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Museums, museum AD and Easy Language: some critical insights

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ABSTRACT

This paper will first trace the development of accessibility and inclusion in relation to the parallel development of the definition of the museum. It will then explore how museum audio description (AD) has become one of the means of accessibility and inclusion in the contemporary museum. The main features of both museum AD and Easy and Plain Language will be illustrated. After highlighting the rational and the salient features of Easy Language (EL), the ‘controversial encounter’ between museum AD and Easy Language will be described. Museum AD is a form of audio description, which is a means of accessible audiovisual translation for the blind and the visually impaired. In audiovisual translation, access to products derives from the visual component in combination with other semiotic channels. The integration of Easy Language into museum AD seems to make problematic the simplification of the verbal component of museum AD. However, this area of research has received scant attention so far, as testified by the very few studies conducted. For this reason, I will limit my scope to make some observations and describe the state-of-the art of this area of research.

KEYWORDS

Museums, inclusion, accessibility, museum AD, Easy Language

The changes that museums have experienced in the last century are rooted in the opinion that the “museum is a power device”, a site of dispute and contestation, which “permanently evolves to meet the needs of different societies and to translate the cultural claims of specific groups” (Brulon Soares 2020: 30). For this reason, a definition of museum is hard to find because it is “a political task” that will determine more and more the International Council of Museums (ICOM)’s political position and relevance in our contemporary society. And yet, the revisions of the museum definition from the 1960s to nowadays testify to the acceptance of the challenges and compromises of an evolving society. In comparing various museum definitions, it will clearly appear how the museum and its functions have broadened in terms of accessibility and inclusion. A brief survey of the most salient ICOM definitions will help to illustrate this point.

In 1960 the museum was defined as “a permanent establishment, administered in the general interest, for the purpose of preserving, studying, enhancing by various means and, in particular, of exhibiting to the public for its delectation and instruction groups of objects and specimens of cultural value” (Rivière 1960: 12). In 1974 a museum became “a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment” (ICOM 1974). In later years, the museum definition included further notions such as those put forward by the British thinker Geoffrey Lewis, who proposed a museum definition that was not founded on the building or institutional character of the museum but on the broader sense of conceiving of the museum as a support of knowledge, made of material and immaterial evidence of the cultural and natural heritage of humanity (Lewis 2016: 72). The museum therefore started to be thought of “as a place, real or virtual, that maintains a variety of elements for the benefit of the public... [and] such a conception is no longer dependent upon the notion of a collection of material objects” (Brulon Soares 2020: 19). In 2007, in fact, the approved definition stated that “a museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (ICOM 2007). Although the 1974 and 2007 definitions were only slightly different, the latter version envisaged the perception of museums in more fluid and open terms: museums were seen more as shaped by human activities and considered as a means to satisfy certain social needs (Brulon Soares 2020: 19). In more recent times, the 2019 and the 2022 ICOM definition try to consider all the transformations of the new century to make the museum inclusive of pluralistic and multicultural views. The 2019 Statute states that “museums are not for profit. They are participatory

and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world..." (ICOM 2019), whereas the 2022 Statute insists that "a museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability" (ICOM 2022).

Thus, a global definition of museum should consider the different notions of what a museum is across the world and its interpretation in various linguistic and cultural contexts (Brown & Mairesse 2018). The emphasis is therefore, once again, on the 'social role of the museum' which in some countries is still perceived as representative of a colonial past (Brulon Soares, Brown & Nazor 2018).

However, a major turning point towards museum's accessibility and inclusion happened at the time of the 1974 definition. In the late 1970s and 1980s, Britain and the United States saw the rise of the New Museology or Museum Studies, which brought about a re-definition of the museum space, its capacity of attraction for new visitors, and made accessibility a priority on its agenda (Durbin 1996; Andersen 1997; Hein [1998] 2002; Roberts 1989; Hooper-Greenhill [1994] 1999). The passage from an 'old museology' to a 'new museology' represented the first step towards a critical rethinking of the museum. Peter Vargo expressed this change in his Introduction to *The New Museology*, an edited collection published in 1989. The new museology, he asserted, was a "state of widespread dissatisfaction with the 'old' museology, both within and outside the museum profession [...] what is wrong with the 'old' museology is that it is too much about museum methods, and too little about the purposes of museums [...]" (Vargo 1989: 3). Relevant issues on accessibility neglected in earlier studies started to come forward. These issues concerned social, cultural and political barriers which were tightly intertwined (Randaccio 2017).

For Richard Sandell (1998: 410), access meant "the opportunities to enjoy and appreciate cultural services", to "the extent to which an individual's cultural heritage is represented within mainstream cultural arena", thus creating "the opportunities an individual has to participate in the process of cultural production". Many sectors of the population and the public in those years felt a sense of alienation from the museum as a social institution where participation and community involvement were denied. Rebecca McGinnis (1999: 281), for example, acknowledges that, in the case of disabled people, "access means not only physical access, but conceptual, intellectual and multi-sensory access as well". She claimed in fact that sometimes attitudes to disabled people represent a psychological barrier that "can be as impassable as physical and sensory barriers" (ibid.: 278). Sandell (1998: 411) therefore hoped for an inclusive museum to contrast social exclusion: "The inclusive museum then, tackles social exclusion within the cultural dimension, although the interrelated nature of the process of social exclusion... suggests that this might lead to positive outcomes in rela-

tion to other dimensions". In his view, the 'inclusive museum' becomes a site for promoting accessibility in social and cultural terms and reveals the relationship between museums, government choices and cultural policies. The strong political and cultural bias of accessibility drew attention to the museum as an institution and revealed some of its contradictory functions. The museum was "the utilitarian instrument for democratic education" (Hooper Greenhill 1989: 63) but, at the same time, the "elite temple of the arts" (ibid.: 63) with a disciplinary function, where citizens were constantly under control to comply with the established order (Bennett 1995: 59-98).

2. MUSEUM AD AS A MEANS OF ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSION

Museum audio description (AD) for the blind and visually impaired has emerged as a research topic in Translation Studies in recent years and it is a sub-genre of Audio description (AD). Over the last thirty years, AD "[has begun] to come of age" (Reviere 2016: 232), especially since AD started to move away from being a service for the needs of the visually impaired and has become "a modality in the field of Translation Studies" (Matamala & Orero 2017: 7). Increasingly recognized as part of audiovisual translation (AVT), which has already undergone several 'turns',¹ AD has been defined by Sabine Braun (2007: 2) as "intersemiotic, intermodal or crossmodal translation or mediation" and by Yves Gambier (2004: 3) as "intersemiotic translation with an inverse definition – an interpretation of non-verbal signs system by means of verbal signs". Museum AD is a verbal description that makes the visual elements of museum content accessible to the visually impaired, and it is a form of AD that has benefited from the social and cultural changes in the museums, which have been described in the previous section. These changes made accessibility a key notion and were also facilitated by the development of legislation in various countries over the last thirty years.² Pioneering studies saw AD as a powerful means against exclusion and marginalization in the information society and started from the premise that, in our contemporary technological society, access is crucial for participation in the benefits of globalization, for example, in relation to economic and cultural growth. Exclusion from information is "the result of age (the fast-growing elderly population in Europe), (remote) geographic location, and/or lack of funds and financial means" (Díaz-Cintas, Orero & Remael 2007: 12). Access and accessibility formerly meant overcoming physical and sensorial barriers for the

1 For an overview of the four turns – the descriptive, the cultural, the sociological and the technological – audiovisual translation has taken to date, see Chaume (2018).

2 From, for example, the *Disability Discrimination Act* (DDA 1995) in the United Kingdom and the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA 1990), to *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD 2008).

disabled, but it has now become a discipline *per se* – encompassing assistive technology, Universal Design, tourism management and services, and new media technology – with the paramount purpose of fighting the economic inequalities and illiteracy that undermine the realization of democracy in many countries. Accessibility has become a ‘proactive principle’ promoting “human rights as a whole for all”, whose benefits extend “to all citizens, not only to those with disabilities” (Greco 2016: 27; see also Greco 2018: 205-232).

3. MAIN FEATURES OF MUSEUM AD

A closer look shall now be taken at the main features of museum AD to explore if and how Easy Language (EL) can be inserted in museum AD texts, which will then be illustrated in the final section of the paper. Central to the analysis of museum AD is whether objective description of the artwork should prevail in museum AD. What constitutes the main features of museum AD is illustrated in some detail in a comparison conducted by the RNIB of existing guidelines in Spain, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Greece and the United States, *A Comparative Study of Audio Description Guidelines Prevalent in Different Countries*, (Rai, Greening & Petré 2010). For example, the Spanish guidelines, published by AENOR and entitled “Norma UNE: 153020. Audiodescripción para personas con discapacidad visual. Requisitos para la audiodescripción y elaboración de audioguías”, recommend using “a proper terminology” for the description of the objects, that their descriptions must be “simple and organised” (AENOR 2005: 19) and must “[avoid] any personal interpretations” (AENOR 2005: 20). The American and British guidelines adapt indications from various sources and recommend “to describe what you see”, to be specific, that “less is more” (Snyder 2007: 100), “to be clear” (ITC Guidance on Standards for Audio Description, UK) and “describe when necessary, but do not necessarily describe” (Clark 2001). Other well-known American guidelines, *The Art Beyond Sight’s Guidelines for Verbal Description* (Salzhauer et al. 1980), recommend giving standard information on a label (the name of the artist, nationality, title of the artwork, date, dimensions or scale of the work, media and technique), to promote museum tours and create audio guides with “extensive verbal description of artworks”. They also suggest that descriptions give information on the subject, form and colour of the artwork. Like the Spanish guidelines, the *American Audio Description International Guidelines* also state that this type of AD must be “a coherent description [that] should provide visual information in a sequence” (Rai, Greening & Petré 2010: 68) and that “clear and precise language is crucial to any good description” (ibid.: 100). From the above-mentioned guidelines, a general advocacy of objective description of the artwork seems to prevail in museum AD. However, the notion of objective description in museum AD is a controversial issue in the guidelines available. In fact, there are those that

favour a more neutral or an objective approach (ADC 2007-2009; AENOR 2005; ITC 2000; Salzhauer et al.1980; Snyder 2010) and those that consider the advantages that more subjective descriptions seem to have for the visually impaired (RNIB & Vocales 2003; the ADLAB AD guidelines edited by Ramael, Reviers & Vercauteren 2015). The notion of un-interpretative description in museum AD has also been questioned in several recent studies in the field, which suggested that more creative and subjective ADs should be beneficial for the visually impaired (Neves 2016; Soler Gallego 2018; Soler Gallego & Luque Colmenero 2018: 141; Soler Gallego 2019: 709; Randaccio 2017; Randaccio 2018; Spinzi 2019; Perego 2019; Taylor and Perego 2020; Luque Colmenero & Soler Gallego 2020, Perego 2021; Taylor and Perego 2022). Just to give a few examples without the intention to be exhaustive, Karin De Coster and Volkmar Mülheis (2007) and Neves (2012, 2015) are among those who favour interpretation in museum AD. De Coster and Mülheis (ibid.) see the language of museum AD as interpretative and describe the extent to which the verbal can render the visual, and when ambiguity in the visual has to be represented through other senses. They believe that the ambivalent signs which every work of art deal with can still be expressed in words if the visual phenomenon can be translated in another sensual phenomenon (touch and hearing) (De Coster & Mülheis 2007: 193). Neves also reflects on the ambiguity of the work of art and is convinced that, unlike AD for film and theatre where visually impaired people can still integrate information coming from film and stage aurally, the language of museum AD has to resort to a higher level of interpretation and goes as far as to promote a ‘multi-sensory approach’ to AD in order to overcome visual ambiguity in paintings and achieve successful artistic communication (Neves 2012: 290). Pujol and Orero (2007: 49-60) describe how the “narrative potential of images” depends on the individual interpretation of reality. The issue of interpretation, however, has always been a delicate matter and it still is a “bone of contention”, as Iwona Mazur and Agnieszka Chmiel (2012) remind us. They propose “that instead of applying the binary opposition of objective versus subjective, we should rather be using an objectivity–subjectivity scale, which can help determine which interpretive descriptions are less subjective and can consequently be used in AD” (Mazur & Chmiel 2012:173). Mazur and Chmiel cite a number of scholars that reject objectivity altogether and favour subjectivity and interpretation. For example, John Patrick Udo and Deborah I. Fels (2009: 179) claim that the task of objective interpretation is impossible, and Veronika Hyks (2006) suggests that AD is highly subjective even if the describers try to be objective.

To see how subjectivity and interpretation concretely work I will now refer to three recent studies in the attempt to single out more specific linguistic features of museum ADs.

Elisa Perego (2019) has conducted a study on the scripted and recorded museum AD texts of 18 paintings from the British Museum. She found out that these texts only partially complied with the recommendations of existing guidelines.

On the one hand, she showed that her corpus presented vivid and imaginative language, text informativity through the combination of high lexical diversity, extensive use of descriptive adjectives, and substantial lexical diversity. At the same time, her museum ADs seemed more lexically and syntactically complex due to the use of opaque technical terms, heavy adjectival phrases, and long sentences.

Silvia Soler Gallego and Maria Olalla Luque Colmenero (2018) have investigated subjectivity in a corpus of audio-descriptive guides of art museums in four different countries, i.e. France, the United States, the United Kingdom and Spain. Drawing on a combination of cognitive-linguistic theories, visual communication theories, corpus-based analysis methods and qualitative data-analysis software as valuable tools to achieve their purpose, they proposed to focus on expressions of opinion and deliberate metaphors as two indicators of subjectivity. Expressions of opinions are “a classification of ‘opinion lexis’... and ... offer a cognitive basis for differentiating evaluative dimensions” (Soler Gallego and Luque Colmenero 2018: 144). This classification of opinion lexis thus allowed them to single out different types of opinion. To give a few examples, there are opinions in which the audio describer speculates about the technique used by the author and are based on the visual components observed in the artwork (e.g. textures, tones), as in the example “Many colours look as if they were thinly applied to the canvas...”; or opinions referring to concepts evoked by the iconic and symbolic signs and the formal components of the work which might be the concepts that the author intended to convey, e.g. “The two figures represent the Moon and Earth of the painting’s title”; or opinions conveying an evaluation of artistic quality or aesthetic value, e.g. “His body is slender and boyish”; or opinions related to the emotions or sensations felt by the viewer or the subject represented in the work, e.g. “This sense of rhythm is heightened by evenly spaced patches of yellow and blue” (ibid.: 144-145). Deliberate metaphors are a special type of metaphors that work as comparisons and are consciously made by the audio describer (such as “like”, “suggesting” and “with the shape of”) who draws the attention of the receiver (ibid.: 146).

Monica Randaccio (2020) has also shown how the discourse-based notions of microstructures and macrostructures are relevant for a comparison between an early un-interpretative example of museum AD, Peter Holland’s well-known ‘Ramparts’ by the British painter Ben Nicholson, and his later interpretative version. The subjectivity of the later version makes the museum AD more complex at lexical, syntactic and semantic level. For example, at the microstructural level, there is an increased use of similes and analogies for vision, expressed in an extensive use of descriptive adjectives (e.g. “areas of white” / “areas of frosty, silvery white”).

4. EASY LANGUAGE AND PLAIN LANGUAGE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW AND SOME EUROPEAN GUIDELINES

Interest in accessible communication has grown in the last few years and many scholars and experts have focussed their attention on the growing demand for this service. In fact, “the benefits of simplification in several contexts and the impact of Plain and Easy Language in granting full participation and communicative inclusion are now clearer than ever” (Perego 2020: 26). Language simplification has been intended to enable participation for users who do not have access to the source texts (Maaß & Rink 2020: 43) and has been applied to a wide range of communicative situations. Language and content simplification have been increasingly employed by political and public institutions, which are confronted with the fact that they must translate existing texts with domain-specific contents for people with cognitive and psychological impairments. In Germany, for example, simplification has involved legal, administrative and second language acquisition (Ahrens 2020: 97) and has been favoured by the requirement of implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, adopted on all administrative levels (Hansen-Schirra & Maaß 2020: 17).

The complexity of the text simplification process is testified to by the large variety of materials which have been subjected to the implementation of Plain and Easy Language in Europe. As it would be impossible to account for all the various official and unofficial guidelines, it is worth briefly mentioning those which are more established in the European context.³

The *Guidelines for Easy-to-Read Material* produced by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institution (IFLA) are based on the work of the leading international body representing the interests of libraries, information services and their users; *Make it Simple* are guidelines published by the International League of Society for Persons with Mental Handicap (ILSMH) in 1998. The ILSMH Association has always worked with and for people with mental handicaps and undertook a project to develop the *European Guidelines for the production of Easy-to-Read Information* that are meant for people with learning disabilities, authors, editors, information providers and translators. Other guidelines are those included in the brochure *Information for all. European standards for making information easy to read and understand*, published by Inclusion Europe (2014). This brochure offers some clear and simple recommendations and focus on accessible communication in general. In Germany, Plain, Easy and Simple Language have been practiced and researched for long and the 2015 digest of practical rules by Christiane Maaß (*Leichte Sprache*) became so popular that it was subsequently scientifically reworked in a volume with an Easy Language Guide and an exercise book addressed to translators and the general public. In Italy,

3 For a detailed discussion of European Guidelines of Plain and Easy Language, see Perego (2020: 39-47).

the official Easy Language guidelines are the Italian translation of the Inclusion Europe booklet, sponsored by Anffas Onlus (Associazione Nazionale Famiglie di Persone con Disabilità Intellettiva e/o Relazionale) (National Association of Families of persons with Intellectual and/or Relational Disabilities). At the Italian national level, some publications (Fortis 2004; Sciumbata 2017, 2022) and the work from EASIT (Easy Access for Social Inclusion Training), a three-year EU project, of which the University of Trieste is a unit, represent further advances in the field. In Spain, implementation of accessible communication is testified to by a host of publications. To quote just a few, detailed guidelines and practical advice are offered, for example, in *Lectura fácil: métodos de redacción y evaluación* (García Muñoz 2014) and in the short guide *Come elaborar textos de fácil lectura*.⁴

5. EASY LANGUAGE: MAIN FEATURES

Easy Language and Plain Language have been defined as “language varieties of different national languages with reduced linguistic complexity, which aim to improve readability and comprehensibility of texts” (Hansen-Schirra & Maa 2020: 17); however, the phrase Easy Language in fact lends itself to a more inclusive concept. If Easy Language was traditionally meant for people with reading difficulties, recent studies have shown that Easy Language “should go beyond struggling readers to include people with cognitive and intellectual disabilities or other disadvantages who have a permanent or temporary need for over-simplified products” (Perego 2020: 32). The notion of Easy Language may therefore be also applied to products addressed to “children, recent immigrants, other non-native language speakers, tourists, exchange students, language learners, poor readers that suffer from functional illiteracy due to lack of education, social problems or mental illness” (Perego 2020: 33).

Rink (2019: 29-65), Maaß (2020) and Maaß & Rink (2020: 41-56) described the characteristics that a text in Easy Language must have to grant accessible communication. According to them, a text has to be *retrievable* in order to be easily found by the users; *perceivable* in order to be perceived by the target group; *comprehensible* in order to be understood; *linkable*, i.e. its information must refer to previous knowledge, otherwise the information cannot be retained. Finally, it must be *acceptable* and *action-oriented* so that the required action can be performed after the reception of the text. Easy language is therefore “maximally perceptible and comprehensible” (Maaß & Garrido 2020: 134) and helps to overcome several communication barriers. These barriers are “the **sensory barrier** insofar as Easy Language texts are perceptibility enhanced; the **cognitive barrier** insofar as presuppositions and implicatures in texts are brought to the text

4 Available at https://sid-inico.usal.es/idocs/F8/FDO22225/elaborar_textos_lectura_facil.pdf.

surface... [and] information is reduced in order not to provoke cognitive overload in users with special needs; the **language barrier** insofar as only central vocabulary and basic grammatical structures are used; the **expert knowledge** and **expert language barrier** insofar as expert language is reduced to the necessary minimum and knowledge is not presupposed by systematically build up; the **cultural barrier** as, again, Easy Language texts explicitly explain what is presupposed in terms of culture” (Maaß & Garrido 2020: 133, emphasis in the original).

Some studies have shown that texts in Easy Language follow techniques of reduction and addition and that vocabulary and grammar are often reduced to a minimum, making it difficult to express complex issues: covert complexity is made explicit and knowledge is built by explanations in the texts (Maaß & Garrido 2020: 133). For example, detailed descriptions of German Easy Language, based on empirical evidence, have been given at morphological, lexical, syntactic semantic and textual level (Hansen-Schirra et al. 2020: 197-226).

A distinction has also been made in Easy Language between strategies which depend on the language content and strategies which do not depend on the language content. The former focus on skilled and conscious use of vocabulary, proficient use of simple syntax and clear content organisation, whereas the latter focus on design and layout of the page and on the implementation of different types and degrees of multimodality (Perego 2020: 48). In order to achieve text comprehensibility, several suggestions are made. At the lexical level, there is the use of everyday simple words and the use of monoreferentiality (each term has only one referent and a word has only one meaning in a given context). Abbreviations, metaphors, abstract concepts, non-literal expressions, borrowings from other languages must instead be avoided. At the syntactic level, there must be a proficient use of simple syntax and the use of the ‘you’ allocutive form. Simplification also requires the use of positive rather than negative formulations and the avoidance of complex verb forms that may generate ambiguity. Punctuation should be kept simple, heavily modified phrases must be avoided and the use of unmarked word order (SVO in English) is favoured. Fronting strategies, which consist of anticipating word groups which customarily follow the verb at the beginning of the sentence, should also be used to enhance cohesion and provide emphasis on what is more important in the text (Perego 2020: 46-51).

6. EASY LANGUAGE AND MUSEUM AD: ‘A CONTROVERSIAL ENCOUNTER’?

The investigation of whether Easy Language can be integrated into Museum AD is quite an under-explored area of research. In general, the introduction of language simplification in audiovisual translation (AVT) as an effective help for users with or without reading, intellectual and cognitive disabilities is a recent topic which needs further examination. Some studies, however, have started to investigate which audiovisual products lend themselves better to forms of

simplification (Arias-Badia & Matamala 2020; Bernabé & Orero 2020; Taylor & Perego 2020).

What follows on museum AD and Easy Language are therefore some general and brief observations to see whether certain features of museum AD, which have been illustrated at the end of Section 3, comply with the features of Easy Language. Starting from the assumption that subjectivity/objectivity is a central issue in museum AD and that interpretation is very often unavoidable, initial considerations do not seem to testify to a ‘successful encounter’ between museum AD and Easy Language. For example, according to some studies, Museum ADs are characterised by the presence of high lexical diversity, the use of a complex lexis and syntax due to the use of opaque technical terms (Perego 2019), the use of expressions of opinion and evaluation and the use of metaphors (Soler Gallego & Luque Colmenero 2018), and an increased use of similes and analogies for vision (Randaccio 2020). These features are in contrast with the general notion that Easy Language must be maximally perceptible and comprehensible to overcome communication barriers. More specifically, lexical diversity must be avoided, whereas monoreferentiality and the use of simple words, of a straightforward syntax and of unambiguous verbs must be favoured.

Two further considerations concerning Easy Language become relevant in relation to museum AD. It has been highlighted that Easy Language must be perceivable and comprehensible but must also be acceptable. In fact, it has been observed that acceptability plays a crucial role in the reading process and it is an important factor to overcome communication barriers. Consequently, if Easy Language is potentially stigmatising for the target groups, it might not be accepted and become a suitable means for communicative inclusion (Maa 2020: 205-217; Hansen-Schirra & Maaß 2020: 21). Stigma is a deeply discrediting attribute that defines a person as flawed, limited or undesirable, with whom positive identification is almost impossible: “The Easy Language target groups [...] are subject to stigmatisation, because a communication impairment is a stigma, even more so if a cognitive disability is the reason for this impairment” (Maaß 2020: 206). Museum AD texts in Easy Language may therefore trigger stigmatisation if there is “a disparity between text sender and recipients” (Hansen-Schirra & Maaß 2020: 21). Moreover, if these texts are simplified for people with communication impairments, they can be rejected by other potential recipients “who are not identical with, but close to the primary address group”, but also need accessible communication in order to participate (Hansen-Schirra & Maaß 2020: 21).

The issue of the aesthetic value and the diversity of language also concerns museum AD and Easy Language, as well as the acceptability issue. As noted, “linguistic beauty and poetic language are usually linked to linguistic diversity and go beyond the central linguistic inventory in lexis and grammar that is typical for EL” (Maaß & Garrido 2020: 147). However, “it is possible to use simplicity of language and expression in an aesthetic way and create EL texts with an aes-

thetic dimension if the AV product is designed as such” (ibid.: 147), i.e. if the AV product in Easy Language is conceived as fictional. Museum AD texts are not proper fictional texts, but they have also a creative and interpretative value, which somehow aligns them with fictional texts. The integration of Museum AD texts and Easy Language should therefore be planned from the beginning and not reworked at a later stage if an aesthetic dimension must be retained.

These observations, which seem to show an ‘uneasy relationship’ between museum AD and Easy Language, derive from a comparative analysis of the typical features of museum ADs and Easy Language but recent studies show a more positive view of this relationship (Seibel & Carlucci Martinez 2020; Perego 2020: 62-69). Art AD is believed to be the “AD sub-genre that lends itself better to different levels of simplification” (Perego: 2020: 62) and that “the idea of producing and adapting Easy Language art AD is actually promising” (ibid.: 62). From the simplification process of the original AD of St. Paul’s Cathedral in Easy Language, interesting considerations have been made on art AD and Easy Language. The difficulty to reduce the number of words of the original text, which was especially due to the need to reword and explain difficult notions and take out unnecessary information, demonstrates that “addition rather than subtraction of material was needed to make the text more comprehensible” (Perego 2020: 63). The complexity of the original text was adapted according to the standards of Inclusion Europe 2014, sentences were kept short and active language was used, as in the following example (Perego 2020: 63):

Original AD	Easy Language AD
This grand entrance is reserved for when visitors such as HM The Queen attend the cathedral.	Only visitors like Her Majesty The Queen use these doors.

The analysis thus revealed four major interrelated processes in the adaptation of the AD text: “repetition of the full referents, definitions of technical words, substitution of complex formal with basic informal vocabulary and the untying or eliminations of noun strings” (Perego 2020: 66). The repetition of nominal referents was also favoured over the use of pro-forms which would lower comprehensibility. English complex noun phrases were avoided to exploit the major informativity load of the noun groups. Finally, the English structure SVO was favoured even if its use would be at the detriment of the visual details: “Despite the abundance of visual details that the original text conveys for the benefit of the blind and the visually impaired end users [...], its adaptation into Easy Language shall do without most of these enriching details” (ibid.: 68). This study seems to leave the door open to further investigations on the integration of museum AD and Easy language, with an increasing focus on the gains and losses that the simplification process entails.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has first described how the definition of the museum has changed over the years and shown how museums became more and more accessible and inclusive from the 1970s onwards. The 1974 ICOM definition may be considered the turning point which brought about a re-definition of the museum space, its capacity of attraction for new visitors, and made accessibility a priority on its agenda. Relevant issues on accessibility neglected in earlier definitions started to come forward and it has been shown how these issues, concerning social, cultural and political barriers, were tightly intertwined. I have then argued that Museum AD, a verbal description that makes the visual elements of museum content accessible to the visually impaired, is a form of AD that has benefited from social and cultural changes in museums. The development of AD has gone hand in hand with the notion of accessibility, which has become a discipline in itself. Accessibility is now a 'proactive principle', promoting human rights for all, not only for those with disabilities. Museum AD and its features have also been taken into consideration and their analysis has centred around the question of whether a subjective or an objective description of the artwork should prevail in museum AD. The features and guidelines of Easy Language and Plain Language have then been discussed in the light of the most recent studies, which show how language and content simplification have been increasingly employed by political and public institutions. Easy and Plain Language were originally defined as language varieties of different national languages with reduced linguistic complexity, and they were traditionally meant for people with reading difficulties. Easy Language, however, has become a more inclusive term and grants accessible communication to other groups such as children, recent immigrants, other non-native language speakers, tourists, language learners and poor readers.

In the final part of the paper, although an under-investigated topic, it has been discussed whether Easy Language can be integrated into museum AD. The assumption that subjectivity/objectivity is a central issue in museum AD and that interpretation is very often unavoidable does not seem to testify to a 'successful encounter' between museum AD and Easy Language. On the one hand, Museum ADs are very often characterised by a high lexical diversity, the use of a more complex lexis and syntax; moreover, issues of perceptibility, aesthetic value and language diversity may represent a problem in the simplification process of museum AD texts. On the other hand, it has also been shown how Easy Language can be quite successfully integrated into museum AD and this leaves space for further investigation in the field.

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