or palette knife and creating a web of colour, is repeated twice in the 465-word AD, which opens as follows:

Velo Azzurro is a painting by the Trieste artist Glauco Cambon. It was competed in 1907 and acquired by the museum in 1908. It is a small oil on cardboard 95 cm by 55 cm. The painting is of a young woman in the early twentieth century.
Switching the closing paragraph with the opening paragraph of the AD is just one option that would enable the introduction of a short definition of “brushstroke” and to use the term later in the text, enabling the end-user to grasp its meaning and thus feel more confident, with more chances to memorise it and presumably re-use it in other contexts.

5. Concluding remarks

Art AD is an AD type with specificities which have been enucleated and transformed into flexible recommendations in Module 4 of the ADLAB PRO course and that can be further analysed and adapted to new audiences through simplification strategies thanks to the work of the current EASIT project. In this chapter, we have shown several aspects of art AD but we wished to highlight its expanded use as a language tool capable of giving the competence and confidence to blind or visually impaired museum-goers, but also to expand first and second language specialised terminology for sighted users.

Notes

1 Both authors contributed to the full chapter, with Christopher Taylor dealing specifically with the Type of presentation, PSL involvement: “nothing about us, without us”, Multisensoriality, Semi live AD and recorded AD for static arts and environment and the Concluding remarks, and Elisa Perego dealing specifically with the Introduction, Type of visitor, Logistics, The ADLAB PRO course materials, and Beyond accessibility: towards language competence expansion.

2 The project ADLAB (Audio Description: Lifelong Access for the Blind), coordinated by Chris Taylor of the University of Trieste, was financed by the European Union under the Lifelong Learning Programme (2011–2014).

3 The project ADLAB PRO (Audio Description: A Laboratory for the Development of a New Professional Profile), coordinated by Elisa Perego of the University of Trieste, was financed by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Programme, Key Action 2, Strategic Partnerships (2016–2019).

4 According to the ECTS User’s Guide “ECTS credits express the volume of learning based on the defined learning outcomes and their associated workload” (European Commission, 2015: 11). ECVET points, on the other hand, express the competences needed by the learner to complete a qualification in numerical form (European Commission, 2015).

5 Cradle to Death, British Museum.
6 Painting of Sir Hans Sloane, British Museum.
7 The National Archaeological Museum of Aquileia.
8 The Gunning Fog Index is a measure devised specifically for English writing to calculate text readability. The index estimates the years of formal education a person needs to understand the text on the first reading (Gunning, 1952).

9 The project EASIT (Easy Access for Social Inclusion Training), coordinated by Anna Matamala of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, was financed by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Programme (2018–2021). Project number: 2018–1-ES01-KA203–050275.

10 The statue of Augustus, the National Archaeological Museum of Aquileia (Pietracci, 2017).
11 The Revoltella Museum of Modern Art, Trieste.

6. Further reading


7. References


8. Disclaimer

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