impaginazione
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Pictures painted in words: ADLAB Audio Description guidelines

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Preface

The guidelines presented in this document are the result of a three-year (2011-2014) research project on Audio Description (AD) for the blind and visually impaired, financed by the European Union under the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP). The basic motivation for the launching of the project was the need to define and create a series of reliable and consistent, research-based guidelines for making arts and media products accessible to the blind and visually impaired through the provision of AD.

These guidelines are intended for AD professionals and students to help them create quality services, but they also consider those people that have come into contact with AD in their personal or professional lives and who wish to better understand the challenges of the practice. The guidelines can be read in their entirety, but their structure also allows you to pinpoint a specific issue and browse the relevant item chapter. The chapters have been grouped in three sections: section 1 is an introduction to AD and introduces some related concepts. Section 2, AD scriptwriting, consists of the guidelines for writing audio descriptions for recorded AD, cinema and television more specifically. Section 3, Information on the AD process and its variants, provides a good insight into the various steps involved in the production of a finalised audio-described product. The chapters in section 3 are informative and have been designed to give you a maximum of insight and knowledge about the whole AD production process in a nutshell. To

conclude, the guidelines also have a number of appendices: an example of an AD script and an Audio Introduction, a glossary with key terms and their definitions and finally a section with suggestions for further reading.

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may leave the audience in doubt as to who is seeing what, thereby creating suspense. Decide if and how this will be described, for example, indicating that whoever is watching can only see part of the scene.

– For the AD of documentaries, additional decisions may have to be taken. First, you will have to determine if and where description is still needed, as much of the visual information is probably already contained in the off-screen narration or interviews. It may suffice to use text-to-speech AST, given the informative nature of the verbal part of the ST (see chapter 3.3 on AST and 3.1 on technical issues for information relating to choosing and recording voices).

2.2   Film techniques

2.2.1   *Film language*

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What is film language?

The accepted systems, methods, or conventions through which a film's story comes to the audience, are known as film language. Film language is flexible and is based on the more or less conventional quality, form and combination of shots. It serves to communicate with the audience, to guide their expectations, to shape their emotions, etc. Film language also gives a film its distinctive shape and character, i.e. its style and its aesthetic value.

Film language is the sum of a combination of various film techniques that are all used simultaneously and that can be grouped into three broad categories: mise-en-scène, cinematography and editing. Mise-en-scène refers to what is being filmed in a shot and includes setting, costume and makeup, and staging. Cinematography deals with how shots are filmed and comprises their photographic qualities, framing and duration. Editing refers to the relations between different shots, which include a graphic, rhythmic, spatial and temporal dimension. In other words, film language determines the form in which the story is told.

Film techniques can serve four different functions: a denotative function (showing what is important for the narrative), an expressive function (rendering a character's emotions or eliciting a mood or emotion in the audience), a symbolic function or a purely aesthetic function.

Film techniques usually coexist and a careful analysis is needed to identify and isolate them and their respective meanings. Not only do film techniques show the audience what is important in an image, they can also guide or confound the viewer's expectations depending on how clearly, consistently, coherently and conventionally they are used. They can be used to generate suspense or surprise and to elicit more longstanding moods in the audience. In other words, they determine both what is told and how it is told, and are therefore just as important as the actual narrative building blocks of the film. When analysing the film language of your ST you can use the following checklist to determine what film techniques are used and what their specific meaning is.

– Film techniques can determine what is presented to the audience in a specific shot, how it is presented and what the relations between successive shots are.

– When a film technique determines what is presented, i.e. when it belongs to the broader category of the mise-en-scène, there are three basic possibilities. It can deal with the setting of a specific shot, i.e. how the different elements in the shot are organised. An analysis of this composition may indicate what is more important (usually central elements in the shot) and what is, both literally and figuratively, peripheral. Second, it can deal with costume and makeup. Again, these can be used to guide the audience's attention to the most significant elements in the image. Costume, in particular, can also be used to indicate the general time period in which a film is set. Finally, mise-en-scène deals with staging, i.e. the movement and the performance of the actors (see chapter 2.1.1 on characters and action for more information on this aspect).

– When a film technique determines how the information is presented, i.e. when it belongs to the broader category of cinematography, you will have to pay attention to three main issues, each encapsulating several meaning-making practices. First, there are the shot's photographic qualities which comprise colour, speed of motion, lighting, camera angle and focus. In *Women in Love* (Russel, 1969) for instance, the bright colours of the opening scene give way to the pale and softer hues of the film's middle portion and to the film's last section's predominantly black-and-white scheme that represents the characters' cooled ardor. In *Déjà Vu* (Scott, 2006) slow motion is used to render the main character's mental reaction to the dramatic aftermath of a terrorist attack. On a more general level, focus is another technique that is used to show the audience what is most important in the image. Second, there is the framing of the shot, i.e. the technique that determines what is presented within the film frame, in other words what you see and how you

see it. Framing is intrinsically linked to the various types of shots, ranging from extreme long shots to extreme closeups. In *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980), a helicopter shot opens the scene thus emphasizing the contrast between the majesty of the landscape and the insignificance of the protagonist's car. On the other hand, in *Inglourious Basterds* (Tarantino, 2009) Shosanna's eyes fill the entire screen in an extreme closeup, which isolates this character from the ongoing action and emphasises the emotional intensity of the moment. Finally, cinematography deals with a shot's duration. A long take can be used to allow the audience to appreciate a certain landscape, or to reflect boredom. Short shot lengths, on the other hand, can be used to create suspense or to reflect a character's restlessness.

– When a film technique determines the relations between different shots, i.e. when it belongs to the broader category of editing, you have to pay attention to four different types of relations. First, the relation between successive shots can be graphic. In *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Marshall, 2005), a shot showing cherry blossoms being carried away by the wind slowly gives way to a following shot in which the cherry blossoms are graphically matched to snowflakes, indicating a leap forward in time. Successive shots can also be related rhythmically, when different shot lengths in a scene are combined to form a specific pattern. In action scenes for example, successive shots will become shorter to reflect the increasing suspense and to arouse tension in the audience. Third, there are so-called spatial relations between successive shots: a filmmaker can start by showing a general space by means of a general establishing shot and zoom in on a detail within this space in the next shot. Finally, shots are also related temporally: two successive shots can either follow each other chronologically, or they can constitute a flashback or flashforward.

When you have analysed what film techniques are used in a certain shot/scene you can proceed to determine their function. First of all, a technique can have a denotative function, i.e. it can be used to guide the audience's attention to the most important elements in the frame (e.g. a woman in a white dress surrounded by men in black tuxedos). Film techniques can also have an expressive function. Specific colours can be used to reflect the mood of the characters (cf. the *Women in Love* (Russell, 1969) example above) or they can be used to generate a certain emotion or mood in the audience (e.g. fast editing to create suspense). Film techniques can also have a symbolic function. In *Away from her* (Polley, 2006) discontinuous editing is used to symbolise the protagonist's advancing Alzheimer's disease. Finally, film techniques can serve an aesthetic function, for example when particular colour schemes are used because they are pleasing to the eye.

Having analysed the film language and the film techniques used in a given shot or scene, you proceed to create your description. However, keep in mind that most cuts from one shot to another are left undescribed in ADs, especially when scene changes do not have a particular added meaning. In a short excerpt from *The Hours* (2002) which includes five scene changes, none is made explicit in the AD, which simply juxtaposes the description of the different scenarios: "As the woman's head sinks beneath the water, the man drops the letter to the floor and runs towards the back door. The woman's body, face down, is carried by the swift current through swaying reeds along the murky river bed, her gold wedding band glinting on her finger, a shoe slipping off her foot".

First determine what category the techniques you encountered in a shot or scene belong to:

– if a technique belongs to the category of mise-en-scène, determine whether it deals with the setting of that shot or scene, with costume and makeup or with the staging;

– if a technique belongs to the category of cinematography, determine whether it deals with the shot's or scene's photographic qualities, with the framing or with the duration of the shot;

– if a technique belongs to the category of editing, determine whether it organises the graphic, rhythmic, temporal or spatial relations between two shots or scenes.

Next determine the function the techniques serve. It is important to realise that a technique can never be dissociated from the function it serves and that this function will determine to a large extent if and how you will describe the technique:

– if a technique serves a denotative function, i.e. when it wants to draw attention to narratively significant information, decide whether the information it highlights needs to be described, or whether this is already known from previous scenes or other channels. Costumes, for example, can indicate that a scene is set in a specific century, but this can also be signalled through a text on screen. In this last case, the describer can decide not to describe the costumes and give priority to other information, such as actions;

– if a technique serves an expressive function, determine whether it expresses an intra-diegetic emotion or mood of one or more of the characters, or whether it wants to generate an emotion or a mood in the audience. In the case of an

intra-diegetic expressive function, decide whether the emotion it wants to render can be derived from other information, such as a line of dialogue. If so, you may decide not to repeat the emotion and prioritise other information. If not, the emotion can be expressed in the description. If the technique wants to create a certain mood in the audience, the decision-making process will be somewhat different: as the technique does not give any narrative information, you will not have to decide what you will describe (e.g. "the dark colours want you to feel sad"). Rather, you will have to determine whether the mood is also generated through other channels, such as the music, and decide if you want to repeat it in your description and how: creating a certain mood in the audience through an AD can for example be achieved by using a specific type of language or by voicing (see chapter 3.1 Technical issues) the description in a way that reflects the mood created by the filmmaker;

– if a technique serves a symbolic function, determine what it symbolises and whether the information symbolised can be derived from other channels or earlier descriptions. If it is already clear, decide whether to repeat it or give priority to other information. If it is not clear, decide if and how to include the symbolic information in the description. Again, this will imply deciding how to render this information: you can decide to explain the symbolic meaning, i.e. describe it in an explicit way, or render it in an implicit way and leave it to the audience to extract the symbolic meaning from your description;

– if a technique serves an aesthetic function, the decision you have to make is again if and how you will render it in your TT. You can decide to focus exclusively on narrative content and leave the aesthetic function aside, or you can render the narrative content by using a specific language (see chapter 2.3.1 on wording and style) or by voicing the description in a way that reflects the aesthetic function of the technique used.

Finally, decide how you will describe the technique. Basically you can decide to name the technique ("now in close-up"), to name it and describe its function ("a close-up reflects the fear in her eyes") or only describe the function or meaning of the close-up ("fear is reflected in her eyes"). The decision of when and how to describe a technique will also depend on the film's (director's, genre's, studio's) style. If the technique is not significant, you can decide not to describe it. If on the other hand, a technique is very significant, occurs frequently, contributes greatly to the style, you might want to make sure that you convey that in your AD. If you need to mention the same technique more than once, use the same linguistic formulation throughout the AD text. Coherence and cohesion (see chapter 2.3 The language of AD) are important and can be maintained in AD also through a consistent use of cinematic language.

An example of cinematography from *Déjà Vu* (2006) rendering ATF agent Doug Carlin's reaction when he sees the body bags on the quay after an explosion on a ferry kills dozens of people:

– "Now in slow motion. Doug walks past the body bags lined up on the quay." (name the technique)
– "Now in slow motion. Taking in the emotional scene, Doug walks past the body bags lined up on the quay." (name the technique and describe its meaning/function)
– "Taking in the emotional scene, Doug walks past the body bags lined up on the quay." (name the function/meaning of the technique)

Another example of cinematography from *The Lady Vanishes* (Hitchcock, 1938): the properties of the shot, which determine the style of the film, could be described in various ways:

– "Now, in black and white footage, a mountain top view looks down over a village nestled in foothills" (name the technique).
– "In a 30s movie, in black and white footage, a mountain top view looks down over a village nestled in foothills" (describe the function/meaning of the technique and name it).
– "In a 30s movie, a mountain top view looks down over a village nestled in foothills" (describe the function/meaning of the)

An example of Editing from *Nights in Rodanthe* (Wolfe, 2008): a man thinks about the day that drastically changed his life. He is lying on a bed and looks at a photograph that triggers different memories. The flashback could be described in various ways:

– "Lying on his bed, Paul studies an old photograph. A flashback" (dialogue) (name the technique)
– "Lying on his bed, Paul studies an old photograph and he thinks back to that last surgery. A flashback" (describe the function/meaning of the technique and name it)
– "Lying on his bed, Paul studies an old photograph as his mind starts wandering." (describe the meaning of the technique).