

Reviere, N. (2018) “A corpus-based study into the linguistic features of a new, multimodal text type”. PhD in Translation Studies, University of Antwerp. Supervisors: Aline Remael, Reinhild Vandekerckhove.

Summary

In the field of (Audiovisual) Translation Studies, Media Accessibility and Audio Description for the blind and visually impaired in particular, have made tremendous progress over the past decade(s). AD might well be the fastest growing sub-discipline of AVT, with a proliferation of research articles since the beginning of this century. Also in practice, AD services are on the rise. AD has become a regular access service in most European countries, as well as the USA and Canada and it is beginning to make its way world-wide. An increased number of countries are putting legislation in place. Nevertheless, the service remains a relatively marginal phenomenon in society at large and research still struggles to create the tight and coherent body of literature required for a mature discipline. Basic research providing insight into how AD actually works is moving slowly and the basic research themes - what, when and how to describe - have not changed substantially since the start of AD research. One of these research themes that requires additional scientific and empirical exploration in particular is the question of how images are put into words. This issue constitutes the topic of the present study.

1. Research questions, theoretical and methodological framework

In terms of how to formulate ADs, scholars have put forward the premise that audio describers use a distinct language or register that is shaped by the unique communicative context, such as the environment external to the text where the communication takes place, the needs of the blind and visually impaired target audience and the unique mode of communication that combines verbal as well as non-verbal sign systems. This idea forms the starting hypothesis of the current project, namely that the communicative context in which descriptions are produced systematically influences the linguistic choices describers make and leads to a “language of AD” characterised by a series of idiosyncratic features. Four research questions stem from this hypothesis:

1. What does “context” encompass in the case of AD and what features of this context are thought to systematically influence the choices describers make?
2. What empirical evidence exists to support the claim that the language used by audio describers is indeed idiosyncratic and what lexical, grammatical and syntactical features are typical of the language of AD?
3. Can the preponderance of certain lexical, grammatical and syntactical features (research question 2) be explained by features related to the context of AD? (research question 1)
4. What is the influence of the non-verbal elements of the AD text - such as the sound effects - on the language of AD and how do verbal and non-verbal elements interact in this text type?

The present study relies on three domains for the development of a theoretical and methodological framework to address the above questions. First, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), of which Michael Halliday is one of the most central figures, forms the main framework for the study of research questions 1

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and 2. SFL provides a very useful descriptive and interpretative framework for studying language in use and how the context of a given text impacts on the way language is realised in that text.

Second, the present analysis borrows insights from Multimodality theory and its application in Audiovisual Translation Studies (AVTS). Multimodality is fast becoming the main conceptual framework for the study of audiovisual texts in AVTS and it goes without saying that any study on the language of AD should take into account the fact that AD is a multimodal text type. AD verbalises the visual and language is only part of the way in which the message is conveyed in interaction with sound effects and music. These non-verbal aspects of the ST and TT might impact on the linguistic choices describers make.

Finally, the above research questions are tackled using a combined approach of qualitative and quantitative research methods, more precisely corpus-based studies. A common criticism in AVTS and particularly accessibility research is the traditionally small scale of its studies. Insights from accessibility research were for a long time based on the findings of individual case-studies, often lacking a common methodological and theoretical framework. However, the situation is changing and greater focus is being placed on empirical, quantitative evidence and methodological rigour. Analysing corpora comprising multiple texts is one method that allows for such an empirical approach and it is the method applied in the present study. Corpora have been used in AVTS since the 1990s, but in the field of AD it is a new and innovative approach.

This dissertation consists of an introduction and five subsequent chapters forming the core of the project. Each chapter ventures to answer one of the four research questions above.

2. Chapter 2 - The context of AD

Chapter 2 tackles the first research question: What does "communicative context" encompass in the case of AD and what features of this context are thought to systematically influence the choices describers make? Chapter 2 touches upon some of the major issues that make audio-described texts a unique form of communication. The discussion is approached from a Systemic Functional Linguistics perspective and divides the context in which a given text occurs into three dimensions, namely Field - what the text is about -, Tenor - who participates in the communication - and Mode - the form in which the message is communicated. The discussion of these three dimensions in the case of AD highlights the high number of variables that make up the context of AD. In terms of Field, audio-described texts prove to come in many different forms (live, recorded, with or without an introduction, with or without audio subtitles, etc.) and to cover a variety of topics. The present study focuses on one specific type, namely recorded AD of narrative fiction.

In terms of Tenor, the AD creation process involves a large number of participants (ranging from the scriptwriter, the director, the camera-crew, the sound technicians and the actors to the describer, the voice talents, the AD sound technician, the primary and secondary AD audiences, etc.).The discussion regarding Tenor focuses on the complex role of describers as mediator who have to remain neutral and objective but simultaneously have to make sure audiences can fully grasp the content and form of the narrative. In other words, they continuously have to strike a balance between "simply" giving information in the form of verbally rendered visual "facts" or explaining and even explicating certain information using the (narrative) context.

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The third and final level of context, namely Mode, turns out to be the most complex one. Audio-described texts are unique audiovisual materials composed of multiple, aural modes - sound effects, music, dialogues and descriptive units - which has consequences for describers on many levels. This means that AD is a form of constrained translation, subject to restrictive time constraints. It also entails that AD is a form of intersemiotic translation and verbalises visual content, a mode that functions completely differently from a semiotic point of view. Last but not least, it entails that AD texts are partial translations rather than stand-alone texts: they function only in combination with sounds, music and dialogue, which has a great influence on the decision-making process of describers.

The discussion in Chapter 2 reveals the relatively high number of issues about which the AD research community is still debating and for which more empirical grounding is required to be able to come to a consensus. One such issue is the question of how to best formulate descriptions and how to choose the appropriate wording. This final observation leads us to the second research question, which is tackled in Chapter 3.

3. Chapter 3 - quantitative analysis of the Dutch AD corpus

The question addressed in Chapter 3 is: What empirical evidence exists to support the claim that the language used by audio describers is indeed idiosyncratic and what lexical, grammatical and syntactical features are typical of the language of AD? In order to gather empirical evidence, I developed the first Dutch corpus of audio-described films and television series: a digital, linguistically annotated, multimodal corpus of 39 audio-described texts, including a total of 154,570 words and 3,074 minutes of video. This Dutch AD corpus is used to extract a series of quantitative data regarding the language of AD, namely frequency counts of parts of speech, words, lemmas, collocations and the calculation of other relevant text statistics such as reading speed, word and sentence length, text readability and type token ratios (a statistical measure reflecting lexical variety). In a next stage, these frequency data are compared to a set of reference data in order to identify those lexico-grammatical features that are typical of the language of AD to a statistically significant level. To this end, I compare the frequency data for parts of speech and lemmas to the data from three different Dutch reference corpora, namely: SoNaR (a corpus of Dutch written language), CGN (a corpus of Dutch spoken language) and Subtlex-nl (a corpus of Dutch subtitles).

I calculate a chi-square goodness of fit test to determine whether the observed differences in frequency between my corpus and the three reference corpora are statistically significant. In addition, I calculate phi-values and odds ratios for each variable, in order to evaluate the strength and the size of the measured differences, respectively.

This statistical analysis offers a reliable answer to my first research question: There is strong empirical evidence that supports the existence of a language or register of AD in Dutch. The frequency data are idiosyncratic compared to all three reference corpora. What is more, the language of AD turns out to be different on a high number of levels - a significant number of parts of speech are used idiosyncratically to a high degree of statistical significance. A high degree of consistency can also be observed among the different texts in the Dutch AD corpus. In other words, the analysis confirms my starting hypothesis that there is indeed a language of AD and it highlights that different describers select the same set of lexico-grammatical features consistently.

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To summarise, the empirical observations in Chapter 3 identify the following general lexicogrammatical features that characterise the language of Dutch AD and are significantly different compared to the reference corpora:

- A preponderance of open-class words: nouns and, in particular, verbs;
- A preponderance of verbs among the most frequently occurring lemmas, followed by nouns referring to human participants and their body parts;
- An inferior frequency of closed-class words, particularly adverbs, conjunctions and pronouns;
- A high level of repetition of the same words and part of speech classes and, consequently, a low lexical variety;
- A relatively advanced level of readability.

4. Chapter 4 - Qualitative data analysis

The quantitative observations from Chapter 3 form the basis of the qualitative analysis in Chapter 4, which is designed to answer the third research question: Can the preponderance of certain lexical, grammatical and syntactical features be explained by the context of AD? Chapter 4 includes an in-depth qualitative analysis of the idiosyncratic features of the language of Dutch AD from a Systemic Functional Linguistics point of view. This means that each significant feature is analysed in terms of its contribution to the three meaning functions language is designed to express, namely Experiential meaning (the participants about which the proposition is made), Interpersonal meaning (how the interaction between interlocutors is cued in the text) and Textual meaning (how the text is organised). In addition, each meaning function has a direct relation to the three dimensions of the context discussed previously: Field values resonate with Experiential meaning, Tenor with Interpersonal meaning and Mode with Textual meaning. This interrelation makes it possible to discuss how the parameters of the context explain the use of certain lexicogrammatical features.

In terms of the Experiential function of language, Dutch AD places the focus on material processes, describing concrete and physical actions (given the preponderance of verbs) performed by human actors (given the preponderance of nouns and proper names). Behavioural aspects of characters typically expressed through the use of behavioural or mental verbs remain limited in my corpus. Adjectives are, contrary to what literature and guidelines suggest, also not strikingly frequent in the Dutch AD corpus either. Moreover, adjectives focus on concrete, physical attributes of people and objects, rather than mental, behavioural or abstract properties. The circumstances against which the described actions take place, another aspect of the Experiential function, are less frequently described than actions and (human) participants and focus particularly on describing the setting through the use of prepositional phrases. In second instance, circumstantial adjuncts of manner are used to describe physical attributes and, to a lesser extent, behavioural aspects of characters. Present participles are a particularly common way to express this latter type of meaning in Dutch ADs (for example, “Steven blikk aarzelend in het rond” [Steven eyes the room hesitatingly]). A final aspect of the Experiential meaning function is the expression of time (usually achieved through the use of adverbs). Adverbs are infrequent in the Dutch AD corpus. Time is assumed to be chronological in audiovisual texts and describers only indicate aspects related to the passing of time when it is not chronological (flashbacks, flashforwards, asynchronous AD) or when several actions occur

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simultaneously. The most common adverbs of time in the Dutch AD corpus indicate frequency ("terug" [again/back], "weer" [again]), duration ("nog" [still], "even" [for a while]) or chronology ("dan"[then] and "nu" [now]).

The above choices in terms of the Experiential function in AD are explained by the parameters of the Field dimension. More specifically, the fact that the ST and TT are visual narratives greatly influences the choices describers make and the types of information they prioritise when time is limited. As previous research indicates, ADs should prioritise general, denotative aspects of the narrative for audiences to be able to follow the storyline whereas other aspects such as behavioural traits of characters, time and setting are described in second instance, when there is additional time available.

In terms of the Interpersonal function, the dominant feature of the language of Dutch AD is that this text type is described in the present tense. Past tenses only occur in very specific cases, such as the description of flashbacks or the description of a character's thought process or a character's intentions (for example, "Nu pas ziet Johnny dat Matty weg is. Dat had hij niet verwacht." [Just now Johnny sees that Matty is gone. He didn't expect that.]). The preponderance of the present tense is also explained by the narrative and dynamic nature of the ST, which presents the story as if it is developing in real time. Other aspects grouped under the Interpersonal function, such as modality (expressing the validity of a proposition) and appraisal (the expression of value judgements) are very infrequent in AD, which is indicated by the low frequency of adverbs, adverbial complements and modal verbs.

This observation is explained by the dimension of Tenor, i.e. the relation between the participants in the communication. Describers are neutral and objective mediators between the ST author and TT audience and are generally advised against formulating a personal opinion. In addition, the expression of modality and appraisal by the characters in the narrative is also infrequently described because this type of information does not need to be prioritised in AD when time is limited from a narrative point of view. In brief, the role of the describer as a neutral and objective mediator has an extensive influence on the language choices describers make, particularly in terms of the types of information they select - focusing on concrete and denotative aspects of the narrative - and the degree of interpretation that is accepted and/or required in terms of formulation.

In terms of the Textual function, the language of AD is characterised by the repetition of a selected set of resources to organise the AD text and create cohesion. More precisely, in terms of theme-organisation AD scripts are dominated by declarative, unmarked clauses, i.e. sentences that start with known information in sentence-initial position as the subject of the sentence. For example, "Celle smeert mayonaise op het gezicht van Gunther." [Celle smears mayonnaise on to the face of Gunther]. In other words, ADs follow a clear and repetitive thematisation pattern. Marked sentences are much less frequent. Some examples are sentences that start with an adjunct of place when there is a scene change (for example, "In een verhoorkamer" [In an interrogation room] at the beginning of a descriptive unit), or an adjunct of manner, when within the same setting only the characters' behaviour/actions change (for example, "Rustig zingend loopt hij tussen de wachtende groepjes door." [Singing quietly he walks in between the waiting groups of people]). When it comes to cohesion, a second feature of the Textual function, ADs rely to a large extent on creating cohesion through the repetition of the same words and, in second instance, through reference (pronouns referring back or ahead to lexical words) and meronymy (part-whole relations between words, such as humans and

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their body parts). Finally, the use of the third parameter of the Textual function, namely conjunction, is limited as well. What is more, only two conjunctions are used in the AD texts under study, to indicate the simultaneity of actions, namely "en" [and] and "terwijl" [as/while].

The limited resources used by describers to organise their texts can be explained in terms of the Mode dimension. Describers have limited time slots into which their descriptions can be inserted and therefore they have to prioritise information. One consequence is that the creation of what is called "texture" is left relatively implicit in AD. AD relies on the "mental models" that audiences construct, based on the information that they have already gathered from the narrative, and on information they are assumed to be able to infer based on their previous knowledge of the text type or genre at hand. As a result, the overall coherence of the text is only partly supported by the cohesive devices. Crucial to the overall coherence is the active input of audiences to create coherence, i.e. the logical relations they infer.

5. Chapter 5 - multimodal analysis of data

Considered from a Systemic Functional Linguistics perspective, the lexico-grammatical analysis in Chapter 4 has one important deficiency: it does not consider the influence of the other semiotic modes of the text, i.e. sound, music and dialogue, which audiences also take into account when (re)constructing a coherent narrative. This observation leads to my final research question: What is the influence of the non-verbal elements of the AD text on the language of AD - such as the sound effects - and how do verbal and non-verbal elements interact in this text type? To answer this question, Chapter 5 first and foremost developed a theoretical framework for the analysis of selected scenes from the Dutch AD corpus from a multimodal and product-oriented perspective. Multimodality research is a relatively new field of study that is still working on the development of unambiguous and systematic analytical tools, particularly for the study of sound effects. One of the aims of Chapter 5, consequently, was to initiate the development of an analytical model for the study of sound in AD. The analytical framework developed combines the main semiotic features of sound described in the literature with the method of multimodal transcription. The result is an in-depth analysis of the semiotic role of sounds in a selection of audio-described scenes, which illustrates the multimodal functioning of audio-described texts and highlights how sound and AD complement each other.

First, the multimodal analysis underlines the crucial role of sound in creating a coherent and vivid AD text. From a methodological point of view, this observation highlights the fact that research should attach more importance to the study of sound, not only in film studies and multimodality research, but also in AVT. In addition, the analysis revealed that a few concepts related to the analysis of sound require further elaboration from a conceptual and methodological point of view. For instance, more objective indicators could be developed to determine the extent to which sounds are readily identifiable by themselves without additional context. Second, the multimodal analysis described the semiotic value of sound effects in AD in relation to the three metafunctions of language, i.e. the Experiential, Textual and Interpersonal.

In terms of the Experiential function, sound effects contribute on different levels. Foley and ambience sounds (respectively the sounds created by actions and characters, and the sounds created by the setting) support the creation of a realistic sonic environment, i.e. they recreate the sounds caused by characters, objects and actions that audiences expect from real life experience. Additionally, however, these sounds can express affective and abstract meanings, reflecting, for instance, characters' emotions or behavioural traits.

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Typical sound types with this function are sound effects and music that have no source in the story world (non-diegetic sounds), but that are added specifically for their emotive/impressionistic effect. Foley and ambience sounds that do have a source in the story world can also have such an impressionistic effect, when their quality (their volume, timbre or pitch) is manipulated to have a heightened emotional impact. Sounds also contribute to expressing perspective in AD texts, either in terms of distance or in terms of a character's subjective perspective (by, for instance, focusing on the music a character hears through headphones, rather than the sound of the traffic around him). Finally, sounds contribute to a large extent to the expression of time in audio-described narratives. The dynamic nature of sounds automatically introduces a sense of real time, but unmeasured, fluctuating sound effects or music that lacks a rhythm or beat can, in contrast, create a sense of timelessness or slow-motion.

When it comes to the Textual function, sound effects contribute on two levels. On the one hand, foley and ambience sounds can help to highlight a certain character, object or action in the narrative, when their volume is increased or when its sound quality attracts attention. On the other hand, the timing of the sound effects (in relation to the other aural modes and the AD) helps to increase the cohesion of the text. The simultaneous or near-simultaneous timing of two different aural elements, signals a potential logical link that can help audiences to make sense of what is unfolding in the scene. In other words, timing and the synchronisation thus created between modes helps audiences to infer information links. For instance, when the description of an action such as a car approaching and the increased volume of a sound effect (such as a mechanic sound in the background) coincide, audiences can infer that the car is the source of the sound and that the mechanic sound represents its engine. Or, an ominous musical score that continues across two different scenes might indicate a causal relationship between the character introduced in one scene and the crime depicted in the other.

In terms of the Interpersonal function, the main role of the sound effects is, besides the expression of real time mentioned before, to contribute affective meaning. Sound effects and particularly the quality of the sound effects can have an emotional impact on the audience members, either reflecting the emotional and/or behavioural traits of characters or eliciting an emotional response from audience members, in order to engage them actively in the narrative action. The multimodal analysis indicated that this is one of the main contributions of sound in audio-described texts, particularly because it is a type of information that is usually not included in the description, but that sound effects express independently. Indeed, the multimodal analysis indicated that sound effects can express meaning either independently from the other modes (which we have called evocative sound effects) or they can express meaning in interaction with other modes (which we have called confirmatory sound effects). Typical evocative sounds in AD are impressionistic/affective sounds, as mentioned earlier, sounds that express subjective perspective and conventionalised sounds. The latter are sounds that resemble the way they would sound in real life and that are, therefore, thought to be readily identifiable by audiences without disambiguation by the AD or other aural modes.

However, many sounds do require disambiguation and I have identified four ways in which this is achieved in the Dutch AD corpus. Either the descriptive unit mentions or reiterates the source of the sound directly, through the use of nouns or verbs that refer to it, or the descriptive unit evokes the source of the sound indirectly through the process of lexical relations (by mentioning a word that meronymically triggers the source of the sound in the audiences' minds). The descriptive unit can (additionally) refer to the quality

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of the sound, rather than the source to further disambiguate it, through the use of nouns, verbs or possibly adjectives.

Finally, the descriptive unit indirectly and implicitly supports the process of information linking, based on which audiences can infer the source of the sound, by creating a “mental model” into which the sound can be fitted. These interactions between sounds and descriptive units evolve on a scale from explicit to implicit and two parameters influence their explicitness, namely timing (the closer together sound and AD are timed, the clearer their link) and sound quality (sounds with a high volume are better recognised than sounds in the background and sounds with a naturalistic modality are more readily identifiable).

To summarise, sounds play a crucial role in bringing across the message in audio-described texts. In some cases the sound effects support what is also said in the descriptive units, but in many cases sound effects play a leading role in bringing meanings across that the descriptive units do not usually include. This is the case for affective meanings. In addition, sound effects contribute to the cohesion of audio-described texts in terms of timing. While the analysis in Chapter 5 did not take a quantitative approach, it does complement my findings from Chapter 4 and helps to paint a more complete picture of what types of meanings are expressed by audio-described texts and how they are textually cued, both verbally and nonverbally.

6. Implications and future research

The present study has two main implications. On the one hand, the detailed description of the language of AD and the role of sounds offers a greater understanding of the functioning of this text type on a linguistic and multimodal level. Consequently, it can help scholars, practitioners and students to make intentional and informed decisions about how to write or study an audio-described film or series. As several scholars have underlined, the creation and even study of ADs remains to a large extent an intuitive process to date. The present study provides the necessary, research-based grounding to consider the AD end product with more deliberation and nuance. For instance, it can stimulate more critical readings of current AD guidelines. Moreover, the present study offers greater insight into the role of sound in AD. As a result, practitioners and scholars can move beyond the general and intuitive way in which sound is currently considered in AD.

On the other hand, the present study has methodological implications. While corpus studies is on the rise in AVT, it is still a relatively new approach in AD research. The corpus developed for the present study is one of the first AD corpora and the very first corpus of Dutch ADs. This project proved the feasibility and usefulness of specialised corpora for the study of audiovisual translations. The integration of a multimodal concordancing system and the addition of a qualitative analysis from a multimodal perspective, is in this respect, a crucial consideration and innovation. Integrating multimodal aspects in AVT research may seem evident, but its concrete realisation raises significant challenges related to the development of a rigid theoretical and methodological framework. The present study contributed to this emerging paradigm within AVTS, by illustrating how concepts relating to the semiotics of sound can be applied systematically to the analysis of AD from a product-oriented point of view.

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To conclude, the present study has highlighted a series of avenues for further research. The descriptive basis provided by the present study could inspire complementary, empirical research in the field of AD. It could inspire elaboration of the corpus-based approach presented here, but it also signals research possibilities in neighbouring fields, such as the development of translation memories, for testing the possibility of (semi-)automatic translation of AD scripts or for the development of systems for the indexation of images.

A second area of AD research that is highlighted by the present study is Multimodality. The present study has revealed the complex issues that arise for researchers venturing into this relatively uncharted domain. Particularly the theoretical and methodological rigour of this framework requires further exploration in order to be able to develop an integrated and translation-oriented framework for the study of AVT. It is hoped that the first steps taken by the present research will inspire others to follow suit.

Finally, the present study highlighted the importance of the active participation of audiences in the meaning-making process of audio-described texts. Particularly the final chapter underlined the importance of cognitive information linking by the audience because many cohesive links between aural signs in the AD text are left implicit, and audiences can only infer their logical interrelation by actively searching for links based on the greater textual environment and their background knowledge. However, more research is crucial in understanding how this process of information linking exactly functions from a user-oriented point of view.