

Audio-Description

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Article abstract

This paper deals mainly with two aspects of audio-description: the development of this mode of language transfer and the main steps in the preparation of an audio-description.

Audio-Description

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RÉSUMÉ

L'audio-description est présentée principalement selon deux axes : son développement récent et les principales étapes de réalisation de ce mode de transfert linguistique.

ABSTRACT

This paper deals mainly with two aspects of audio-description: the development of this mode of language transfer and the main steps in the preparation of an audio-description.

MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

audio-description, blind and visually-impaired people, German TV channels, recording

1. The development of Audio-Description

Audio-description is the technique used for making theatre, movies and TV programmes accessible to blind and visually impaired people: an additional narration describes the action, body language, facial expressions, scenery and costumes. The description fits in between the dialogue and does not interfere with important sound and music effects.

Audio-description is as old as sighted people telling visually impaired people about visual events happening in the world around them. As a formalised means of enhancing entertainment for blind and partially-sighted, it is generally thought to have begun at the beginning of the 80's, in different theatres. Nowadays, cinema and television too are benefiting from audio-description, mainly in the United States, in several European countries and in Japan.

The technique was developed in the seventies in the USA. Today, for example, the Descriptive Video Service in Boston produces audio-description for video and DVD and for television channels like PBS, Turner Classic Movie, CBS and Fox. Regulations force the four top TV networks to offer 50 hours per calendar quarter of programmes with audio-description. In the United Kingdom, the Royal National Institute for the Blind produces descriptive narration for videos. Since 2001 all TV broadcasters in the UK must provide audio-description for 4% of their programmes. The legislation foresees an increase to 10% by 2010. In France, a mobile movie service is offered by the National Blind Association; described TV programmes are also broadcast by Arte, the bilingual Franco-German channel.

In Germany, the first movie was described in 1989 and presented in a cinema (*Hear no evil see no evil*), followed by two similar projects in 1990 and 1992. The first film on TV was shown in 1993 by ZDF. It was financed by the German Association for the Blind. The next years saw only one or two films a year on public television ZDF. In 1995 private broadcaster Pro7 offered a TV-movie with audio-description

not on TV, but on three public presentations of the film which was the story of a blind witness of a murder.

Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR) is the public radio and TV broadcaster in Bavaria, providing five radio and two TV channels. As part of the German ARD-network, BR also delivers programmes for TV channels like Das Erste (Germany First Channel), 3Sat, Arte, Kinderkanal (children's programme) and Phenix. In 1997, BR was the first broadcaster in Germany to start a self-financed regular audio-description programme. Since then Bayerischer Rundfunk has changed more than 60 movies plus a TV series, a few TV movies and some documentaries into "Hörfilme" (the name audio-described programmes was given in Germany). In 2001 more than 40 BR-made programmes were aired on German television. This is about 20% of the total number of described movies in that year. BR has received several awards for its work on audio-description. In March 2002 it was awarded the "Deutscher Hörfilmpreis" by the German Association for the Blind.

In co-operation with the German and the Bavarian Association for the Blind, BR runs training and continuing training seminars and courses for audio-description authors in order to guarantee high-quality standards in this new audiovisual language field. Bayerischer Rundfunk has also given help to other broadcasters, such as Arte, NDR, WDR and MDR, in developing their own audio-described programmes. The films shown in ZDF and SWR are produced by "Deutsche Hörfilm GmbH," which also produces descriptive narration for video and DVD.

2. The way audio-description is done

BR is today the only TV station in Germany with a full audio-description editor. I already started with audio-description in 1989 when the first movie was described in Germany. I worked as an audio-description author and narrator for ZDF and Pro7 and, since 1997, for BR. I train authors, revise audio-descriptions and direct the narrating and sound mixing process.

The Description is written by a team of three, one of them is blind. This reflects the idea that two people who watch the same scene will not always see the same things, so as a team they can monitor and complement one another. The blind member of the group will indicate where he needs the description and how much and what kind of information is necessary. This text will then be revised at BR by myself and my blind colleague Elmar Dosch. Finally, it is recorded with the narrator and mixed into the film soundtrack.

In other words, we can say there are several steps in the preparation of an audio-description:

a) Choosing suitable programme and viewing it. Most visually impaired people like to watch the same sort of programmes as the sighted audience, with documentaries, soaps drama, movies...However, not all highly rated programmes are suitable for audio-description. Some programmes are too fast moving; some have tightly-worded almost continuous scripts, like news, quiz programmes and game shows. Some films require almost continuous description and this can prove tiring to listen to. In December 2002, TV movies like *Tatort: Kleine Diebe*, and feature-length films like *Moonstruck*, *In and Out*, *A pocketful of Miracles* were audio-described on ARD (Das Erste) and on BR.

b) Preparing a draft script. The audio-describer should take into account that individuals seek different levels of detail and content from description and these differences are most noticeable with age and degree of visual impairment. The experience of people whose visual disability has occurred through a progressive degeneration of sight, accompanied by a visual memory, is quite different from those who were born without sight and who have no visual memory to draw upon.

c) Reviewing the script which can be rehearsed live in order to save recording time.

d) Adjusting the programme sound level (the majority of visually impaired people are likely to suffer difficulty in comprehending speech in the presence of background sounds) and recording the description. Recording here requires concentration, and attention to delivery as any voice over. Good audio-description should be unobtrusive and neutral, but not lifeless or monotonous. The voice should not draw attention to it but should be a coherent element of the description. Its purpose is to paint pictures, convey plot, scenery and action. Finally, it is important to listen back to the recording, to ensure that each description has been recorded without mistakes, omissions or imperfect delivery.

REFERENCE

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