Audio description

Evolving recommendations for usable, effective and enjoyable practices

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Definition

Audio description (AD) is a form of assistive audiovisual translation, or inclusion service, designed to make (audio)visual products available to blind and visually impaired persons (VIPs). AD offers people who cannot see what others take for granted. Also known as ‘video description’, ‘described video’ (Piety 2004), and ‘audio captions’ (Snyder 2014), AD is a unique form of communication that captures and translates the visual elements of a source text into spoken words. When present, e.g. in audiovisual texts, these words combine—and yet do not interfere—with the existing auditory ensemble (consisting of dialogues, sounds, music, noise, silence, etc.) to form a new coherent text. AD enables VIPs to access, understand better and appreciate more fully products that are conceived primarily as visual, such as paintings or films. Therefore, it has an important social impact enabling VIPs to integrate in the cultural and social life they are embedded in.

AD can therefore be used to describe the visual aspects of any product, service or event that combines multiple semiotic modes to create meaning. In practice, this includes all static and dynamic arts—e.g. artworks in cultural venues, museums and heritage sites as well as television programmes, films and theatre plays—but also educational material, public meetings, sports or religious events, and ceremonies.

Despite the versatility of AD and the variety of uses it has been put to, this assistive service appears to be typically associated with the medium of film. Film AD is no doubt the most well-known, spread, established and researched AD type. However, more recent forms of AD (e.g. dance and concert AD) are gaining ground.

Depending on the nature of the product to be made accessible, AD has to fulfil different requirements (Remael et al. 2015). It can be prepared ahead and delivered in a pre-recorded form—as in the case of film or museum AD, or it can be performed live—as often happens in theatre performances (Holland 2009). In the case of museum exhibitions (Neves 2015), AD can be combined with tactile information. In those countries where subtitling is the dominant AVT modality, the subtitles are voiced (i.e. turned into audio subtitles) and they interweave with regular AD, which is added in the pauses between dialogues (Braun and Orero 2010). AD can also be preceded by an audio introduction (York 2007). Audio...
introductions are introductory notes that serve as a framework for the blind audience or provide information about the visual style of the product. Audio introductions have been used in the opera and theatre since the early days of AD, but they have been traditionally absent from AD for films and television, even though the idea of introducing them to these products has recently begun to gain currency (Fryer and Romero-Fresco 2014, Romero-Fresco and Fryer 2013).

The creation of AD entails the collaboration of several professionals: audio describers, voice talents or voice actors, sound technicians and, ideally, blind consultants. There is not yet a fixed template for the creation of AD, but even if each company follows its own in-house rules, the process generally starts with the analysis of the product, the writing, rewriting and editing of the description, the timing of the AD script—especially in film description, where it is necessary to map out the pauses between the dialogues—and its final editing. The latter step usually benefits both from teamwork, which can help to make the right lexical choices, and from the presence of a blind consultant, who can help to tailor the script to the real needs of end users by providing feedback and suggesting adaptations (Perego and Benecke 2014). Finally, rehearsing the AD enables professionals to make final changes before recording it with voice talents or synthetic voices and mixing it with the original soundtrack, if present (Remael et al. 2015: 12–13).

The whole process is time-consuming—it takes about 16 to 20 hours to write the descriptions for a 1-hour drama episode, and about 2 to 3 hours to record a 1-hour script (Cronin and King 1990: 503). The fact that the audio describer often has to spot the in and out times to insert ADs between dialogues in films only adds up to the already complex descriptive work. However, in spite of its technicalities and need for precision, AD is a highly creative process, even comparable to a kind of literary art form (Snyder 2008), that demands a thorough mastering of one’s mother tongue.

Target audience

AD caters both for blind and visually impaired patrons. Indeed, professionals and scholars know well that the target audience for audio described content is varied. Significantly, official parameters used to define blindness vary across different countries, and the same AD might not suit all audience members to the same extent (ADLAB 2012: 6, Ofcom 2010: 9, Remael et al. 2015: 17). Each type of visual impairment affects differently an individual’s ability to perceive the world and to conduct their daily routine activities independently or with various degrees of assistance. For example, people can suffer from moderate to severe visual impairment, or they can be completely blind. Furthermore, visual impairment may be congenital when it occurs during the process of foetal development, at birth or immediately following birth, i.e. before visual memory has been established at all—or adventitious—i.e. after having enjoyed a period of normal vision, which allows visual memory to remain at least partially (Project IDEAL 2013, WHO 2014). Consequently, ‘some users will still rely on the visual information to some extent, whereas others might use the AD as a talking book’ (Remael et al. 2015: 17).

Originally meant exclusively for VIPs (see, for example, Frazier 1975, Cronin and King 1990), AD is thought to be extremely useful for other sectors of the population too. Potential extended users include vulnerable audiences such as the mentally disabled, users with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, new immigrants and older adults (ADLAB 2012, Dosch and Benecke 2004, Ofcom 2010, Morisset and Gonant 2008, Remael et al. 2015), but also
regular users such as children, language learners or people who want to follow AV material while performing another task. However, in spite of the known benefits that AD delivers to VIPs, the impact of AD on sighted viewers is not yet fully understood. To date, empirical research on the effect of AD on sighted users is limited or incomplete. While a number of empirical studies would appear to confirm preliminarily that AD does not pose major challenges to regular audiences (Cronin and King 1990, Krejtz et al. 2012a, 2012b; Perego 2016), it is not yet possible to give a definite answer on whether AD would interfere with sighted viewers’ comprehension, memory and enjoyment of the audio described product; another question that remains currently unanswered is whether the addition of a verbal stimulus to the film complex semiotic system may have a positive effect on viewers—e.g. helping them remember lexical items. Knowing whether sighted viewers are able to cope with AD, however, would help scholars open new theoretical and applied perspectives into the study of AD. Not only could it tell us, for instance, whether sighted viewers and VIPs can tolerate audio described films, but it would also shed light on the feasibility of extending the uses of AD beyond its original purpose and target audience.

History and development of audio description

AD has always been employed, more or less loosely, to verbalize visual material for the blind (Benecke 2004, Ofcom 2000, Snyder 2014). However, the first instance of its professional use was documented in the early 1940s: in Spain, after the Civil War, AD began to be provided weekly (Orero 2007).

The use of AD as a formalized means of enhancing entertainment for VIPs can be traced back to the 1980s, and attributed to Margaret and Cody Pfanstiehl, from the Metropolitan Washington Ear, who started to produce and promote AD for live theatre performances across the whole of the US (ADC 2013, Snyder 2014). By the end of the 1980s, over fifty establishments overseas were producing described performances. In Europe, the work of a small family-run theatre in Nottinghamshire paved the way for the regular provision of AD in British theatres (Ofcom 2000: 4). Today, the UK still is Europe’s leading country in terms of number of venues that regularly offer audio described performances, with others (e.g. Spain) quickly catching up.

Back in the 1980s, cinema began to benefit from AD too. The first countries to employ regular descriptions using live script readers were Britain and France (Ofcom 2000: 4), but it was in the US that AD took off. A key figure in this respect was Gregory Frazier, a pioneer in the field and the founder of Audio Vision, a non-profit organization that has provided description services since 1989, and been the standard setter for descriptive services ever since. Today, Britain (followed by Spain and the Dutch-speaking areas of the Netherlands and the Flemish region) is a leading country in cinema AD; in most other European countries, the provision of AD is either confined to special screenings—often in the context of film festivals or one-off projects—or simply does not exist at all (ADLAB 2012).

The 1980s also witnessed the first instances of AD on television (ADLAB 2012, Ofcom 2000). Today, the service is offered in most countries, although there is wide variation in terms of availability and regulatory framework concerning the provision of assistive forms of translation, with the US and the UK leading the field. The reason for the scarcity of AD on television is that private broadcasters are still too reluctant to offer AD, given that it is not likely to deliver a substantial return on the investment required to deliver AD services (ADLAB 2012: 17). To make things worse, the scant offer of AD on television is not always
compensated by the availability of audio described home video products. The production of DVDs and Blu-ray discs remains very limited, except in the English-speaking world, where AD is routinely included with other post-production extras. By contrast, in some European countries (e.g. Portugal, Italy and Flanders) the offer of audio described commercial DVDs and Blu-ray discs is almost negligible (ADLAB 2012).

Although its existence as an area of professional practice is widely acknowledged, AD is a relatively young academic discipline. Its inception dates back to the 1970s, when Gregory Frazier (1938–1996) developed the first set of AD principles as part of his master dissertation in the field of broadcasting (Frazier 1975). Since then, AD has been practised and studied all over the world, with different countries following different timeframes in terms of enforcement of legislation, provision of AD services, production of guidelines, as well as support for research and training initiatives (ADLAB 2012, ADLAB PRO 2017a, Perego 2014a, Rai et al. 2010).

In the academic world, AD has gained recognition and visibility mainly since the turn of the century—although some key studies were conducted much earlier (e.g. Lodge 1993, Peli et al. 1996). AD-specific events (e.g. the biannual Advance Research Seminars on Audio Description held in Barcelona, Spain) and thematic sessions within specialized conferences (Media for All and Languages and the Media) are being held on a regular basis, and the number of academic publications on different aspects of AD has significantly increased. The fact that AD-related papers are being published in a range of journals from various disciplinary areas (from translation studies to literary, medical and psychology periodicals) bears witness to the multi-faceted nature of AD and the relevance of multiple disciplines to the development of research on this specific AVT mode.

Audio description guidelines: past and present

Guidelines are sets of general rules, principles or pieces of advice seeking to streamline and harmonize particular processes, ultimately enhancing the quality of the final product. In the case of AD, guidelines (also known as standards or norms) have emerged from the need to establish reliable criteria and to homogenize AD scriptwriting practices—at least within each local context. Guidelines have also emerged to assist professionals lacking specific training in AD, as this is not always easy to find (ADLAB PRO 2017a).

Existing guidelines differ in terms of length, precision, theoretical orientation and general focus, and they do not adhere to a uniform structure (Vercauteren 2007, Rai et al. 2010, Bittner 2012), as they are often issued by different organizations. Ireland and the UK, for instance, have official guidelines compiled by television and broadcasting commissions, respectively. The Spanish guidelines have been developed and approved by a recognized standardization body, AENOR. The guidelines currently used in Germany and in Italy were formulated by professional service providers: Bayerischer Rundfunk and Senza Barriere. In France and French Belgium, the guidelines have been prepared by cultural associations or theatre companies, whereas in Flemish Belgium, Catalonia, Greece and Portugal they have been produced and developed by academics.

Guidelines have become available at different points in each country, which is indicative of varying national stances towards AD in particular, and towards inclusion services in general. Most guidelines have been issued since the turn of the century. The British standards can be traced back to the year 2000 (Ofcom 2000). The UK was followed by Germany (Dosch and Benecke 2004), Spain (AENOR 2005), Ireland (BCI 2005), Greece (Georgakopoulou
2008), France (Morisset and Gonant 2008), Catalonia (Puigdomènech et al. 2008), French-speaking Belgium (ABCD 2009, Audioscenic 2010) Poland (Szymańska and Strzymiński 2010), Dutch-speaking Belgium (Remael and Vercauteren 2011), Portugal (Neves 2011), and Italy (Busarello and Sordo 2011). Outside Europe, the countries with recognized guidelines are Australia (with guidelines inspired by their UK and the US counterparts) and the US (ADC 2009).

Most guidelines agree on key aspects of AD formulation (Bittner 2012, Rai et al. 2010). However, while they are all essentially prescriptive, some are more rigid in their expression of the rules and fail to consider that, in some cases, these rules can or even should be disregarded. So, instead of providing a general strategy that makes audio describers think about creative alternatives, they tend to restrict their sphere of action (Bittner 2012). Furthermore, however valid locally, most guidelines are rarely based on empirical research; instead, in most cases, they are informed by experience, common sense and personal preferences.

The growing awareness that the actual needs of blind users (as opposed to the intuition of sighted describers) should shape the norms governing AD formulation, and that reception research can facilitate the definition of usable translation standards and good practices (Chmiel and Mazur 2012) has shaped the remit of the European project ADLAB (Audio Description: Lifelong Access for the Blind). ADLAB (2011–2014) sought to draw reliable AD guidelines reflecting the preferences and needs of the visually impaired audience and ensure that they are usable throughout Europe. The idea of common European guidelines is not new (Vercauteren 2007), but it was not until 2011 that it became a reality under the framework of the ADLAB project.

The extensive research work and results of the empirical studies carried out by the ADLAB team produced the first set of accessible AD strategic guidelines or recommendations: Pictures Painted in Words: ADLAB Audio Description Guidelines (Remael et al. 2015). These guidelines (i) have been made available as an open source e-book with several accessibility features—so users can choose to read the book using text-to-speech or magnification; (ii) are strategic because they propose flexible strategies (vs. rigid norms) to face the most critical issues arising in the AD process; and (iii) reach out beyond the realm of film and television to cover areas such as theatre, museum and exhibitions. In the case of film AD, they emphasize the importance of having a deep understanding of the main narrative elements of the source material, thus highlighting the relevance of film and cinema studies to the practice of AD.

Instead of offering set solutions to AD problems, these recommendations show that there are several ways of dealing with difficulties in any given set of circumstances. The guidelines thus take the form of advice based on meticulous analysis and testing and they are organized under headings that flag up the most challenging areas in AD formulation (Maszerowska et al. 2014; Remael et al. 2015). Technically, each chapter revolves around a specific topic (e.g. text on screen, or wording and style) and it is divided into four parts: definition of the topic, analysis of the source text (e.g. film, play, audio introduction, etc.), suggestions on the production of the target text (based on the following model: ‘once you have established whether . . . make a decision on . . . ’), and examples of possible strategies taken from real ADs. The central idea is that it is necessary to adopt individual strategies instead of general across-the-board recommendations. As in any other type of translation, individual solutions are decided within each specific context and should be carefully considered by the decision-maker, i.e. the audio describer.
The language of audio description

**Distinctive features**

Language is an aspect of AD that has received much attention (Arma 2011, Maszerowska *et al.* 2014, Piety 2004, Rai *et al.* 2010, Salway 2007, Snyder 2008, Taylor 2015). After all, AD entails the transposition of images into words. Lexical, grammatical, syntactic and stylistic choices therefore become crucial to warrant that AD is at the same time usable, effective and enjoyable. Scholars and guidelines have therefore been trying to determine the most appropriate linguistic features of a good AD for some time. In order to designate these features, a wide range of adjectives has been employed. On the whole, though, the adjectives ‘meticulous’, ‘concise’, ‘visually intense’ and ‘usable’ (see below for definitions) seem to portray the distinctive and preferred features of AD language (Perego 2014a: 28–30) (see Table 8.1). There is no univocal definition for each term, and while no systematic research on these specific aspects of AD exists yet, it is possible to make some general observations. On the whole, ‘meticulous’ and ‘visual intense’ pertain mainly to the lexical domain of AD, whereas ‘concise’ and ‘usable’ are more closely related to the syntax.

These key features can be defined as follows:

- A *meticulous* AD provides detailed, accurate and precise descriptions through well-chosen, clear (vs. obscure, jargon-rich) vocabulary. A meticulous AD generates from the observational skills of the describer that should be able to analyze and understand the source text, select its most salient visual elements, and make the right word choice in a given context. However, not only do words have to be appropriate to the context: they should also engage the listener through long-lasting descriptions.

### Table 8.1 Key adjectives used to define AD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main features of AD</th>
<th>Common terms used in literature</th>
<th>Sources</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meticulous</td>
<td>detailed</td>
<td>Remael and Vercauteren 2011</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>accurate</td>
<td>Ofcom 2010</td>
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<td></td>
<td>precise</td>
<td>AENOR 2005, Morisset and Gonant 2008</td>
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<td></td>
<td>well-chosen</td>
<td>ADP 2009</td>
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<td>Concise</td>
<td>succinct</td>
<td>ADP 2009, Ofcom 2010, Snyder 2007</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>concise</td>
<td>ADP 2009</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visually intense</td>
<td>imaginative</td>
<td>ADP 2009, Snyder 2007</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rich</td>
<td>Morisset and Gonant 2008</td>
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<td></td>
<td>descriptive</td>
<td>BCI 2005</td>
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<td></td>
<td>varied</td>
<td>Remael and Vercauteren 2011, Ofcom 2010, Busarello and Sordo 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usable</td>
<td>simple</td>
<td>Ofcom 2010</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>clear</td>
<td>ADP 2009, Taylor 2015</td>
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</table>
• **Visual intensity** refers to the depth and the force with which AD conveys visual details in words. The adjectives found in literature—e.g. ‘imaginative’, ‘rich’, ‘descriptive’, ‘vivid’, ‘varied’—generally refer to visual intensity, a quality of AD that brings it closer to an art than a craft (Snyder 2008: 192).

• Given the needs of the target audience and the communicative purposes of AD, as well as its strict time limitations, the density of information conveyed through carefully selected words is not compatible with an equally dense, or intricate, syntax. **Concision** is therefore vital. Audio describers should learn to use no more words than necessary to convey ideas effectively, taking care not to omit important information.

• Concision is also a first step towards usable ADs that are easy to access and understand. In AD, **usability** is typically achieved through the use of plain syntax favouring short sentences and uncluttered constructions, as well as a logical organization of information (e.g. from known to new, from general to specific) facilitating text processing and visualization (Taylor 2015: 49–50).

**Idiosyncratic features of a special language**

Ideally, AD should be meticulous, concise, visually intense and usable. But how do ADs behave in reality? Only corpus-based investigations can answer this question and enable us to understand how AD works in practice. To date, corpus-based research in AD is limited (Arma 2011, Jiménez Hurtado *et al.* 2010, Piety 2004, Salway 2007). However, existing studies preliminarily indicate that AD has some idiosyncratic features. In other words, it would seem to be a language of its own, exhibiting features that are different from those characterizing general language.

Salway (2007), for instance, observed that, compared to general language, AD shows a higher rate of non-grammatical words; words referring to actions, especially in the form of troponyms—verbs that express a particular manner of doing something, e.g. spins, crawls, etc. (Salway 2007: 159); and unusual lexical combinations to describe, for example, characters’ appearances (‘woman/man in’, ‘woman/man wearing’) or aspects of their interaction with other characters (e.g. ‘turns to’, ‘shakes hands’, ‘sit next to’, etc.) (Salway 2007: 160–161). Salway’s pioneering study is based on a large corpus (91 films), but the regularities he found can only be regarded as typical of English AD language—indeed other languages might behave differently. This has been initially demonstrated in a smaller-scale comparative study conducted on Italian vs. English by Arma (2011, 2012), which has identified some similarities in sentence structure that exist in both languages, but also a number of Italian-specific features, e.g. the tendency to overuse secondary embedded clauses despite recommendations against this practice (Busarello and Sordo 2011).

The existence of regularities in AD scripts, as documented in existing corpuses, is both useful and encouraging. These findings might be of assistance to those who produce ADs and train audio describers (ADLAB PRO, n.d.). Drawing on other corpuses might also yield insights into the idiosyncrasy of AD in other languages, and thus refine our understanding of the universal features of AD across languages—which could then be tested on VIPs to establish how the effectiveness of AD can be maximized (Salway 2007: 171).

**The style of audio description**

An important aspect of the language of AD pertains to style, i.e. the way in which vocabulary and grammar vary across different speech situations. The style of a text is aimed to
produce certain effects and to evoke certain responses in AD users. It is determined by
diction (the choice and use of words) and syntax (the sentence structure) (Leech and Short
1981). Closely related to such phenomena is the use of rhetorical devices, e.g. rhythmic pat-
tterns and sound effects, which are typical of poetry and verse-drama.

The style of AD is crucial: there is a widely held consensus (Rai et al. 2010) that it should
match the style, tone and pace of the programme, scene or event that is being described, and
be consistent throughout a film or across the various episodes of a television series. The
information included in the description must also be appropriate for the target audience for
a specific film (Rai et al. 2010: 7). The description should not stand out or draw attention to
itself, but the describer should blend in seamlessly with the rest of the audio. To do so, the
AD should respect the genre of the source text and its specificities (Georgakopoulou 2008,
the AD for a dramatic black and white film will have to avoid colloquial or slang lexical
choices, unconventional syntax, or a squeaky voice to narrate it.

On the other hand, AD for children favours a more intimate and expressive style, as well
as the use of proper intonation and lexical choices. The description of Disney’s Dumbo
(1941), for example, includes items like ‘big smile’, ‘Dumbo’s little trunk’ and ‘two plump
teardrops’. These are reflective of the greater simplicity of narratives aimed at children,
but also of the ‘cuteness’ that drives some animation films (Ofcom 2000, AENOR 2005,
BCI 2005).

Objectivity vs. subjectivity

Whereas it is easy to agree on the style that AD scripts should have, the question of inter-
pretative vs. neutral descriptions is still open and the debate on objectivity vs. subjectivity
remains unresolved. Interpretation is the ‘subjective treatment of reality perceived by audio
describers . . . and the equally subjective verbal expression of that reality’ in AD (Mazur and
Chmiel 2012: 173–174). Most early AD guidelines do not welcome subjective judgments and
they openly favour objectivity as a way to avoid manipulation, spoon-feeding or a patroniz-
ing attitude towards the target audience (Mazur and Chmiel 2012, Rai et al. 2010). The ITC
guidelines (Ofcom 2000: 15–16) warn their readers and prospective audio describers not to
give personal opinions or interpret events, and stipulate that, in general, information must
never give away the plot. In the same vein, the French Audio Description Charter dictates
that embracing objectivity is important: by remaining objective, audio describers do not
impose their feelings on viewers, aiming instead to stir the listener’s (Morissett and Gonant
2008: 2, Rai et al. 2010: 61). This is an uncompromising view that is shared, for instance, by
the German (Dosch and Benecke 2004) and the Italian (Busarello and Sordo 2011) guide-
lines, and that is also fiercely endorsed by the American school: qualitative judgements
are unnecessary, unwanted and unacceptable because they interpret subjectively (instead of
describing objectively) and leave no interpretative space to users (Snyder 2007: 102).

From a practical point of view, formulating objective descriptions favours the use of fac-
tual adjectives (‘tall’, ‘blond-haired’), rather than evaluative adjectives (‘ugly’, ‘beautiful’),
and specific descriptive adverbs (‘arguably’, ‘characteristically’, ‘clearly’, ‘instinctively’) are preferred over vague interpretative ones (‘anxiously’, ‘brusquely’, ‘eagerly’) (Ofcom

Instances of more flexible views on the use of interpretative language, however, do
exist (Haig 2005, Mälzer-Semlinger 2012, Orero 2012, Udo and Fels 2009), especially in
Europe and in Canada. These derive from a different conception of AD and of the work
of the audio describer, based on the premise that a work of art such as a film—as is also the case with paintings or dance performances—needs to be fully understood, and its story needs to be reconstructed for the new audience, even when the reconstruction of the source text can open the way for the AD to incorporate inferences made by the describer (Udo and Fels 2009). According to the supporters of this view, interpreting is not a problem; on the contrary, it is sometimes the only means to give VIPs an experience that is comparable to that of sighted audiences.

Crucially, it is not always clear when judgments are subjective, or which interpretations are more objective, and hence more worthy of being included in AD (Mazur and Chmiel 2012: 174). This is the reason why it is difficult—almost impossible, despite the describer’s effort—to be objective. In fact, audio describers are also viewers, and the story that they tell will always represent, to some extent, their own interpretation of seemingly factual contents (Remael et al. 2015: 17). The fact that any source text contains elements that are extremely difficult to describe objectively—e.g. gestures, facial expressions, or complex emotions (Dosch and Benecke 2004, Mazur and Chmiel 2012, Mazur 2014)—lends further credence to the idea that rigid norms governing AD are disruptive and can interfere with the quality and the effectiveness of the final product.

It is reassuring however to read that, in spite of the different views on the objectivity/subjectivity issue, ‘the research revealed that there are many definitions of a successful audio description, not merely because describing styles differ, but because there are many fundamental differences in audience expectation, need and experience’ (Ofcom 2000: 4). Current research seems to show that VIPs do not appreciate inflexible objectivity (Mazur and Chmiel 2012), which brings us back to the most crucial principles of AD formulation: (i) it is necessary to find the right balance between interpretation and objectivity, so that VIPs are always given enough room to develop their own interpretations; and (ii) the need to always favour the end users’ preferences over sighted viewers’ and audio describers’ intuitions. Such preferences should provide orientation for professionals, and can be formalized through systematic audience research (ADLAB 2013, ADLAB PRO 2017b).

**Reception studies**

Given the relatively recent establishment of AD as a field professional practice, and a domain of scholarly enquiry and specialized training in higher education institutions, a substantial number of early studies on AD are descriptive and designed to identify the main features and technical developments pertaining to this form of audiovisual transfer (Benecke 2004, Snyder 2007). With the exception of those issued by ITC (Ofcom 2000) and the ADLAB project (Remael et al. 2015), guidelines are mainly based on the practitioners’ experience, rather than on the real preferences of VIPs or their reactions to established AD solutions. However, unlike what happened with other forms of AVT, findings from survey-based and empirical research on AD (and, in particular, film AD) became available in the 1990s, that is, relatively early in the development of this discipline (Cronin and King 1990, Peli et al. 1996, Schneiderl and Kirchner 2001).

Both survey and empirical research rely on direct and indirect observation. Survey research involves asking questions to respondents, and it is often used to assess thoughts, opinions, and feelings. Empirical research is based on observation and interpretation of evidence and it is used, for instance, to gauge user experience. The challenges involved in formulating effective ADs for VIPs promptly raised the awareness of academics that it is crucial to assess the effects of AD on real users and produce user-oriented translations.
adhering to their actual needs. Despite the difficulties that both methodologies involve (Chmiel and Mazur 2012), reception studies (also known as audience studies) facilitate the direct involvement of VIPs in research, and deliver key insights into the processing and appreciation of AD (Fels et al. 2005, Chmiel and Mazur 2012, Mazur and Chmiel 2012, Perego 2016, Walczak and Szarkowszka 2012).

**Reception research and VIPs**

To date, the results of reception research have been able to confirm the advantages of film AD for VIPs. From the early stages of its introduction on television in the US, VIPs have displayed an overall positive reaction to the AD service. They do not perceive AD as obtrusive; instead, AD is regarded as an aid to increase their independence and understanding of key elements in the plot of a film, and a source of added enjoyment (Frazier 1975, Peli et al. 1996, Schmeidler and Kirchner 2001). Moreover, AD enhances the comprehension of VIPs, even when specific AD styles (i.e. cinematic vs. standard) or techniques (text-to-speech AD) are tested. Indeed, cinematic AD, a type of AD that uses filmic terms referring to editing, *mise-en-scène* and cinematography, is easily understood and appreciated, especially by frequent cinema-goers (Fryer and Freeman 2013), despite the sceptical attitude of most guidelines towards the use of jargon (Perego 2014b, Rai et al. 2010). Also the text-to-speech technique, whereby AD is narrated by a synthetic voice, does not seem to have a particularly negative impact on VIPs' perception of AD. While declaring to prefer human voices, VIPs seem to be very open to this cheaper alternative to traditional AD. Text-to-speech AD is therefore well accepted as an effective solution to increase the current number of accessible products on the market (Szarkowska and Jankowska 2012, Walczak and Szarkowska 2012). Recently, it has also been demonstrated that AD enhances the sense of immersion (strong emotional involvement and reactions toward media exposure) of VIPs because it helps them to experience the emotional content of audiovisual products (Fryer and Freeman 2013), thus making their experience closer to the experience of sighted viewers.

Several large-scale projects have exploited the benefits of survey and empirical research, too: the AUDETEL project (Lodge 1993) studied the requirements of the target audience in order to develop an innovative system designed to make television accessible to visually impaired people through AD. The Bollywood for All project (Rai 2009) explored whether a potential demand for audio described Bollywood films existed in the UK and India, and it investigated the target audience medium (TV/DVD/Cinema) and language preferences with respect to AD. The ADLAB project (ADLAB, n.d.) formulated new AD guidelines based on research and experiments involving real users in four different countries. The ITC Guidance on Standards for Audio Description resulted from a large survey conducted on blind and partially sighted people throughout the UK with the help of the Royal National Institute for the Blind (Ofcom 2000).

**Reception research and sighted viewers**

Besides focusing on VIPs, reception studies have also shown some of the effects that AD has on sighted viewers, although research in this field is limited and results are not yet conclusive. A survey of sighted viewers watching AD with their visually impaired families, covering their experience over one year, showed that they did not find AD obtrusive (Cronin and King 1990), which is confirmed by more recent research (Perego 2016). Besides tolerating AD well, sighted viewers seem to benefit from AD in some circumstances. In their
eye-tracking studies conducted on children (8–9 years), Krejtz et al. (2012a, 2012b) showed that the addition of AD to educational films facilitates knowledge and vocabulary acquisition. In fact, AD positively guides the attention of viewers towards the described objects and provides them with specialized vocabulary presented in context, without interfering with the recognition of the film scenes. Similarly, Szarkowska et al. (2013) showed that teenagers (15 to 17 years) exposed to audio described works of art focused significantly longer on the described elements in the painting, which functioned as an aid to developing their visual literacy. For her part, Perego (2016) demonstrated that when AD is added to a film it does not negatively affect the cognitive aspects of film viewing (understanding and recognition of pictorial details) of young adults (15–28 years), nor does it dramatically affect its overall enjoyment. On the other hand, listening to AD without the visuals can pose some challenges to sighted viewers, who understand less in terms of film content, enjoy the film less, and have to struggle to integrate information delivered though only one semiotic channel.

**Future reception research**

Still in its infancy within the wider field of AVT studies, reception research remains a powerful tool to investigate best practices and produce usable ADs, but also to assess the possible benefits that sighted viewers can reap from AD.

More detailed knowledge and systematic research on the effects of AD on VIPs is still missing. We do not know, for instance, whether (i) their cognitive benefits and positive reaction to AD would be maintained irrespective of the film genre and complexity; (ii) groups suffering from different types of blindness (congenital vs. adventitious) would react differently to the same AD; (iii) blind children and older adults have specific processing difficulties; (iv) text-to-speech AD is effective with all film genres, if it combines well with all forms of audiovisual translation, if it is equally effective for all groups of users (younger/older, more/less familiar with text-to-speech AD), etc.

There is also a dearth of knowledge and research on the effects of AD on sighted viewers. For instance, we do not have sufficient evidence as to whether users without visual impairment could benefit from AD, e.g. in the contexts of language acquisition and literacy development for native speakers and immigrants, or as a support for vulnerable users, including those with reduced perceptual and cognitive abilities. A number of scholars and some guidelines endorse that such benefits exist (ADP 2009: 3–5, AENOR 2005, Rai et al. 2010: 14–15, 53, 60, Dosch and Benecke 2004, Rai et al. 2010: 53, Morrisett and Gonant 2008: 1, Rai et al. 2010: 60, Ofcom 2000: 9, 13, Remael and Vercauteren 2011: 1), but this has not been corroborated by systematic research. Future research developments should ensure that AD addresses the actual needs of its users, rather than take for granted that scholars are already aware of such needs.

**The future of audio description**

AD for the blind has come a long way in the past several years, both as an area of professional practice and as a domain of scholarly enquiry. Several countries in Europe and beyond have improved their AD practices and increased their service provision; more importantly, they have also demonstrated the advantages of letting research inform the re-definition of AD quality standards. There is little doubt that AD will continue to advance thanks to technological developments and research. There are still questions waiting to be answered, but the box of methodological tools that is now available to researchers is growing.
studies, eye tracking and empirical research still have much to offer in order to gauge the real merits and limitations of existing ADs, but also to better understand what are the needs and preferences of VIPs, understood as a heterogeneous group of users.

Summary
This chapter has defined AD as an accessible form of AVT for the blind and visually impaired people, and explored the composition of its primary target audience, with particular emphasis on its heterogeneity and diversified needs. After outlining the history of AD both as a professional practice and as an academic discipline, it has focused on AD guidelines, showing the commonalities and the differences that exist between those already available on the market. It has also foregrounded the changes that have taken place over the last few years regarding the role of guidelines—as they move away from the former rigid norms that governed professional AD practices towards the formulation of new user-centred and flexible recommendations. The second half of the chapter has examined some of the most relevant aspects of the language of AD, including the qualities shaping its key lexical features (meticulousness, concision, visual intensity and usability) and other idiosyncratic trends (relatively high rate of content words and marked collocational structures) identified through corpus-based research. After looking at the stylistic properties of AD, the chapter has finally delved into the unresolved debate of description vs. interpretation in AD. The chapter closes with an overview of the most relevant findings of AD reception research involving both VIPs and sighted viewers.

Further reading
Remael, A., N. Reviers and G. Vercauteren (2015) Pictures Painted in Words. ADLAB Audio Description Guidelines, Trieste: EUT | These innovative guidelines suggest strategies (rather than prescriptive rules) for dealing with common challenges in the process of AD writing. They do not offer set solutions to AD problems, but show creative and flexible approaches to deal with specific difficulties in particular circumstances. It uses examples of successful ADs.
Maszerowska, A., A. Matamala and P. Orero (2014) (eds) Audio Description: New Perspectives Illustrated, Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins | This is the first academic volume on the topic addressing basic issues regarding AD strategies. It sets a robust practical and theoretical framework for AD. Not only is the book oriented towards the identification of the challenges that await the describer, but it also offers an insight into possible solutions.

Related topics
14 Psycholinguistics and perception in audiovisual translation
15 Narratology and audiovisual translation
17 Multimodality and audiovisual translation: cohesion in accessible films
20 Corpus-based audiovisual translation studies: ample room for development
21 Multimodal corpora in audiovisual translation studies
22 Eye tracking in audiovisual translation research
23 Audiovisual translation and audience reception
29 Audiovisual translator training
30 Audiovisual translation in language teaching and learning
31 Accessible filmmaking: translation and accessibility from production
References


Busarello, E. and F. Sordo (2011) *Manuale per aspiranti audio descrittori di audiofilm per non vedenti*. Scurelle, Trento: Cooperativa Sociale Senza Barriere ONLUS.


Audio description


**Filmography**

*Dumbo* (1941) Various directors. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0033563/?ref_=nv_sr_2