

Persons with visual impairment and functions of multimodal texts: Development of a functional model of audio description

Can a person with blindness watch a comedy and laugh when a sighted person is laughing? Can they be just as sacred as their sighted companion when watching a horror film? Can they watch a cooking show and then recreate the presented recipes in the comfort of their own kitchens? The aim of the project is to develop a functional model of audio description (AD), thanks to which the answer to the above questions will be a 'yes'.

Audio description is an accessibility service whose primary purpose is to make multimodal content (such as a film, a theatre performance or a sports event) accessible to persons with blindness and low vision. AD is considered to be a type of translation, whereby images are translated into words. It is, however, a challenging process, as images in a complex multimodal text (such as a film) that are perceived holistically by the sighted viewer need to be replaced with linear description. The description ought to be concise enough to fit into the often short pauses between dialogues. What is more, AD must be properly integrated with the existing soundtrack so that the blind viewer can easily follow the description, but also 'see' it their mind's eye. So the two fundamental questions in AD are what to describe and how to do it.

The goal of the project is to create an innovative comprehensive model of AD that takes into account, among other things, the functions of multimodal texts, the purpose of AD in a specific context and the needs and expectations of persons with visual impairment. The model, which is inspired by existing functional approaches to translation, is meant to be a theoretical conceptualisation on the one hand, and a practical tool for determining what and how to describe, depending on the type and genre of the described text (a drama, a comedy, a reality show, a commercial, etc.). So first, an original classification of multimodal text types and genres will be created, which will be followed by a multifaceted framework for source text analysis (this will be the 'what to describe' part). The analysis will serve the purpose of identifying the functional priorities in a given source text, which will then impact the selection of AD strategies (this will be the 'how to describe' part). In order to create the model, relevant theoretical concepts will be analysed, various film and TV genres with AD (in Polish and English) reviewed and selected AD tracks transcribed. The different solutions will be then compared and critically assessed and the results will be incorporated into the model.

The functional model will significantly advance knowledge in the area of audio description, both in terms of research and practice. On the one hand, it will be a general theory that can be applied to all AD types, and on the other, it will be a practical tool that can be used in the teaching and practice of AD. It will also expand the borders of translation studies as a discipline by 'dissecting' AD as a translation process. Ultimately – and perhaps most importantly – the project will have a positive social impact. It is expected that by disseminating its results the social awareness of making multimodal content accessible to persons with sight loss will increase, their needs will be better understood and a tool for training prospective audio describers provided. So the project will contribute 'a brick' to building an inclusive society, where persons with visual impairment will be able to fully engage in culture and the social life.