

Museum Audio Descriptions vs. General Audio Guides: Describing or Interpreting Cultural Heritage?

 Chiara Bartolini 

Fondation Grand Paradis

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Abstract

The question of objectivity vs. subjectivity in audio description (AD) is still open and unresolved, even more so when considering less researched AD sub-genres, such as museum ADs. While sparse guidelines for describing artworks and cultural artefacts tend to favour neutrality, no clear consensus exists, and the limits of a factual style have already been highlighted (Hutchinson & Eardley, 2019).

By crossing the borders of Translation Studies (TS) to gain insights from Museum Studies (MS), this paper claims that the ideal of achieving absolute objectivity is problematic and that a comparison between museum ADs and other tools for the visit would be a beneficial contribution to the objectivity vs. subjectivity debate.

In light of current theories in MS, this study seeks to explore subjectivity in museum ADs (primarily addressed to visually impaired visitors) and general audio guides (AGs). Trailing previous research into subjectivity in museum ADs (Gallego, 2019), a text-focused analysis based on the appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) was conducted on a corpus of ADs and AGs to highlight discrepancies in terms of subjectivity between museum communicative practices aimed at different target audiences.

Key words: museum audio description, audio guides, museum interpretation, museum experience, cultural heritage.

Introduction

The long debate over the need for objectivity in audio description (AD) – which arguably shows similarities with that concerning the translator’s invisibility – is still open and unresolved, especially when considering fairly neglected objects of study, such as museum ADs. While sparse guidelines for describing artworks and cultural artefacts tend to favour neutrality (e.g., RNIB & VocalEyes, 2003; Snyder, 2010), no clear consensus exists over this issue, as the concept of objectivity is not clear-cut, and the limits of a factual style have already been highlighted (Hutchinson & Eardley, 2019). Yet objectivity does not seem to be a subject of discussion when it comes to museum audio guides (AGs) for the general public.

By crossing the borders of Translation Studies (TS) to gain insights from Museum Studies (MS), this paper claims that the ideal of achieving absolute objectivity is problematic for a number of reasons. First, “our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing” (Berger, 1972/2008, p. 10): since audio describers are also viewers, they inadvertently tend to describe an object according to their own view. Second, the “museum experience” (Falk & Dierking, 2000), which has a complex, multifaceted nature, is also an aesthetic, subjective experience: an image may evoke emotions and memories that altogether interact with our conceptual representation of that image. Third, postmodern theories in MS have acknowledged that museums are not repositories of undisputed knowledge: in fact, any form of cultural mediation – precisely defined as “interpretation” – implies constructing a narrative (Vergo, 1989). To these premises, we add from a TS perspective that if the search for objectivity is equalled to a sense of “loyalty”, the question is whether a describer should be loyal to the object intended as the source text (ST) or to the museum experience as a whole: the former may require an object-oriented (and thus source-oriented) approach providing a strictly adherent translation, whereas in the latter case an audience-oriented (and target-oriented) approach could produce a more flexible translation or “transcreation” (Hadley & Rieger, 2021), capable of triggering an aesthetic experience.

In light of current theories in MS, this research seeks to explore subjectivity in two communicative tools within the wider museum “interpretive frameworks” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000): the AD (primarily addressed to visually impaired visitors) and the general AG. The aim is to investigate which elements show a higher degree of subjectivity in ADs and AGs produced for a selection of exhibits. Trailing previous studies focusing on subjectivity in museum ADs (Gallego & Colmenero, 2018; Gallego, 2019; Randaccio, 2020), a text-focused analysis based on the appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) was conducted on a corpus of ADs and AGs to highlight discrepancies between communicative practices aimed at two target audiences with differing abilities. The corpus includes AD and AG transcripts in English related to a selection of items from different museums in terms of collections, museological tradition, and location (Australia, Germany, Italy and the US).

The paper opens with theoretical reflections on museum AD by drawing on research in TS (in particular audiovisual translation) and in MS, concerning especially the concepts of museum interpretation and museum experience. This is followed by a presentation of the corpus constructed

for this study and of the methodological framework adopted. After the illustration of the results of the analysis, the final section is devoted to the discussion and conclusions.

1. Theoretical Context

Museum AD is discussed here from four perspectives: (1) as an instance of translation and an access tool; (2) as an interpretative resource within the wider museum's "interpretation", by drawing on the field of MS; (3) as an integral part of the interactive museum experience; finally, (4) as a "multimodal communicative artefact" by comparing it with general AGs for the museum visit. This multidimensional approach will serve as a theoretical foundation for the present study.

1.1. Museum AD as Intersemiotic Translation

Museum AD has been investigated in the field of TS as a modality of intersemiotic and "intersensorial" (De Coster & Muehleis, 2007) translation practice and as a sub-genre of AD, i.e., an access resource primarily aimed at non-sighted and partially sighted individuals. As an instance of translation practice, it has been subject to the principle of "loyalty" to the ST, i.e., in the case of museum AD the "object" to be described, as well as to the principle of the describer/translator's invisibility. Nonetheless, scholars have already claimed that "AD as a creative and artistic human activity is subjective by definition" (Matamala & Orero, 2017, p. 8), and that "it is difficult – almost impossible, despite the describer's effort – to be objective ... [as] describers are also viewers, and the story that they tell will always represent, to some extent, their own interpretation of seemingly factual contents" (Perego, 2019, p. 122).

The long-standing debate between the need for absolute objectivity and the inherent subjectivity in AD is reflected in the existing AD standards and norms (Rai et al., 2010). Likewise, this is not new to the sparse museum-specific AD guidelines, which have traditionally favoured neutrality by inviting describers to "objectively recount the visual aspects of an image" and to avoid "subjective or qualitative judgments or comment[s] [that] get in the way" and are deemed "unnecessary and unwanted" (Snyder, 2010, p. 17). Museums, as reliable cultural institutions, seem to be expected to "deliver interesting facts" through an "authoritative" and objective voice (RNIB & VocalEyes, 2003, p. 46) in order to allow listeners to develop their own interpretations independently. At the same time, guidelines recognise the importance of using "qualitative words ... in constructing a strong sense of the work" (RNIB & VocalEyes, 2003, p. 52), as well as resorting to analogies to items or experiences that are supposed to be familiar to the listeners (Snyder, 2010; Giansante, 2015).

Research-based museum AD guidelines have acknowledged multiple approaches and styles to provide factual information in an appealing way, including an "objective (factual) description", a "narrative approach" aiming at delivering a story and an "interpretative approach" based on "suggestive language, sound effects and music" (Remael et al., 2015, p. 71). By drawing on the

insights gained from focus groups with visually impaired consultants, guidelines have advocated for “a delicate balance” – also depending on the subject matter – between a “dry academic, completely objective narrative” and a more involving “dramatic interpretation” that helps visitors create a mental image but may over-interpret a work (RNIB & VocalEyes, 2003, p. 46).

Research has been questioning the feasibility of absolute objectivity in museum AD. For instance, product-oriented studies have focused on the analysis of existing museum ADs and revealed different levels and types of subjectivity in the current practices (Gallego, 2019), also calling for the use of interpretative language in museum AD (Randaccio, 2020). In line with the new directions pursued by “creative media accessibility” (Romero-Fresco, 2021), the benefits of more creative approaches to museum AD have also been investigated, e.g., by proposing “soundpainting” as a form of artistic transcreation (Neves, 2012), as well as “enriched descriptive guide(s)” (Eardley et al., 2017), which are based on multisensory imagery and may “enhance the ‘seeing’ ability of all people” (Eardley et al., 2017, p. 195).

Finally, reception studies on AD (Caro, 2016; Walczak, 2017), and more specifically museum AD (Hutchinson, 2019; Castaño & Hurtado, 2020), have explored users’ reactions and emotional reception of different AD styles, as well as presence and memorability, showing that “more subjective descriptions seem to be beneficial at least for some sections of the visually impaired population” (Gallego, 2019, p. 709), potentially depending on whether the visual impairment is congenital or acquired later in life (Castaño & Hurtado, 2020). Therefore, research seems to be pointing towards an inherent – and perhaps even necessary – subjectivity in museum AD.

1.2. Museum AD Within the Museum Interpretation

By crossing the borders of TS to draw on other fields such as MS, Art Education, and Visitors Studies, museum AD is positioned within the wider museum’s communicative framework and acknowledged as an instance of “museum interpretation” – a concept that is different from the common notion of interpretation in TS. Postmodern theories in MS have come to recognise that any form of cultural mediation in a museum context – defined precisely as “interpretation” and spanning from labels and panels to guided tours – is not neutral but implies constructing a specific narrative around heritage (Vergo, 1989). This means that museums are not repositories of an undisputed “truth” but institutions that shape knowledge (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992) and convey a certain vision of the world by selecting, arranging, and describing objects (Hein, 1998) through different forms of interpretation. Such vision, which is necessarily ideological and situated, may vary depending on a range of factors, including the country in which the museum is based, museological traditions and accepted practices, the museum’s identity and values, as well as the people involved in museum interpretation, such as curators, mediators, and guides.

One of the pioneering definitions of museum interpretation, provided by Tilden (1957), already seems to shy away from objectiveness and factuality. According to the father of heritage

interpretation, the latter should be understood as “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, *rather than simply to communicate factual information* [emphasis added]” (Tilden, 1957, p. 8). Tilden argues that information and interpretation are “entirely different things” but explains that “interpretation is revelation based upon information” (Tilden, 1957, p. 9), suggesting that the former encompasses and goes beyond the latter. Likewise, Veverka (1994/2013) distinguishes an informative style from an interpretative style, whereby the latter aims to “translate information into terms and analogies that everyday people can relate to and understand” (Veverka, 1994/2013, p. 355). Therefore, as pointed out by Ham (1992/2013, p. 158), “in interpretation ... the facts are a means to an end, rather than the end itself.”

Whitehead (2012, p. 38) makes a distinction between “closed interpretation [that] presents itself as informative rather than as explicitly interpretive [e]ven when there are statements of opinion” and “more open interpretation” including “a sense of a multiplicity of possible histories”. The scholar goes even further by suggesting that not even a white, empty physical space or a frame can be truly neutral, but all actions and media in museum interpretation participate in the active construction of meanings that are inevitably partial (Whitehead, 2012, p. 92). Along the same lines, Reeve (2018, p. 75) notices that “there is no innocent eye and no unmediated experience in the modern museum or gallery even if the text is minimal.” By borrowing Cable et al.’s words (1986, p. 14):

although some interpreters may use an objective approach to communication of facts, stories, and analogies, with no apparent attempt to color the information, their basic purpose is to persuade the visitor at least to consider the facts as perceived by the interpreter.

If museums cannot be neutral, there may be no such thing as an objective approach to museum communication; the same may arguably apply to museum AD, conceived as an interpretative resource within the wider museum’s “cultural map” (Whitehead, 2012, p. 40).

1.3. Museum AD Within the Museum Experience

As an instance of museum interpretation, the AD of artworks and artefacts is considered an integral part of the museum experience. Heritage interpreters seek to “provide access to experiences – both intellectual and emotional – that encourage understanding” (Ham, 1992/2013, p. xii). This major focus on the visitor’s experience is the result of a paradigmatic change in the conceptualisation of heritage and museums in postmodern approaches to museology, which has seen a shift from an object- to a user-centred perspective (Conway & Leighton, 2012). The museum visit is thus now investigated as a personal and interactive learning experience (Falk & Dierking, 2000), as well as a social activity where cooperative learning takes place thanks to the interactions between different stakeholders, including the visitors themselves and the museum staff. In light of the postmodern constructivist theories in MS, there is no such thing as a unique, fixed experience of a museum or an

exhibit, as each visitor's experience is mediated and affected by different personal, social, and physical factors (Falk & Dierking, 2000).

As far as the experience itself is concerned, visitors may come to the museum – or decide to enjoy the online content offered by a museum through apps or on its institutional website – in search of a variety of experiences, such as entertaining, learning, aesthetic, or escapist experiences (Veverka, 1994/2013, pp. 98–99). Museum AD, as an instance of museum interpretation, may thus be expected to fulfil one or more functions, besides the overarching aim of widening accessibility. For instance, especially in the case of art museums, it may be expected to arouse an aesthetic pleasure, i.e., the pleasure of imagining, associating, understanding, and interpreting, also by evoking other images or associations with prior memories or experiences (Pacinotti, 2019, p. 180).

As such, the definition of objectivity calls for a clearer identification of the “ST” to which the AD is supposed to be “loyal”, which may be either the object itself (in the case of a “modernist” approach) or the experience (in the case of a postmodern approach). If museums are increasingly expected to focus on people and their experiences (rather than exclusively on their collections), museum AD should facilitate an experience rather than strictly provide objective information on an exhibit. This may require a form of “transcreation” (Eardley et al., 2017; Hadley & Rieger, 2021), involving a shifted emphasis from performing an intersemiotic translation (based on fidelity to the object) to embracing “the creative possibilities of re-creation” in museum AD (Hutchinson & Eardley, 2019, p. 54).

1.4. Museum AD vs. AG

In this article, museum AD is compared to general AGs in the context of the museum visit. Although the scant literature concerning AGs mainly focuses on usability features (Petrelli & Not, 2005; Gebbensleben et al., 2006), recent studies have been devoted to multimodality in city and museum AGs (Fina, 2018). By drawing on what Crystal and Davy (1969, p. 71) term “complex medium”, Fina (2018, p. 41) argued that the AG “can be [first] configured as a written text to be read aloud”, as well as “a recorded speech, which will be delivered to final receivers asynchronously, at a later stage.” Nonetheless, in her analysis of city AGs, the scholar noticed that the latter may also include “spontaneous speech delivered by people with special knowledge of the site” (Fina, 2018, p. 42). Furthermore, due to the visitors' normally short attention span, AGs require “adequate strategies for effective delivery” (Fina, 2018, p. 41), as well as “competences in creative writing” (Fina, 2018, p. 59) in order to squeeze in historical information and artistic descriptions in a quick, appealing way.

By comparing the local grammars of ADs and AGs, Jiménez Hurtado and Soler Gallego (2015, p. 290) noticed that descriptive elements do not play a key role in AGs, whereby “description relinquishes its primary role in favour of the interpretation of the artwork”, thus suggesting that “the valued sender's opinion” is considered reliable due to the cultural authority exerted by the curator.

If the AG can be described as a “complex medium” and a “multimodal communicative artefact” (Fina, 2018, p. 59), the same may be said for pre-recorded museum ADs, which pose similar challenges but supposedly have a different target audience and main function. However, while subjectivity and interpretation in AD are considered problematic, they do not seem to be a matter of discussion when it comes to producing effective AGs. This raises questions about the differences between the two media.

2. Methodological Framework

A text-focused analysis was conducted to investigate which elements show a higher degree of subjectivity in ADs and AGs produced for a selection of exhibits¹ (40 in total). The two sub-sets of the corpus constructed for this study respectively include AD and AG scripts² in English belonging to museums from different countries, i.e., Australia, Germany, Italy, and the US. Table 1 provides corpus details with information about the museums selected, namely their code, the number, and types of exhibits described (spanning artworks, cultural objects, and scientific specimens), and the number of tokens per institution for each sub-set and in total.

Table 1

Corpus Details

Code	Institution	Country	Type of exhibits	No. of exhibits	No. of AD tokens	No. of AG tokens	Total no. of tokens
AM	Australian Museum, Sydney	Australia	Scientific specimens and cultural objects	15	6,091	4,386	10,477
BG	Berlinische Galerie, Berlin	Germany	Artworks	13	6,971	3,926	10,897
MoMA	MoMA, New York	US	Artworks	8	3,397	1,965	5,362
PB	Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan	Italy	Artworks	4	3,695	1,172	4,867
Total				40	20,154	11,449	31,603

Source: author’s own elaboration.

¹ An exhibit is intended as a single object on display within a broader exhibition.

² For each object, both the AD and the AG scripts were included in the corpus, given the availability of both options to the visitors. Since a multimodal analysis was beyond the scope of this study, the recordings were not included, but pictures related to the objects described were also consulted for examining visual elements.

The software ATLAS.ti was used to code the data at a word level according to two different analytical frameworks. On the one hand, the types of information provided were observed to highlight differences in the content provided in museum ADs and AGs. For this purpose, the following typology was adapted from the guidelines developed as part of the Open Art project³ (Szarkowska et al., 2016, p. 312) regarding the contents characterising museum ADs:

- Introductory information, i.e., basic factual information such as object type, name/title, artist's/creator's name, date/origin, size, medium/material/technique, use and any other relevant data or general introductory statements;
- Visual description of the work, focusing on its main elements, structure, composition, point of view, style, light, and colours, or any other relevant details;
- Contextual information, presenting "possible interpretation(s)" (Szarkowska et al., 2016, p. 315) by providing information about the period, movement, or historical facts connected to the object;
- Information about the artist/creator and other related works/objects;
- Interviews with curators, critics, conservators, artists, and others (Szarkowska et al., 2016, p. 317);
- Instructions, which is an additional category (absent from the Open Art project) related to practical indications and direct "calls to actions" addressed to the visitor.

The second framework applied was the appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005). Since appraisal involves "the subjective presence of writers/speakers in texts as they adopt stances towards both the material they present and those with whom they communicate" (Martin & White, 2005, p. 1), it was deemed useful to study subjectivity. Within the broader theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1985), appraisal "co-articulates interpersonal meaning with two other systems – negotiation and involvement" (Martin & White, 2005, p. 33) – and regards the expression or amplification of evaluation.

The appraisal framework is composed of three categories, i.e., attitude, engagement, and graduation, each including further sub-categories, often working in conjunction with one another. The former regards feelings and emotional reactions (affect), ethics and attitudes towards behaviour (judgement), and evaluation of semiotic or natural phenomena (appreciation). Engagement involves "the ways in which resources such as projection, modality, polarity, concession and various comment adverbials position the speaker/writer with respect to the value position being advanced and with respect to potential responses to that value position" (Martin & White, 2005, p. 36). Finally, graduation is concerned with gradability, i.e., the scalability of attitudinal meanings and engagement values according to intensity, amount, or prototypicality.

³ The project advocated for a Universal Design approach, according to which ADs may benefit non-sighted and sighted alike. The category "curiosities and titbits" (Szarkowska et al., 2016, p. 318), which is part of the guidelines developed in the project, was not classified in the present contribution as a separate type of information but was categorised within other types depending on the information provided.

Since “a given attitude can be realised across a range of grammatical categories” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 10), it is worth stressing that the analysis focused on different grammatical structures showing evaluation. As Biber et al. claim (1999, p. 969), the expression of stance or evaluation does not depend on specific grammatical structures but “on the context and shared background for their interpretation”, and thus “on the addressee’s ability to recognize the use of value-laden words”.

Ultimately, the corpus was examined by investigating (1) which types of information are included in the ADs and AGs, (2) which information shows more evaluative features (as indicators of subjectivity) in each sub-set, and (3) how attitude (as the most common appraisal feature in the corpus) is expressed in ADs and AGs.

3. Results

The following sub-sections, which correspond to the three research questions outlined above, present the main quantitative and qualitative results of this study. Due to obvious space constraints, only a selection of examples⁴ from the corpus is discussed.

3.1. ADs vs. AGs: Types of Information Offered

The results of the analysis, summarised in Table 2⁵, show that ADs provide visual and introductory information to a greater extent than AGs do, whereas the latter offer more contextual information related to the interpretation and the artist, and also include interviews (which were not found in the ADs analysed). This seems to suggest a tendency for ADs to focus on descriptive content about the object or artwork in order to provide the main target audience (i.e., supposedly blind and visually impaired) with visual information that they may not access otherwise, either totally or partially. As a result, this may leave less space for information about the context or the artist.

The opposite seems to be true for AGs, which tend to take visual information for granted by assuming that the image of the described object (or the object itself) is available to the target audience and that the latter will be able to explore the visual content autonomously. It is interesting to note that instructions are only available in ADs and were not found in AGs, suggesting that the AG target audience is not expected to need further guidance.

Table 2

Structural Differences Between ADs and AGs

⁴ Bold and underlined text signals relevant aspects in the examples.

⁵ Table 2 shows the absolute frequencies, i.e., the number of words coded as a specific type of information (introductory, visual, contextual, etc.) over the total number of words for each sub-set. Relative frequencies, normalised per 100, are also reported. The colour scale should make it easier to compare the values.

Type of information	ADs		AGs	
	Word count (absolute freq.)	Word count (relative freq.)	Word count (absolute freq.)	Word count (relative freq.)
Introductory information	945	4.7	412	3.6
Visual description	18,215	90.4	2,966	25.9
Contextual information	290	1.4	5,444	47.6
Information about artist(s)	327	1.6	2,349	20.5
Interviews	0	0.0	1,871	16.3
Instructions	864	4.3	0	0.0

Source: author's own elaboration.

In Example 1 provided in Table 3, introductory information in the AG – sometimes totally missing – here presents a more generic focus, whereas additional details are provided in the AD, e.g., the size of the object. Visual information also tends to be richer and more exhaustive in the AD in comparison with the AG, which in Example 2 offers slightly different information, as if proposing a distinct visual “reading” of the image. Although to a different extent, instructions are also used in ADs, for guiding the listener in constructing a mental image through a specific visual scheme (e.g., “like a noughts and crosses grid”, PB_02_AD) or for inviting a personal experience (“To better understand the picture, allow yourself a mental experiment. Paint it in your mind”, BG_11_AD). The opposite applies to information about the context or the artist, which is totally missing in Example 3 in the AD, although the latter mentions the “African mask” in the visual description (MoMA_01_AD) without explaining its significance.

Table 3

Discrepancies in Terms of Information Between ADs and AGs Related to the Same Exhibit

Example	Type of information	AD	AG
01	Introductory information	Featured in this display is a morning star pole from Elcho Island which is a wooden ceremonial pole used in important Dhüwra ceremonies. It is 151cm tall with a 4.5cm diameter. (AM_07_AD)	This display presents several examples of the Museum's important collections of Indigenous Australian artefacts. (AM_07_AG)
02	Visual description	Rudolf Schlichter portrays a young woman with the everyday name Jenny sitting on a chair in his studio . She is the central figure in the painting and fills the foreground. Jenny is only wearing knee-long white underpants and black stockings . Her left hand rests on her lap while opening a red garter above the right knee with her right hand without turning away from the gaze of the painter right in front of her. The gesture seems as automatic and absentminded as her gaze. Her dark hair is done in youthful fashionable bangs. Jenny wears heavy make up : the eyebrows are traced out in black. ... Her hanging shoulders and breasts seem tired. The inhospitable bare room in dark shades of blue, brown and green supports the overall melancholic impression. (BG_09_AD)	[...] as can be seen in this portrait of the prostitute Jenny . She sits in the sparse, uninviting room , and seems to stare through the viewer like a doll . Although strikingly and youthfully made up, her facial expression looks like a mask and her skin looks old . As if remote controlled , she removes the pink garter , her nipples hidden in the shadows. (BG_09_AG)
03	Information about artist(s)	n.a.	The inclusion of these masks reflect Picasso's interest in getting away from Western art traditions by identifying with the art of other cultures. He and his peers would have seen masks like these in museums in Paris. These types of objects were interesting to them because of the supernatural powers they would have had as objects in the communities in which they were made. (MoMA_01_AG)

Source: author's own elaboration.

Nonetheless, overlaps between different types of information were also observed during the analysis, as the same piece of text could contain information of different natures. This tends to be particularly common in AGs, whereby the border between visual and contextual information seems to be more blurred than in ADs – the latter normally showing different types of information as separate (and thus more easily identifiable) blocks. In Examples 4 and 5 (Table 4), while the ADs only provide general visual information about the objects and their position, the AGs describe them more in detail and offer historical information on their use.

Table 4

Overlaps Between Different Types of Information in AGs

Example	Type of information	AD	AG
04	Visual information	Set above the armour is the Meto navigation stick chart . (AM_14_AD)	Behind the Kiribati armour, an array of interwoven bamboo sticks is in fact a form of sea chart used by Marshall Islanders to navigate their canoes . The charts represent ocean swell patterns around the islands and were memorised prior to a voyage . (AM_14_AG)
05	Visual information	The display is dominated by the Tetale bird figure at the top back of the cabinet, a large elaborate head ornament , about 1.5m from beak to tail. (AM_10_AD)	This tetale represents a bird dema who transforms into a man and a stork, allowing the wearer to connect with nature and gain power in fertility rituals . (AM_10_AG)

Source: author's own elaboration.

3.2. ADs vs. AGs: Use of Appraisal Resources Across Different Types of Information

Attitude resources are the most common in both sub-sets, followed by graduation and to a lesser extent engagement resources, as evident from the frequencies (number of occurrences) reported in Table 5. Overall, appraisal resources are more common in ADs than in AGs. The ADs analysed are richer in attitude, engagement, and graduation – the latter frequently found in a cluster with attitude or engagement resources. The strikingly higher number of appraisal resources in ADs in comparison with AGs seems to suggest a general tendency towards the use of evaluative language in heritage interpretation when addressing a sighted as well as a non-sighted or partially sighted audience.

Table 5

Appraisal Resources in ADs and AGs

Appraisal resources	ADs	AGs
	Occurrence count	Occurrence count
Attitude	651	404
Graduation	361	203
Engagement	123	96
Total	1135	703

Source: author's own elaboration.

Table 6 offers an overview of the distribution of appraisal resources across different types of information, with values indicating the number of single occurrences. Within the sub-set of ADs, visual descriptions show the higher number of occurrences of appraisal resources, whereas contextual information is the richest in evaluative language in AGs, followed by visual information, although to a lesser extent. All the other types of information in both sub-sets seem to be characterised by lower use of evaluation. Introductory and contextual information, as well as information about artists, includes more appraisal resources in AGs than in ADs, whereas visual descriptions in ADs are richer in evaluative language than AGs.

Table 6

Appraisal Resources Across Different Types of Information in ADs and AGs

Appraisal resource / Type of information	Attitude		Graduation		Engagement	
	ADs	AGs	ADs	AGs	ADs	AGs
Introductory information	14	19	7	12	2	6
Visual description	636	161	355	46	113	41
Contextual information	9	168	2	110	1	41
Information about artist(s)	13	78	3	36	3	16
Interviews	0	86	0	45	0	16
Instructions	15	0	10	0	9	0

Source: author's own elaboration.

3.3. ADs vs. AGs: Expression of Attitude

Given the predominance of attitude features in both sub-sets and in all types of information, this section is more closely dedicated to observations regarding the expression of attitude⁶ as the most common appraisal resource in the ADs and AGs analysed. Among the three regions included within the category of attitude (Martin & White, 2005), appreciation was the most represented in both sub-sets, with more occurrences in the ADs than in the AGs. On the other hand, AGs showed a greater number of affect and judgement resources. As far as the types of information are concerned, attitude resources in ADs were mainly found in visual descriptions, whereas in AGs they were more evenly distributed between visual (especially affect) and contextual information (appreciation and judgement).

Occurrences of affect in the corpus involve both positive and negative feelings, as made clear from the examples in Table 7⁷. Of course, this depends on how culture construes those feelings; at times, borders may be blurred (Example AG 6) or negative feelings may be associated with positive consequences or results, either for the listener (“**hauntingly** strange” but at the same time “memorable” in Example AD 8) or for the object itself (“**painstakingly** restored” in Example AG 8).

Realisations of affect may involve a behavioural surge of emotion (e.g., “we see the **grieving** faces of a man and two women”, PB_01_AD) or a mental state (“Christ seems like a **tired** man”, PB_03_AG). Generally, the feelings expressed – spanning the three sets conceived by Martin and White (2005), i.e., un/happiness, in/security, dis/satisfaction – represent a general, ongoing mood, but they may also be the reaction to a trigger (e.g., “in his twenties suffered **serious depression** due to the death of his **beloved** girlfriend”, BG_10_AG).

Finally, it is interesting to note that in both sub-sets the feelings described mainly referred to the figures depicted (Examples AD and AG 6, AG 7, AD 8) but also to the artist (e.g., “Dalí **liked** things in this state of becoming, unbecoming”, MoMA_04_AG) or to a conservator (Example AG 8), as well as to the listener (Example AD 7). Finally, affect is often used in combination with engagement resources (Example AG 7) and graduation (Example AG 8).

⁶ All the sub-categories within the macro-category of attitude that are mentioned in this section are drawn from Martin and White (2005, pp. 46–56), i.e., the main categories of affect (p. 46), judgement (pp. 52–53), and appreciation (p. 56), as well as the micro-categories included in each of them.

⁷ In this table and in the following ones, examples from ADs and AGs are compared because similar appraisal resources are present, although the ADs and AGs in a given row are not related to the same museum item.

Table 7

Affect Resources in ADs and AGs

Example	Micro-category	AD	AG
06	Quality	An indefinable gaze; awake, filled with pain, aggressive and scornful at the same time. (BG_11_AD)	... we perceive the surprise and incredulity through the instinctive gestures that underline the intensity of the emotion . (PB_03_AG)
07	Process	Four black ottomans are spaced out along the centre of the gallery for visitors to sit and enjoy the exhibits. (AM_01_AD)	... this musician <u>seems to</u> exude a melancholy comic feel . (BG_08_AG)
08	Comment	it's a hauntingly strange and memorable image. (MoMA_04_AD)	It is made of <u>extremely fragile</u> materials and has been painstakingly restored ... (AM_10_AG)

Source: author's own elaboration.

In the appraisal system, judgement construes positive or negative assessments of behaviour, which is either admired or criticised as un/usual, in/capable, ir/resolute, un/truthful, un/ethical. As shown in Table 8, such assessments may be referred to the artist (Examples AG 9, AD and AG 11 and AG 13), to somebody related to the object (Examples AG 10 and AG 12), to a figure depicted within the item (Examples AD 9, AD 10, AD 11) or even to a humanised visual element, such as colours (Example AD 12). As with affect, positive and negative connotations are also combined (Examples AD 10 and AG 11), or found in conjunction with engagement resources (Example AD 13).

Table 8

Judgement Resources in ADs and AGs

Example	Micro-category	AD	AG
09	Social esteem (normality)	The fourth dancer, positioned at 3 o'clock, awkwardly bridges the compressed space between foreground and background. (MoMA_02_AD)	"The future of art and the seriousness of the present situation force us of revolutionary spirit (expressionists, cubists, futurists) into agreement and close alliance. ... (BG_03_AG)
10	Social esteem (capacity)	The figure's body <u>seems curved yet</u> powerful , without any definite indication of gender. (BG_05_AD)	Kreffft was a renowned zoologist, a prolific specimen collector, and an accomplished scientific illustrator. (AM_03_AG)
11	Social esteem (tenacity)	The painter has taken meticulous care in depicting their medieval costume. (PB_04_AD)	Obsessed with <u>detail</u> and photographic <u>exactitude</u> ... (BG_01_AG)

12	Social sanction (veracity)	Here the colors appear amicably alongside one another ... (BG_03_AD)	... an elaborate hoax , created by an unscrupulous prankster ... (AM_04_AG)
13	Social sanction (propriety)	The one on the left raises her bent right elbow and places her hand behind her hand, <u>as if</u> posing provocatively . (MoMA_01_AD)	With cold sobriety , Schlichter shows a modern big-city-dweller ... (BG_09_AG)

Source: author's own elaboration.

Finally, appreciation entails construing the value of things and natural phenomena, especially in a given field. In this sense, both sub-sets showed positive and negative evaluation at the "interpersonal" level of reaction (including impact and quality), at the "textual" level of composition (involving balance and complexity) and at the "ideational" level of valuation (i.e., opinion). Table 9 reveals that appreciation is expressed in both ADs and AGs with reference to visual elements, such as the figures depicted (Examples AD and AG 14, AD 15, AD 17), colours employed (Examples AD 16 and AD 18) or the environment represented (Examples AG 16 and AG 17), as well as to the artist/creator (Example AG 18) or to contextual information, e.g., about the community represented (Example AG 17) or about the origin and location of the item (Example AG 15). Furthermore, appreciation is often accompanied by engagement (Examples AG 14 and 15 AD) or graduation resources (Examples AD 14, AD 15).

Table 9

Appreciation Resources in ADs and AGs

Example	Micro-category	AD	AG
14	Reaction (impact)	Below this is a Kovave spirit mask which, at just over a metre high, strikes an imposing figure. (AM_09_AD)	<u>But</u> behind the lovers a <u>mysterious silhouette seems to presage something disturbing</u> ... (PB_04_AG)
15	Reaction (quality)	Over the cheek area of this grotesque creature—if it is a <u>creature</u> ... (MoMA_04_AD)	... <u>one of the finest</u> sites for crocoite <u>in the world</u> ... (AM_15_AG)
16	Composition (balance)	The luminous colours alternate in a perfect balance between cold and warm tones. (PB_02_AD)	This is a dark Rome, topsy-turvy . (BG_06_AG)
17	Composition (complexity)	... black, indefinable forms (BG_12_AD)	The carvings reveal rich stories of the New Ireland people ... (AM_12_AG)
18	Valuation	The remainder are in glorious shades of bright blue (AM_06_AD)	He had made, for many years, paintings on easels in a kind of conventional way ... (MoMA_06_AG)

Source: author's own elaboration.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This analysis sheds light on distinct ways of mediating a museum object for sighted and non-sighted audiences, supposedly based on different assumed needs for experiencing cultural heritage, thus revealing how ADs for museum exhibitions are conceived in comparison with other forms of museum interpretation, notably AGs. What emerges from this study is that ADs mainly include visual descriptions, in line with their primary function. On the other hand, AGs show a more complex interaction of visual and contextual information, often without a clear-cut distinction between the two, which also seems to confirm the hybridisation process in the AG genre already noted by Fina (2018). While the existing museum AD guidelines tend to promote factual and sober descriptions (RNIB & VocalEyes, 2003; Snyder, 2010), the ADs observed (no matter their focus – artworks, cultural objects, or scientific specimens) were surprisingly richer in appraisal resources than AGs, especially in their visual descriptions. Overall, attitude was the main realisation of evaluative language in the corpus; ADs included more appreciation features, whereas affect and engagement resources were more common in AGs. Therefore, both sub-sets seem to construe evaluations of things and natural phenomena at the level of emotion, ethics, or aesthetics – the latter even more so in ADs than in AGs.

Although conclusions related to culture-specific differences among the contexts involved in this study cannot be drawn due to the limited corpus size and variety, ADs and AGs produced by museums from different countries seemed to show similar evaluative patterns. Texts in English collected from German and Italian museums were not considered to be the result of an interlingual translation process. Nevertheless, it would also be important to compare such ADs and AGs with their corresponding STs in Italian and German from a contrastive perspective; in fact, “[w]hen a new version of a text is produced for a new cultural context ... the basis of evaluation also shifts” (Munday, 2012, p. 40), which may result in a different use of evaluative language in the source and target texts.

The analytical framework adopted, based on the identification of different types of information and on the appraisal theory, proved to be valuable in studying evaluation and subjectivity in ADs and AGs. Through the lenses of appraisal, the analysis could be fruitfully expanded by focusing on gradable meanings and the way attitude features are intensified through graduation, as well as by distinguishing “explicitly subjective and implicitly subjective realisation” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 13), which may reveal further insights into subjectivity in museum interpretation. In fact, direct or “inscribed” attitude “requires less processing effort from the reader” than indirect, “implied,” or “invoked” attitude (Munday, 2012, p. 31).

Future work could consider various aspects that go beyond the present study, as will be briefly discussed in what follows. These aspects, which may include the use of metaphors and sensorial references, the idea of AD as a metaphor in itself, and the “seeing” experience as part of the wider museum experience, seem to emphasise the need for varying degrees of subjectivity in museum AD.

Features such as sensorial references and metaphors, which were noted in both ADs and AGs and are in line with the guidelines (Snyder, 2010; Giansante, 2015), seemed to escape the methodological categories adopted for this analysis. Allusions to the senses of touch or sight in the corpus referred either to the figures represented in the item or more interestingly to the listeners in order to engage them in a multisensorial (Eardley et al., 2017) – and perhaps more intimate – experience (e.g., “One can imagine the experience of running one’s hands over its knobbly surface, and following the trails of paint with one’s fingertips”, MoMA_06_AD). Yet, references to sight in ADs (e.g., “we see large sail-like ears”, BG_13_AD) could be problematic for non-sighted. On the other hand, the corpus (especially the AD sub-set) was rich in metaphors (e.g., “The white foams up between like a cold ocean spray”, BG_11_AD), which confirms the results from previous research (Gallego, 2019). Although they could not be unequivocally categorised within the framework adopted, metaphors seemed to be important to express resemblance, e.g., in terms of shape or size (e.g., “saucer-size head ornaments”, AM_09_AD). Describing through metaphors and through a variety of senses, which is at the heart of museology and museography (Agrell, 2005; Veverka, 1994/2013), seems to suggest a more subjective approach, whereby visual information is provided by sharing “the perception of similarities or correspondences between unlike entities and processes, so that we can see, experience, think and communicate about one thing in terms of another” (Semino & Demjén, 2017, p. 1). Given the potential of metaphors as emotional triggers to relate museum exhibits to more familiar objects or phenomena, it would be useful to investigate whether this approach to AD may be beneficial for congenitally blind visitors, whose culture may be somewhat different in terms of visual metaphors (Toronchuk, 2018).

More broadly, drawing on the notion of “translation as metaphor” (Guldin, 2015), if AD is conceived as an instance of translation, one could conceptualise AD itself as a metaphor or “way of seeing”. As argued by Berger (1972/2008, p. 10), “although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing.” In other words, every individual may perceive an image in a different way, due to different “ways of seeing”. Within the scope of the present article, this has at least two consequences. First, an AD does not simply translate visual inputs into words but rather translates the specific (and probably subjective) “seeing” experience of the describer/heritage interpreter. Furthermore, if we define AD as the translation (or transcreation) of a “way of seeing”, it is also important to consider that listeners may expect or prefer different “ways of seeing”, and thus different types of ADs with varying levels of subjectivity and emotional involvement. Similarly, with respect to the question of subjectivity/objectivity, Mazur and Chmiel (2012, p. 180) propose “a scale with objective and subjective at the two extremes and varying degrees of objectivity and subjectivity in between”. Distinct AD experiences may, for instance, be delineated by drawing on Housen’s (2010) “Visual Thinking Strategy”, which sought to codify forms of museum fruition in relation to the viewer’s experience of the visual world, according to five stages (i.e., accountive, constructive, classifying, interpretive, and re-creative), each reflecting a specific “seeing” experience.

The debate about the “seeing” experience could also benefit from the reflections about objects and their corresponding pictures by Alloa (2011, p. 497). The author draws a distinction between “propositional *seeing-as*” (where a picture is considered to be a representation of an object), “projecting *seeing-in*” (where an individual sees the object in the picture), and “medial *seeing-with*” (where the object becomes visible through the picture). In the latter case, “things come to the fore that could never be seen otherwise” (Alloa, 2011, p. 497). Similarly, AD (corresponding to the “image” of an exhibit) may be conceived either as a straightforward representation of the exhibit (*seeing-as*), a mental projection (*seeing-in*) or an aid through which the exhibit is made visible (*seeing-with*). While the former two would seem to hint at a more objective approach (whereby the AD is supposed to be “loyal” to the exhibit considered as the ST and to the mental image constructed in the listener’s mind), the third opens to a more creative, subjective approach, according to which the AD is “loyal” to the “seeing” experience rather than to the exhibit itself. This is in line with recent theories in MS focusing on the visitor’s experience and acknowledging the impossibility of absolute objectivity in any form of museum interpretation, as “[m]useums, like maps, construct relationships, propose hierarchies, define territories, and present a *view* [t]hrough those things that are made *visible* and those things that are left *invisible* [emphasis added]” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 18).

Furthermore, considering AD from a universal accessibility perspective as an inclusive tool that benefits both non-sighted and sighted individuals (Szarkowska et al., 2016), museum AD may contribute to enhancing anybody’s “seeing” experience, as well as the museum experience as a whole, by allowing for a shared, social experience. Given all that, providing ADs with different degrees of subjectivity may arguably allow cultural institutions to suit the needs and preferences of a group of people with differing abilities, and thus truly foster social inclusion. As such, this contribution advocates a move beyond objectivity as a norm in museum AD towards a more open, layered, and inclusive approach explicitly acknowledging subjectivity.

The results of this study are necessarily provisional and call for further analyses of ADs and AGs related to a wider variety of cultural heritage that encompasses different disciplines, spanning from archaeology and ethnography to natural science and history. Future research could take into account museum accessibility programmes more closely in order to examine whether ADs and AGs are proposed separately, i.e., through distinct media/channels and to separate audiences, or whether both are available and offered to sighted and non-sighted alike as different possible “ways of seeing” heritage, perhaps also in combination with touch tours and other forms of museum interpretation. Finally, more reception studies are necessary to investigate visitors’ preferences and cognitive effort when listening to ADs and AGs, no matter their abilities, also considering the spoken delivery of ADs and AGs, as well as the integration of music and sound effects. Such studies – which could involve innovative experiments embracing subjectivity and integrating AD into the creative process (Fryer, 2018) or into the wider museological approach – may further contribute to the objectivity/subjectivity debate in museum interpretation, also through the involvement of MS scholars and professionals.

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