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Audiovisual translation and media accessibility:
new languages, new forms of transfer

Abstract

This article explores the evolution of audiovisual translation (AVT) and media accessibility research and practice, first of all by locating them within the framework of Translation Studies. After focusing on some of the main tenets that have guided the development of the mother discipline over the past decades, an exploration of the expanding roads taken by audiovisual translation, especially since the inception of media accessibility research, leads us to reflect on the changing nature of both the languages and the translational processes at the core of both. A brief overview of the results obtained from a questionnaire on the education background and the skills required of accessibility professionals across Europe today reinstates the centrality of linguistic and translational competence, in old and new forms. The final section of the chapter brings into the spotlight a series of examples from the practice of accessibility to media and live events today, pinpointing the increasingly diverse and rich nature of communicative codes and transfer strategies involved.

1. *Introduction*

Translation Studies (TS) is a relatively young discipline. Its official name and the definition of its nature as a field of research are linked, as is known, to a 1972 conference held in Copenhagen and to the key defining paper delivered on that occasion by the Dutch-based, US scholar James S. Holmes, i.e., "The Name and Nature of Translation Studies" (1988). It goes without saying that inquiries and commentaries on translation, its nature and its study had been circulating worldwide prior to that date and that they go back in history at least as far as the ancient European empires.

Research on audiovisual translation, a sub-field of Translation Studies (TS), emerged steadily less than two decades later, at the very beginning of the Nineties. Initially animated by what were mainly prescriptive contributions and practice reports (Pérez-González 2014), they have since developed along many avenues, to encompass the needs of constantly changing audiences.

The inclusion of media accessibility research in audiovisual translation (AVT) that occurred at the turn of the century led to a momentous evolution in this growing sub-field of TS: research on access to media and live events brought about the imperative need to explore the realm of disability from a socio-cultural, psychological, anthropological perspective, thus ushering in interdisciplinarity. Moreover, as media accessibility research entered AVT and rapidly gained momentum, it focused more attention on the needs of persons with disabilities and their rights to equal access to entertainment and culture in all their forms. All things considered, media accessibility research has led AVT to attain new heights, a greater disciplinary complexity and wider recognition by scholars in other fields. The latter is a pivotal change for a young and growing field. Over time, as we shall see in more detail in the following sections, media accessibility as part of AVT research has witnessed major structural and conceptual developments, also as a reflection of societal and cultural changes. Among them is a shift from the concept of disability to that of diversity, from equality to equity and from traditional notions of access (Gosset et al. 2009) to more open, proactive visions of inclusion and universal design for culture and media (Di Giovanni 2022).

This article offers an overview of the evolution of Translation Studies, audiovisual translation and media accessibility, keeping an eye on the shifting centrality of languages and translation practices of yesterday and today. Since the expansion of all three areas of research – especially media accessibility – has occasionally diverted attention from the pivotal role played by languages and translation processes to privilege the sociological, psychological and clinical dimension. Our aim is to trace this expansion, in conjunction with the very notions of language and translation.

Starting from an overview of the development of Translation Studies as the 'mother' discipline, along with the very notion of translation within it, we will move on to focus on audiovisual translation and the inception of media accessibility research, with all the changes this has brought about in the past 20 years. The final sections of this article will concentrate on media accessibility,

arguably the area of research where the centrality of languages and translation has occasionally been lost.

2. *Translation studies and audiovisual translation, yesterday and today*

As Luis Pérez-González put it (2019), over the past few years we have witnessed the proliferation of articles and books on Translation Studies that start off by highlighting the vitality and the growing expansion of the discipline. Repetitive though such statements may occasionally appear, they bear witness to a real and steady development that can be related to a number of factors. First of all, TS is still a young discipline and so are its sub-fields, including AVT. This explains the increasing volume of research generated over the past few decades. Secondly, the ever-growing presence of intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic translation, as well as the evolution of modes of distribution and reception, have drawn the attention of critics and scholars worldwide.

Although the study of translation finds its contemporary origins in comparative stylistics and linguistics (see, for instance, the work of Jean Paul Vinay and Jean Dalbernet, but also John Cunnison Catford, in the mid Fifties and Sixties of the past century), it has quickly come to encompass broader perspectives. It has grounded its theoretical and methodological developments in social and cultural settings since the early days, thus differentiating itself from linguistic studies. Indeed, distinguished Translation Studies scholars that were active in the early 1980s and 1990s spelled out the need for translation to be studied as a socially and culturally-determined act. For example, Gideon Toury, as is known, drew attention to translation as a norm-governed activity and to the fact that norms are socially determined and thus subject to change like societies themselves (1978/1995, 169). Similarly, a famous quote by Belgian theorist André Lefevere reminds us that "translations are not made in a vacuum. Translations function in a given culture at a given time" (1992, 14).

In several countries outside Europe, translation scholars and practitioners like the late Indian intellectual Sujit Mukherjee provided insightful analyses of the great relevance of translational activities in postcolonial settings, where mutating relations among languages were seen as a reflection of mutating power relations between countries and cultures. Mukherjee, a very prolific translator himself, also lucidly emphasized the importance of languages and transla-

tions to ensure diversity. Today, this is also one of the guiding principles for the practice of and research on accessibility:

Language is one of our greatest wealths, and translation enables us to continue to speak, write or read to each other. In such diversity is our security, durability and unity (Mukherjee 2004, 52).

Also, in the first decade of this century, many scholars emphasized that the roots of all translational activities lie in society. Among them, great relevance is given to the work of Maria Tymoczko, who stated that,

As a representation, translation offers an image or likeness of another thing. It exhibits that thing in a tangible manner. A representation has a formal standing in society, and translations must be considered in this light (2007, 112).

Tymoczko uses "superordinate concepts" (Ibid., 39) such as representation, transmission and transculturation to define the shifting nature of translation as an activity and an object of study, and she also recalls that change, difference and otherness are at the core of any inquiry into this broad subject area, where the very definition of language is shifting.

Ten years later, Luc Van Doorslaer acknowledged the rapid pace at which Translation Studies had been evolving and looked back at almost fifty years of history of the discipline to highlight precisely how the scope of the latter had been broadening, following the dynamic variations imposed by a changing world. Moreover, Van Doorslaer observed that increased levels of interdisciplinarity in research on translation, as well as the very broadening of the notion itself, have taken us away from traditional notions of linguistic transfer:

The historiography of the discipline mostly emphasizes the importance of those scholars in Translation Studies who, for almost four decades, have been working on broadening the boundaries of both the concept and the discipline.

In general, the broadening tendencies illustrate a gradual development from a retrospective focus on non-change to an approach that privileges dynamics and variation via expanding types of change, such as modal, cultural, media-related, social, and technological. The greater interdisciplinarity of TS raises the question of whether TS is better off with a traditional concept that focuses on interlingual replacement, or whether it might be better served by a broader concept that encompasses new developments and extensions under the umbrella of TS (2018, 220).

In audiovisual translation research, a first stage of maturity was reached as a consequence of the steady process of inclusion of media accessibility in the first decade of this century. This inclusion, as anticipated, was so powerful as to contribute further to a dilution of the notion of translation, marginalizing the role of verbal languages and interlingual transfer to privilege studies of an interdisciplinary nature, often with a psychological or sociological slant, where the role of verbal languages was minor if present at all. A more recent development in media accessibility research was determined by changes in international legislation, but also through the provision of access services throughout Europe and beyond. This has led scholars (Neves 2020; Di Giovanni 2020 and 2022) to expand the notion of access to participatory, inclusive ways, while also noting that translation is, in itself, a tool aimed to provide access. As Neves puts it,

It is an established fact that translation – in all its forms – is all about accessibility. Since translation provides access to different languages, cultures, sign systems and codes, translation can and should be seen as a form of access.

With media accessibility becoming more and more prominent, and translation acknowledging its function to provide access, the focus has, for some time, shifted away from linguistic concepts and analyses (2020, 315).

Seeing translation in broader terms and highlighting its accessibility function has contributed, as Neves puts it, to shifting the focus away from linguistic notions and analyses. Indeed, if ever we were to adopt 'accessibility' as an overarching term to (re)define the study of translation for media and live events, we would run the risk of further shifting the emphasis away from languages and linguistic acts, to privilege the function of barrier-removal and opening up access. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that audiovisual translation today requires a broader definition that can better encompass the increasingly diverse forms of communication and transfer that we need and encounter in our daily lives and that are bound to grow. The right solution seems to lie not so much in deleting or marginalizing the concept of translation, but rather in broadening the perspective on languages, their presence, and their interaction in audiovisual media. Mary Carroll and Aline Remael seem to interpret precisely this viewpoint:

We see translation as fundamentally semiotic and central to the way in which humans communicate and make sense of the world. Meaning is generated as we interpret signs and translate them into other signs, whether they be linguistic, aural, visual, olfactory or haptic (2022, 4).

As a matter of fact, despite the turns and evolutions described above in relation to Translation Studies, AVT and media accessibility research, languages and language transfers have always remained central, both in practice and research. New signs, new codes and new textualities, as well as increasingly hybrid, multimodal forms of communication, have emerged in order to cater to an ever-changing, multimedia landscape whose fast evolution we witness every day. The next sections are centered on accessibility to media and live events, with a focus on the role of old and new languages and translations from a practical and theoretical viewpoint.

3. *Media accessibility professionals: linguistic and translational skills*

Within the framework of a wide-ranging, international project aimed at mapping the profile, competences and actual employment of language professionals worldwide, carried out in 2022, two researchers based at the University of Macerata, Italy, were entrusted with analyzing the work and status of professionals in accessibility to media and live events. To this end, a survey was designed and distributed via social media (Facebook and Twitter) between 15 July and 12 August 2022. The survey was built using Google Forms and comprised 14 closed questions, 8 questions requiring graded responses on a 5-point Likert scale, and 3 open questions. The aim was to map the main demographic features of operators in the field of accessibility to media and live events, their education and career path, their tasks, their earnings, their satisfaction with their job, and their views on the future of the professions in media access.

On the whole, 24 complete questionnaires were collected, with respondents based in 9 different countries, i.e., Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. At the time of completion, all respondents were working in the field of accessibility to media and live events, with a varying number of years of expertise ranging from 1 to 16, with an average value of 7.4. As for their employers, 8 respondents declared that they worked for a private company providing access services, 6 for a not-for-profit organization or a foundation, 3 for governmental bodies, 3 were freelancers working for various institutions and/or companies, 2 worked for educational institutions (colleges), and 2 for theaters. When asked about their main field of activity, 12 participants declared to be working in entertainment and live

events, 5 specifically for VOD and streaming platforms, 3 in the arts and culture sector, and the remaining 4 were in tourism, education and broadcasting.

In terms of earnings, respondents fell within a variety of ranges: a datum that would certainly need further analysis in relation to the average salaries and the cost of living in the nine countries featured in the survey. Moreover, earnings have to be related to the type of job held: freelancers decide how much they want to work, whereas the earnings of employees in companies and other organizations depend on a number of factors, including the number of years in the job, the position held, etc.

Besides these and other interesting findings, some of the most significant data were obtained in relation to languages, in terms of education as well as application in the job. First of all, it is worth mentioning that 12 out of 24 respondents declared that they have a postgraduate degree (MA, etc.), 7 have a Bachelor's degree and 5 hold a PhD, mostly in language-related fields. Moreover, 50% of the respondents went on to specify that their education was based in languages and/or Translation Studies. This datum should be considered also in relation to the scarcity of undergraduate and postgraduate training programs specifically dedicated to accessibility to media, entertainment and culture, an expanding field that most professionals across Europe approach after completing translation and interpreting courses. The latter today tend to offer some form of training for media accessibility, mainly concentrating on captioning or audio description. However, when mapping the competences and skills required to the respondents on their jobs, much more than knowledge of one or more foreign languages seems to be generally required. After inquiring about their education and background, the survey aimed to explore the type of activities that media accessibility professionals are engaged in when doing their job. From content creation to accessible communication, from training younger professionals to designing accessibility paths and guidelines, from writing accessible texts from home to providing on-site services, a variety of activities were selected and described, especially through a dedicated open question. Yet, when asked to select the main skills required to perform these activities (five options provided, two could be chosen), 16 out of 24 respondents ticked linguistic competence, whereas 21 out of 24 selected language-based accessibility strategies such as captioning and audio description. Once again, these findings confirm the great relevance of old and new language-based competences for the provision of access across the cultural spectrum.

To conclude, the overall results of the survey also reveal a lack of homogeneity in the media accessibility professions, within and across countries. This is likely to be due to a number of factors, including the lack of systematic and standardized training, and the irregular presence of guidelines for access in the different countries despite the EU efforts to provide overall regulations through directives and acts (see, for instance, the *European Accessibility Act 2025*).

The next section focuses on research and, more extensively, on the practice of accessibility today, with a host of examples that point to emerging opportunities in the use of old and new languages.

4. *Media accessibility research and practice today: new languages, new translations*

Besides and beyond the centrality of languages and translation competence in the training of accessibility professionals discussed above, this section focuses on the latest developments in media accessibility research and practice, with specific examples aimed at highlighting the role of old and new languages and forms of transfer.

In research, a brief overview of the articles on media accessibility published in 2022, for instance, points to frequent associations with language acquisition and language learning (Black 2022; Bausells-Espin 2022; Nicora 2022, etc.), with linguistic creativity and variation (Romero Fresco and Chaume Varela 2022), with the learning of idiomatic expressions (Mahatma Agung 2022), with the automatization of translation processes for access (Hagström and Pedersen 2022), and with many more topics that clearly have languages and translations at their core. Therefore, notwithstanding the great interdisciplinarity embraced in media accessibility research and the prominence of technological as well as clinical considerations, it seems undeniable that it is perfectly placed within audiovisual translation and that it has helped this overarching field to grow also in the direction of new forms of language transfer, as we shall see in further detail below.

As for the practice of accessibility to media and live events, the traditional forms employed in many contexts to grant access to people with sensory disabilities, i.e., subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH), or captions, and audio description (AD) for the blind and partially sighted, can be said to have come of age, having welcomed variables but also new forms of interlingual, intralingual and intersemiotic translation. Audio description has gone through a

steady process of automatization in various parts of the world and in different contexts of application, so as to cater for the needs of providers with limited budgets or specific distribution requirements. It has also witnessed an authorial turn, being occasionally (but increasingly) created by/with film and theater directors or artists (Szarkowska and Wasylczyk 2014; Burke 2023). Most significantly, AD has come to be increasingly co-created with people with visual disabilities, for a more inclusive and empowering process of production and reception where creators and end users are no longer clearly divided (Di Giovanni 2018). As for SDH, or captions, creativity has shaped their production and distribution in multiple ways, also thanks to the ever-growing pervasiveness of social media and their increased need for access.[1] But besides these traditional, consolidated strategies, a surge in the recourse to other languages and forms of translation in the provision of access across media, live events and cultural venues, has been recorded worldwide in the past decade or so. Sign languages in all their national varieties are increasingly – and more visibly – employed, also in conjunction with other forms of access. For example, a proliferation of news reports and TV/VOD shows providing both SDH and sign language interpreting has been witnessed in these past few years, especially during and after the Covid pandemic. Also, sign languages are being automatized, thanks to artificial intelligence tools, so as to possibly become more widely available in the near future. However, the co-existence of various languages and forms of access is certainly not limited to the old and new media platforms. In the context of live events, sports games and theater shows offer an array of opportunities and solutions. The MetLife Stadium in New York City, by way of example, offers assistive listening and close captioning services for their games, in addition to sign language interpreting for concerts and live shows. They also cater to what they term sensory inclusion, by making trained operators available to assist patrons with sensory processing difficulties before, during, and after the games or shows.[2] In Italy, the Milan football club based in Milano provides live audio description for all games through a radio system designed and developed in conjunction with the local blind union. They also provide signed

1 Royal National Institute for the Deaf, "How to Use Video Captions on Social Media": https://rnid.org.uk/information-and-support/technology-and-products/how-to-use-video-captions-subtitles-social-media-accessibility/
2 Met Life Stadium, "Guests with Disabilities": https://www.metlifestadium.com/guest-services/guests-with-disabilities#q11

and captioned video interviews made available on their website, as well as live sign language interpreting upon request.[3] Although they were developed only a few years ago, these live access services are accessed by over 300 users per game.

In the context of theater and opera performances, many new forms of access have been introduced over the past few years, thus stimulating change, enhancing awareness and supporting dissemination. Leading the way in both provision and innovation in the field of accessibility is the Royal Opera House in London, UK. Indeed, the theater is among the very first in Europe to have introduced audio description for the blind and is today one of the very few theaters to offer a wide-ranging program with dedicated services for many disabilities. The yearly programming features a host of diverse opportunities from relaxed and sensory adapted performances to regular shows available with access services such as audio description, assistive listening, subtitles and sign language interpreting. Additionally, audio introductions are offered before most performances and not just to blind or visually impaired audiences, but to all who request the service, thus implying a writing style that suits all with an information selection that remains appropriate for blind patrons.

In the summer of 2023, the Fondazione Arena di Verona, Italy, which manages the Arena di Verona Opera Festival, introduced a new accessibility project called "Arena per Tutti" aimed at catering to the needs of people with visual, hearing and cognitive disabilities. Besides the live services provided before and during the performances (tactile tours led by the festival staff, sign language tours, surtitles in 2 languages on large LED screens, captions for the deaf delivered through an accessible app, audio introductions and audio descriptions), a set of digital tools were developed and made available on a dedicated website (www.arenapertutti. it), free for everyone to use, with some texts also available for download. These accessible, digital opera books were the first of their kind ever to be created in Europe, they were accessed by over 12,000 people from 15 July to 15 September and, last but not least, they were the result of a series of translation processes. Their development began with the writing of Italian texts to introduce and explain the production of the four operas selected for the project, to which audio descriptions of a few selected images for each show were added. The texts were then translated into Italian Sign Language. Both the texts and descriptions were audio recorded in Italian with two different voices and then translated into Eng-

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3 A.C. Milan, "San Siro per Tutti". https://www.acmilan.com/it/san-siro-per-tutti

lish for the international version of the books. From the English translations of both texts and audio descriptions, further translations into International Sign Language were created and all texts were recorded in English with two different voices. Last, the main texts for the opera books were rewritten according to the Italian and English *Easy to Read* standards, as designed by Inclusion Europe for the European Union (https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/easy-to-read/). Easy to Read standards for all the languages of the European Union have marked a great (r)evolution in the provision of accessibility, not only for media and live events. An increasing attention to the needs of people with cognitive and learning disabilities has brought about a surge in the requests for the writing and rewriting of many texts, thus bringing into the realm of media accessibility studies yet another form of translation that, quite unusually but luckily, has been standardized.

An additional language that is increasingly used for cultural institutions, museums and live events is AAC, augmented and alternative communication created for the benefit of people with a severe limitation of their learning, speaking and reading abilities. Despite the current lack of a standardized translation method from verbal languages into AAC, the recourse to it is growing in many contexts and software for this type of translation is appearing for the major verbal languages spoken throughout the world. Today, AAC is used in the form of icons or symbols accompanied by written words for each item, and it is normally provided along with other tools or accessibility services. Last but not least, it is important to recall that AAC is the result of the reversed intersemiotic transfer that is at the basis of audio description: while AAC turns verbal language into iconic signs, AD turns the latter into verbal language.

The proliferation of languages, intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic translations that have been exemplified above in the context of accessibility to media and live events emphasize both the vibrancy of this field of activity and its great expansion. It also pinpoints the dynamism of the notions of language(s) and translation that both research and practice are experiencing.

5. *Conclusions*

As has been recalled above, audiovisual translation and media accessibility research have witnessed a marked evolution and numerous upturns despite their relatively short history. And if AVT has evolved from an initial, essen-

tially prescriptive nature into a long (and still ongoing) era of descriptive studies that haven't always been beneficial to the recognition of the discipline (Nornes 2007), the same cannot be said of media accessibility research. Since its inception, the latter has required and brought about solid interdisciplinary approaches, contamination, and recognition from international bodies and institutions through increased funding for research and practical projects. Therefore, the positioning of media accessibility research within AVT is all but unfortunate, although scholars have expressed concerns about the shifting nature of this new field (Deckert 2020), also with reference to the difficulty of evaluating the research that is produced. As Deckert puts it, AVT and media accessibility "methodologically and thematically interface a range of disciplines including – but not limited to – linguistics, psychology, film studies, educational sciences, media and communications, history, law, sociology and philosophy" (2020, 3). This, combined with the youth of the overall domain, makes it hard to identify clear lines of development today, unless we bring the focus back on languages and translational processes. Even considering the very important shift "from particularist accounts to a universalist account" (Greco and Jankowska 2020, 65) that media accessibility has recently faced and that has contributed to further diluting its boundaries towards notions of universal and inclusive design, it remains evident that intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic communication in all its forms is central to AVT and to media access. Indeed, as pointed out several times above, a more flexible and semiotically complex notion of language and translation is required.

Although the renaming of notions, actions and practices has its fascination and raison d'être, especially if it is consequent to evident, ongoing evolutions, it also poses challenges for researchers, practitioners and all other users. Without delving into the debate that has led several scholars in the past years to posit that media accessibility should be considered the hypernym for AVT today (Greco and Jankowska 2020; Di Giovanni 2022), it may be useful to look at broader, multidimensional definitions and concepts, not so much to suggest a renaming, but to embrace and apprehend new roads and ways of thinking. Canadian installation artist David Rokeby, for instance, has used the concept of *intermodal translation* with reference to art, more precisely to "the challenges and possibilities of translating cultural works to other sensory modalities in order to make them accessible to those who are unable to experience them in

their native mode".[4] Intermodal translation is, for Rokeby, a form of access: without accessibility that caters for special requirements, the work of art faces disappearance. Perhaps, to further contextualize, comprehend and follow the evolution of languages and translation processes with reference to media, live events and the arts, it may be useful to encompass the viewpoints of creators, as well as those of the diverse audiences of today.

To conclude with a few thoughts on the training of accessibility professionals, the brief overview of the survey carried out across Europe (Section 3) has shown that there is still an overall lack of solid and comprehensive training schemes, and that existing courses are not homogeneous in structure. However, the centrality of linguistic and translational competences has emerged clearly, with reference to traditional and new skills that are required across the professional spectrum. In view of a much-needed expansion of training programmes in and outside Europe, this centrality needs to remain solid and developed along the many trajectories outlined in this chapter.

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4 David Rokeby, http://www.davidrokeby.com/Culturall2/0_introduction.html

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