

Chapter 7

Quality Assessment in Audio Description: Lessons Learned From Interpreting

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ABSTRACT

Audio description (AD) is one of the younger modes of translation. It shares many similarities with interpreting, although AD users have specific needs because they are blind or partially sighted. As quality is of concern in both fields, this chapter explores the overlaps to see what can be learned for AD from research already carried out in interpreting. Macro and micro criteria suggested for each discipline are compared, and describer competencies are discussed in the context of AdlabPRO, a European research project that seeks to define the professional profile of an audio describer and develop training materials and courses. The chapter concludes that assessment protocols and rating scales developed for interpreting might be adopted for AD, after appropriate adaptation to accommodate areas where the fit is incomplete. These include synchrony and the need for the AD to be considered, not in isolation, but in relation to the existing audio elements of the source text (ST).

INTRODUCTION

Audio description (AD) is one of the access modes of audiovisual translation (AVT), a verbal commentary that makes visual information accessible to people who cannot perceive it unaided—principally people who are blind or partially sighted. Audio describers work in a range of settings, describing everything from recorded media (e.g., film and television) to live events such as theatre, opera, dance, and sport. Describers in live settings could be thought to perform a similar role to simultaneous interpreters (i.e., oral translation delivered live), and require many of the same competencies (Iglesias Fernández, Martínez Martínez, & Chica Núñez, 2015).

Interpreting as a discipline as well as a profession encompasses a broad range of activities (as cited in Pöhhacker, 2016). As Kohn and Kalina express it (1996, p.118), “The interpreter listens to the speaker’s

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source discourse and produces a corresponding target discourse which will enable the target discourse audience to understand what the speaker meant.” For audiovisual texts, the audio describer watches the source product and produces a corresponding spoken discourse which will enable the target audience to understand the full message of the original. This chapter explores commonalities between AD and simultaneous interpreting, with particular regard to quality assurance and assessment. As Iglesias Fernández and her colleagues suggest (2015, p.75), “it seems only natural to investigate what quality assessment research into interpreting can teach us about quality reception in AD.” Although there are similarities between the quality of the end product (the description) and the skills and competencies of the translator (the describer), in that the former is dependent on the latter, this chapter argues that a distinction must be drawn between ways of assessing the quality of the description and assessing the skills and competencies of the describer, such that the describer has the skills needed to meet established standards. Pöchhacker (2001) points out that interpreting quality assessment for trainees is essentially different from professional assessment, because of its guiding function. This is discussed in the context of ADLAB PRO, a three-year research project financed by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Programme Key Action 2 – Strategic Partnerships. The project aims to define the profile of the professional audio describer, to identify current training routes and future training needs, and to create open-access training materials. The ADLAB PRO partners intend the resulting training course to be accredited using the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) or The European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVETS), so that the quality of the course and its graduates may be recognised throughout Europe. One of the intellectual outputs of the project is a questionnaire (IO1, 2017a) that has provided a snapshot of the current training situation. Compiled by Agnieszka Chmiel and Iwona Mazur from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland, the questionnaire sampled 192 extant AD courses across Europe, comprising 93 academic courses, and 99 non-academic courses. In this chapter, criteria for quality assessment in interpreter training will be compared with criteria for assessing trainee describers. The complexities of creating a numerical weighting system are discussed, and a solution proposed in the form of assessment sheets (contained in the appendix).

BACKGROUND

Gouadec (2010, p. 270) argues, “Quality in translation is both the quality of an end-product (the translated material) and the quality of the transaction (the service provided).” He acknowledges that only the quality of the service-provision transaction has been benchmarked through a number of standards, the best known being EN 15038— a quality standard specifically written for the translation industry. “The basic idea is that the quality of the transaction is ‘good’ if and when both the provider and providee are satisfied with the translation provision process and, of course, its result” (Gouadec 2010, p. 270). This fits happily with the marketing model that Ingrid Kurz (1989, 1993, 2001) has applied in relation to quality in conference interpreting, to which the discussion will turn below. Yet, as observed above, there is a third aspect of quality to consider: namely, the skills and performance of the trainee whose work needs to be assessed for pedagogical purposes.

Creating a course implies understanding the quality of the end product, so that the ingredients included in the course will produce learners capable of producing such quality. For a course to deliver high-quality training, those creating the course must understand the skills and competencies necessary to produce a quality product.

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