

AUDIOSUBTITLING: A POSSIBLE SOLUTION FOR OPERA ACCESSIBILITY IN CATALONIA¹

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RESUMO: Embora estejamos submersos em uma sociedade IT, uma larga acessibilidade à mídia audiovisual ainda é vista mais como um desejo do que como um futuro praticável. Muitas organizações em todos os níveis – local, nacional, e europeu – estão tentando estabelecer uma agenda para a implementação da acessibilidade na mídia ou “de radiodifusão para todos”. Pesquisas têm sido desenvolvidas nas universidades em muitos níveis e em muitas áreas – direito, engenharia, telecomunicações – para fornecer respostas que possam servir como possíveis recomendações a serem implementadas em futuros Atos de Radiodifusão. Este artigo examina o modo de transferência semiótico conhecido como audiolendagem, como uma alternativa à audiodescrição ao vivo para a ópera, e em particular uma experiência de audiolendagem na Ópera de Barcelona, o Liceu.

UNITERMOS: audiolendagem; sobre-legenda; ópera; acessibilidade; tradução audiovisual; deficiente visual.

ABSTRACT: Although we are immersed within an IT society, a wide accessibility to audiovisual media is still seen as a wishful thinking rather than a feasible future. Many

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organizations at all levels – local, national, and European – are trying to establish an agenda for the implementation of media accessibility or “broadcasting for all”. Research is being carried out at universities at many levels and in many fields –legal, engineering, telecommunications – to provide answers which may be taken as possible recommendations to be implemented in future Broadcasting Acts. This article looks at the semiotic transfer mode known as audiosubtitling as an alternative to live audiodescription for opera, and in particular to one audiosubtitling experience at Barcelona Opera House the Liceu.

KEYWORDS: Audiosubtitling; surtitling; opera; accessibility; audiovisual translation; visually impaired.

1. Introduction

In 1994 the Gran Teatre del Liceu² was destroyed by fire and the subsequent reconstruction work and design of the new building focused on technology at all levels. Thus five years later, in 1999, it opened with some state-of-the-art programmes such as the engineering programme *Katia*, or the subtitling system *Figaro* which allows every seat in the theatre to follow the libretto in Catalan, English or Spanish.

The Liceu was rebuilt following the old seating arrangement hence, as in the old Liceu, there are some seats with little or no stage visibility. To palliate the lack of vision, TFT (Thin Film Transistor) screens were fitted in front of the seats – with partial or no sight of the proscenium – to offer a full view of the stage plus subtitles in three languages. This screen also has an audio switch, where a standard audio headset can be plugged in.

² http://www.liceubarcelona.com/teatre_liceu.asp



Picture 1: Seats with TFT screen with switch for headset

Seats with full vision also have a small screen fitted at the back of the seat in front, with the choice of subtitles in three languages. No switch for headsets is available in these screens.



Picture 2: Seats with TFT and no switch for headset

The new hi-tech Liceu plus a firm attitude by the Liceu management to make opera accessible to a wider audience has sent Catalan Opera to the forefront of a new approach to opera and its reception. Without any technical improvements, the Liceu was ready to offer live audiodescription and in October 2004. The Liceu signed an agreement with Associació Catalana de Cecs i Disminuïts Visuals³ (ACC) to audiodescribe (AD), for the first time, four operas in the 2004-5 opera season (*Boris Godunov*, *Rigoletto*, *Parsifal* and *Roberto Devereux*). It also signed an agreement with ONCE (Organización Nacional de Ciegos de España) to AD some operas. By signing these two agreements the Liceu handed over the responsibility of the creation and locution of ADs to the two blind associations. The Liceu did not control either the style or the quality of the ADs. A research group at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona – part of a larger international research team⁴ – has been monitoring and testing some accessibility initiatives in the opera productions which were offered in this first season,⁵ and this article describes one of them.

2. The setup

Every person who attends an opera performance at the Liceu enjoys the projected surtitles in Catalan and the subtitles in three different languages.

The use of surtitles or subtitles is now a reality, dispelling any possible doubt over the benefits or drawbacks (Dewolf, 2001; Mateo, 2002; Desblache, 2004) since they make opera more user-friendly, and also accessible to those with hearing impediments. The TFT screens fitted for the seats, with little or no vision, have the plug facility for headsets. Through this headset the visually impaired can attend the performance and receive an individual AD with no disturbance to the neighbouring seats.

³ <http://www.accdv.org/index.asp?estil=styles>

⁴ TRANSMEDIA <http://www.fti.uab.es>

⁵ We are greatly indebted to both Manel Martí and Llorenç Blasi (ACC) for allowing us to test different accessible solutions in the many opera representations, and for the people in the ACC who evaluated the tests.



Picture 3: Proscenium and three language subtitles simultaneously on offer

The voice-talent, voice-artist or descriptor is in a different room, where he has a TVscreen to follow the action of the stage plus the subtitles, and a microphone to read the description to be transmitted to the headsets inside the theatre. This setup causes no discomfort or noise interference to the rest of the audience.

This season was the first time audiodescription was offered – by blind associations – to opera goers in Barcelona. It was well received by the community, and research was set up at university level, trying to establish style of the AD on offer (Matamala, 2005) mainly taking into consideration that it was the first time this experience had taken place, and also the main feature of AD: it is live.

It is this main characteristic, live AD – against edited and recorded AD – which opened an avenue of research. Issues such as AD style or adequacy were also studied (Matamala & Orero, forthcoming) but the synchronic delivery of the AD posed serious questions to the viability of the whole enterprise. Live AD meant a different way of working as it involves:

(1) Preparation

- a) Documentation of the opera through the many available webs and reference books and articles.
- b) To have both the libretto in the source text and the translation.
- c) Viewing – and recording – of the dress-rehearsal: the need to be in a seat as the audience⁶.
- d) With the recording of the dress rehearsal in VHS format, the descriptor can take it home and work preparing a text trying to spot the AD comments within the libretto.

(2) Rehearsal

A day or two before the performance, the descriptor attends a representation where the description is squared and fitted. Another person attends the representation and listens to the AD to simulate conditions of the actual AD night. The descriptor works at home, giving the final adjustment to the description.

(3) Delivery

Locution of the text – presentation, introduction, notes, and credits.

These three producing stages meant two serious drawbacks: cost and time. The number of hours needed for the documentation, preparation, rehearsal and delivery make the cost of a live AD impractical. Also the need to have two people – at least in the first and second stages – doubles the cost. Only with a grant or subsidy, or a sponsor, this time consuming activity – which is close to being a craft – can be financially viable.

⁶ Boris Godunov, the first opera to be AD, was prepared with the descriptor taking notes in an adjacent room with a large TFT screen. This was an ideal set up, because it provided light, a large table where to work, and the possibility of exchanging comments. On the night of the rehearsal one person went inside to listen to the AD – to simulate the conditions of the actual AD night – and found that there were many noises on stage that needed to be AD, and which had been missed by the AD team because they were away from the stage. This meant that in future operas the descriptor was seated inside the theatre.

3. Audiosubtitling

Audiosubtitling is the media accessible mode of reading aloud, or voicing, subtitles. In a number of subtitling countries⁷ some research has taken place to make audiovisual texts accessible for visually impaired people who are not familiar with the foreign source language of the broadcasted audiovisual text e.g. when films on TV are broadcast in English with subtitles in Catalan. The translated Catalan subtitles are of no value to this group of sensorially handicapped people.

It was also shown by research⁸ that 40 to 60 per cent of elderly people encounter problems with subtitles, and experience difficulties with the size of the subtitle letters and the contrast between the colour of the subtitle letters and the screen background. Studies were made of all the aspects of TV accessibility and AD was dismissed given the high cost: as explained by Verboom *et al.* (2002: 297) AD is “a very expensive approach and it is not financially feasible for most broadcasting companies to make significant portion of their programmes accessible” hence alternative solutions were researched.

At a conference⁹ in 1999 the initiative for an implementation project for spoken subtitles was born (Theunisz, 2002). The primary objective was to make foreign TV programmes more accessible for those who are visually impaired, and also for the elderly, and for people with language impairments such as aphasia or dyslexia, or cognitive impairment such as mental retardation or decreased concentration.

The technology required to bring spoken subtitles to the homes of these people was a decoding system. Broadcasters

⁷ Those countries where the language transfer mode for broadcasting foreign production is in the source language with subtitles in the target language. In Europe north European countries – Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, etc. – also Portugal and Greece are subtitling countries while Spain, Italy and France are dubbing countries.

⁸ Research carried out by J. G. Frankhuizen at the University of Eindhoven, in 1995.

⁹ Toegankelijke Televisie. Verslag van de conferentie Media Park Hilversum, Iv/RDS, Sint Michielsgestel, CGL, Grave.

needed a speech-synthesis computer which is fitted with speech-synthesis software which converts the text into speech. This output is then converted into a signal and broadcast without disturbing the programme.

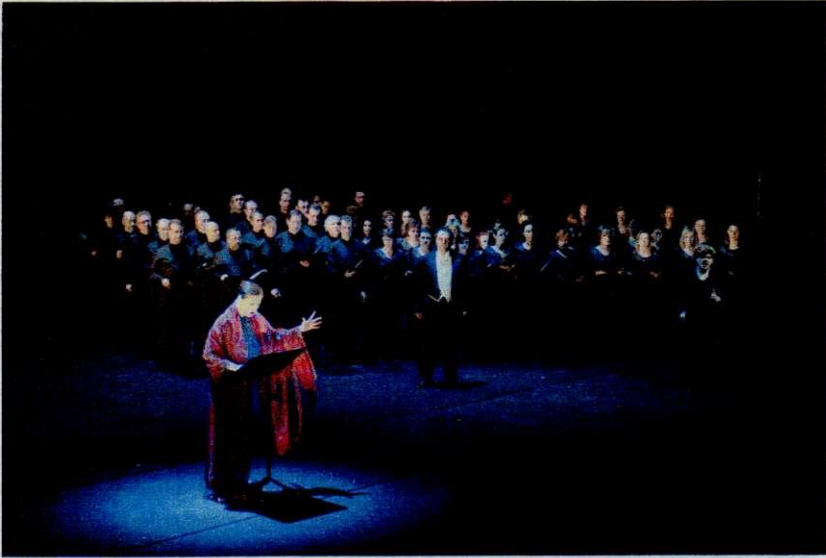
The project "Spoken Subtitles" was developed and evaluated with a high degree of acceptance,¹⁰ and on 14th December 2001 the audiosubtitling service was officially opened by the Dutch Secretary of State and the president of the NOS. Audiosubtitling has been implemented as a permanent service on Dutch TV.

4. Audiosubtitling Opera

The Dutch "Spoken Subtitles" experience served as inspiration of the possible use of audiosubtitling for opera, since the person who attends an opera representation in Barcelona is in a similar situation to the person in the Netherlands who is sitting in front of a TV set broadcasting a foreign film in a foreign language.

The visually impaired has little or no vision of what takes place on the stage, and no understanding of the dialogue, since opera is sung in the source language. It was then suggested to the Associació Catalana de Cecs to have a trial of this accessible service. Originally, it was planned to test an act of Wagner's *Parsifal*, arguing that a five-hour AD will be taxing for the descriptor in the three stages of production – as already described in the previous section. Attention was also paid to the importance text has in operas such as *Parsifal* (Dewolf, 2001). After an initial acceptance, it was then suggested by the ACC to prepare the concert version of Donizetti's opera *Roberto Devereux*.

¹⁰ Though some more developing had to take place to correct and improve the quality of sound, since voice was found monotonous.



Pictures 4 and 5: Proscenium of *Roberto Devereux*

It was argued by the ACC that no dramatic action takes place in a concert version opera, leading singers and choir are in a still position throughout the representation. Hence little AD is

needed in a concert version opera. Surtitles are also offered in concert operas so we thought of testing the reception by the blind community of a descriptor reading the subtitles. This experience would offer the visually impaired the same information as the sighted audience: though they would have the comments read on top of the music and singing, and the sighted could read them without any noise interference.

It is clear that ACC has a pledge to their associates, but they also felt they wanted to help us with our research, and not wanting to tamper with a five-hour-test *Parsifal*, an agreement was reached, and *Roberto Devereux* was prepared for audiosubtitling (AS).

The voice reading the surtitles was the same descriptor, or voice-talent, who had done the AD in the previous three operas, hence the many voice problems found by the Dutch research "Spoken Subtitles" team would not exist. For example the Catalan voice-talent made clear cuts coinciding with syntactic units, which makes understanding much easier. Technically, there were no problems, since the voice-talent could broadcast from a separate room where a screen was set up offering the singing taking place on stage plus the surtitles.

A questionnaire was prepared and read to the attendants after the performance. Though the experiment was at first greeted with much reticence and scepticism by those who knew about it, it laid the following results.

(1) To the question: "Do you know the opera synopses or what takes place?" the majority answered: "No."

This is an interesting question and answer by itself. That a person has sight problems does not mean s/he cannot document him/herself before going to an opera performance. Perhaps in a different way as sighted people, but for example the Liceo web page itself offers comprehensive information on all aspects of the opera being represented. This lack of interest for the plot of what they were going to see made us think of the pertinence of the system used in the UK for opera accessibility – "Talking Notes"¹¹ – where a cassette tape is sent upon request in advance,

¹¹ <http://www.fsz.bme.hu/opera/enoaccess.html>

containing a description of the plot, the historical background, the costumes, props, etc., which is read aloud. The description is so rich, so visual and detailed, that it really places at an advantage those who have listened to it in advance and it helps to follow the opera performance, though it is not AD. So, we were dealing with people who came to the audiosubtitled performance and did not know anything about the plot, historical context, etc. of what they were about to hear sung in Italian.

(2) The second question: “Did you manage to follow the plot?” was unanimously answered: “Yes, perfectly.” Respondents had a choice between: Perfectly, So-so, Not much or Nothing¹².

(3) The third question asked whether they had enjoyed the opera performance, and among answer choices like:

- (a) Yes but only for the music, not the commentary
- (b) Yes both the music and commentary
- (c) Yes, because I enjoyed going to the Liceu and listening to a live opera performance
- (d) No, I didn't like it because the commentary was in the way
- (e) I didn't like the music.

the unanimous answer was (b), and some added that they were surprised to find out that the commentary was not in the way. This answer was confirmed at another instance of the questionnaire, when respondents were asked to grade from 1 (little) to 5 (a lot) if the commentary read had annoyed them, and whose unanimous answer was 1.

(4) Question four asked if they would have liked more or less commentary. Again, the near unanimous answer to this question was that they would have liked more commentary, with a couple saying that it was perfect as it was. They also added a very interesting appreciation. The language of the opera was Ital-

¹² Some people commented on the volume of the AS (audiosubtitling) sound, which at times – when music was loud – was difficult to hear. We consider this to be a technical aspect that could be overcome easily.

ian, the audience was Catalan and commentaries were read in Catalan. Since the commentary was read as soon as it appeared on the surtitling screen, the actual singing was delayed by a few seconds. The proximity of Catalan and Italian as Romance languages is such that, in most cases, both were almost matching. This created a reassurance in the listener who was able to follow almost word by word what was sung, hence the plot. This comment was also made by those sighted people who accompanied the impaired, and who also listened to the commentary.

(5) The fifth question wondered whether the audience felt disoriented at any moment, or did not know what was taking place, and the unanimous question was “no”, with the occasional comment already explained in footnote 12 about the AS sound volume.

(6) To the options given next:

- (a) Did you like it as it was done, that is: a literal reading of the surtitles?
- (b) Would you have preferred a condensed reading of the surtitles, a more simple explanation?
- (c) I would have liked condensed reading of surtitles to enjoy fully of the music

This time there was no consensus. Though a large majority replied with (a) some also went for (b).

(7) The Catalan surtitles offered had a rather high register of Catalan language, with some rather literary expressions – which were a reflection of the translation and nature of the Italian text. So we asked if the level of language used was adequate. Again, a unanimous “yes” was answered. It is worth saying that this was a very surprising answer since a slight rejection of such a learned Catalan language was anticipated. The wide acceptance may have been triggered by the fact that it allowed to follow the singing almost word for word, and that gave the overwhelming feeling of security and that of not losing anything that was going on.

(8) Finally, respondents were asked if they preferred operas with or without commentaries, and that meant AD or AS. All pre-

ferred to have a commentary throughout the opera. This may come as a surprise to those who are against live opera AD because the music is tampered with, and they would restrict commentary to introductions before each act.

This new experience, and its welcomed reception, has opened on the one hand a new accessibility avenue of university research, and on the other hand a possible accessibility mode which could be implemented in Catalonia, and a much cheaper and time effective alternative to live opera performance. Though AS will be adequate for concert opera versions, further research will have to take place for representations with dramatic action¹³.

5. Conclusion

Though Catalonia has been pioneer in media accessibility¹⁴ we are still at dawn of comprehensive media accessibility. Many initiatives – and at many levels – are taking place to research, evaluate and develop media accessibility. Universities (Orero, 2005), associations and broadcasters, along with the industry and local government have joined efforts to find viable solutions which can be implemented as soon as digital television is widely

¹³ Perhaps an introduction such as those prepared by Gregory York for *Talking Notes* in the UK along with an audiosubtitling, could be a possible solution for live opera AD.

¹⁴ The Local Catalan TV (TV3) was pioneer in broadcasting subtitled programmes in teletext for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, it has been broadcasting AD programmes, and has the highest ration of broadcasting hours of subtitled programs in the Spanish state (Moreno, 2004; Vila, 2004). Cinemas Balaña in 2004 started offering open AD in some selected films. As explained in this article the Liceu has offered over ten representations with AD, and all representations have surtitles and subtitles. At the Facultat de Traducció (FTI) the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona offered in 2004 the first training course in subtitling for the deaf and hard-of-hearing in face-to-face and online formats, and will offer from 2005-6 a new course “Media Accessibility”.

accepted in Catalonia. The experience presented in this article is one of the many projects we are developing at university, and we hope it is a small step forward towards social integration.

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