

Audio description norms in Italy: state of the art and the case of “Senza Barriere”

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ABSTRACT

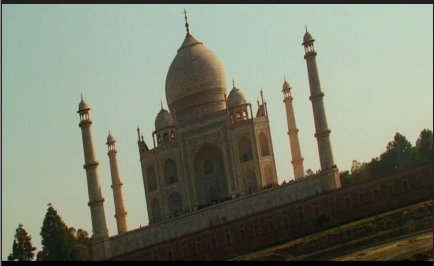

Audio description is a relatively new discipline, particularly in certain European countries, including Italy. Consequently, shared universal criteria that enable describers to rely on a reference point when preparing audio descriptions have long been lacking both within single countries and at a European level. Although the ADLAB project recently filled this gap providing EU guidelines, some virtuous and productive service providers had already managed to distill their best practice into important working documents. This paper focuses on the norms of the nonprofit social cooperative *Senza Barriere ONLUS*, aiming at a process of inclusion of the Italian blind population in the multimedia world. After defining audio description and offering a short overview on its status in Europe and in Italy, the paper will illustrate the history, scope and focus of the cooperative, its employees, its services, and its committed work in the production of professional audio films. The focus will then move on the audio description tutorial produced by *Senza Barriere* (Busarello & Sordo, 2011). This will offer a picture of SB's work and will contribute to placing Italy on the audio description map.

KEYWORDS

Audio description, blind, norms, Italy, accessibility.

1. WHAT IS AUDIO DESCRIPTION

Audio description is a form of audiovisual translation whereby the visual elements of a product (moving or still pictures - as in Fig. 1, but also captions and displays - as in Fig. 2) are translated into aural verbal elements (words) that enable the sight-impaired audience to access the product itself (Fryer, 2016; Remael *et al.*, 2015). To use Joel Snyder's (2007, 2014) words, it is the process whereby the visual is made verbal. Thanks to audio description, sight impaired audiences can fully access any audiovisual product aurally, i.e., perceiving it by the ear. This can happen to the full if the description manages to convey the visual image using "succinct, vivid and imaginative" words (Snyder, 2007: 100) that make what is visually appealing aurally appealing. The linguistic perfection and richness required to form a good audio description make some audio describers compare audio description to an art rather than a craft (Frazier, in Hardy, 2012). First and foremost, however, audio description is an accessibility service. While generating a feeling of independence, it offers the blind a valuable opportunity to access information and culture, to form a critical opinion and to confront with sighted people on the basis of an equivalent knowledge background. It plays an important role as a socialization instrument in the integration process that most visually impaired people (VIP) aspire to go through. Thanks to its multiple applications and to its socio-cultural function, audio description can truly facilitate media accessibility for all, opening the door to the prospect of real sight-impaired and sighted communication and interaction (see Perego, 2016 for a review).

	
Figure 1. Freeze frame from <i>Slumdog Millionaire</i> (D. Boyle, 2008)	Figure 2. Freeze frame from <i>The Hours</i> (S. Daldry, 2002)
AD: The dust clears, revealing the majestic, white marbled palace of the Taj Mahal in the distance.	AD: In Los Angeles in 1951, a removal van drives past a row of neat single-storey homes.

2. AUDIO DESCRIPTION IN ITALY

The surveys of the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat) show that the number of blind people in Italy is approximately 362.000, with one million and a half sight impaired people (updated data for end 2010; ADLAB, 2012; Arma, 2012). The Italian Blind Association has long been working to reduce the possible barriers to the integration of the blind in modern society. In spite of the association's multiple efforts, however, and in spite of the Italian Interministerial Commission which considers accessibility a right for all citizens (Valero, 2011), the realms of culture and entertainment are not yet fully accessible to the blind sector of the Italian population (ADLAB, 2012; Dell'Orto, 2012; Fedele, 2011; Marchesi, 2011; Poli, 2010).

2.1. AD ON TV

As regards Italian television, the public service remains the main provider - like in most European countries (Table 1).¹ To access the interactive double audio channel service for the blind, users need to select the audio channel assigned to audio descriptions, only available and active for few programmes on RAI channels. Indeed, state television only broadcasts old feature films, TV series and dramas, documentaries, or repeats of various programmes audio described on the radio. Up to date described material appears to be gold dust.

	Public broadcaster	Private broadcaster
Flanders	VRT	-
Germany	BR, Arte, NDR, WDR, MDR, ZDF, 3Sat, HR, RBB, SWR	-
Italy	RAI 1, 2, 3	-
Poland	TVP	TVN
Portugal	RTP	-
Spain	RTVE, Televisión Pública Andalucía, TP de Catalunya	Disney Channel Antena 3 Televisión
The UK	BBC	BSkyB, ITV, Ch. 4, S4C

Table 1: Broadcasters offering AD in Europe (Source: ADLAB, 2012: 21).

1 The private market does not seem to be interested in offering regular services for VIPs mainly because this would not be a profitable investment.

Audio descriptions are envisaged by the service contract between the Italian radio-television system and the Ministry of Communications and they form part of the planning to promote access to multimedia products for disabled persons. Besides directly incorporating ADs on TV channels, RAI makes audio descriptions available on the radio and for streaming. This service however proves to be troublesome because not all receivers are able to pick up the frequencies and the audio quality is often poor. Hearing audio descriptions on the Internet can improve the situation. The fact remains however that users have to synchronize two different sets simultaneously.

According to some sources, the number of AD hours offered in Italy is reasonable, even compared to the amount of AD offered in other European countries (Table 2): in winter, Rai provides more than 70 hours of television programmes with AD every week (roughly 14%) and up to 20% in the summer when the number of programmes broadcast live is lower and less recent television series are repeated (ADLAB, 2012; Arma, 2012; Díaz Cintas, Orero, Remael, 2007).

	AD provided since	Mins per year
Flanders	2012	780
Germany	1993	93.600-140.400
Italy	1997	218.400
Poland	2011	15,000
Portugal	2009	3120
Spain	1995	accurate figures not available

Table 2: Amount of AD provided on TV in the participating countries (Source: ADLAB, 2012: 25).

2.2. AD AT THE CINEMA

The situation at the cinema is also open to improvement. In Europe there are almost no cinemas offering AD on a regular basis (ADLAB, 2012). Special screenings with AD, all linked to single initiatives, cooperation with film festivals, film archives, and one-off projects, take place intermittently everywhere but the frequency of such screenings is far from sufficient, slight differences between countries notwithstanding. In Italy, the cinemas which offer AD normally offer mainstream films with a certain box-office success. No premiers are shown but cinemas show audio described reruns, which is in line with what is offered on TV. The main systems for synchronization and broadcast of audio descriptions

in cinemas is Dolby Screen Talk, thanks to which the blind audience who asks for headphones on entering can access the service (Marchesi, 2011). Scuccimarra (2010) stresses that we are dealing with relatively modest investments, in the order of 10-15,000 euros per room, which would benefit a potential audience of about one million eight hundred thousand blind and partially sighted people. The financial support for cinema audio description has, on the other hand, and at least for the moment, come from episodic and residual ministerial contributions and from the sensitivity of some local bodies (ADLAB, 2012; Valero, 2011 for further details). Although cinema AD remains an extremely rare event, recent advances are making the audiovisual experience, including cinema, more accessible and simple for a large number of users (cf. for instance details on the App Moviereading on <https://www.moviereading.com/>).

2.3. AD AND HOME VIDEO

Regarding the Home Video service, only recently has Italy taken a step forward. On March 2008 the first DVD with audio description was released and the number of DVDs with an integrated audio description commercially available is slowly increasing. With so scant an offer, the only response to the Home Video market for blind and partially sighted patrons, and the first regular service of audio description for films, was provided by a group of visually impaired volunteers who, in 1992, founded a nonprofit cooperative association named *Senza Barriere* (<http://www.senzabarriere.org/>). With its substantial number of available titles distributed on a hire basis to Italian blind and partially sighted persons since 2004, *Senza Barriere* promotes access to cultural heritage through audio descriptions and other services. In so doing it has been working to set a series of in-house norms and procedures which have resulted in the publication of a tutorial for would be audio describers. In the following paragraphs, after providing an overview of the cooperative's history, purpose, staff and services, we will give an account of the suggestions for good practice that have been collected and organized over the years (Busarello & Sordo, 2011), and that contributed to the creation of the ADLAB EU guidelines (Remael *et al.*, 2015; www.adlabproject.eu/).²

- 2 *Senza Barriere* participated actively in the ADLAB project as a non academic partner through the figure of its blind director Eraldo Busarello. Eraldo has always been involved in the study, planning and realisation of multimedial material giving access to the sensorially disadvantaged, in particular in the sector of audiodescription for the blind and partially sighted. He has a considerable experience both as a producer, tester and user of audiodescription.

3. SENZA BARRIERE³

3.1. HISTORY AND PURPOSE



Figure 3. *Senza Barriere* headquarters in Scurelle (Busarello, 2003; reprinted with permission)

Senza Barriere is a social nonprofit cooperative based in a village near Trento (Fig. 3). The cooperative was created in 1992 by a group of sight-impaired volunteers with the aim to produce and develop multimedia tools that could facilitate disabled people (especially the sight impaired) to access the technological advances of communication, and that could enhance their inclusion process in an ever growing multimodal society.

A considerable amount of the information that people receive every day is in fact audiovisual, thus potentially excluding sensorially disabled persons from culture, from active participation in society, and from many aspects of everyday life (Braun, 2008; Porta & Mosconi, 2012; Garofolo, 2016). *Senza Barriere* was born to serve as a reference point in Italy for both public bodies and private companies wishing to make provision for accessible audiovisual material thus taking into account the needs of the disabled users.

Accessibility, i.e., the ability to offer users equal opportunity to access services and use them regardless of potential disabilities (Henry, 2002; Porta & Mosconi, 2012), can be obtained in several ways: if we are dealing with sensorial disabili-

3 Information on *Senza Barriere* has been collected from its official website (<http://www.senzabarriere.org>).

ties, by incorporating accessible video menus on DVDs or internet web pages, by inserting audio descriptions any time a video track is present, by sticking Braille tags on multimedia product cases, and by creating or incorporating subtitle or sign language tracks in multimodal products for the deaf and hard-of-hearing audience. *Senza Barriere* caters for these types of services on a daily basis, and although sight impaired people are currently the main target portion of the population catered for, specific equipment to satisfy the deaf and hard of hearing's needs are also being looked into. At *Senza Barriere*, the fully equipped multimedia lab (Fig. 4) including a digital audio and video editing studio, a sound and video recording and mastering studio, a CD, CD-ROM and DVD conversion room, and studios for the editing and printing of high quality digital prints, are fully accessible to the disabled, who make up a large portion of the employees.⁴



Figure 4. Fully equipped multimedia lab at *Senza Barriere* (Busarello, 2003; reprinted with permission)

- 4 The multimedia lab also deals with copyright issues, especially as far as sound recording and motion pictures are concerned. Although the production of audio films is still the main focus of the cooperative, a selection of audio journals is also provided on a regular basis. In fact, buying autonomously informative material at a newsagent's is not yet possible for the blind population. Five audio journals are available. The topics covered range from general culture to accessible tourism, from science to medicine. Three journals provide local institutional news.

3.2. THE AUDIO-FILM LIBRARY

Soon after founding *Senza Barriere*, an audio-film library for Italian blind users was set up by the same group of volunteers in 2004. The idea of creating the first and only audio-film library for the Italian blind population satisfies the VIP's need to benefit autonomously from the overall cultural heritage offered by national and international cinematography, and it has the purpose of minimizing a major cultural inconvenience, namely the fact that films are visual media produced to be *watched*.

3.2.1. WHAT IS AN AUDIO FILM?

The audio-film library dispatches audio films, rather than audio described films, to its members. Technically, audio films and audio described films are different products. Audio described films include an extra audio track with an audio description interwoven with the film dialogues and soundtrack. They are typically distributed on DVDs with the image kept in place and descriptions added to the film as a whole. Audio films, on the other hand, are digital audio tracks not including any video tracks.⁵ The reason for producing audio films rather than audio described films is twofold and dictated by usability and production criteria. As for the former, audio files are considered easier to carry and to handle. As for the latter, removing the image enables the copyright procedures to be overcome at a faster speed. As a consequence, the audio description chain can be speeded up and the number of potential films to be described enlarged.

Although the two modes of audio visual transfer and the two final products (audio described films and audio films) do have some commonalities, they are not the same thing, especially as far as inclusion is concerned. Firstly, in the case of audio films, viewers with low vision cannot benefit from the added value of looking at the image from which they can extract information and gratification. Secondly, audio films do not offer social inclusion opportunities, as they are listened to in a solitary context. Traditional ADs included in films make it possible for VIPs to be more easily included in the social context, and it enables them to watch TV with other sighted people (Perego, 2016). Whether one is better than the other is not possible to say: both have advantages and disadvantages. The choice of *Senza Barriere* can certainly be enjoyed by VIPs and, being technically easier to be produced than traditional AD, could be used to make a greater number of audiovisual productions available in addition to regular AD, which in Italy is scarce.

5 They are recorded on a CD support and a .mp3 format for distribution.

The creation of an audio film is a complex procedure which requires the expertise of a wide array of professional figures. These range from audio describers who craft the final AD script to blind text editors who test the effectiveness of the product; from voice talents who deliver the description to technical staff who do the audio mixing; from copyright experts to skilled labour for product packaging and posting. In spite of the complexities involved in the creation of an audio film, at present *Senza Barriere* offers over 800 hand-list audio films.

Films are chosen following the requests of the blind members of the library, which receive major consideration. There is full awareness that some films are more suitable than others for the transposition of their visual track into words, but fixed selection criteria have not been established. Choosing the right product to be described is a controversial issue also outside *Senza Barriere*, one which to date has not been systematically discussed in existing literature (e.g. Braun & Orero, 2010). It is a fact that the visually impaired audience feels the need to access all types of audio visual products. The question arises however as to whether it is really possible to describe all audiovisual genres. Some scholars and practitioners strongly disagree and prefer to think it more convenient to avoid genres where action on screen is too fast or where the audio channel is too rich (e.g., news, talk shows, quiz shows). Such situations might prevent descriptions from fitting in well between dialogues, or they might overload listeners (ANEOR, 2005; Ofcom, 2000, 2010; Pini, 2005; Rai, Greening, Petré, 2010). Other scholars are more flexible, and recognize that different degrees of audiovisual complexity might make the AD writing process more challenging but not impossible (cf. the German and the French guidelines respectively in Dosch & Benecke, 2004, and in Morisset & Gonant, 2008; cf. also ADLAB guidelines: Remael *et al.*, 2015). As a matter of fact, in spite of genre, there are some critical issues in all films that would pose a challenge to any audio describer (e.g. dealing with intertextuality, textual cohesion, audio describing text on screen, gestures and facial expressions, etc.; Maszerowska *et al.*, 2014).

Senza Barriere currently makes a rough selection based on the perceived (vs. empirically measured) complexity of the screenplay, on the number of talking characters, on the balance between dialogues, images and silent moments. Horror, action, science fiction and fantasy films have been passed up with very few exceptions (Busarello, personal communication). The decisions are taken by the describers, who appear to follow an acknowledged line: according to some existing guidelines, knowing how to evaluate and choose the type of product to be described is claimed to be a requirement the audio describer has to satisfy (AENOR, 2005; ITC, 2000; Ofcom, 2000, 2010).

3.2.3. MEMBERSHIP AND LOANS

Although many national associations are involved in the production of audio books for VIPs, there has been a lack of engagement with film products and in general with audiovisual materials. This led *Senza Barriere* to fill the gap with its audio-film library in 2004. VIPs can join the association paying a modest fee per year as a contribution for the association management and administration. Paying the fee enables members to access the audio-film catalogue and to receive 24 free audio films per year, in 12 monthly dispatches. The catalogue includes a wide number of audio films, audio documentaries, audio TV series, audio theatre shows and also audio books.⁶ Besides accessing an audio catalogue, VIPs can listen to audio described film trailers on the web. Audio films are sent to the members' homes in a flat holder with the member's home address printed on a small tag. To return the CD, the blind person can turn the tag and mail it back escaping postal costs entirely (Fig. 5). The tag is double faced and has the association address on its reverse side. Members can draw on a delivery tracking service without paying extra charge. The tracking service enables them to check the status of the delivery of each of their packages thanks to a text message, a phone audio message or an email that will be sent to the member at the moment of the delivery.

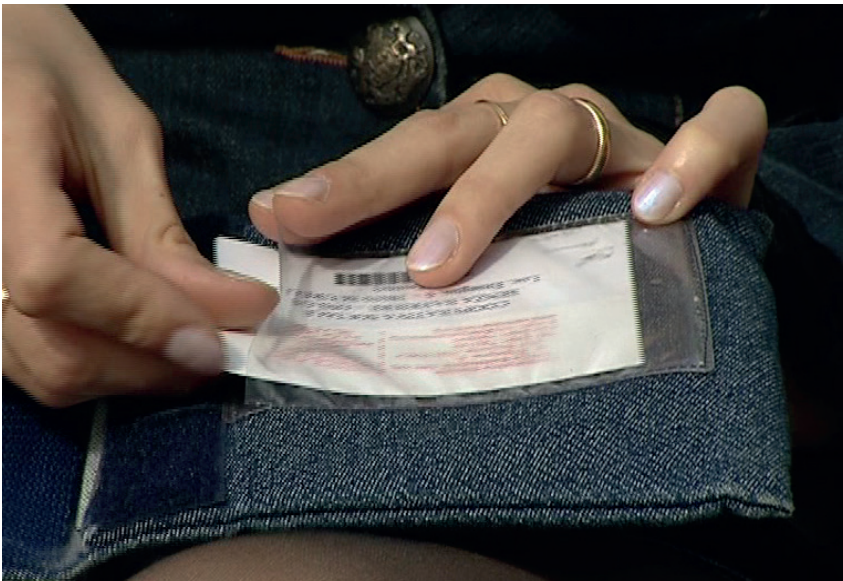


Figure 5. Double faced tag enabling the blind to easily return audio films (Busarello, 2003; reprinted with permission)

⁶ Around 60 to 80 audio films are produced every year, with the quantity depending on the complexity of the films. By the end of 2011 *Senza Barriere* had a catalogue of 388 titles covering films produced from January 2004 to December 2011. Creating a small section of audio films in English is an option that is under consideration.

3.2.4. EMPLOYEES

As we pointed out earlier, the creation of an audio film requires the joint effort of a number of professionals with different skills. Besides the technical staff, five audio describers currently work for *Senza Barriere* along with three voice talents.

Because fixed and exact recruitment criteria do not yet exist, audio describers are selected on the judgment of an in-house committee⁷ which evaluates the description of a few film excerpts. In short, applicants are considered suitable if their description complies with the in-house requirements (e.g. objectivity, smooth text, description focused on actions and delivered via short sentences in impeccable Italian). Fair evaluations however are difficult to make in such a fluid area, where fixed criteria are difficult to settle for products that cannot be faultless. The effectiveness of the descriptions is not an objectively measurable criterion, but it is one mainly linked to the idiosyncrasies of end-users, to their interpretation of reality, to their education, to their background, to their personal preferences (Busarello, personal communication; cf. Mälzer-Semlinger, 2012; Orero & Pujol, 2007). Candidates who wish to become audio describers are asked to audio describe short film excerpts taken from different film genres. The task is challenging and the final green light always comes from the blind community. Once they get the job, audio describers at *Senza Barriere* are paid according to the number of typewritten pages they produce, with wages that range from a minimum to a maximum price per page depending on the professional's experience. The major assets to take on the job are a perfect knowledge of Italian, excellent education, observation aptitude and ability to objectively portray details, optimum listening and team working skills.⁸

Once the audio description is ready and it has been checked by a committee of blind end-users (Perego & Benecke, 2014), an adequate voice talent has to be picked for the reading session and its recording, which culminates in its mixing and blending with the dialogues. At *Senza Barriere* writing and recording are not done by the same person as may happen in other countries or companies (e.g., Orero, 2007). To date, three voice talents are employed at *Senza Barriere* and each is specialized in describing specific audiovisual text types: humorous films and films for children; dramas, horror and crime films; light-hearted and romantic comedies. Extra in-house voice training is offered in the cooperative labs to professionals who wish to become audio narrators. Here they are taught

7 The committee includes two multimedia professionals, an expert with a degree in Italian language and literature, two blind people and the blind head of the cooperative.

8 This partly resembles the professional assets required to become a good film adapter in the dubbing industry (as in Perego & Pavesi, 2006) with the exception that the competition in the latter professional environment is not yet so strong and frustrating, and it partly overlaps with the skills typically required in other countries (e.g. Arma, 2012; Benecke, 2007; Braun, 2007; Rai, Greene, Petré, 2010; Orero, 2005, 2007; Snyder, 2007).

how to modulate their voice according to the feelings that are being described, and according to the film genre. Audio narrators at *Senza Barriere* are currently all men.⁹ Unlike audio describers, voice talents are paid a fixed wage per working day.

4. AUDIO DESCRIPTION GUIDELINES: IN EUROPE AND IN ITALY

In countries where audio description is provided, professionals have felt the need for guidelines to refer to, with the aim of unifying the various trends and practices (Remael & Vercauteren, 2007). Across Europe there are official guidelines (Spain, Ireland and the UK, cf. respectively AENOR, 2005; BCI, 2005; ITC, 2000 and Ofcom, 2006) or guidelines prepared by professionals (Germany and Italy, cf. respectively Dosch & Benecke, 2004; Busarello & Sordo, 2011), by associations (France and French Belgium; cf. respectively Morriset & Gonant, 2008; ABCD, 2009) and by academics (Flemish Belgium, Greece and Portugal; cf. respectively Remael, 2005; and Georgakopoulou, 2008; Neves, 2011) - today audio describers can also rely on ADLAB's guidelines (Remael et al., 2015). Outside Europe, countries with recognized guidelines include for instance the US (ADC, 2009), Australia (those proposed on the website of Media Access Australia are derived from English and American documents), Canada (Milligan, Fels, 2012, for Media Access Canada). Most guidelines regard the audio description of films though some also consider theater performances and museum exhibitions. Recently, the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) has conducted a comparative study of the main existing guidelines (Rai, Greening, Petré, 2010) to see what aspects are addressed in each, and to identify common elements, with the objective of achieving international standards. The ADLAB Project (www.adlab-project.eu)¹⁰ has adopted a similar methodology to produce EU guidelines. International guidelines can in fact have many advantages, e.g. to "ensure a consistent viewer experience of high quality, regardless of that viewer's location" (Vercauteren, 2007: 140), or to provide trainers with adequate tools for teaching

9 While female voices are still being looked for, male voices have been preferred because they seem to adapt more effectively when audio narrating a film. This, however, is an in-house speculation on a thorny issue, which is central yet not adequately researched upon. Although audience preferences on the narrator's voice have been considered by some scholars maintaining the importance of such parameter in AD reception studies (Chmiel, Mazur, 2012; see also AENOR, 2005; Dell'Orto, 2012), no final conclusions have been drawn.

10 ADLAB is a three-year (2011-2014) project on audiodescription financed by the European Union under the Lifelong Learning Programme with the aim of funding HEI courses to train AD specialists and to design reliable and consistent guidelines for the practice of AD. Thanks to the joint contribution of eight partners from six European countries (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Poland and Germany) the project aims at identifying the present inconsistencies in AD crafting methods and provision policies at European level. The University of Trieste is the Project's coordinator.

(Remael & Vercauteren, 2007). It is important that they are not too rigid and applied universally and indiscriminately across languages (Chmiel & Mazur, 2011; Mälzer-Semlinger, 2012; ARSAD, 2011): each country has its own needs, language specificities, stylistic idiosyncrasies, rhetorical preferences. ADLAB's EU guidelines respect such diversity and propose strategic recommendations to be used flexibly to solve AD problems. In spite of this recent tool which is the result of a blend of research and user test data, local documents still exist, and keep on being valuable complementary tools for practitioners.

In the following paragraphs, we will focus on the specific case of the tutorial for would be audio describers published by *Senza Barriere* (Busarello & Sordo, 2011). Far from being prescriptive, the tutorial reflects the need to systematize a process and it functions as a guide to initiate and facilitate prospective professionals. In fact, to date, AD training is not yet consistently provided (or provided at all) over EU (ADLAB PRO, 2017; Chmiel & Mazur, 2017). The tutorial also reflects the need for a flexible reference point - which has been respected in the ADLAB's guidelines. They include gaps and weaknesses along with good ideas and strong points. Going through them might be useful as a basis for comparison with other similar publications facing complex AD situations. Whether *Senza Barriere*'s practices adhere to or deviate from other Italian ones (e.g. RAI or Sub-Ti) cannot be assessed in this paper because access to other guidelines has not been offered.

5. SENZA BARRIERE: A TUTORIAL FOR WOULD BE AUDIO DESCRIBERS

The tutorial drafted in 2011 by Busarello and Sordo is an in-house guide outlining the basic rules to be followed by would be audio describers who wish to work at *Senza Barriere*. The recommendations encapsulate the preferred solutions of the film library users and they capture description tricks and rules of good practice acquired on the job by customary *Senza Barriere* describers. They are not recommendations that stem from academic and empirical research, and their purpose is to fix at least some basic in-house norms that novice can refer to when they start working for the cooperative. No training had ever been offered to new describers up until 2013, when *Senza Barriere* held its first and only training course to tutor prospective employees. So the tutorial has the main purpose of serving and orienting prospective employees, who could not count on a period of formal instruction. ¹¹The tutorial is divided into four sections (an *Introduction*, a *Guide to*

11 AD formal training is still a weak point across Europe, and it is currently the focus of ADLAB PRO, a three-year (2016-2019) project financed by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Programme, Key Action 2 – Strategic Partnerships, and the natural successor to ADLAB. ADLAB PRO has the primary aim to create free-access, flexible didactic materials for the creation and training of an extremely important professional figure with a key role in the field of media accessibility: the audio describer.

the use of the DVD which is included in the manual, a *Suggestions* section and the *Concluding Notes*) and it offers hints on blind user needs and instructions on how to face specific describing necessities. In the following paragraphs, we will tackle and condense the main issues repeatedly addressed in the volume and we will offer some examples selected from SB hand-listed ADs.

5.1. RESPECT SOUND

The importance of sound is stressed repeatedly from the introductory to the concluding section of the tutorial. Indeed, films are heard - and not seen - by an audience who are particularly sound-sensitive. The describer is therefore invited to become equally sensitive and respectful of film sounds and noises, and aware that voices are not the only meaningful layer of the film soundtrack. For this reason, exercising listening skills and learning how to preserve and prioritize relevant sound information (be it silence, music, a characters' sob or laugh) without being redundant is crucial. To this end, the tutorial invites trainees to develop their own sound sensitivity by forgetting the visual track and repeatedly listening to (vs. watching) the film they will have to audio describe, and by getting acquainted with examples of good practice.

5.2. LET THE BLIND INTERPRET

The emphasis on respecting sounds is based on the credo that whatever the blind audience can decipher on their own has to be there: it can't be covered, and it can't be made verbal. Instead of spoon feeding the blind audience, the audio description should give them the chance to capture and interpret the relevant and interpretable sound details. Only in this way can the blind user resort to his senses, judgment and interpretative skills, form assumptions that will be gradually confirmed, construct his emotions and build up a mental model of each situation - just like the sighted viewer does. Although this is known and it has been tackled both in existing guidelines (Rai *et al.*, 2010, Remael *et al.*, 2015) and in academic literature (Braun, 2007; Snyder, 2007), it is important to see it emphasized also in this tutorial in the attempt to warn practitioners and to stay away from easily avoidable slip-ups.

5.3. PRIORITIZE ACTION

Sound is important, but audio films have the aim of making the visual verbal, that is to say, of describing what takes place on screen. When it comes to describing visual elements, actions seem to have priority over details on characters and

setting, because actions are “necessary to understand the film plot” (Sordo & Busarello, 2011: 25) and to deliver the storyline (Busarello, 6th March 2012) This is obvious in the following example taken from the AD of *Big deal on Madonna street* (*I soliti ignoti*, M. Monicelli, 1958, Italy).

Sta fumando, seduto sulla bici. Quando vede che un impiegato si appresta a manovrare la serranda, scatta in piedi, appoggia il velocipede al muro, estrae dalla giacca una pistola e la impugna nascondendola sotto un giornale piegato a metà. Attraversa la strada frettolosamente, guardandosi intorno, e si infila nell’ufficio passando accanto all’uomo intento a liberare la saracinesca incastrata.¹²

If time permits, however, as is often the case in opening film scenes, the describer can give bonus details whilst focusing on action, as in the following example taken from the Italian version with audio description of the Chinese drama *Not one less* (Z. Yimou, 1999).

Una ragazza con una grande coperta arrotolata e portata a tracolla ed un uomo con in mano una borsa si avvicinano ad un villaggio cinese fatto di poche piccole case diroccate, poste ai lati di una strada sconnessa e polverosa. Colline verdi circondano il povero abitato. Sul loro cammino incrociano soltanto un asino.¹³

The way information should be organized in audio descriptions still remains an open question also in literature, where most are aware that final rigid answers cannot be given due to the inexact nature of such practice and to the subjective nature of every decision-making process (Arma, 2012; Hycks, 2006; Vercauteren, 2007). Ultimately, time dictates priorities, and priorities can tip over (Benecke, 2007, Braun, 2007; Posados, 2010), making it difficult to set a fixed vital-to-extra pattern that describers can always rely on.

5.4. THE SYNCHRONY DISPUTE

Most forms of audiovisual translation (e.g. dubbing and subtitling) need to be perfectly congruent with the original text to be considered acceptable and to be fully enjoyed and processed. Ideally, audio description should be synchronous with on-screen scenes as well, especially for the sake of low vision users, who

- 12 He is smoking, sitting on a bicycle. When he sees that an employee is going to operate the shutter, he springs to his feet, leaning the bike against the wall. He pulls a gun from his jacket and he holds it hiding it under a newspaper folded in half. He crosses the road hastily, looking around, and slips in the office, passing beside the man intent to release the jammed shutter.
- 13 A girl with a big blanket rolled up and carried slung over her shoulder and a man holding a bag get close to a Chinese village made up of a few small dilapidated houses, on either side of a bumpy and dusty street. Green hills surround the poor village. On their way they only bump into a donkey.

also rely on and enjoy what they perceive visually (Rai *et al.*, 2010; Dosh and Benecke, 2004; ITC, 2000; Ofcom, 2000, 2010). In some cases, however, asynchrony is accepted – there might be more immediate priorities. In the case of SB, the audio film format made available allows great flexibility: audio films have no visual track (§ 3.2.1) which might constrain the describer. SB describers are therefore free to anticipate or lag behind pieces of information as long as audio descriptions do not clash with sound information. Mastering the whole film plot enables describers to dose out information in such a way as not to spoil the film experience whilst having to make them precede, co-occur or follow the visuals.

5.5. CINEMATIC LANGUAGE

AD guidelines tend to claim that overall, technical terms are not welcome (cf. Rai *et al.*, 2010 and Perego, 2014 for a review). In particular, cinema meta-language (e.g. camera range and viewpoints, camera angles and movement, the arrangement of shots in a structured film sequence and the way in which shots are linked) is considered uninteresting and unnecessary, too complex and taxing. Although this stance goes against recent findings telling us that explicit reference to cinematic language is actually appreciated (Fryer, 2010; Fryer & Freeman, 2012) and although this does not take into account the preferences of all end-users, *Senza Barriere* seems to remain extremely inflexible about this point. To avoid what are considered (short) inaccessible technicalities, a (longer) more-user-friendly rephrasing is preferred. Flashbacks, for instance, are made explicit resorting to expressions such as ... *he/she lingers over a cup of coffee as memories come to the surface* or ...*the rural vision is a fragment of a memory*. Whether this restriction is wisely applicable to all film genres remains an open issue.

5.6. AUDIO SUBTITLING

The tutorial includes a hint to audio subtitling (e.g. Braun and Orero, 2010), which is interesting because Italy is a dubbing country, where the use of subtitles is limited. Some multilingual films however need it to be there. When subtitles are used in multilingual dubbed products to make foreign dialogues which have not been dubbed accessible, *Senza Barriere*'s policy is to summarize them, especially when they include turns uttered by more than one speaker, and to deliver the compressed translation in the form of indirect speech. A recent example that illustrates SB's strategy is the following. The Italian dubbed version of *Inglourious basterds* (Q. Tarantino, 2008) preserves the French dialogues and it translates them via subtitles (Fig. 6). The opening scene of the film features SS Colonel Hans Landa getting out of a Nazi car and approaching French dairy farmer Perrier La

Padite. The two men start talking in French and the SB audio description at this stage is the following:

Il colonnello domanda se è quella la proprietà di Perrier La Padite. Il francese risponde affermativamente. L'ufficiale si presenta come Hans Landa delle Esse-Esse e gli stringe la mano. L'uomo chiede in cosa può essergli utile. Il tedesco manifesta il desiderio di essere invitato in casa per parlare con lui. Il contadino acconsente e lo esorta a precederlo.¹⁴



Figure 6. Still taken from the commercially released Italian dubbed version of *Inglourious basterds*. The French dialogues have been maintained and translated via subtitles.

Certainly other ways of overcoming the problems posed by written text on screen are available and today each company follows their in-house rules (Remael, 2012). Indirect speech seems quite effective, it reduces the number of extra voices and therefore of confusion, and it gives smoothness to the whole described film.

5.7. STYLE AND REGISTER

A further emphasized point pertains to the style and the register of the description, which should be in keeping with the film genre being described. A very formal and stylized description would be at odds with a film for children and a shrill, squeaky voice would be unsuitable to describe a drama. When the tutorial refers to the importance of delivering “harmonic descriptions” (p. 4), a reference is being made to both the ability of the describer to adapt language to its final context of use and to the ability of the voice talent to please the user’s ear by adjusting to the film mood. Overall, harmonic descriptions will be based on a correct film

14 The Colonel asks whether that is the property of Perrier La Padite. The Frenchman replies affirmatively. The officer introduces himself as Hans Landa of the SS, and he shakes his hand. The man asks what he can do for him. The German indicates that he wishes to be invited into the house to talk to him. The farmer agrees and he urges him to precede him.

reading (Orero, 2012), which at times makes describers depart from fixed describing rules (Mälzer-Semlinger, 2012), and on the skills of the voice talent. The latter can be enhanced (and the whole recording process can be speeded up) by the describer's attention to the performability of the description (Bassnett, 2000; Espasa, 2000; Perego and Pavesi, 2006).

5.8. FILM CREDITS INFO

Finally, practical suggestions and in-house rules on the location of specific film credits information (e.g. the actors appearing in the film, the director(s), the screenwriters, the companies producing and distributing the film, the artistic and technical crew, the title of the film) are given. Most of the credits are encapsulated at the beginning of the audio film (as for instance in ITC, 2000). This is however typically preceded by a very short audio track giving information on the audio film library membership obligations, and listing the audio film production crew.¹⁵ This is followed by a succinct audio version of the film opening credits along with the logo description, after which the actual film description begins. Last but not least, the names of the actors are given along with the names of the associated character and of the dubbing actor.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper focused on a in-house audio description tutorial and on a relatively new niche realty which seems to cater for most of the Home Video needs of Italian blind users. *Senza Barriere* has been offering an invaluable service (free delivery of audio films) for years now. The number of described films is increasing and the need to set rules for new describers has led the cooperative to release an in-house tutorial. Since 2011 many things have happened in the academic and professional world. In this paper an analysis of the tutorial has been offered along with some hints to the organizational policy of a singular service provider. Besides shedding light on the Italian situation and on a further important set of AD rules, the paper show where Italy stands today as far as AD is concerned and it offers the description of a unique and nonstandard situation – one which resorts to audio films vs. audio described films, and one which manages to freely and

15 For instance: “The audio film library for the Italian blind, a nonprofit activity of the social cooperative *Senza Barriere* ONLUS, is an audio film loan service meant exclusively for the blind and sight-impaired subscribed to the audio film library in compliance with the undersigned regulation. Duplication and broadcasting are strictly prohibited. Director of the audio film library: Eraldo Busarello. Coordination for audio production: Anna Cassol. Descriptive text: Fabio Sordo. Audio engineer/expert: Alessandro Moranduzzo. Audio testing: Nadia Costa. Voice talent: Claudio Quinzani” (our translation).

regularly deliver described material to a large community of VIPs – that other countries might wish to consider. Although AD guidelines remain an important issue linked to the production of effective ADs, adequate training and a more comprehensive idea of what accessibility involves are now being investigated, knowing local best practices remains an important duty of the academic and professional community as well as a useful instrument for comparison.

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