4 The audience for audio description

4.1 Introduction

As you can tell from the exercise at the end of Chapter 1, and as Ofcom's Code on Television Access Services confirms, 'People using access services do not fall neatly into homogeneous groups. For example, many people using audio description have visual impairments, but by no means all are completely blind, and most have had some vision at some time . . . Those using access services range from the very young to older people, but a significant proportion of viewers using access services are older people, as the incidence of hearing and sight loss increases with age' (Ofcom, 2015: point A4.2).

This has implications for the kind of language you can use in your descriptions. The age characteristics of the blind population are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. In practice, although a blind audience is as diverse as any sighted audience in terms of age and experience (in addition to their varied sight loss characteristics), audio describers largely work from the assumption that they are describing for a person with no sight. That said, it is important that the description is timed to coincide with the action as closely as possible, for the benefit of those (the majority) who have some residual vision. Timing is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

First, for whom are you describing?

4.2 What is blindness?

Literature relating to studies with BPS people uses an array of terminology to discuss those with a visual impairment. In the USA, for example, the term low vision is used in place of partially sighted (for a review of terms, see Cattaneo and Vecchi, 2011). In the UK, a person is legally blind when 'they cannot do any work for which eyesight is essential' (Palmer et al., 2007: 199). This is regarded as having between zero and 10 per cent of nominal visual acuity. This legal definition fails to distinguish between those who see nothing at all (totally blind) – which, incidentally, is only around 4 per cent of the blind population – and those with severe visual impairment, meaning that they have some light perception and can perceive the difference between light and shade. Blindness encompasses not only

extremely poor visual acuity (less than 3/60, i.e. the inability to see at 3 metres what a person with 'nominal' visual acuity can see at 60 metres), but also poor visual acuity (3/60–6/60), combined with severe reduction in the visual field; and average visual acuity (6/60 or better) with extreme reduction in the visual field. Partial sight is legally defined in the UK as very poor visual acuity (3/60–6/60) combined with a full field of vision; moderate visual acuity (up to 6/24) and a reduced field of vision or blurred or cloudy central vision; or relatively good visual acuity (up to 6/18) but severe reduction in the visual field. The effect of this variation in residual vision, for AD, is that people may see some parts of the screen or stage more clearly than others. For example, they may be able to perceive a character's movement but not their facial expression. They may be able to perceive action but struggle to read captions or subtitles. In the USA the legal definition of blindness is uncorrected visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye; or a visual field limitation such that the widest diameter of the visual field, in the better eye, is at an angle no greater than 20 degrees. In addition, a person is regarded as functionally blind when he or she has to use so many alternative techniques to perform tasks that are ordinarily performed with sight that his/her pattern of daily living is substantially altered. Such alternative techniques might include reading a newspaper by listening to it or using Braille to read a book. This may be a more helpful way of thinking about blindness than the medical definitions.

Another aspect of this broad spectrum is that only a very small number of people are born with no sight or lose it in early infancy, meaning that they have no visual experience. This explains many of the answers to the quiz at the end of Chapter 1 that you may have found surprising. For example, women are more likely than men to become blind simply because women tend to live longer. Sight problems commonly develop later in life, through accident or illness. Some eye conditions, such as retinitis pigmentosa, lead to gradual deterioration, so the impairment progresses from partial sight to total blindness over years or even decades. A few conditions, such as congenital cataracts, are reversible, so initial blindness is replaced by sight. Some acquired conditions can be reversed to a certain extent, e.g. one woman who suffered from diabetic retinopathy found that her sight improved following a kidney transplant (Jo Hopkins, personal communication). With medical and technical advances such as retinal implants it seems likely that the number of people whose visual impairment improves will increase.

4.3 Age and blindness

Most BPS people are elderly. Of the 143,385 people registered blind in England (HSCIC, 2014), 61 per cent are aged 75 or over, and only 0.5 per cent are aged 4 or under. The figures are similar for those who are registered with partial sight: 61 per cent aged 75 or over; 1 per cent aged 4 or under. Overall, as vision problems are mostly age related, and given the ageing population, the number of BPS people in the UK is expected to increase (RNIB online).

The AD audience is therefore diverse in terms of sight experience and circumstances. It might include a young person living independently who has been born blind or lost their sight in early infancy; an elderly relative who has recently lost their sight and is living with their sighted partner or family; the sighted or partially sighted parents of a sighted child and the sighted parents of a blind child. All might benefit from AD in some way. Some partially sighted people may rely more on AD in some circumstances than in others. As one occasional AD user who has partial sight explained:

> In action films that have very fast sequences I might have to say to someone sitting next to me, you know, what happened there? Um . . . because I don't always see the fast action. [I find problems with] anything in black and white, because the contrast disappears. And I often use a strategy to identify my characters by remembering what they're wearing and what colour their clothes are, or I remember the colour of their hair or something like that and I know it's the same person. And in black and white movies you can't do that. And so I remember when I went to see *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1993), a movie that begins and ends in colour, but for most of the time is in black and white, just being totally lost because to me it looked like a whole series of disconnected frames um . . . with no continuity, none of the characters seemed to be the same, it was just, completely disconnected.

4.4 A model of visual processing

At its most basic, the visual processing system is triggered by light entering the brain via photoreceptors at the back of the eyeball. Visual information is conveyed along the optic nerve leading from each eye to the optic chiasm where the optic nerves converge. One axon from each crosses over into the contralateral optic tract. From this point the optic tracts diverge, pass around the mid-brain (cerebral peduncle) and feed into the lateral geniculate nucleus (LGN) of the thalamus. The LGN axons radiate from here, through white matter of the brain, to the primary visual cortex (striate cortex or V1) of the occipital lobe at the back of the brain. The rest of the occipital lobe makes up the pathway of association (extra striate) cortex, concerned with recognition, colour, motion and depth (Crossman and Neary, 2014).

4.4.1 Mental models, schemata and scripts

However, perceiving with our eyes does not only involve the visual pathway. What we see is also influenced by our experience. The early twentieth-century theoretical biologist, Jakob von Uexkul, identified the *Umwelt*, i.e. 'the mass of knowledge that we carry around with us into every interaction'. Such knowledge is thought to be organised by the use of schemata (see section 4.6), a set

of cognitive shortcuts whereby a simple trigger activates all that we know and have experienced from previous encounters with a particular object, action or environment. The word 'beach', for example, brings with it associations that may include yellow sand, blue sea, the call of gulls, children building sandcastles and adults playing beach ball. Each schema provides a reference frame for interpreting incoming sensory data and presents a likely script (Schank and Abelson, 1977). Schemata and, in turn, the *Umwelt* are continually updated, depending on new encounters and experiences, so that a visit to a volcanic island may create a revised schema for 'beach' that includes the possibility of black sand. Petrilli and Ponzio (2013) claim that human beings are able to model an indefinite number of worlds. Describers need to be aware of their own 'scripts' and mental models that 'blind' them to particular details. For example, a describer who grew up in the south-west of England described a barn in a production of Brian Friel's *Translations* (dir. J. Grieve, 2014), but without mentioning that it was built of stone. She felt that it went without saying because stone is the standard building material for barns in the South-West. However, the appearance of the barn was surprising to her colleague, who grew up in the east of England, where barns are traditionally built of wood. Having read the AI, this was what she was expecting. To her, the stone construction was a notable feature. We all see differently, depending on our interest and experience. As Tom Sutcliffe (2000) memorably expressed it, when an audience is watching Hitchcock's film *Psycho* (1960), there is always someone looking at the shower fittings. Pinchbeck and Stevens (2005) suggest that levels of presence are affected by the interaction between sensory data and a user's schemata. In particular, bottom-up information that is incongruent with a schema may delay processing and interrupt presence (see section 1.5).

For a low-immersive environment, namely books, Gysbers et al. (2004) showed that a minimal description that provided less specific information evoked a greater sense of presence than a text abundant in detail. The author Tracy Chevalier (Minshull, 2011) illustrates this in a discussion of Guy de Maupassant's short story 'The Necklace'. Although the necklace is central to the plot, Chevalier points out that de Maupassant limits his description to just four words: 'a superb diamond necklace'. This allows readers to imagine the necklace for themselves. It also allows that image to change over time. As Chevalier puts it in a radio essay broadcast by BBC Radio 3 (Minshull, 2011):

> As a teenager I'd pictured the necklace as a big net of diamonds that would cover most of your chest – something Elizabeth Taylor would wear, the sort of thing you need an impressive décolletage to display it on. Now, 30 years later when I imagine Mathilde's necklace, it is a simple strand of diamonds, very understated and elegant – Grace Kelly rather than Liz Taylor.

It is ironic that Chevalier's radio essay is illustrated on BBC iPlayer by a picture of a diamond necklace that allows for no ambiguity.

As a schema – shaped by an individual's own experience – influences what that person expects in terms of incoming information, it may also influence the allocation of their attention to reinforce those expectations. Bistricky et al. (2011) showed that depressed (sighted) individuals detected fewer words portraying people in a positive light (e.g. 'winner'), as compared both with negative words and with positive words that were unrelated to people (e.g. 'sunshine'). Participants with no history of depression showed no difference between word types.

This is why the oft-quoted American approach to AD, advocated by Snyder (2014), that describers should say what they see, or WSIWYS (What You See Is What You Say), is not necessarily helpful. Describers need to be aware that their own perception is likely to be biased. In her book about her experience of blindness, *Sight Unseen*, Georgina Kleege marvels at the ignorance of sighted people about sight: 'For the sighted seeing is both instantaneous and absolute. They apparently believe the brain stays out of it' (Kleege, 1999: 96). In the 1970s, the psychologist J. J. Gibson developed what he termed 'an ecological approach to visual perception' (1979). He took issue with the photographic analogy of vision, with its model of objects projected on the retina, like pictures projected on a screen. Gibson (1979) argues that we are not passive recipients of a static, snapshot view of the world. We look around and move around while we are looking. Gibson suggests that perception is not merely a response to a stimulus but, rather, a way of picking up information: 'Perception may or may not occur in the presence of information' (ibid.: 56). That is a phrase to remember when you are considering whether or not something in the background of the scene (a secondary object) should be mentioned.

Orero and Vilaró (2014) give a good example, comparing the eye-gaze of sighted viewers for a short sequence from the DVD of Danny Boyle's film *Millions* (2004) shown with and without AD. The DVD menu begins with the yellow cockerel mobile of the Pathé logo, its shadow projected on a white wall. Once the user presses 'play', the cockerel appears again, but now modified such that the shadow features a halo. Only the group watching with AD reported noticing the difference, and a heat map generated by an eye tracker showed that the eye-gaze of those viewers had shifted up to focus on the halo itself. This prompts the question, should the describer mention the halo? Or not? There are two reasons why the describer should do so. First, the director has deliberately chosen to include the halo. In the situation that even just one sighted person notices the halo it is important to describe it, otherwise you guarantee that no blind person will be able to. Second, the halo may subconsciously trigger a schema of saintliness and moral behaviour, which is what the film is about. It may make what follows easier to understand because it gives us the right context in which to interpret the information from the film dialogue and the AD, i.e. it stimulates retrieval of an appropriate script and schema.

4.5 A cognitive model of AD

Before we think about how visual impairment affects the way BPS people engage with audiovisual media, let us think about what happens when someone who does not have impaired sight watches a television programme or a film. These AV forms are both recognised as low-immersive, mediated environments. For the sighted audience direct perceptual information comes from a reduced number of senses, as compared with the real world. People with no sensory loss enjoy a stream of congruent information from two sensory modalities: sight and hearing. When they watch a bottle falling, for example, they also hear it shatter as it hits the ground. The two information streams support and complement each other, replicating the kind of environmental synchrony of auditory and visual stimuli in the real world that Bertelsen and de Gelder term 'valid co-occurrence' (2004). It is proposed that such perceptual information from two sources activates sensory and semantic associations shaped by the experience of the viewer, filling in absent sensory data, to create a sense of 'being there' (Biocca, 1997: 18). AD can itself be regarded as a form of mediation but the words can be so well chosen and placed that the user is unaware of the AD and it does not intrude on the user's conscious perception. Although visibility can be a contentious issue in translation, BPS people continually stress that they prefer the describer to remain invisible. They come to watch a film or see a show; not to listen to the AD. By adding a verbal commentary, woven around the existing dialogue, to capture the visual elements of a scene, AD creates what Piety (2004: 455) calls an 'audio amalgam'. In this way an AV medium is translated into pure audio, so that for the AD user a film or play in some ways comes to resemble an audio drama (Fryer, 2010). Words interacting with the existing sound track should stimulate a number of other senses in the user. That this is achievable is shown by users' comments in response to some of the early UK TV broadcasts with AD (Whitehead, 2005):

> [*Murder in the First* was] . . . absolutely first class. I have visited Alcatraz and the AD on this film brought back the atmosphere, smells and everything. Superb!
>
> For *The Godfather*: the AD was stunning, absolutely amazing: I could actually smell the olive trees!

The semi-structured interviews carried out with BPS people as part of the author's doctoral research provoked many spontaneous comments, such as to suggest that people with visual impairment can immerse themselves in mediated environments such that they have a sense of 'being there'. One participant suggested that the experience of a blind person could even be enhanced, as compared with that of a sighted person, because, with no visual reminder of media form (such as wobbly scenery or the frame of the cinema or television screen), there was less need to suspend disbelief. However, most felt that without AD their sense of presence was

hindered by lack of access to visual information. Dialogue and non-verbal sound did not always enable a person with a visual impairment to follow the plot, let alone access the 'full picture'. This led to a sense of exclusion or general disengagement, i.e. the antithesis of presence.

Occasionally the audio and visual streams do not present consistent information but are deliberately incongruent so as to achieve a particular effect. In Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), for example, even though it is not natural to hear sharp, shrill violin shrieks as you are taking a shower, the mediated environment (the bathroom) is maintained through the visuals. For the blind user, non-diegetic music may lead to a temporary 'Break in Presence' (BIP) (Slater: 2002) because, with no ambient sound, the mediated environment ceases to persist for the duration of the scene. Similar BIPs may occur when a non-speaking character affects the action, or when the translated words of a character who speaks in a foreign language are subtitled rather than dubbed, resulting in an inability to follow the narrative flow. Nuances that are more subtle, as when the facial expression of a character belies their speech, may initiate a false schema in the mind of the blind user, affecting their interpretation of the drama. AD is specifically intended to address these problems.

4.6 Exercises and points for discussion

Watch *Notes on Blindness* (dirs Middleton and Spinney, 2014), which you can find on the product page for this book: https://www.routledge.com/products/978-1-138-84817-7. (The script is given below.) This film clip visualises an extract from the audio diary of John Hull, who recorded his experience as he gradually lost his sight. The filmmakers have used John's original tape recordings as the voice-over. This audio was originally intended to stand alone. However, the filmmakers felt it was important that the film be audio described so that their visualisations were available to blind and partially sighted audiences.

You will notice that this AD threads its way through John Hull's own narration. The describer has given herself cues of different types, so she knows when to speak. Those in bold are time cues taken from the film's timecode or elapsed running time. This is the most common type of cue in film and TV AD, and is usually listed like this: 00:00:00:00 in hours:minutes:seconds:frames, although in the above example only minutes and seconds are used, owing to the software the describer had available. Frame rate per second varies from country to country and format to format. In the PAL system that is used for analogue television in most of Europe, Eastern Africa and much of Asia and Australasia, the standard frame rate per second is 25. The NTSC standard used in North America, the northern countries of South America, the Philippines, Taiwan and Japan, has a frame rate of 26 per second. You will notice that great precision is necessary in identifying gaps to place the description. Those cues in *italics* are taken from the film dialogue (in this case John's narration). This is the most common type of cue in live AD contexts. You will also notice that some of these sound

cues are not dialogue but SFX. It is also common to use visually apprehended actions or lighting effects as cues. If you are familiar with the practice or theory of subtitling you will notice that the AD continues across cuts and exceeds the duration recommended for on-screen captions. Reading speed is discussed in Chapter 7.

4.6.1 An extract from the AD script for Notes on Blindness

09:24 Rain stipples the frosted glass of John' workshop window. Moss grows in the rotting frame. John runs his hand along the wooden workbench.

09:37 He comes to stand facing the door, with its view of the garden. In his 40s, bearded, wearing glasses, John opens the door and inhales.He pauses on the threshold, listening.

Cue: . . . *falling inside*. water teems down over crockery
Cue: . . . *shape and dimension.* Splashing in the kitchen sink. John sits at his kitchen table, soaked. Rain falls around him. Blurry droplets bounce from every surface as he holds his cup of tea.
Cue: . . . *addressed by a world*. Framed again in the doorway, in close-up - now in longshot from the end of the garden, our view of John expands.
Cue: . . . *it is beautiful to know* a close-up of the cassette recorder. The depressed record button springs up. Darkness

4.6.2 Notes on Blindness

The AD for this clip is unusual in that it describes not only the action but also, on occasion, the camerawork. The filmmakers for *Notes on Blindness* were particularly concerned that people should be aware of the way their film was constructed. This is not the usual approach to audio description: usually, the camera POV and type of shot are ignored. Describing camerawork will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 10. The description for this particular film was written in collaboration with the filmmakers; it is an example of accessible filmmaking (Romero-Fresco, 2013). You may wonder why or whether blind people are interested in camerawork. This will also be addressed in Chapter 10. For now, we have a chance to find out more about what the users are hoping AD will provide.

4.7 What do AD users want from AD?

Many blind people value AD not only in order to follow the plot but also as a means of social inclusion. Here are some comments from AD users with a variety of sight characteristics:

> I want to try and get as close as I can to what a sighted person would experience when they go to the theatre, so I want to be able to experience [the actors'] actions and the movements and the looks and all the things that, as a blind person, I don't get. The best way of putting it is listening to other people laugh and not knowing why they're laughing. Because . . . it's quite an isolating experience to kind of hear other people laughing and to be thinking what's going on, why are you laughing? It might be that if I knew, I might not find it funny but it's just knowing that something is happening that's having an effect on everybody else but I'm out of that experience.
>
> (Male, aged 30, blind from 5 years old)

> I am a firm believer that blind people suffer from visual illiteracy – that is, when sighted people gather and discuss a movie, TV programme, or even a media image, they share the knowledge of what the thing looks like, with all the data points that image knowledge contains. I, as a blind man, lack this essential data, so I am at a disadvantage in this discussion.
>
> (Male, aged 60, who lost his sight in later life)

How important is it that the image built from a description matches what sighted people see? This is one partially sighted person's opinion:

> Most educated people around the world I suppose, or certainly the western world, would have an instant picture in their minds if you said 'Big Ben' to them. So I would like an accurate picture in my mind – everybody knows what it looks like, or at least there's probably a common perception of how it looks . . . maybe in reality close up it's grubby or smaller than perceived, or bigger, or crumbling or something? So I want to share in the common perception.

In addition to social inclusion, AD also aids comprehension, which in turn leads to increased independence:

> The AD added so much more and let me know that previously I hadn't really been understanding what was happening.
>
> The AD saves having to ask questions about what is happening.
>
> It is so good to be able to understand the programme and have a laugh at the right time and not to have to wait for someone to explain the joke or ask what everyone else is laughing at.

As John Hull expresses it, 'Cognition is beautiful, it is beautiful to know'.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter shows another paradox at the heart of AD – that even though the audience is heterogeneous, describers are expected to create a 'one-size fits all'

description. Unlike other areas of translation, there is rarely an opportunity for multiple versions in AVT. The challenge for the describer is to create a target text that satisfies most of the audience, most of the time. This will inevitably involve compromise whereby some information must be sacrificed. The coming chapters offer strategies to minimise this as much as possible.

4.9 Exercises and points for discussion

1 Find some examples from AV media where the auditory and visual information streams are incongruent, for example a person who says they are happy to see someone when their facial expression or body posture suggests the opposite, or an inside location accompanied by an external soundscape. How would that affect what and where you might describe?
2 Why do you think AD is important?
3 What have you learnt about blindness that you didn't know before?
4 What can audio describers use as cues?

4.10 Suggested reading

If you would like to know more about the lived experience of blindness, the following are recommended:

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