

## Perspectives on Complex Understandings

 Jan Pedersen 

University of Stockholm

 Anna Matamala 

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

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### Abstract

This special issue contains a peer-reviewed selection of papers presented at *Media for All 8: Complex understandings*, a conference which took place in Stockholm in 2019. This introduction links the 15 articles included in this special issue to the conference theme, which is also the theme of this volume: *complex understandings*. The ultimate aim of the research presented here is to throw light on the various and complex perspectives, processes, views and agents involved in audiovisual translation and media accessibility. This introductory article highlights the main points of the different papers, and it also organises the contributions according to the various perspectives they take: product-based studies, process-based studies, training-based studies, user-based studies and policy-based studies. Overall, this volume offers a thorough overview of state-of-the-art research in audiovisual translation and media accessibility.

**Key words:** audiovisual translation, media accessibility, product research, process research, professional aspects, training, user reception, policy.

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 jan.pedersen@su.se, <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9189-0330>

 Anna.Matamala@uab.cat, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1607-9011>

## 1. Introduction

This volume of *Journal of Audiovisual Translation (JAT)* presents the state of the art in research into audiovisual translation and media accessibility. Ever since the dawn of organized AVT research back in the early 1990s, there have been numerous volumes like this one, and they not only inform our knowledge, but they also help charting how the discipline has evolved. In the early days, the domination of product research on dubbing and (particularly) subtitling was almost total. This volume shows how far the discipline has developed in just the last quarter century, how diverse the field has become, and how many perspectives are involved.

This volume contains very thoroughly selected papers from the latest instalment of the *Media for All* conference series, namely *Media for All 8: Complex understandings*, which took place in Stockholm on June 17 – 19 2019, and which attracted scholars, practitioners, producers, consumers, and other stakeholders from all continents except Antarctica. From more than a hundred presentations, 39 extended abstracts were submitted, out of which 21 were selected. The resulting articles went through a rigorous double-blind peer review process, in accordance with the standards of *JAT*, and the result is this volume, which contains 15 articles (excluding this introduction). We extend our deep gratitude to all the peer reviewers for their excellent work, and most useful feedback.

The theme of the conference, and of this volume, is *complex understandings* and this is an attempt to throw light on all the various and complex perspectives, processes, views and agents involved. It is an attempt to create understanding of and for these various agents and processes, which is important in an ever-more polarized world. Using ‘understanding’ in the plural, i.e. understandings, is a bit of a play on words, as using ‘understanding’ in a countable way means not only various ways of understanding, but also understanding *between* people and processes, in the possibly slightly old-fashioned sense of informal agreement or engagement, so notoriously used by writers such as Wodehouse. When you have an understanding, you have an informal agreement, if not necessarily to get engaged, then at least to cooperate; there is a relationship between the parties involved. This can be very complex indeed (as can engagements) but it shows that there is a will to cooperate to make the relationship work. That was very much the spirit of the conference, and that comes out very clearly in the articles of this volume. This is the understanding that lies at the core of the relationship between the writers and readers of this volume: the authors engage in their subject matter and they want you as readers to understand it, even though it may be quite complex.

Needless to say, a theme like this does not lead to very homogeneous and easily organized output, but instead it celebrates the heterogeneity and the diversity of the many perspectives of our discipline. As such, it differs from the first special issue of *JAT* (2019 2 (2)) which had a more clearly defined theme, that of *Framing Media Accessibility Quality*. What you find in this volume is instead a sampling of state-of-the-art research viewed through many perspectives. In this, it also differs very much from the conference-based publications of the infancy of our discipline.

Many, if not most perspectives of this wide-ranging diversified discipline that we have these days are well represented in the present volume; a discipline that started out as AVT, and then moved on to include media accessibility, and then spawned, according to Greco (2018), accessibility studies. Similarly, Chesterman's (e.g. 2016) three sociological strands are present here: the study of translation as product (translation), as process (translating), and as activity carried out by agents (translators). It can indeed be argued that almost all perspectives are included in this volume. Traditional product-based perspectives are represented by the contributions by Alsharhad, Minutella, Luque Colmenero & Soler Gallego, and Napoli.

The process perspective is newer than the product perspective, but it has already become well established. It is represented in this volume by the contributions by Tardel and Braun et al. They explore the interaction between human and machine, typical of the high-paced technical development of our modern world. As the translators' tools become ever more advanced, new possibilities and challenges arise in the translation process.

Perhaps the most obviously sociological strand in Chesterman's partition is the perspective of the translators (and other accessibility professionals), represented in this volume by the contributions of Sibul, Minutella and Georgiou & Perdikaki. This arguably newest strand uses methodology that differs rather pointedly from what has previously been used in AVT. Connected to this perspective is that of training and an ever-growing focus on AVT didactics, with more and more training courses and university programmes taking on the task of educating future translators and accessibility professionals. This perspective is represented by Mazur, Dawson, and Davitti & Sandrelli in this volume. From the sociological perspective, we also see studies comparing novice and professional translators (Tardel and Sandrelli & Davitti).

A very traditional way of organizing research (and practice) is to look at the mode of AVT; this can be done here as well, with Napoli and Minutella investigating dubbing, and Tardel, Alsharhan, Martínez-Lorenzo, Georgiou & Perdikaki analysing subtitling. When it comes to accessibility, Chica-Núñez & Jiménez-Hurtado, Mazur, Braun et al., and Luque Colmenero & Soler Gallego look at audio description, an area of study that has really come into its own. Subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing is also well represented, particularly when the process involved is respeaking (Dawson and Davitti & Sandrelli).

The perspective of the end user has been gaining more ground, not least when it comes to accessibility. This is very gratifying, as arguably the focus has for a very long time been on the end product, with a postulated idealized reader or viewer. Now we more often look into the experience of the actual users. This volume includes reception studies by Wang et al. and Chica-Núñez & Jiménez-Hurtado.

The perspective of the venue has grown more salient as AVT, and particularly accessibility, extends beyond screens (which is arguably why audiovisual translation is a more useful umbrella term than the older term screen translation). Theatres and museums are becoming more and more accessible

and the studies by Sibul, Wang et al., Luque Colmenero & Soler Gallego, and Chica-Núñez & Jiménez-Hurtado reflect this.

In recent years, it has become clear that AVT and accessibility incorporate political perspectives. The universalist approach to accessibility means that more legislation needs to be passed for more people to have full access to culture and other aspects of life. At the same time, if promoted politically, AVT can be used to strengthen minority languages and cultures. This is reflected in this volume by the policy-centred works of Martínez-Lorenzo, and Fuentes Luque & González Irizarry.

## 2. About the contributions

So, what are the complex understandings that these different perspectives endeavor to reach?

The product-based studies typically, and perhaps obviously, try to understand the complex ways language is transferred from source to target text. The “understanding” in this perspective is between the source and the target through the agency of the translator. Alsharhan investigates how English-language source texts on Netflix are translated into Arabic, and particularly how taboo language is treated. The findings show i.a. that while euphemisms, register shifts and omissions still occur, more and more varied strategies have been found in comparison to previous such studies, where there was more censorship. Napoli, on the other hand, takes a speech act approach to the Italian dubbing of Anglophone films, more precisely to the dubbing of requests. The findings show i.a. that the process of dubbing reshapes characterization, where characters can come across as more or less polite in the dubbed target text in comparison to the source text. Similarly, Minutella looks at how non-anglophone languages in the Anglophone movie *Despicable Me 2* are transferred to Italian via dubbing. The results show i.a. that the process is very complex indeed and that a thorough understanding of the function of the language in the source text is necessary. Luque Colmenero & Soler Gallego investigate how metaphors function as part of the audio description in art museums. The results show i.a. that, contrary to the traditional audio description credo, subjective descriptions, including deliberate metaphors, can be helpful for sharing art experiences.

The process-based studies typically endeavour to understand the complex act of (re-)creating communication. As mentioned above, the relationship, or understanding, that is investigated from this perspective in this volume is that between human and machine. Thus, Tardel investigates how automatic speech recognition and assisting scripts could aid subtitlers. The results show i.a. that the quality of machine output is vital for its usefulness. Similarly, Davitti & Sandrelli conducted a pilot study where automatic speech recognition was used in interlingual respeaking for live subtitling by student participants with various backgrounds. The results show i.a. that extensive training is necessary for achieving satisfactory results, even with the help of the machines. Braun et al. make a quality analysis of automated video descriptions for audio description. The results clearly show that the software is “blind” to narrative coherence, and is also found wanting when it comes to character identification and temporal continuity.

The agent-based (be s/he a translator or accessibility professional) studies typically venture to understand the people behind the transferred texts. The understanding in this perspective is between the agents and their complex working conditions, as well as the texts they work with. Sibul conducts a historical study of simultaneous theatre interpreters in Estonia, using interviews and archival resources. The results show i.a. that theater interpreting is not conference interpreting, and still it bridges a gap between communities. Focusing on the impact of texts on the translator, Georgiou and Perdikaki carry out a survey and interview-based study with subtitlers to understand how they deal with the emotions caused by sensitive audiovisual material. The results show i.a. that subtitlers working with others find it easier to cope than those working alone do.

The training-based studies typically endeavor to either set up didactic tools or understand the learning process for future translators and accessibility professionals. The understanding from this perspective is between the student and the subject matter, and their future professions. In this volume, two studies involve the teaching of interlingual respeaking, one of which is the above-mentioned contribution by Davitti & Sandrelli. The contribution by Dawson presents a research-informed training model for interlingual respeaking. The model comes with recommendations for units, tasks, materials and assessment useful for training interlingual respeakers. The contribution by Mazur, on the other hand, discusses a functional approach to audio description. She proposes a didactic model based on a functional source text analysis for felicitous audio description; a model which can also be useful for professionals and purports to integrate audio description more into translation studies.

The user-based studies typically seek to understand the perspective of the consumer. The understanding here is between consumer and product, and by extension, between consumer and producer. In this volume, both user-based contributions are centred on museums (just like the contribution by Luque Colmenero & Soler Gallego). Wang et al. conducted a pilot study, using EEG to evaluate the audio description for blind and partially sighted visitors to Titanic Belfast. The results indicate i.a. that the visitors' emotions are too complex to be measured by portable EEG, and that consumer feedback shows that they experience several emotions simultaneously. The contribution by Chica-Núñez & Jiménez-Hurtado presents an online portal for the evaluation of accessible audiovisual resources (in museums and elsewhere) that proposes a new way of analysing the quality of reception by developing a series of online questionnaires targeting sensory and cognitively impaired public in particular.

The policy-based studies typically aspire to understand the process or result of policy-making, often as the result of political activism. The understanding is here between citizens and legislation and other tools for exercising power or influence. In this volume, Fuentes Luque & González Irizarry map AVT accessibility in the Spanish-speaking Greater Antilles, particularly subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing, from the perspective of the viewers on the one hand, and legislation on the other. Their results show i.a. how much remains to be done in this region. Martínez-Lorenzo's contribution shows how subtitling can be used to strengthen a minority language, in this case Galician, as she discusses

whether it is more felicitous to correct or not to correct speakers of Galician and standardize their speech in subtitles. This results in a protocol for the subtitling of oral errors.

We hope that you will enjoy and be informed and stimulated by this, the most recent state-of the art research in AVT and media accessibility presented in this volume, and that it will inspire you to understand more of the complexities of the modern AVT world, as it continues to develop and diversify. Do we have an understanding on that?

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