

Beyond Objectivity in Audio Description: New Practices and Perspectives

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Abstract

For many years, objectivity was considered a key norm of quality in audio description (AD), and it still features prominently in many AD guidelines. The primary motivation behind the concept is a recognition of users' autonomy in forming a mental image of the audiovisual content independently. Research has offered many alternative views on the issue that conceptualise the idea of objectivity/subjectivity as a continuum, emphasizing that different approaches can be appropriate depending on the given context of situation, giving rise to different AD styles that cater for a range of aesthetic preferences. Against this background, various cultural domains are experimenting with alternative approaches, challenging established AD practices and the assumptions it is built on. The articles included in this special issue all explore the various ways in which AD user needs can be met and illustrate the dynamic views that exist on objectivity, addressing key questions related to the operationalisation of objectivity, the challenge of interpretation for AD, the exploration of emerging subjective styles, and the concept of aesthetics of or in access.

Key words: audio description, objectivity, media accessibility, aesthetics of access, creative media accessibility.

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1. Introduction

Research on audio description (AD) entered the realm of audiovisual translation studies at the turn of the century: over the past twenty years, a long path has been established, with a number of domains that have enriched, and continue to enrich this ever-growing field. Amongst the issues that have been instrumental to the development of AD since its early days is that of objectivity. For many years, objectivity was considered one of the key norms of quality in AD, and it is still incorporated in many AD guidelines. The primary motivation behind the frequent use of this concept is a recognition of users' autonomy and a wish to leave enough room for AD users to form a mental image of the content independently. On the website of the *American Council of the Blind*, for instance, "Say what you see" is presented as a "fundamental rule" of audio description (Brack, n.d.). On the other hand, *The Ultimate Guide to Audio Description* (n.d.) recommends more explicitly to "Describe what you see without interpretation or personal comment." Such advice has been further developed over the years. Bernd Benecke, a European audio description pioneer, states, "Good audio-description should be unobtrusive and neutral, but not lifeless or monotonous." (Benecke 2004). If "neutral" can be taken here as a synonym for "objective", pairing it with a need for AD not to be lifeless and monotonous it highlights the creative potential of objective descriptions. As a matter of fact, a tendency to move away from the "dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity" in European audio descriptions has been recorded many times since the early days of research within AVT, as is mentioned, for instance, by Tor-Carroggio and Vercauteren (2020).

Today, a consensus exists that a level of subjectivity is part of the AD process given that interpretation is always required and is essentially individual; the *Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel* (2020), for instance, states in its guidelines for France that objectivity is impossible to obtain. In the field of psychoanalysis, objectivity has been defined as "the perception or experience of the external" as opposed to subjectivity, assumed to stand for "the perception or experience of the internal." (Smith, 1999) Such a definition evokes not only a long cross-disciplinary academic debate over the boundaries between objectivity and subjectivity but also between perception and reception, many times discussed in psychology-inspired audiovisual translation studies, as reported, among others, by Di Giovanni (2018). If we consider that a strict application of the objectivity rule might lead to factual and too technical descriptions of visual information that prioritise comprehension over engagement, research has studied various alternatives that aim to define and highlight subjectivity within the context of AD. Jan Louis Kruger (2010), for instance, proposed the concept of audio-narration as a more creative alternative to "traditional" AD. Fresno (2014) found that "semantic AD" improves retention of information as opposed to a more traditional visual AD approach. Geerinck and Vercauteren (2020), in turn, relate objectivity to a focus on action, while more subjective approaches can be related to the expression of the inner life of characters. Similarly, the research-based *ADLAB Audio Description Guidelines* (2014) incorporate the idea that a text-based interpretation of a film may lead to AD strategies with different levels of explicitation of the same content, ranging from describing what you see to naming its meaning, to explaining what it means. Di Giovanni (2014, 137) recalled that AD "allows for the restoration of agency in the enjoyment of audiovisual texts", as it

provides the blind and partially sighted with the elements that they need to form their own interpretation of a text. To sum it up, the research approaches described above conceptualise the idea of objectivity/subjectivity as a continuum or scale, which includes different approaches that can be appropriate depending on the given context of the situation.

Given these positions, it is not surprising to see differences between audio descriptions of the same audiovisual material in different languages but within one and the same country, and to see different AD styles emerging for different contexts and genres. Recently, Ofcom, the media regulator in the UK who was one of the first to publish AD guidelines that are widely used, initiated a consultation to update their guidelines in order to explicitly recognise the existence of various AD styles by replacing the advice to use an “impersonal style” with encouragement to consider different approaches to audio description styles (Ofcom, 2023). The consultation proposes to encourage taking audiences’ preferences and the programme genre into account. In addition, it recognises that audiences respond positively to more creative styles of AD and that AD should cater for a range of aesthetic preferences.

In various cultural domains, the method of factual description is challenged by AD users, audio describers, and artists/makers (Greyson, 2020; Romero-Fresco and Fryer 2018; Kleege 2016, Thompson, 2018). Such initiatives resonate with critical voices that question some of the assumptions on which AD has been built, such as its centredness on removing barriers and its focus on remedying a sense of loss. Instead, such scholars emphasise the need for an alternative aesthetic of access. Kleege (2014: 8), for instance, says that AD is based on “a shaky assumption that the words describing the work of art will create a picture of it in the blind person’s mind’s eye, which the blind person can then form independent aesthetic judgements about.” This view criticises the normative idea behind objectivity, which is said to be built on the assumption that the task of an audio describer is to provide an accurate description of the image to fill in the gaps caused by blindness in order to bring the blind users’ comprehension as close as possible to that of the sighted audience. As a result – and this is particularly the case in the scenic arts – alternative approaches are developed and tested. Practices such as the Aesthetics of Access (Sealey & Lynch, 2012), integrated AD (Fryer & Cavallo, 2022), or Creative Media Accessibility (Romero & Dangerfield, 2022) go beyond accessibility as a neutral tool and add-on. Instead, they experiment with integrating audio description into the creative process and promote working in a participatory way with users with the lived experience of disability, therefore adding artistic value to the AD and consciously embracing the aesthetic (and often subjective) perspectives of the various stakeholders involved. At the same time, however, the objective AD style remains dominant in several areas and is still part of many guidelines and even quality assessment metrics (Romero Fresco, *fc.*; CESyA 2023). In brief, while the objectivity debate is as old as AD itself and has been widely debated and nuanced since the beginning of AD, its relevance is still very much alive today. Maybe because at the heart of this debate – regardless of the view adopted – resides a central concern for the users, their autonomy, experience and enjoyment. As Fryer (2018, p. 179) said: “If everyone agrees about the primary purpose of AD, what remains contentious is the best way in which those needs can be met.”

The articles included in this special issue all explore the various ways in which AD user needs can be met and illustrate the dynamic views that exist on objectivity, addressing key questions related to the operationalisation of objectivity, the challenge of interpretation for AD, the exploration of emerging subjective styles, and the concept of aesthetics of or in access.

This issue opens with Alejandro Romero-Muñoz's study "Multimodal analysis as a way to operationalise objectivity in audio description. A corpus-based study of Spanish series on Netflix." The author defines central concepts, presents the context in which the topics "objectivity" and "subjectivity" appear, and explains to which extent they shape intersemiotic translation modes which compete with one another in filmic audio descriptions. Romero uses Chaume's classification of acoustic and visual meaning codes to identify and quantify objective and subjective audio description events in his corpus of four Spanish Netflix films. These are his main results: The quantitatively best-represented categories are the iconographic code (indexes, icons, and symbols) and the mobility code associated with proxemic, kinesic, and mouth articulation signs. With respect to the distribution of objectively versus subjectively described events, it can be noticed that only two out of the eleven codes are clearly on the objectivity side, i.e. the mobility code and graphic code, the latter represented by written language appearing on the screen. No one of the codes is dominated by subjectivity. In the iconographic code and the editing code (represented by film transition marks that organise the film in shots, sequences, etc.), subjectivity competes with objectivity. The general proportion in these Spanish filmic audio descriptions is 20.24% for elements representing subjectivity versus 79.76% for those which indicate objectivity.

The second article, titled "The expression of emotions in the Spanish and Italian filmic audio descriptions of *The King's speech*" by Laura Marra, offers a contrastive analysis based on a three-level framework for the evaluation of different linguistic items and their meaning potential in AD. Relying on concepts drawn from film theory, narratology and different branches of linguistics, Marra explores the expression of meaning and emotions in AD scripting. All in all, her study sheds light on potentially advantageous verbalisation strategies in AD: she observes that in the Italian text, verbs are used to construct parallelism between the King's appearance and his feelings and that adverbial locutions help qualify his attitude. In the Spanish AD, adjectives qualify the actions of the main character and give prominence to his inner condition in scenes aimed at introducing him or at moving the story forward. At the end of her article, the author claims that implicit meanings originating from the interaction of several semiotic systems should be conveyed in AD to grant the users an immersive and enjoyable filmic experience.

The third article, written by Silvia Soler Gallego and María Olalla Luque Colmenero, is entitled "Increased subjectivity in visual art AD: a focus-group reception study of content minimalism and interpretive voicing." This paper reports on "The Emancipatory and Creative Approaches to Audio Description (ECREA) project", which investigates the reception of different AD styles by people who are blind or partially sighted, as well as their role and visibility in the creation of these accessibility tools. Based on an in-depth analysis of focus group discussions, they explore the use and reception of what they call "minority" AD styles that contrast with the standard objective AD style adopted in

some areas. The article focuses on what the authors term the “gist style”, which can be defined as “an enunciation of a limited number of the visual components that make up the work, with little or no conceptual connection between them”, often adding voice to complement language in creative ways. One of their study's main takeaways is that AD audiences are diverse and that their needs and preferences are shaped by various contextual and background factors. Like many other styles, the gist style has benefits and downsides but constitutes a relevant strategy in a universal-design approach to accessible art. Therefore, the authors support an approach to art AD that offers audiences choice – including various styles, but also choices between short impressions or longer informational descriptions – making AD as diverse as its intended audience.

This volume also provides space for the objectivity-subjectivity debate applied to the reception of audio descriptions for non-filmic artefacts such as museum exhibits. In the fourth article, “Museum audio descriptions vs general audio guides: Describing or interpreting cultural heritage?” Chiara Bartolini looks for evidence of subjectivity in two types of cultural products applied to museum exhibits: audio descriptions created for blind or visually impaired visitors and audio guides for non blind visitors. She discovered that museum AD is much more subjective than expected and that subjectivity does not concern the same aspects as in audio guides created for non blind visitors. She concludes that museum audio description techniques could suit all sorts of audiences, not only the blind or visually impaired.

Nina Revier’s and Sabien Hanouille’s study “Aesthetics and participation in accessible art experiences: reflections on an action research project of an audio guide” closes this issue. The authors offer a holistic vision of how audio descriptions can be created by involving various actors (artists, AD writers and users with or without disabilities) at various stages of the AD production process. Inclusive museum audio guides and tactile tours serve as examples to demonstrate the philosophy behind this AD model, called “universal access service”. This sort of service aims to satisfy not only the needs of people with a visual impairment but also those of other types of audiences with or without disabilities. The presented AD creation model is part of a world vision in which disability is considered a “normal aspect of the human experience”. This feature is then not perceived as a stumbling block, but recognised as an eye-opener which stimulates researchers, artists and audiovisual translators to reshape the field of aesthetics.

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