1. Introduction

A thought-provoking way to start an account of audio description in Russia is to point to the fact that Netflix does not consider that AD exists in Russia and has never requested any services of the kind from vendors so far. Why should this be the case? Does it really not exist in Russia? Or is this some kind of historical or terminological mistake? Actually, it is both.

2. Historical perspective

As with the rest of the world, audio description emerged in Russia (or in the USSR, to be more correct) in the 1970s. However, some early forerunners of audio describers may be identified. In 1803, Emperor Alexander I of Russia asked Valentin Haüy, a famous teacher and humanist from France, to open an educational institution for blind children in St. Petersburg. However, from the very first days of his stay in Russia, Haüy faced certain difficulties. Russian authorities claimed that there were no blind people in Russia. Haüy had to search for such children and invite them to the school. The curriculum included such subjects as reading and writing using dotted alphabet, theology, Russian language, literature, arithmetic, history, geography, singing and music. Blind children were also taught to make baskets and chairs and knit. There is no doubt that all the teachers were audio describers to a certain degree, although this term was not used. A national census performed in the late 1890s in fact found a large number of blind and visually impaired people in Russia (in Siberia alone, there were 247,000 blind people). At that time, there were 20 schools for the blind in Russia. Furthermore, a magazine Russky Slepets (“Russian Blind Person”) was published. In 1910, the first Braille textbook was published. In 1920, a decree of the Russian Government specified that all kinds of educational institutions for the blind should be founded, from kindergartens to colleges. In 1924, the All-Russia Society for the Blind was founded and a blind writer, A. Belorukov, initiated publication of the magazine Zhizn' Slepykh (“Life of the Blind”).
3. Russian “Cinema Reciters” of the silent film era

From the very moment of its birth, cinema was silent. However, complete silence in a dark room was unbearable for the audience. Therefore, “tapers” were invited to film screenings. These were musicians who played at balls, parties and receptions. They were the first to fill the cinema with sounds. But music was just the beginning. The first films were very short, so there were pauses during the sessions, when projectors had to be recharged. Therefore, film distributors began to invite lecturers who filled the breaks with stories about the technology of cinema and its significance. And at some point, someone came up with the idea to describe what was happening on the screen for the audience. Several filmmakers, such as Georges Méliès in France, began to write special comments that were read out during the screening of the film and explained its plot. In French such verbal descriptions were called boniment (“advertising, product description”) and the people who read them were called bonimenteur (“barker, chatterbox”) (Altman, 2004: 141). In the English-speaking world, these specialists were called “lecturers”. In Persia, silent films were also accompanied by comments made by a man or woman sitting in a cinema hall: they were simply called “translators”. In Japan, benshi not only described the plot and translated intertitles into Japanese, but also explained the behaviour of European and American actors that could be misunderstood by the Japanese audience. In Russia, these specialists were called kinodeklamator (cinema reciters) (Perego & Pacinotti, 2020).

In 1909, a famous silent film director, P.I. Chardynin, created the genre of cinema reciting in Russia (Tsivyan, 1992: 208). Every film description consisted of monologues in prose and verse. It was also called “speaking motion pictures”.

V.G. Niglov (considered to be the first star of this genre) was one of the most famous film reciters. Newspapers wrote that V.G. Niglov “revived the dead canvas of cinema, brought it closer to life . . . The artist has a great tragic talent, the power of which captures the audience”. (Eletskikh, 2007: 32). This art of film description was so popular that the mass media wrote about the “epidemics of cinema reciting” (Eletskikh, 2007: 33).

The following extract from the description of a silent film Drama v Moskve (“Drama in Moscow or An Episode from the Criminal Chronicle”) demonstrates the style of Russian film reciters:

An office of a young attorney. He has just finished receiving clients. The door opens and Nata, his fiancée, enters: she had come to invite the betrothed to celebrate the New Year with them. They are carelessly chatting, when suddenly Nata notices someone’s portrait on the table. ‘Who is this’? she asks. ‘Well, a friend’ – the groom answers confusedly. He is so embarrassed, because he has not yet told his fiancée that he is married and that his wife will not give him a divorce. Nata leaves. His wife comes in almost immediately; she asks him to forget all the past and start a new life, but when he refuses, she leaves, threatening him with revenge.

In the Far East of Russia, the Soviet military intelligence officer and martial artist Vasily Oschepkov mastered the Japanese art of benshi and worked as a film describer both in Japan and Soviet Russia. Alexander Kulanov, Oschepkov’s biographer, found a document showing the genres that this Russian benshi worked with. These are “dramas from the life of a detective, the investigation of some complicated criminal crime”, pictures of “lyrical content” and stories “from the life of a patriot, a hero who distinguished himself in the war for the benefit of the Fatherland”, “Grimm’s, Gauf’s, Andersen’s tales”, films “from the life of wild tribes”, as well as comedies with Charlie Chaplin (Kulanov, 2017: 125–127).
Although the genre of film lectures was not intended to help the blind and visually impaired understand the film content, they undoubtedly benefitted from these descriptions. However, during the Silent Film era, at least in cinema theatres of the Russian Empire, there were narrators, who described motion pictures specifically for the blind. As was stated previously, “tapers” accompanied films with their music. Most of them were blind and visually impaired (Belorukov, 1912: 173). Alexander Belorukov, who himself was a blind musician, described the problem faced by his colleagues:

the main advantage of our competitors, i.e., sighted musicians, is that when they see a film, they are better able to illustrate all its features and scenes with music. Blind musicians, on the contrary, sometimes do not care about the plot at all. But the music that does not correspond to the content of the motion pictures cannot be accepted successfully by the audience. (Belorukov, 1912: 176)

Therefore, experienced musicians hired sighted “film prompters” who would sit next to the musician and explain to them what was shown on the screen, thus helping the blind person to adjust the music to the picture. “The technique of narrating films is a kind of invention of blind musicians”, claims Belorukov (Belorukov, 1912: 176). He also emphasises the benefits of such narrations:

when the visually impaired get acquainted with the film content, they open their minds to new scientific data from such fields as geography, history, literature, natural science, etc. Various emotions of the screen characters seem to open the secrets of psychology to the blind, teach them to understand other people’s joys and troubles and, at the same time, to be aware of their own emotions . . . The blind can surely benefit from all these things. (Belorukov, 1912: 177)

Therefore, it may be concluded that the first attempts to make films accessible to the blind and visually impaired were made as early as the 1910s.

4. Audio description for blind, visually impaired and Deaf-Blind students

In Russia, the first attempts to teach Deaf-Blind people were made by the St. Petersburg charitable society in 1909 (Apraushev, 1973: 4). In 1923, at the Kharkiv school of the blind, Professor I. A. Sokolyansky opened the first class for the Deaf-Blind. Eight students from different parts of the Ukraine were taught to speak, write, read and do chores. This school was destroyed by the Nazis during World War II and almost all the students died. In 1947, Professor Sokolyansky continued his work with the Deaf-Blind at the Moscow Research Institute of Defectology under the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences. He also invented several gadgets to facilitate communication with the Deaf-Blind. For example, he designed a teletactor (a device enabling deaf people to feel vibrations using their fingers); a Braille phone; a Braille reading device, and more (Apraushev, 1983: 136). One of his students, Olga Skorokhodova, who lost her vision and hearing in childhood, obtained a PhD in Education and wrote several books on the psychology of Deaf-Blindness. She also wrote several poems.

In 1963, a boarding school for Deaf-Blind children was founded in Zagorsk – now known as Sergiyev Posad. It was a unique educational institution, where 50 teachers took care of 50 students. It can be stated that during this period (starting from 1923) the first attempts to set basic principles of description of the surrounding world for the blind were made. Deaf-Blind
students visited museums, theatres and cinemas, where teachers described what was happen-
ing on the stage or on the screen.

In her book, Skorokhodova talks about her experience of perception of such narrations. For example, in the chapter “How I Imagine What Happens on Stage”, she says: “they described the style and colour of the costumes of acrobats and dancers; I could not imagine the colour at all, but if some dress was already familiar to me, I could imagine it” (Skorokhodova, 1990: 173). Description of theatre performance also caused certain difficulties:

there was a play in which only two women participated. They were always talking to each other, but facial expressions and gestures that accompanied this conversation were crucial for the plot. Maria translated the contents of their conversation alone and this did not make any impression on me. Frankly, I didn’t even imagine the stage or the two women. It seemed to me that there was a void ahead of me and Maria seemed to be saying something boring or hastily reading a book.

(Skorokhodova, 1990: 173)

The same problems occurred when watching movies:

while describing a film, a translator usually hurries to tell me everything that they see at
the moment. A translator is in a hurry, they perceive everything almost mechanically and
my attention is entirely focused on how to perceive the words and I do not have time to
imagine characters, settings and landscapes.

(Skorokhodova, 1990: 175)

She also explains that a brief introduction with a description of locations, costumes and the
plot would help to perceive a film better. Although no guidelines on audio description were
published, teachers at schools for the Deaf-Blind gathered a lot of information on how to
describe the surrounding world for visually impaired children.

5. Audio description in the USSR

The first film with a Russian audio description was shown at the Moscow cinema theatre
Burevesnik in 1978. It was located near the Dobryninskaya subway station, not far from the
Russian National Central Library for the Blind. In addition, this cinema was equipped with an
audio induction loop system (also known as audio-frequency induction loops [AFILs] or hear-
ing loops) for transmitting enhanced film sound to help the hearing-impaired audience listen to
movie soundtracks. Therefore, to provide the blind people with access to the described film, it
was enough to give them pocket hearing aids and connect a microphone to the inductive loop
amplifier, while the describer was located in a booth and described the movie.

The event took place under the supervision of a group of specialists from the All-Russian
Society of the Blind. Anatoly Chechetin, an actor and a Professor at the Moscow State Institute
of Culture, wrote a description for the 1963 Hollywood drama Cleopatra, directed by Joseph
Leo Mankiewicz.

Sergey Solovyov, a correspondent of the Dialog magazine, writes:

of course, it was impossible to convey properly the beauty of the movie and its sophisti-
cated stage effects, but Anatoly Chechetin tried to do it. And he succeeded! The day before
the performance, he watched the film twice, wrote down the names of the characters and made other necessary notes. At the appointed time, about thirty blind people bought tickets and took their seats. The movie started . . . When the performance was finished, the organisers of the experiment, who had a lot of questions in store for the participants, were already waiting for them at the exit of the cinema theatre. They discussed what should be described and how, whether it was convenient to use the hearing aid and so on. The audience was unanimous on one point: the experiment was a success. This was followed by more described films such as *Mimino* (“Mimino”) (1977, directed by Georgiy Daneliya), *Osenny Maraphon* (“Autumn Marathon”) (1979, directed by Georgiy Daneliya), *Tri Plus Dva* (“Three Plus Two”) (1963, directed by Genrikh Oganisyan) and a number of others. In total, ten films were shown with a real-time (live) audio description. Then the project was closed because of financial problems.

(Vanshin, 2011: 10)

Later, audio described movies were shown at the Central Recreation Center of the All-Russian Society for the Blind. In the period 1979–1984, several films with an audio description were shown. However, the quality of the description was very poor. In late 1980s, an experiment was carried out with a recorded audio description for the 1967 Soviet war drama *Chronicles of a Dive Bomber*. The recorded description was dubbed with the original film soundtrack and switched on during the film screening. However, the experiment failed, because the sighted audience was not eager to listen to additional commentaries that, in fact, distracted them from the film (Vanshin, 2011).

In the 1970s–1980s, the release of so-called “sound films” began. A sound film is a phonogram recorded on various media, in which the film soundtrack and the audio description are mixed. *Otets Soldata* (“Soldier’s Father”), a 1964 war drama directed by R. Chkheidze, was the first sound film released on vinyl.

Central Publishing, the Educational and Industrial Institution of the All-Russia Society for the Blind, arranged the release of sound films on tapes in the form of audio books through the initiative and active participation of Vladislav Stepanov, the head of the technological laboratory.

The description was prepared by N. A. Trofimchenko with the help of the blind expert Vladislav Stepanov. Trofimchenko also became a voice talent who read the audio description. Then the recording of the audio description was added to the movie soundtrack. Such recordings did not differ much from audio books.

In total, seven sound films were released: *Chelovek s Ruzhyom* (“The Man with the Gun”) (1938, directed by Sergei Yutkevich), *Sinyay Tetrad’* (“The Blue Notebook”) (1963, directed by Lev Kulidzhanov), *Alexander Nevsky* (“Alexander Nevsky”) (1938, directed by Sergei Eisenstein and Dmitry Vasilyev), *Oni Srazhalis’ za Rodinu* (“They Fought for Their Country”) (1975, directed by Sergei Bondarchuk), *Ogaryova, 6* (“Ogaryova Street, Number 6”) (1980, directed by Boris Grigoriev) and *Balamut* (“Balamut”) (1978, directed by Vasily Rogovoy). The laboratory produced many copies of the sound films to be sent to libraries for the blind all over Russia.

In the mid-1980s, the Centralised Library System of Russia produced two sound films: an Ostern *Beloye Solntse Pustyni* (“White Sun of the Desert”) (1969, directed by Vladimir Motyl) and *Tri Topolya na Plushchikhe* (“Three Poplars in Plyushchikha”) (1968, directed by Tatyana Lioznova). These sound films were of poor quality. The soundtrack was louder than the audio description and overlapped the dialogues.
At the same time, the All-Russia Society of the Blind began the production of sound recordings of the most popular performances of Moscow theatres with audio description. Actors recorded performances in the studio and then the audio description was added. A total of ten such performances were produced.

6. The first Russian guidelines on audio description

The first attempts to describe audio description basic techniques were made in the book *Slepoy rebenok v semye* (“A Blind Child in a Family”) (Borshchevsky, 2018: 49). Among other things, the book advised parents of a blind or visually impaired child to visit the cinema and theatres and explained how to prepare for it and how to comment on what was happening on the screen. Thus, parents had to act as ad hoc audio describers. The author focused on the emotional effect of a film on the child:

> it may seem strange that you are asked to watch movies with your child. But movies are not silent (for a long period of time already) and bright colours allow your child, if they have any residual vision, to follow the action on the screen. Not only should your child know that there is such an art as cinema, but also learn to understand it. See how much they enjoy listening to a radio programme, fairy tales, or songs recorded on vinyl or tape. With the same pleasure, they will “watch” a movie, but only if you help them.

*(Solntseva, 1989: 26)*

If a blind person is taught to understand films since childhood, this will help them to live a full life. It has been demonstrated that those blind people who were deprived of the opportunity to get acquainted with cinematography and understand it as a child would not watch movies and would not like them (Solntseva, 1989: 26). Solntseva (1989) recommend starting with watching TV at home. While watching TV, a blind child hears voices, sounds and music. If they have residual vision, then they can recognise large objects and details of the image and identify them with objects already known to them. However, the child needs the parents’ comment on what is happening on the screen. Therefore, the parents should describe objects and actions the child cannot identify.

The book states that, first of all, parents should explain what a movie is in plain words that can be easily understood by their children. Then, “while watching a film, give a brief description of the characters (their appearance and dress), tell the child only the information that they cannot get from the conversations (location, time, place, season)” (Solntseva, 1989: 27). The narration should be brief, accurate and contain no unnecessary information. The description should be inserted between dialogues and significant sounds, so that the child is able to both listen to parents’ comments and follow the plot of the film. The book recommended avoiding any personal interpretation of the events, but rather to focus on conveying the storyline. At the same time, parents should not hide their emotional reactions in order to teach the child how to react correctly. After watching a film, parents may discuss the characters, their actions and motivations. Then the book states that the theatre

> is of great importance for the development of a blind child. It is based on the dialogues and monologues of the characters, which express their inner experiences and through which the plot of a play is revealed. We can say that the theatre is more accessible to the blind than cinema.

*(Solntseva, 1989: 27)*
A visit to the theatre should begin with a story about it, about the actors and the performance itself. While describing the performance parents were told “to speak quietly enough in order to avoid disturbing other people, but at the same time loud enough so that the child can hear you” (Solntseva, 1989: 27). The book also gives some recommendations about visiting a museum with a blind child. This book was the first one to provide certain guidelines on audio description in this country. Many parents still use it to help their children enjoy films and theatre performances and certain ideas were later included into modern AD standards in Russia.

7. Audio description in post-soviet Russia: “typhlocomenting”

In the early 2000s, interest in audio description revived. At that time, the Russian disability non-governmental organisation Perspektiva began preparations for the international film festival about the life of people with disabilities Kino Bez Bar’erov (“Cinema Without Barriers”). Sergey Vanshin, the CEO of the Institute for Professional Rehabilitation and Occupational Re-Training “Reacomp”, was invited to join its organising committee to represent the interests of the blind.

“Cinema Without Barriers” is a unique film festival that does not just dwell on the problems of people with disabilities, but also tells stories about overcoming barriers inside and around us. The films shown during the festival demonstrate that it is important to be humane (Singh in this volume).

Alexander Veledinsky, the Chairman of the 8th International Film Festival “Cinema Without Barriers” said:

The Film Festival is remarkable because it breaks barriers. There is a stereotype that shows people with disabilities as weak and helpless. We do not show films like that. Yes, filmmakers show people with disabilities. But the focus is on the person himself, not his physical or mental characteristics. These films are about people, about universal values, about our life, funny and sad at the same time. An interesting story is the key to making a good film.

(Bazhenova, 2012)

The main goal of the Festival is to draw public attention to the problems faced by people with disabilities, to demonstrate their potential and diversity of interests through cinematography.

Sergey Vanshin knew about successful experiments with audio description in the 1980s, so he immediately raised the question of creating appropriate conditions for blind and visually impaired participants. It was not possible to solve this problem quickly, so the first film festival in 2002 was held without meeting the needs of visually impaired people. Sergey Vanshin proposed training a group of audio describers for the second film festival and providing several films with a description of a high quality. Therefore, Denise Roza, the director of the Russian disability non-governmental organisation Perspektiva, invited Joel Snyder, one of the pioneers of audio description, to Moscow to train future audio describers. During the training course, Snyder told the participants about the theory and practice of audio description. He listed requirements for describers, showed typical mistakes and revealed the secrets of the profession. The course was short, but he managed to talk not only about audio descriptions for films, but also about theatre performances. From that point on, Snyder’s recommendations started to be used in Russia as an important reference point. In 2006, two of Snyder’s students, Maria Ovcharenko and Inna Margulis, described the Russian black comedy Zhmurki (“Dead Man’s Bluff”). After that, audio description was provided during film festivals. Later, not only
trained describers but also volunteers worked during the Film Festival providing real-time audio description.

The first experience in audio description in post-Soviet Russia showed that further development is impossible without an in-depth systematic approach. Therefore, the staff of the “Reacomp” Institute submitted proposals for creating a system of audio description to the Moscow Department of Social Care. In June 2009, at the exhibition “Moscow for Everybody”, representatives of the “Reakomp” Institute along with specialists from the publishing institution “Logosvos” demonstrated various techniques and methods of audio description. Since then, these two institutions started a joint project aimed to develop the audio description system in Moscow: production of necessary equipment, training of specialists, and so on. Sergey Vanshin, in cooperation with his colleagues, developed his own concept of audio description and named it “typhlocommenting”. He published a textbook on “typhlocommenting” in 2011 and trained a number of “typhlocommentators” from different parts of Russia. His activities raised public awareness to the problems of audio description.

8. The concept of “typhlocommenting” according to Sergey Vanshin

The term “typhlocommenting” is formed from a Greek root, *typhlo*, “blind” and a word of Latin origin: “comment”. According to Vanshin’s definition, it is “a concise description of an object, location or action that a blind (visually impaired) person cannot understand without special verbal explanations” (Vanshin, 2011: 6). However, some authors criticise this term. For example, Maria Mocarz-Kleindienst argues that the word “comment” implies personal opinion or attitude to a subject being discussed, whereas most AD guidelines recommend avoiding any addition of personal attitude (Mocarz-Kleindienst, 2014). Moreover, at present, the audience for audio description is wider and does not include only people with visual impairment.

Vanshin’s concept of “typhlocommenting” pays much attention to qualities and skills a specialist in this field should have. The following paragraphs are based mainly on Vanshin and Vanshina’s textbook (2011).

The Commentator’s voice should be clear and words should be pronounced correctly. Special attention should be paid to the pronunciation of word endings. Sometimes, because of the rush, a commentator “swallows the words”, which is considered unacceptable. The vocal cords must be able to work for at least one and a half to two hours without a stop. These features are comparable to the requirements that were imposed on professional radio announcers in the recent past. According to the “typhlocommenting” concept, there are five basic requirements that should be met by a person who wants to become a commentator (who in Russia is both a describer and a voice talent), namely:

1. observation;
2. ability to choose the most important element in the visual image and edit one’s speech;
3. grammatically correct speech;
4. natural intonations;
5. ability to observe and interpret the observation.

It is obvious that these requirements remind us of Joel Snyder’s four principal elements of audio description: observation, edit, language and vocal skills (Snyder, 2014). However, the fifth requirement contradicts some of the original AD guidelines, where interpretations are not welcome and there is a basic rule “Describe what you see”. If a person wants to study
“typhlocommenting”, they should pass a psychological test, which is aimed to assess different traits of the candidate’s personality, as well as their cognitive functions. For instance, a psychologist studies a candidate’s desire to work with blind and visually impaired people. Moreover, a candidate is also assessed as to whether he/she has a good diction and rich vocabulary and knows the fundamentals of psychology and main principles of cinematography. A candidate should also be broad-minded, emotionally stable and be able to work for several hours without a break. As for the technique of “typhlocommenting”, the guidelines recommend the following: “you should not say much in your comments. It is important to combine your commentary with the film’s soundtrack, ensuring that one does not dominate over the other” (Vanshin, 2011: 30). It also recommends avoiding such mistakes as indistinct speech, the use of verbs in the past tense, poor grammar, and so on. It should be noted that the technique of “typhlocommenting” and even the term itself was patented by S. Vanshin.

9. The current situation

9.1 “Typhlocommenting” versus audio description

Sergey Vanshin initiated a campaign to remove the international term “audio description” from Russian scientific literature and mass-media. He claims that the term “audio description” does not reflect the wide spectrum of activities provided for the blind audience, since the word “audio” implies the oral form of description alone, whereas such descriptions may also be made in a written form. As a result, a certain terminological “iron curtain” was created that prevented Russian specialists from studying the international experience in this field, because some commentators didn’t even know the term “audio description”. In numerous interviews, many “typhlocommentors” admit that they cannot describe dance, ballet, or visual effects, whereas their international colleagues had published many articles and guidelines on these topics. Moreover, Sergey Vanshin claims that “typhlocommenting” is not a form of translation. He criticises all authors who call it a translation and says that this point of view is a mistake. He argues that a translation process implies rendering from one language into another, whereas “typhlocommenting” deals with one and the same language.

This claim has been disproved by many authors. First, it should be noted that in 1959 the prominent Russian linguist, Roman Jakobson, published the famous article On Linguistic Aspects of Translation (Jakobson, 1959: 234), where he distinguished three kinds of translation:

1) intralingual translation or rewording is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language;
2) interlingual translation or translation proper is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language;
3) intersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.

Maria Mocarz-Kleindienst quotes this definition of the intersemiotic translation and indicates that Sergey Vanshin’s claim contradicts Jakobson’s theory (Mocarz-Kleindienst, 2014: 198). Other authors also refer to audio description as a form of translation (e.g., Matamala & Orero, 2007: 329). Therefore, many modern researchers consider audio description a form of intersemiotic translation, where images are translated into words (e.g., Borschhevsky, 2018: 50). Some authors even propose a term “audiodescriptive translation” (Mocarz-Kleindienst, 2014: 198). The terminological “iron curtain” and the denial of the international experience affected...
the quality of “typhlocommenting”. The audience is often confused because of AD of a poor quality.

Table 36.1 shows a transcript of the soundtrack for the Russian Oscar-winning film *Moskva Slezam Ne Verit* (“Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears”) (dir. V. Menshov, 1984). As can be seen, the commentary is split into smaller phrases inserted in very short pauses between the dialogues. The description is not synchronised with the video and with the plot and easily misleads the audience.

In 2015, a group of researchers and audiovisual translators began studying the international experience in this field and promoting the widely-accepted scientific approach to audio description. The RuFilms *Shkola audiovizual'nogo perevoda* (School for Audiovisual Translation, Moscow) invited prominent researchers, audio describers and audiovisual translators to train Russian colleagues in audio description. In cooperation with several leading universities, the School for AVT started the training of audio describers throughout the country.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Timing</th>
<th>Soundtrack</th>
<th>What is demonstrated on the screen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ludmila</td>
<td>06.40</td>
<td>Can you just say “Hello” when he calls me?</td>
<td>Ludmila talks to a receptionist in the hostel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Describer</strong></td>
<td><strong>06.42</strong></td>
<td><strong>At the monument. . .</strong></td>
<td>Ludmila returns to her room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptionist</td>
<td>06.43</td>
<td>I must put it down.</td>
<td>The receptionist takes a pen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Describer</strong></td>
<td><strong>06.44</strong></td>
<td><strong>. . . to Mayakovsky.</strong></td>
<td>Andrey Voznesensky, a famous Russian poet, reads his poem at Mayakovsky’s monument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poet</td>
<td>06.45</td>
<td>Walla</td>
<td>Katya and Ludmila are walking along the street. They pass a young man who is giving a hug to his girlfriend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katya</td>
<td>07.31</td>
<td>You say Tonya’s life is bad, mine is bad too.</td>
<td>Katya and Ludmila are walking along the street followed by two young men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Describer</strong></td>
<td><strong>07.33</strong></td>
<td><strong>Police Community Support Officers. . .</strong></td>
<td>Police Community Support Officers approach the young man.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katya</td>
<td>07.34</td>
<td>What do you call “life”?</td>
<td>The young man takes away his arm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Community Support Officer</td>
<td>07.35</td>
<td>Stop hugging! You’re in a public place! Don’t you know that?</td>
<td>Katya and Ludmila are still walking along the street followed by two young men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Describer</strong></td>
<td><strong>07.39</strong></td>
<td><strong>. . . address the young man. . .</strong></td>
<td>Katya and Ludmila pass large shop windows.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ludmila</td>
<td>07.41</td>
<td>And your chemistry is such a boring science.</td>
<td>Ludmila is adjusting her clothes and stumbles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Describer</strong></td>
<td><strong>07.42</strong></td>
<td><strong>. . . who placed his hand.</strong></td>
<td>Katya and Ludmila pass large shop windows.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ludmila</td>
<td>07.42</td>
<td>You deal with boring formulas.</td>
<td>Ludmila is adjusting her clothes and stumbles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Describer</strong></td>
<td><strong>07.43</strong></td>
<td><strong>. . . on girl’s shoulder.</strong></td>
<td>Katya and Ludmila pass large shop windows.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10. National standard on “typhlocommenting” versus Vanshin’s concept

In 2017, a National Standard, GOST R 57891–2017, on “typhlocommenting” was adopted. It was an important step in the promotion of accessibility principles. The Standard contains terms and their definitions and is intended to regulate various activities related to audio description. The terms listed there should be used in scientific literature and other texts related to this field. The concept, on which the Standard is based, differs from Vanshin’s “typhlocommenting” concept. The principal differences between the concepts are discussed here.

First, the Standard gives a different definition of “typhlocommenting”: “typhlocommenting is a creative process of verbal description of visual information, which takes into account the psychological features and needs of visually impaired people, thus allowing them to perceive visual information that is not available to them” (National Standard, 2017), whereas Vanshin defines it as “a concise description of an object, space, or action that the blind or visually impaired cannot understand without special verbal explanations” (Vanshin, 2011: 6). The difference between the two concepts can also be seen in what they call “an object of typhlocommenting”: “a moving or static image of an object, space, or action observed by a commentator that the blind or visually impaired cannot understand without special verbal explanations” (Vanshin, 2011: 8), versus “animate and inanimate objects, people, animals, elements of a landscape, scenery, interior or background, static and dynamic images and various events, where these objects interact with each other” (National Standard, 2017). The Standard introduces the term “script” to the practice of “typhlocommenting”: “a document used to prepare a commentary; it is a text or table with the commentary and the time during which it should be voiced” (National Standard, 2017). Vanshin’s concept does not imply the use of scripts. It contains such terms as “draft” and “notes” and is focused mainly on the real-time description (“hot typhlocommenting”, according to Vanshin), rather than on the recorded one.

The Standard contains a classification of “typhlocommenting” types and forms that has no direct correspondence in Vanshin’s concept:

- verbal commentary, i.e., a voiced commentary that a visually impaired person can listen to;
- written commentary, i.e., a text made accessible to a blind or visually impaired person: large-print, Braille or an electronic document;
- description of actions;

The following forms of “typhlocommenting” can be found in both concepts but sometimes under different names:

- prepared commentary (in both concepts);
- real-time commentary (Standard) vs. direct commentary (Vanshin, 2011).

And the last two forms can be found in Vanshin’s concept alone:

- automated commentary (automated “typhlocommenting” without a direct participation of a commentator, e.g., in the cinema or on TV);
- “hot typhlocommenting”, i.e., the one made without any prior preparation (Vanshin, 2011: 30).
Sergey Vanshin claims that a commentary should be made only by one person: from writing a “draft” to voicing. At the same time, the Standard lists a number of specialists who should be invited to make a commentary of a high quality:

- commentator, i.e., a person who is directly involved in “typhlocommenting”;
- author, i.e., a person who prepares the script;
- voice talent;
- expert, proofreader, i.e., a blind person trained in audio description, who checks the draft, corrects mistakes and approves the final script.

The Standard pays much attention to the “typhlocommenting” quality assessment. The commentary should comply with the guidelines and be accessible to the target audience. A prepared commentary should be examined by a group of experts, including at least one blind person, experienced commentators and professionals in the corresponding field (i.e., filmmakers or sportsmen). Not only the script, but also the audio recording of the commentary should be checked. The commentary should not overlap dialogues; it should be loud enough and contain a detailed but concise description. The description should be consistent and no personal interpretation should be added. Therefore, the National Standard made certain improvements to the “typhlocommenting” concept by unifying the terminology and bringing “typhlocommenting” into conformity with international practices.

11. Apps for audio description in Russia

Over recent years, several companies have developed mobile apps that will allow blind and visually impaired persons to watch films with audio description using a smartphone both at home and in the cinema. The app syncs a pre-recorded description with the film soundtrack and the user listens to it using headphones (for more details on AD receptor tools, Figiel and Albin in this volume).

Such apps are created for mobile devices using both Android and iOS systems. How do they work? A pre-recorded description is saved on a remote server. A user needs to select the desired film from the app’s catalogue and upload the AD to the device. Then the user must activate syncing before the session. The app uses the microphone to identify the film by its soundtrack and starts playing the AD. The app can start or resume depending on the film episode. The user needs Internet connection only to download the commentary. Then the synchronisation is performed without access to the Internet. The app will allow a blind person to go to the cinema with their smartphone, even if the cinema is not equipped with AD-transmitting devices. They can watch a film at home or at a party, together with their sighted friends and family members and share common emotions and experience. The apps are constantly updating, thus providing access to new described content. Such apps were developed both by enthusiasts and large companies (e.g., Sberbank). The one created by specialists of the National Society for the Blind (Tiflomedia) is one of the most popular ones.

12. Russian internet resources related to audio description

In 2015, a group of blind enthusiasts in Yekaterinburg created a website with a library of descriptions made by volunteers. They called it “Describe It to Me”. Any person can visit this website and submit their description of any image, painting, photo, label, video, and...
so on. Then, any visually impaired person can upload any image (via e-mail, a form on the website or app) and volunteers will describe it. In 2018, the “Art, Science and Sport” Charity Foundation created a web resource “Special View” (specialviewportal.ru). It was intended to help people with visual impairment, as well as to support their relatives and friends. On this website, audio describers, teachers, psychologists, artists, scientists and of course, blind and visually impaired people share their experiences, discuss urgent topics, watch films, learn new skills, and so on. Its columnists write about problems of inclusion in the context of culture, education, sports and employment, talk about Russian and international projects and AD techniques. The website publishes up-to-date information about inclusive approaches in education, culture and employment, as well as the recent technological and medical discoveries and achievements. On this website one can read bios of people with visual impairment and get practical advice. One section of this resource is dedicated to accessible events in different cities in Russia. The site also contains various guidelines, a library for specialists and parents, databases of companies and audio describers, as well as publications on ophthalmology.

13. Audio description and science: a unique project “astronomy for the blind”

In modern-day society, blind and visually impaired people become more involved in activities which had been unavailable to them for centuries. Science is not an exception. Both professional scientists with low vision and visually impaired amateurs depend on audio description. In this case, the AD serves not only as a way to “describe what we see”, but also as a way to educate the audience; thus, a certain degree of interpretation cannot be avoided.

In 2018, the authors of this chapter founded a unique project for blind and visually impaired adults interested in astronomy: “Astronomy for the Blind”. Within the framework of this project, a number of planets and other astronomical objects were described and the description was published on the Internet. All the objects were described from different points of view:

- naked-eye observation;
- aided-eye observation;
- “visitor’s” observation.

For example:

the moon is the second brightest object in the earth’s sky after the Sun. Many details of the lunar surface are clearly visible to the naked eye, that is, without the use of magnifying devices such as a telescope or binoculars. The colour of the moon’s surface mainly depends on the content of iron and titanium. Its surface has a brownish-grey or blackish-brown colour.

While describing bodies in space, the description of different phases was included:

the moon looks different on different days of the month. Its appearance depends on the phase: for example, the new moon is not visible in the sky; the young moon and the old moon are visible in the form of a narrow sickle; first and last: a half of the moon is seen, it looks like a semicircle.
Metaphors and similes were also of great help: “fairy tales say that the Moon is made of cheese. Indeed, the surface of the satellite resembles cheese with ‘holes’ of craters”. Even the face on the Moon was mentioned and described:

the left “eye” of the moon is the Sea of Tranquility (Mare Tranquilitatis). The right “eye” is the Sea of Rains (Mare Imbrium) and the nose between them is formed by the Sea of Serenity (Mare Serenitiatis) and the Sea of Vapors (Mare Vaporum).

Moreover, we arranged live audio description of the full lunar eclipse and the favourable opposition of Mars on June 27, 2018. Below, you can read an abstract from the description:

09.22 pm. In a cloudless, dark sky, the full moon shines brightly. Its surface is now grey-brown. A dark shadow begins to cover its disk from the bottom left;
09.30 pm. The lower left edge of the lunar disk is completely hidden by the shadow. The moon now looks like a pancake with the edge bitten off;
10.09 pm. The earth’s shadow covers almost the entire surface of the moon. Only a narrow crescent in the upper right part of the lunar disk glows;
10.16 pm. This year, you can observe another interesting astronomical phenomenon, the favourable opposition of Mars. The red planet will come as close as possible to Earth. Next time this phenomenon will occur will be on September 15, 2035. During the favourable opposition, Mars becomes brighter than Jupiter;
10.23 pm. The surface of the moon covered with the earth’s shadow turns reddish-grey. When observed in northern latitudes, the Moon and Mars are located close to each other. Last time, the two rare astronomical phenomena occurred on one and the same day was in 1830;
10.33 pm. Mars looks like a red star in the dark sky and it is brighter than the Moon.

14. Audio description on TV: Russian experience

In Russia, some experience was had in broadcasting audio described TV content. For example, in the international digital TV standard, which is adopted in Russia, there is a special sound channel for the broadcasting of AD. However, Russian specialists used a different method. Several TV shows were selected beforehand and there were announcements that they would be shown with “typhlocommenting”. In order to listen to it, a blind person would have had to have had a radio receiver, “Logos”, with a pre-installed special decoder. When a TV show began, an audio describer watched and commented it in real time. The blind person could switch on both a TV set and radio and enjoy the show. In the same way, real-time AD was broadcast online.

15. Audio description in Russian Legislation

In Russia, several laws related to accessibility issues (and audio description, in particular) have been adopted. Federal Law No. 34 (March 28, 2017) On State support of Filmmaking in the Russian Federation was approved by the Government. It says: “if a filmmaker receives funds from the State for the production of a full-length film or an animated form . . . they are obliged to provide subtitles and audio description of this film”. The Civil Code of the Russian Federation also contains very important information for audio describers. Unlike subtitling or translation, films may be described for the blind audience without the
specific permission of a copyright holder. Article 1274 specifies that audio description of any content may be done without paying any royalty and without obtaining a permission from a copyright holder.

16. Training and education

In 2011, Sergey Vanshin et al. published the first textbook on “typhlocommenting” followed by a number of articles that dwelt on different aspects of its implementation. In 2017, Mikhail Korneev and Pavel Obiukh from the All-Russia Society for the blind wrote their guidelines and made them available online free of charge. Their concept of the “typhlocommenting” is very close to that published in the National Standard. “Reacomp” has been the first and the only educational institution that has been training typhlocommentors for about ten years. The curriculum consists of 142 hours of theoretical and practical training. Since 2015, The RuFilms School for Audiovisual Translation (Moscow) started to draw public attention to the international practice of audio description. They invited leading audio describers from different countries and arranged several workshops in several Russian universities: the Saint Petersburg State University of Aerospace Instrumentation, the Moscow State Linguistic University, Pyatigorsk State University, Omsk State University and others. The School for Audiovisual Translation offers a combined course in AVT and AD, and has prepared several hundreds of specialists in this field. In 2018, a department of “typhlocommenting” was opened in the Moscow State Linguistic University.

17. Where can Russian-speaking blind persons find audio described content?

At present, several companies and charities, as well as a great number of volunteers, work as audio description providers. There are pages on social media that publish both professional and amateur audio description. As was mentioned earlier, several apps with audio description were introduced to the market. Films with Russian audio description are included in the inflight entertainment programme of Aeroflot. A number of theatres all over the country provide both live and recorded audio description. “Mosfilm”, one of the largest Russian filmmaking companies, recorded audio description for many films from its collection and published them on their official YouTube Channel. The national network of libraries for the blind and visually impaired has its own audio description service that records AD and then distributes it on DVDs.

18. Conclusion

It can be seen that audio description in Russia (although it was not known by this term) has a long history dating back to the 19th century. Experience gained from silent film era readers, as well as teachers and researchers who worked with blind and Deaf-Blind children was later accumulated and gave birth to a national technique of typhlocommenting, which also absorbed international experience in the field. However, the typhlocommenting technique differs from the international practice in some aspects, namely, in recognition of audio description as a form of translation. Unfortunately, creators of the initial typhlocommenting theory took a very controversial stand that took Russia behind the terminological “iron curtain”. Thus, anecdotal evidence suggested to outside industry analysts that there was no AD in Russia whatsoever. Recently events have taken a positive U-turn and many Russian researchers and AD
practitioners have adopted international practices and terminology, thus increasing the overall visibility of AD in Russia.

**Note**

1. All quotes from Russian sources were translated by the authors.

19. References

- Vanshin, S.N. (2011). *Institut Reakomp – desyat’ let effektivnoi integratsii invalidov* [Reacomp Institute – Ten years of effective integration of
Audio description in Russia
