

## Getting the Full Picture in English and Spanish? Audio Described Characters in Netflix's *Élite*

 María José García-Vizcaíno 

Montclair State University

### Abstract

Drawing on the mental model theory of fictional characters (Schneider, 2001) applied to audio description (Fresno, 2016), this paper examines the audio description (AD) of characters in English and Spanish for the Netflix series *Élite*. The study is based on the premise that semantic descriptions of characters, rather than merely visual descriptions of physical traits, contribute to a better understanding of the narrative complexities of a film, favour AD users' memory, and reduce cognitive effort (Fresno et al., 2016). This contrastive analysis shows how pertinent description of action movements and appearances together with lexical accuracy can trigger helpful semantic meanings that reveal characters' psychological features. Because *Élite* is a thriller in which the majority of the characters are murder suspects, accessing all types of information about them is essential to fully understand the plot. In addition, this analysis indicates that the English AD emphasizes certain character attributes which are absent from the Spanish AD, a distinction that influences the semantic domains, filmic cohesion and coherence of the narrative. This finding underscores the fact that cross-linguistic and cultural differences actually affect the reception of a fictional character by AD users (Orero, 2008; Mazur & Chmiel, 2012) and consequently, their appreciation and enjoyment of the program in question.

**Key words:** audio description, characters, mental models, cross-cultural differences, physical traits, semantic meaning.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last decade, there has been an enormous increase in the number of streaming services and platforms that provide at-home entertainment. This phenomenon escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when people all over the world were forced to stay home and had more time to watch a myriad of shows and films that are available in many countries and languages. Accessibility features are now offered in a more diverse way, too, and the case of audio description (AD, hereinafter) is a case in point.

The present study was conceived in this pandemic-induced Netflix surge when Season 3 of the Spanish show *Élite* was released. *Élite* is a thriller teen drama created by Carlos Montero and Darío Madrona and produced by Zeta Producciones. It is based on a murder committed in Las Encinas, an exclusive private secondary school in Madrid, and explores the relationships between three working-class students enrolled at this school through a scholarship and their wealthy classmates. After watching the two previous seasons in the series' original language, Spanish, I was curious to see the third season in English since Netflix offers the show both dubbed and audio described in both languages. I was immediately intrigued by the accurate and detail-oriented audio descriptions of the characters in English and I started to switch into Spanish and compare the two AD versions.

Several authors have explored the topic of characters in AD (Benecke, 2014; Fresno et al., 2016; Fresno, 2016; Orero, 2011; Orero and Wharton, 2007), undertaken comparative and contrastive analyses of AD of the same movie in two languages (Bourne & Jiménez Hurtado, 2007; Masłowska, 2012; Mazur & Chmiel, 2012; Orero, 2008), and tackled the cultural challenges that AD poses in certain films (Maszerowska & Mangiron, 2014; Matamala & Rami, 2009; Szarkowska & Jankowska, 2015; Walczak & Figiel, 2013). What has not been addressed thus far is looking at AD of characters from the same show in different language versions to examine how cultural differences can impact the filmic narrative and the way audiences understand the plot of a thriller. For this reason, I decided to examine the English and Spanish AD in Episode 1 Season 1, where the characters are introduced for the first time and their descriptions are provided.

## 2. Delving Into the Description of Characters

The theoretical framework on which this work is based is the mental model theory of literary characters proposed by Schneider (2001) and applied to the AD of characters by Fresno (2016). According to this theory, "literary characters are conceived as mental models that readers construe in the reading process through a combination of information from textual and mental sources" (Schneider, 2001, p. 608). Stretching this definition to the field of AD and characters in a film, instead of "readers", we refer to AD users who construe their mental models of characters through a combination of information about their physical traits, emotional states, movements and behaviours from both auditory (dialogue, soundtrack, music, and AD) and mental sources (AD users' knowledge and experience of the world).

This mental model of characters can be processed through two main strategies: categorization (top-down process) and personalization (bottom-up process). The former is activated when readers recognize certain character features that can be ascribed to a specific social categorization or genre schema such as a widow or a teacher. In contrast, the latter takes place when readers cannot categorize a character because “the structure of knowledge that comes into play are specific recollections of the properties of specific individuals, rather than abstract properties of whole groups of persons”. (Schneider, 2001, p. 624).

Moreover, according to Schneider (2001, p. 623), there are two other complementary processes that may derive from categorization and develop along the narrative: individuation and decategorization. The first occurs when further information about a character confirms the initial mental model or category. The second takes place when further details about a character contradict the category or mental model in which that character had been assigned at the beginning of the narration. These two modes reveal the dynamic nature of the model since characters are constantly being refined during the reading process or, in our case, the auditory process.

Finally, another relevant point in Schneider’s model (2001) for AD is the differentiation between direct and indirect characterization. In both categorization and personalization strategies, the analysis of a character can be done directly or indirectly. In direct characterization mode, the character’s traits are explicitly mentioned, and in indirect characterization mode, they are deduced by the reader (the AD user in our case) from the character’s actions and appearance (p. 628).

When it comes to characters’ traits in AD, it is necessary to undertake reception studies in order to identify what types of features are more salient and more easily recognized by the AD addressees in order for them to be able to construe their mental models. Fresno et al., in their empirical study on film characters in AD (2016) based on Fresno (2014), concluded that features such as age, height, and weight were recognized by AD users with more efficiency than other features such as hair, facial traits or clothes. Yet, the most interesting result of this study is the fact that participants were able to mention general ideas about characters (i.e. being depressed, elegant or well-dressed), but did not recall the specific detail (i.e. bandaged wrists, blue shirt and grey trousers). This means that AD users extract semantic meanings (psychological or emotional aspects) out of certain visual details (clothes, hair, accessories, crutches), especially for the film’s main characters. This result leads Fresno to conclude that “if blind and visually-impaired audiences tend to use visual descriptions as a scaffold upon which to ascribe semantic meaning, providing these audiences with ‘semantic ADs instead of visual ADs’ could be beneficial in reducing their cognitive effort” (2016, p. 160) and, as she later adds, it would favour users’ memory (p. 161).

Using Schneider’s cognitive framework of mental models and Fresno et al.’s (2016) AD reception study revealing the salience of semantic over visual information makes sense when analysing characters descriptions in *Élite* for one outstanding reason. In this show, all the characters are suspects in the investigation of the murder of Marina, one of the wealthy students, and they are all interrogated during the course of the 8 episodes of Season 1, although Marina’s murder is only

revealed in the last one. Therefore, the episodes incorporate a number of flashbacks, flash forwards, and stream of consciousness very characteristic of psychological thrillers. For this reason, the potential semantic meaning extracted from the visual descriptions of characters plays a decisive role in understanding the mental and emotional states of the potential culprits and the complexities of the narrative. In the present study in particular, these visual and semantic descriptions of characters are examined in two different languages for two different AD audiences, adding another layer of cross-cultural meaning to the analysis.

### 3. Contrastive Analysis of Characters AD in *Élite*

Netflix's style guide for the audio description of characters addresses many of the characterization traits mentioned in Fresno (2016). More specifically, the following guidelines should be highlighted:

- For non-fictional characters, determine how known/unknown they are in your territory to decide which elements to describe and describe visual aspects that reveal information about their personality and traits (how they move, what they're wearing, facial expression etc.). This might apply to fictional characters too (e.g. a leprechaun).
- Description should prioritize an individual's appearance to address their most significant physical characteristics as pertinent to the plot, such as hair, build, height and wardrobe.
- When plot-pertinent, include an age description such as late thirties, fifties, teenage, etc.

First, physical characteristics and age are identified as features that should be described considering "both the needs of the plot and the importance of representation". In *Élite* most of the characters belong to the same age group since all of them are high school students, so mentioning their age each time a character is described is irrelevant and unnecessary to the plot. Second, it is recommended that AD should "describe visual aspects that reveal information about their personality and traits (how they move, what they're wearing, facial expression, etc.)" (Netflix Audio Description Style Guide v2.1). As mentioned above, indirect characterization happens when the AD user makes deductions based on the character's actions and appearance. In a psychological thriller, making the right characterization to explore the emotional and mental states of the characters is critical in understanding the motivation for their behaviours. Understanding the reasons for their actions is precisely what will fuel the plot and explain the story.

However, in the case of *Élite*, those guidelines do not seem to be followed in the same way for both languages. In particular, there are three aspects of the descriptions of characters in which outstanding differences have been observed between the English AD and the Spanish AD: physical traits, the language of the eyes, and kinesics. All three have an impact on the semantic representation of the main characters in the show. Let's review each one of them in detail.

### 3.1. Physical Traits

Two examples of visual descriptions that ascribe semantic meaning to the characterization of main characters and two descriptions from secondary characters will be examined in detail to illustrate this point.

The first time Guzmán, one of the main characters, appears, he is described in English as “a male student” and later on, once he emerges from the pool and viewers can see him fully, he is described as “a tall handsome well-built young man with light brown hair”. However, in the Spanish AD, he is simply described as “un joven atlético” (an athletic young man). Though the adjective “atlético” implies the idea of being well-built (and possibly tall), it is still a very sparse description for a main character (see Table 1)<sup>1</sup>. As Fresno et al. point out, height is recognized by AD users with considerably more efficiency, probably due to the fact that this trait helps the listener picture the most schematic image of a character (2016, p. 156).

Two other traits are mentioned in English and omitted in Spanish: hair and clothes. Even though hair and clothes are two physical traits that are not recognized by AD users with the same efficiency as height or weight in Fresno et al.’s study, hair was better recalled for main characters, such as Guzmán in our case. The explanation offered is that “when characters are perceived as more important to the plot, more cognitive effort is devoted to the creation and updates of their mental model” (p. 159).

Regarding clothes, one aspect that deserves attention here is branding. In Guzmán’s AD in English it is mentioned that he is wearing a dark Speedo. Brand names trigger certain symbolic and ideological associations (Dávila-Montes & Orero, 2014, 2016), and therefore add semantic meaning to a specific categorization. Students attending Las Encinas School are all students from wealthy or upper-class families, except for the three new students enrolled on a scholarship: Nadia, Sam, and Christian. Thus, saying that Guzmán is wearing a Speedo swimsuit categorizes him in the wealthy group that wears quality clothing and well-known brands. AD users may not recall the specific brand that he was wearing but they will likely remember that he is a stylish and preppy young man<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> There seems to be a tendency in the English AD of *Élite* (absent in the Spanish AD) to use more subjectivity in the choice of some descriptive adjectives. In the corpus used in this paper, in the AD of the characters, only two subjective adjectives were found (“handsome” for Guzmán and “attractive” for Nadia), so we cannot generalize about actual differences between the English and the Spanish AD. All in all, the issue of objectivity, subjectivity and creativity in AD has been the object of extensive research (Chmiel & Mazur, 2021; Ramos Caro, 2016; Walczak, 2017; Walczak & Fryer, 2017, among others) and it is outside the scope of this paper to analyse it here.

<sup>2</sup> Later in the show, Guzmán wears Lacoste and Fred Perry polo shirts, the quintessential stylish tennis attire created by two tennis players who became fashion icons in the entire world. The French wealthy Rene Lacoste and the British Fred Perry created the famous polo shirt, which has become a symbol of quality and style (<https://www.moderngentlemanmagazine.com/lacoste-fred-perry-polo-shirts/>). This reinforces the initial categorization of Guzmán (individuation) as someone with classic clothing style and neat appearance.

Table 1.

*Description of Guzmán*

English AD	Spanish AD
00:04:50: In the pool, a male student front crawls in a dark Speedo.	00:04:58: En el agua, un joven atlético nada a crol [In the pool, an athletic young man front crawls].
00:04:59: Reaching the end, he grasps the pool's edge, then removing his blue cap and goggles, he dunks his head and pulls himself out of the pool.	00:05:03: Llega hasta el borde de la piscina, se quita las gafas y el gorro y mete la cabeza en el agua [Reaching the pool's edge, he removes his cap and goggles and he submerges his head into the water].
00:05:09: He is a tall handsome well-built young man with light brown hair. He picks up a towel and struts past them eyeing Nadia on his way. She averts her gaze.	00:05:17: Sale de la piscina, mira a los tres chicos nuevos y coge una toalla del suelo [He gets out of the pool, looks at the three new students and picks up a towel from the floor]. 00:05:21: Pasa por delante de ellos sin dejar de mirarlos [He walks in front of them without taking his eyes off them].

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the ADs of *Élite*.

Secondly, no physical description of Nadia is provided in the Spanish AD of *Élite*, except that her hair is tied back in a braid. The AD user does not know the colour of her hair or any other facial features that the English AD provides (see Table 2) and that may be considered prototypical of Arab people (e.g., dark eyes and olive skin)<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> In the latest version of the Netflix audio description guidelines published during the revision of this article, skin colour is added as an attribute that should be considered when describing a character: "Description should be factual and prioritize an individual's visual attributes to address their most significant identity traits, such as hair texture, skin color, eyes color, build, height, age description (such as late thirties, fifties, teenage, etc.), traits related to visible disabilities, etc." (Netflix Audio Description Style Guide v2.3)

Table 2.

*Description of Nadia*

English AD	Spanish AD
00:18:00: In the school bathroom, Nadia stands before a mirror. She slowly unravels a light blue hijab. Her dark hair is tied back. She wraps the fabric in her head and gazes at her austere reflection. She is an attractive girl with olive skin, dark eyes and full lips.	00:18:00: En el cuarto de baño del colegio, Nadia se mira en el espejo [In the school bathroom, Nadia looks at herself in the mirror].  00:18:05: Se quita el pañuelo lentamente [She slowly removes her scarf]. Lleva el pelo recogido en una trenza [Her dark hair is tied back in a braid].  00:18:07: Observa su reflejo con tristeza mientras dobla el pañuelo con cuidado [She stares at her reflection in sadness while she carefully folds her scarf].

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the ADs of *Élite*.

However, one of the most striking omissions of a physical trait that is extremely relevant for the categorization of a main character and full comprehension of the narrative is Nadia's hijab, which is never mentioned in the Spanish AD. This lack of detail results in a less cohesive and coherent dialogue as represented in Table 3. The scene takes place at the very beginning of the episode when Christian arrives at Las Encinas School for the first time and meets Sam and Nadia who are at the main entrance:

Table 3.

*Scene at the Main Entrance of Las Encinas on the First Day of Classes.*

English AD	Spanish AD
00:03:20: A male student strides toward the entrance where Sam is with a teenage girl.	00:03:13: De día, un adolescente camina por un puente hacia un imponente colegio. Lleva un pendiente en la oreja. Samuel está sentado en las escaleras junto a una chica que lleva un pañuelo [During the day, a teenager walks over a bridge towards a stunning school. He has an ear piercing. Samuel is sitting on the stairs next to a girl wearing a scarf].
Christian: "Sammie!"	
00:03:24: Sam grins.	
Sam: "Hey, dude."	
Christian: "What's up?"	Christian:—Samu!
00:03:29: On the front steps, Sam embraces the boy.	Sam: —¿Qué tal, tío? ["What's up, dude?"]
Christian: "Hey, babe. Hey, I won't get blown up for calling you babe, right?"	Christian:—¿Qué tal? ["What's up?"]
00:03:35: The girl wears a green hijab. She leans towards Sam:	00:03:29: Samuel sonrío y le da un abrazo [Samuel grins and hugs him].
Nadia: "You know him?"	Christian:—Hola, guapa. Hostia, perdona, no te vas a inmolarse, ¿no? por llamarte guapa ["Hey, babe! Shit, you are not going to set yourself on fire, are you? Because I called you babe."]
Sam: "He is a friend of my brother's."	
Christian: "This is fucking paradise, man. You smell that? Chicks pee Chanel here. I am telling you."	00:03:35: La chica mira a Samuel con gesto serio [The girl looks at Samuel with an annoyed expression].
The boy has a cigarette behind his ear. He brushes past them on the way up the steps.	Nadia: —¿Os conocéis? ["Do you know each other?"]
	Sam: —Es colega de mi hermano ["He is a friend of my brother's"].
	Christian: —Esto es el puto paraíso, chaval. ¿No lo hueles? Aquí las pivas mean colonia, tronco. Te lo digo yo ["This is fucking paradise, man. You smell that? Chicks piss cologne here. I am telling you"].

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the ADs of *Élite*.

In the Spanish AD, it is said that Nadia is wearing a scarf (*pañuelo*) instead of a hijab. A scarf and a hijab are two very different objects and certainly have different implications. The first is a clothing



accessory usually wrapped around the neck. A hijab, on the contrary, is a veil that Muslim women use to cover not only their neck, but also their hair. Therefore, saying that Nadia is wearing a hijab identifies her as a Muslim.

When Christian calls her babe, he immediately apologizes and makes a joke saying that he hopes she won't set herself on fire after he calls her babe<sup>4</sup> ("no te vas a inmolar, ¿no? por llamarte guapa"). Since Nadia is wearing a hijab, which is supposed to be a symbol of modesty and privacy, Christian makes the assumption that she cannot receive compliments with sexual connotations from men she does not know. Furthermore, her hijab seems to signal the connection in Christian's brain between Nadia and a stereotype of Muslims committing extreme acts of self-harm, in this case an act of self-immolation. However, the Spanish AD user will not understand the joke due to the lack of coherence in that scene stemming from the mistaken use of "pañuelo" (scarf). Unless the AD user understands that Nadia is wearing a hijab, that is, that she is Muslim, the AD user will not understand Christian's comment. During the rest of the episode (Tables 2 and 7), in Spanish the hijab is always referred to as "pañuelo" instead of "hiyab" in Spanish.

Another noteworthy detail to mention in this scene, also related to physical appearance, is the fact that Christian is described in English as "having a cigarette behind his ear", whereas in Spanish he is described as having a piercing in his ear (*Lleva un pendiente en la oreja*).

Finally, when it comes to secondary characters, description of physical traits is again almost non-existent in Spanish, yet profuse visual descriptions are provided in English. Two examples can be seen in Tables 4 and 5 when describing Omar, Nadia's brother, and the inspector who interrogates the suspects. Omar is identified in Spanish as the young man with thick eyebrows (*el chico de cejas gruesas*) in the dialogue below in the same way he was described earlier when he was walking with Sam (00:14:02). Nothing else is said about him, unlike in English where his clothes and hairstyle are described and there is also mention of his skin tone ("he has olive skin"). This is the same physical trait that was used to describe his sister, Nadia, hence the reference to skin tone triggers the semantic meaning of Omar also being Muslim.

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<sup>4</sup> In the Spanish original version, the action of being blown up is oriented towards Nadia: "no te vas a inmolar, ¿no? por llamarte guapa" ("you won't set yourself on fire because I called you babe, right?"). However, in the English dubbed version, Christian says that he hopes he would not be the one to get blown up for calling her babe, that is, the blowing up is oriented towards him instead of towards Nadia.

Table 4.

*Description of Omar*

English AD	Spanish AD
00:22:02: Sam's friend Omar shrugs then turns to Ander who reaches into his pocket and removes his wallet. He pays Omar. Omar digs into his pocket then passes Ander a small rectangular package. He has olive skin, weary eyes and a thin goatee. His black hair is short and straight. He wears a chain necklace and a dark leather jacket over a hoodie sweatshirt.	00:22:02: El chico de cejas gruesas y Ander se miran [The young man with thick eyebrows and Ander look at each other].  00:22:07: Ander se palpa los bolsillos y coge su cartera. Le entrega un billete de 20 euros [Ander feels his pockets and removes his wallet. He gives Omar 20 euros].  00:22:12: Omar le da una bolsa. Los dos se miran a los ojos [Omar hands Ander a bag. They look into each other's eyes].

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the ADs of *Élite*.

The description of the detective is interesting (see Table 5) because in English she is presented as red-haired and in Spanish as a blonde. Hair colour is the only physical trait mentioned in Spanish. In English more details are included about her hair style and about her clothing. Wearing a black leather jacket contributes to the decategorization of her as a modern and liberal person (personal dimension) and an open-minded detective (professional dimension) instead of the categorization of her as the typical conservative and rigid investigator who wears pantsuits and prefers a more traditional clothing style.

Table 5.

*Description of the Detective*

English AD	Spanish AD
00:00:47: A red hair female detective faces him.	00:00:47: Una inspectora rubia está sentada delante de él [A blonde female detective is sitting in front of him].  00:14:02: La inspectora mira expectante [The detective looks expectantly].
00:14:22: She wears her hair in a pony tail and bangs cover her forehead.	
00:14:26: She wears a black leather jacket.	

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the ADs of *Élite*.

### 3.2. The Language of the Eyes

The way certain characters look at others or even at themselves can reveal meaningful semantic features that help one delve into the character's psychology and appreciate at a deeper level the semiotics and, consequently, the gist of the narrative. Three examples are presented here.

First, in the sequence transcribed in Table 1, Sam, Christian and Nadia watch Guzmán while he is swimming and then later as he comes out of the pool. The English AD, "He picks up a towel and struts past them eyeing Nadia on his way. She averts her gaze", contributes to portraying Guzmán as a self-confident young man of a higher social status than the three new students. Also, it tells us that Nadia has drawn his attention in a special way. As for Nadia, the fact that she averts her gaze as Guzmán walks next to her gives us the idea of her shyness, particularly taking into account that she is Muslim and, in that moment, Guzmán is half-naked.

However, the Spanish AD states the following:

00:05:17: Sale de la piscina, mira a los tres chicos nuevos y coge una toalla del suelo. [He comes out of the pool, looks at the three new students and picks up a towel from the floor.]

00:05:21: Pasa por delante de ellos sin dejar de mirarlos. [He walks in front of them without taking his eyes off them.]

Although the self-confidence and superiority of Guzman can also be perceived because of the fact that he walks in front of the other students without taking his eyes off them, it does not make any reference to the special way in which Guzman stares at Nadia and, most importantly, the fact that she averts her gaze. Those looks are necessary to understanding what will happen between them later in the show and how Guzman will be "de-categorized". At the beginning, in Episode 1, he is categorized with the typical characteristics of a privileged villain: controlling (especially with his sister) and self-confident. But as the show progresses and the narrative develops, new information contradicts the initial model. Guzmán deeply cares about his family, is tremendously loyal to his friends, and falls in love with Nadia, the girl that he wanted to humiliate at the beginning of the series. Thus, he no longer belongs to the category of a manipulative rich boy: a "de-categorization" of that character has taken place and a new category is needed for him.

Another moment where looks and gazes are essential to understanding characters' feelings and future actions is when Marina goes to Sam's apartment. The night before at Marina's party, Sam's brother, Nano, had confronted Marina's brother, Guzmán. Nano punched him in the face and told him that his father stole money from people like Sam's family in order to live a wealthy lifestyle.

Table 6.

*Marina and Nano Scene at his Apartment*

English AD	Spanish AD
00:49:18: In the sunshine, a dark luxury Sedan stops on a village street lined with concrete apartments.	00:49:20: De día, Marina llega hasta el barrio de Samuel en un coche negro [During the day, Marina arrives at Samuel's neighbourhood in a dark car].
00:49:21: Marina gets out of the back seat.	
00:49:23: She enters a building's alcove.	
00:49:27: Nano answers the door shirtless. A cigarette dangles in his mouth. He looks her up and down.	00:49:24: Marina baja del coche [Marina gets out of the car].
(. . .)	00:49:26: Nano le abre la puerta. No lleva camisa [Nano opens the door. He is shirtless].
00:49:57: He dons a brown under shirt.	
00:50:22: He stands at an ironing board and takes a drag from his cigarette.	(. . .)
00:50:27: He has a slender muscular build. The sides of his hair are shaved and the top is shaggy.	00:50:22: Marina examina a Nano. Él se pone a planchar [Marina observes Nano. He starts ironing].
00:50:47: They exchange intrigued glances. Marina goes to the window. His eyes follow her. The sun shines through the window washing the room in a hazy glow.	
00:51:13: She turns to face him.	00:50:52: Marina camina por el comedor de la casa de Nano y Samuel [Marina walks around the living room of Nano and Samuel's apartment].
00:51:27: They gaze into each other's eyes.	00:51:10: Se para delante de la ventana y mira a Nano dubitativa. Nano es moreno, tiene los ojos azules y un cuerpo atlético [She stops by the window and looks at Nano hesitantly. Nano has brown hair, blue eyes and an athletic body].
00:51:33: With one last glance, Marina heads for the door.	00:51:27: Marina se para delante de Nano y le mira a los ojos [Marina stands in front of Nano and looks into his eyes].
00:51:40: At the door, she looks over her shoulder at him before leaving.	
00:51:43: Outside she descends the stairs to the street and pauses in the alcove. She peers back up the stairs.	
00:51:47: In his apartment, Nano watches her walk away.	00:51:41: Nano sigue a Marina con la mirada mientras ella sale de la casa [Nano follows Marina with his eyes as she leaves the apartment].
	00:51:45: Marina sale al rellano, baja las escaleras y se para en el portal [Marina steps out, descends the stairs and pauses in the alcove].
	00:51:48: Nano se asoma a la ventana y observa cómo Marina se aleja de su casa [Nano looks out of the window and watches her walk away].

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the ADs of *Élite*.

As we see, the English AD makes many references to the way the two characters exchange looks (eight times versus five times in Spanish); yet it is not only the number of times, but also the type of looks between them that gets audio described. English uses a variety of verbs to accurately render ways of looking: “they exchange intrigued glances”, “they gaze into each other’s eyes”, “she looks over her shoulder”, “she peers back up the stairs”, “Nano watches her walk away”. In Spanish, we hear “mira” (look), “examina” (examine) and “observa” (watch). The AD user in English is likely categorizing these two characters as experiencing a sexual attraction between them because of the way they look into each other’s eyes (indirect characterization).

Another difference in this passage is that in the Spanish AD it seems that it is Nano who is attracted to Marina rather than both of them mutually, since Nano is the subject in the descriptions (except one), when actually it is both of them (or if we had to choose one, the more invested person would be Marina) who perform that action. In fact, when she steps out of Nano’s apartment and starts descending the stairs to the street exit, she stops and “peers back *up* the stairs”. That use of the preposition “up” is relevant because it makes reference to the fact that her stopping in the stairs is related to Nano who is upstairs. The English AD user can automatically infer she is hesitant about going up again or simply that she is interested in Nano. In the Spanish AD, it is simply said that Marina descends the stairs and stops at the main entrance, but there is no reference to “looking up”, so the Spanish AD user cannot make the same inference.

The emotional states inferred from looks and gazes between Marina and Nano also serve to “decategorize” the character of Marina and place her in a different category from the one possibly ascribed to her at the beginning of the episode. She is one of the wealthy students at Las Encinas; however, she does not behave like the rest of the students who do not want to get involved with their three new lower-class peers. Marina crosses an invisible socio-economic line when she goes to Sam’s place, encounters his brother, Nano, and, as a result, feels a series of emotions. Direct characterization of Marina begins a new decategorization process of a wealthy girl who mingles with working-class people (even an ex-convict such as Nano) when we explicitly hear the English AD saying “a dark luxury Sedan stops on a village street lined with concrete apartments”. In Spanish it simply says that Marina arrives to Sam’s neighborhood in a black car (*Marina llega hasta el barrio de Samuel en un coche negro*), so the socio-economic clash between the two characters and their respective worlds is missing.

Finally, there are several occasions where Nadia, wearing her hijab, looks at herself in a mirror or a shop window and those looks carry relevant meaning to understand the struggles that this character is undergoing. For example, in Table 7, Nadia is doing her homework at the counter of her parents’ shop one night, and she looks at her reflection in the window with a pensive expression.

Table 7.

*Nadia at Her Grocery Store*

English AD	Spanish AD
00:16:11: She turns her head to the window. She gazes at her reflection. Her light green hijab covers her head and neck.	00:16:11: Luego mira a su izquierda. Contempla su rostro reflejado en un cristal de la tienda [Then she looks to her left. She stares at her face reflection in the store window].

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the ADs of *Élite*.

In the English AD there is mention of the hijab which is crucial for the cohesion of the filmic narrative since earlier that day the school principal had told Nadia that she could not wear her hijab to class because the school is not a religious institution, but a private secular one. Therefore, mentioning that she is staring at her own hijab helps the AD user make the connection with what happened at school and infer that she is conflicted. Also, there is an artistic visual aspect in that scene because of the contrast between light (light green hijab) and dark (the scene is happening at night) that is totally missing in the Spanish AD. As Maszerowska points out "lighting moulds characters" (2013, p. 174) and according to Brown (as cited in Maszerowska, 2013, p. 167), luminance conveys certain psychological values that can trigger emotional responses<sup>5</sup>.

### 3.3. Kinesics

Action movements and certain types of non-verbal behaviour reveal information about the emotional, personal and psychological dimensions of characters. First, through explicit verb choices, AD users can activate the process of individuation or categorization ascribing certain attributes to a character. For example, in Table 1 above, it can be observed that the verb used in the English AD helps to categorize Guzmán fittingly as a self-assured and confident character at the beginning of Season 1. In English, we hear "He picks up a towel and struts past them eyeing Nadia on his way". The verb "strut" is a very specific way of walking. According to Merriam Webster dictionary it is "to walk with a proud gait". In Spanish, it simply says that Guzmán "pasa por delante de ellos" ("walks in front of them"). The connotation of self-confidence that "struts" entails is entirely absent from the Spanish version.

Likewise, in the scene where Sam, Nadia, and Christian arrive at Marina's party (Table 8 below), the verb "stride" is used to describe their entrance. As we know by now, Sam, Nadia and Christian are the three students who have been given a scholarship to study at Las Encinas. They belong to a lower

<sup>5</sup> Other scholars have explored the importance of cinematographic aspects such as lighting, framing, composition or camera angles in audio description advocating for more creative and artistic audio descriptions of films (Fryer & Freeman, 2013; Maszerowska, 2015; Szarkowska, 2013; Walczak, 2017; Walczak & Fryer, 2017).

social-economic class than the rest of the students, especially those who are attending the luxurious party. However, when they make their appearance at that stately mansion, “they stride side by side”. This lexical choice is very informative, first, because of the verb choice used in English (stride) versus the Spanish option “entran” (enter). Striding means “to move over or along with or as if with long measured steps” (*Merriam Webster Dictionary*), so it reveals confidence in themselves. Second, they are side by side, that is, the three of them arrive at that up-scale party as a group, united in pride. This scene is filmed in slow motion as well, a technique that highlights this moment as a grand entrance for these three main characters.

Second, through indirect characterization, the English AD user can deduct certain psychological traits about Christian from his actions and behaviours in that same scene, in particular, his smoking. As Table 8 shows below, the English AD says: “He takes a long drag from his cigarette and flicks it on the ground”. Taking a long drag just before entering the party conveys the idea that he is about to face some difficult, challenging or perhaps just exciting task. Also, dropping cigarette butts is considered littering, an offence carrying a fine in many countries, not to mention that it is just wrong because it has a tremendous environmental impact on our planet. Thus, dropping his cigarette butt involves a kind of attitude and behaviour that contributes to his categorization as a rebel<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, the lexical choice of the verb “flick” implies an aggressive and brisk movement in his way of performing that “forbidden” action that adds another layer to Christian’s personality.

Interestingly enough, smoking is never mentioned in the Spanish AD for Christian (Tables 3 and 8) nor for Nano, who was smoking while ironing in the apartment scene with Marina (see Table 6 above). In the latter scene, the AD user can hear the long drag that Nano takes while watching Marina moving around his place, yet it is not described in the Spanish AD at all. Here, as in the case of Christian, smoking can enhance the portrayal of Nano as a rebellious youth, who just got out of jail and is on probation.

Another cue derived from the act of smoking that contributes to refining the categorization of Christian and Nano is that they are the only characters to do it. The other students at Las Encinas are never seen smoking cigarettes<sup>7</sup>, but Nano and Christian are both working-class and do not belong to that “elite” group of students. Therefore, smoking is a trait used to categorize these two characters into a specific socio-economic group.

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<sup>6</sup> There are a number of studies that have examined the connections between smoking habits and smokers’ behaviours and attitudes (Campbell, 2007; Rath et al., 2012; Schultz, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Ander and Omar smoke a joint in a scene, but not cigarettes on a regular basis as Nano and Christian do.

Table 8.

*Scene of Sam, Christian and Nadia Making an Entrance at Marina's Birthday Party*

English AD	Spanish AD
00:30:46: Christian bounces excitedly. They enter the compound. Guzmán wears a tuxedo. He spots the foursome. They stride side by side. Christian takes a long drag from his cigarette and flicks it on the ground. The yard is lavishly decorated with stylish light installations and torches. At the centre of the patio, Marina's name is spelled in large brightly LED-block letters.	00:30:46: Samuel, Nadia, Christian y Ander entran al recinto bajo la atenta mirada de Guzmán [Samuel, Nadia, Christian, and Ander enter the compound while Guzmán watches them closely].
	00: 31:11: Llegan hasta el jardín. [They walk into the garden].

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the ADs of *Élite*.

In the same sense, the explicit descriptions of how Marina's house has been decorated for the occasion ("The yard is lavishly decorated with stylish light installations and torches. At the centre of the patio, Marina's name is spelled in large brightly LED-block letters") and Guzmán wearing a tuxedo additionally highlight even more the contrasting social and economic class of the two groups of students.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

Several conclusions can be drawn from the present analysis. First, the mental model theory has proved to be useful in AD to show how different sources of information help in the categorization of characters. Physical traits (Nadia wearing a hijab, the detective wearing a black leather jacket, Christian wearing a piercing in his ear), eye language (Nadia gazing at her reflection and her hijab in the window, Marina peering back up the stairs), and behavioural characteristics (Nadia averting her gaze when Guzmán is eyeing her, Christian flicking his cigarette butt on the ground) all reveal mental and emotional states, which are crucial to fully understanding characters and their role in this thriller.

Second, more important than the visual aspect or physical traits communicated either through direct or indirect characterization are the semantic meanings that those features trigger in the AD user's mind. Wearing a tuxedo or Speedo swimwear will help AD users to remember that Guzmán is rich and elegant. Nadia averting her gaze means that she is shy and overwhelmed by Guzmán's appearance and self-confidence. Taking a long drag from a cigarette and flicking the butt on the ground portrays Christian's rebellious and non-conformist attitude.



Third, most of the semantic meanings that trigger certain mental inferences in AD users are likely to be relevant for any linguistic and cultural audience which a given AD targets. Wearing a tuxedo is likely to be universally considered a symbol of elegance and littering is illegal or, at least, punishable in most cultures. However, it is the visual aspects or details that trigger those semantic meanings that seem to be culturally bound. For example, the first time Christian is described (Table 3), the physical trait mentioned in the English AD is that he has a cigarette behind his ear, whereas in the Spanish AD he has a piercing in his ear. Will the AD users in English and Spanish infer the same semantic meaning about Christian from those visual details? Smoking and having a piercing are certainly not typical for the rest of the wealthy and preppy students at Las Encinas, so those traits may well serve to identify Christian as, at least, an outsider of that elite group of students.

Currently, in Anglo-Saxon cultures, smoking tends to be associated with the working or lower class rather than middle or upper-class people. That is not the case in Spain where smoking has been, until recently<sup>8</sup>, a widespread habit among the entire population regardless of socioeconomic level or status. So, the fact that smoking is described as a trait of some characters in the English AD helps the English AD user categorize them as working-class and not very well educated. Yet, for the Spanish audio describer the fact the Christian is smoking may not be as informative nor would that imply anything about his social class. On the other hand, wearing a piercing in Spain is typically ascribed to the more revolutionary or nonconformist attitudes and, hence, it is likely to help categorize Christian as a more rebellious student within the mainstream population at Las Encinas.

Conversely, we could also argue that the fact that some physical traits are mentioned in one language and not in another is due to individual preference of the audio describer and does not have anything to do with different cultural perceptions of what is relevant or more informative for a certain linguistic audience versus another. In this regard, it would make sense to interview the audio describers of both languages to find out their motivation behind choosing certain visual aspects and not others in the description of main characters. Likewise, surveys or interviews of the English and Spanish AD users would be useful to conclude if the description of different visual details for the same character leads to the same semantic inference about them.

Fourth, the fact that in AD of characters the same semantic meaning may be inferred from two different visual sources in two different languages may be of importance to editors and revisers of multilingual ADs of the same show or film, especially in streaming platforms such as Netflix. The preparation of AD of the same show for different linguistic and cultural audiences is a fascinating, though challenging, field because many layers of sociocultural meanings and connotations come into play. In that regard, the present analysis provides some helpful insights into the practice of audio describing characters in different languages. Yet, more comparative and reception studies of the same film in several languages should be conducted to deepen and refine the role and impact of sociocultural perceptions based on visual details in the description of characters in AD.

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<sup>8</sup> Smoking regulations banning tobacco in public places in 2005 and later banning tobacco in bars and restaurants in 2011 dramatically decreased the number of smokers in the country.

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