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Language Without Words: Light and Contrast in Audio Description

Anna Maszerowska, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Abstract

The importance of the inclusion of directorial vision and cinematographic language cues in film audio description scripts is a claim that has long been maintained in the literature related to media accessibility. This article aims to analyse the existing audio descriptions of light and contrast patterns. The first part presents an overview of the functions attributed to luminance in the field of Film Studies. The author then investigates the state of the art in the related literature on media accessibility and audio description. Guidelines and research papers are consulted in order to establish the stance on the issue from both a practical and scholarly point of view. The second part presents an analysis of a corpus of six professionally audio described films and discusses the strategies employed by the describers when confronted with certain lighting set-ups. Finally, the article concludes with a set of recommendations for future research in the area.

Keywords

Audiovisual translation, media accessibility, audio description, film language description, light and contrast.

1. Introduction

Film audio description (AD) is to a great extent an art of compromise. In a predetermined and often limited amount of time and space, AD attempts to verbally account for the visual elements of the moving picture. However, given the multimodal nature of the cinema, the decision as to what and how to describe becomes all the more complicated. Raina Haig, a visually impaired film maker, claims (2002) that "[e]ven an apparently simple shot can contain a number of visual elements, presenting a dilemma for the audio description writer." Furthermore, sometimes the way the plot develops or the manner in which the characters perform their actions is supported or even explained by the use of certain cinematographic tools. Awareness of the mutual interaction between the visual elements of a shot and its implications for the story line can therefore be considered a valuable asset in the work of a describer.

This paper is an attempt to study such relationships. It seeks to provide an overview of the issues involved in the verbal rendition of techniques relevant to cinematography in audio description scripts. Specific attention is paid to light and contrast patterns, cinema tools which are critical in terms of meaning, style and mood creation. Recognising the importance of luminance set-ups for plot development and analysing the heavy load of implicit meaning they carry, the author seeks to investigate their modes of realisation in a corpus of existing AD scripts. In other words, the main objective of this article is to investigate the position light and contrast patterns assume in the composition of an audio descriptive text, as well as

to map out any professional tendencies to approach the integration of luminance cues in the body of an AD script.

2. Light and contrast: some insights from Film Studies

Light enables us to see. In consequence, it dictates the way in which we look at the world. This is partly because, as Brown (1996: 11) points out, the sense of sight provides much more information about the physical world than those of touch or smell. In a cinematographic context, as Bordwell and Thompson (1990: 133) observe, "[a] brightly illuminated patch may draw our attention and reveal a key gesture, while a shadow may conceal a detail and build up our suspense about what may be present there." The art of lighting for film lies in the recognition of its manifold functions which are briefly discussed below.

First of all, the changing cycles of luminance allow for the spectator to evaluate the temporal duration of a scene and acknowledge the cinematographic passing of time (Wharton and Grant 2005: 36). In other words, the varying levels of lighting (night/day, dark/light) serve to provide a spatio-temporal framework for the relevant shot and, as Arijon (2010: 540) expresses it, punctuate the plot.

Secondly, lighting shapes our perceptions of people, objects and spaces (Corrigan and White 2009: 81). While, typically, figures obscured by shadows or dark interiors are associated with mystery, fear or even evil, characters displayed in daylight and brightly illuminated settings evoke feelings of safety and comfort (Brown 1996: 12). Put differently, the creative combination of various lighting codes (backlighting, sidelighting, underlighting, etc.) serves to express the effects of domination, drama and secrecy, to name but a few (Monaco 1981: 159).

Thirdly, luminance allows for the attention of the spectator to be drawn to determined areas of the screen. According to Bordwell and Thompson (1990: 133), the combination of "[l]ighter and darker areas within the frame help create the overall composition of each shot and hence guide our eyes to certain objects and actions." To be more precise, lighting constantly emphasises and de-emphasises the constituents of a scene by either accentuating or shading their presence (Brown 1996: 12, Corrigan and White 2009: 81).

Lighting also reveals texture. A combination of its source, direction and quality can determine the degree of perceived roughness or softness of an object (Bordwell and Thompson 1990: 133-134, Brown 1996: 11). Furthermore, as Wharton and Grant (2005: 44, 46) observe, luminance can on the one hand generate "depth and meaning" or, conversely, "flatten forms, to create a more two-dimensional effect."

According to Brown (1996: 12), luminance is even credited with psychological values. Its colour can trigger emotional responses in the audience, so that, for instance, orange surfaces are associated with heat while blue spaces evoke a sensation of cold. Put differently, "[t]he filmmaker can present a story in such a way that it provides affectively charged reactions, and these affectively charged sensations are suggestive of, and may elicit, human moods" (Plantinga 2012: 465).

Though light in Film Studies is a separate field in its own right, this brief overview of some of its key features and functions has shown the importance of luminance as an intrinsic element in the appreciation of film meaning. As Brown (1996: 12) observes, light not only makes major contributions to modulating our perception, but it also influences the mechanisms of human memory, and marks its presence in cultural responses to objects of visual culture.

3. Light and contrast in audio description: some insights from guidelines and research

Recently, various cinematographic codes have been enjoying a considerable increase of attention from media accessibility scholars. Pérez Payá (2007) studies the audio description of the language of cameras. Later (2010), using a tagged film corpus, she compiles a catalogue of professional description strategies for elements of cinematographic language such as editing, types of shots, mise-en-scène, etc. Fryer and Freeman (2012) discuss the benefits of what they call a "cinematic" AD style, while Wilken (2013) explores the impact mise-en-shot components have on the interpretation of audio described films.

Despite the fact that an increasing number of studies are dedicated to that field, lighting, a prominent cinematographic code itself, still remains a rather unexplored area. An overview of the existing guidelines and best practice codes for audio description confirms that.

The ITC (2000: 13) guidelines mention the importance of the reference to the passing of time when setting the scene in AD. They state that even a one-word description can be helpful for the target audience (e.g. *That night*, *The next morning*). Similarly, in the *Audio Description Guidelines for Greek*, Georgakopoulou (2008) recommends that one indicate in each scene whether the action takes place at night or during the day and whether the set is cloudy or dark. The same observation is made in the standards developed by the American Council of the Blind (2009: 6). According to this document, when describing time of day, the describer should make it clear whether it is light or dark, overcast or sunny. The Draft Audio Description Guidelines provided by Media Access Australia (2010) recommend describing lighting, in addition to "locations, settings, characters, clothing, facial expressions and mannerisms," provided there

is enough time. However, the authors do not offer any further suggestions on how best to verbalise the versatile aspects of luminance.

A common observation made in all these and similar documents is that literal references to film terminology should be avoided. Instead, the majority of the authors suggest using commonly known terms or, where possible, describing the impact of the relevant technique (Rai *et al.* 2010: 39).

Generally speaking, most of the existing guidelines for audio description do not explicitly mention lighting as an element to be considered when working on film AD script. Interestingly enough, luminance is an important issue in the description of performing arts, especially dance (cf. standards by the American Council of the Blind 2009) However, the particularities of the use of lighting for such performances are beyond the scope of this article. Furthermore, this brief overview reveals that, of the many functions attributed to film lighting, the consulted best practice codes recognise only that related to plot punctuation. The remaining areas of luminance application are largely unaccounted for.

As far as research is concerned, so far no contribution has been made concerning how lighting helps narrate stories and how its configuration, or the effects thereof, are rendered in AD. Representing the bottom-up analysis approach, Mascarenhas (2013) discusses the issues of focalisation through lighting on the basis of a Brazilian TV mini-series. Other than that, no further studies on film lighting and AD using top-down methodology exist to date.

However, there seems to be a repeated claim amongst many media accessibility scholars that the particular choices of film directors and editors need to be verbally represented: Haig (2002), states that the substance of audio descriptions on the market remains "amateur" and consequently fails to acknowledge the vision and the figure of the director as the ultimate creator and designer of cinematographic reality. In a similar vein, Orero and Wharton (2007: 171) stress the importance of cinematographic codes and techniques for the overall expression of the relevant film, at the same time highlighting the necessity of their incorporation into the script, as they may have been used by the film crew "with a clear purpose." Vercauteren (2012: 215) arrives at a similar conclusion and claims that the decisions made by the creative crew "determine what specific narrative text the audience will finally be presented with." Furthermore, Kruger (2012) calls for the inclusion of visually functional details in the process of image interpretation and concludes by saying that one of the principal aims of AD should be to facilitate the closest possible interaction of the audience with the film, not with the person reading the AD script. Finally, Orero (2012: 16–17) states that "[u]nderstanding the language of films will be a step forward in the creation of an AD language."

Therefore, the main focus and principal motivation of this article is to first conduct a review of current practices for the verbalisation of light and contrast patterns in AD. Then, the author will investigate whether there is a correspondence between the importance and versatility of luminance in film and their reflection in AD.

4. The case study

Having established the necessity of studying the issue of audio description and film lighting, this paper now moves on to an analysis of luminance using a determined corpus of audio described movies. It is important to point out here that, at this point, it is beyond the scope of this work to discuss the possible implications that the relevant modes of luminance verbalisation can have on the target audience. The following investigation is rather a seminal attempt to bring together and systematise the identified approaches.

4.1. Corpus

The analysis is based on a corpus of six professionally audio described films (some of the data provided in this section was consulted at Amazon.co.uk and imdb.com):

- *21* (2008). Dir. R. Luketic, Sony Picture Home Ent. ITFC audio description by Sam Clock. DVD release date 08.09.2008;

- *Firewall* (2006). Dir. R. Loncraine, Warner Home Video. ITFC audio description by Mark Levesley, John Wolskel and James O'Hara voiced by Mark Levesley. DVD release date 24.07.2006;

- *Gridiron Gang* (2006). Dir. P. Joanou, Sony Picture Home Ent. Audio description by IMS. DVD release date 04.06.2007;

- *Perfect Stranger* (2007). Dir. J. Foley, Sony Pictures Home Ent. Audio description written and produced by IMS. DVD release date 10.09.2007;

- *The Brave One* (2007). Dir. N. Jordan, Warner Home Video. ITFC audio description by Matthew Vickers. DVD release date 11.02.2008;

- *The Punisher* (2004). Dir. J. Hensleigh, Sony Picture Home Ent. ITFC audio description by Aimee de Larrabeiti. DVD release date 24.01.2005.

All these titles represent mainstream cinema. They are unilingual films, with dialogues in English, encoded for Region 2 (the UK, Europe, Japan,

South Africa and the Middle East). The intention of the author was to select films which were released after 2000, which was when the ITC *Guidance on Standards for Audio Description*, a major set of instructions for describers, was developed. As far as their genre is concerned, Amazon.co.uk lists all the above mentioned titles under the category of "crime, thrillers and mystery." However, it should be noted that they also have elements of action, drama or even sports, and so the prominence of a particular genre may fluctuate depending on the scene (cf. Jaffe 2008: 6).

4.2. Methodology

The state of the art review discussed in Section 2 of the present paper revealed a wealth of functions attributed to lighting within the field of Film Studies. For the sake of this research, however, only the four most prominent luminance features were selected:

- plot punctuation;
- setting perception;
- character perception;
- eye guidance.

All films were watched several times, first with no audio description, and any observed instances of particular lighting usage were noted. Then, a series of new viewings followed, this time accompanied by the audio descriptive track. The previously identified scenes and scene fragments were analysed in terms of verbal references made to the relevant lighting feature. The spotted AD excerpts were transcribed literally and presented in separate tables. The research is qualitatively oriented. Therefore, those instances where the same phenomenon occurred several times in the corpus and was always described in the same way were eventually excluded from the tables. Also, in many cases the enumerated functions of light have an influence on each other: for example, a single lighted object attracts the attention of the viewer, but it also determines the way the whole scene is illuminated (apart from the item in question, the rest of the scene constituents will probably be considerably darker). Even so, an attempt was made to make a distinction between respective luminance set-ups and their descriptive counterparts. This approach enabled a clear overview of the correspondences between the visual and verbal information.

5. The analysis

The following sections present the outcomes of the conducted analysis. Each is based on a table containing portions of AD texts organised in accordance with the lighting functions listed in Section 4.2.

5.1. Plot punctuation

Along with iconography (changing cards in the calendar), text on screen (intertitles) or editing (time-lapse footage), the manipulation of lighting is one of the most popular methods to indicate the passing of time in cinema. After all, as Geuens (2000: 151) observes:

> Light dominates our universe: it functions as its heartbeat, helping us count the days. Daily life responds to its rhythm. We are at home in its tempo. We respond to its changes, its moods. We adapt ourselves to a world punctuated by its presence. Throughout our entire life, we bathe in it.

This is why the consequent audio descriptive rendition of a film's temporal circumstances is a recommendation unanimously repeated in the existing guidelines. The following table illustrates the verbal equivalents of the changing light levels.

EVENING/NIGHT
In the night air
Night
Night sky
Night-time city streets
Night sky beside a full moon
Under a full moon
A building sits in the darkness under a pitch-black sky
That night
After dark
The lights are off
After lights are out
Sun starts to set
Dusk
That evening
It's already dark outside
An expanse of water rippling before the skyline in the darkness
Silhouetted against an indigo sky, the house's lights are reflected in the gently lapping waters of the bay

Table 1. Audio descriptions of night settings

DAY
Night gives way to a wet morning
A golden shaft of light stretches across the gently rippling water
Dull morning light seeps in through the windows
The pale golds of early morning sun
Broad daylight
Harsh light of morning

In the morning
In daylight
Daytime
Day
New day dawns
A new day
The sun shines brightly

Table 2. Audio descriptions of daytime settings

In the corpus material, the changes from day to night and vice versa were very frequent. However, the analysis of those instances revealed that, contrary to what the guidelines advise, sometimes the AD failed to mention the temporal setting. Occasionally, the onset of a new day was instead referred to by means of the description of the actions performed by the characters (e.g. *Erika is in an office*), rather than described literally. A recurring description strategy for time-indicative changes of light levels was the use of the word *later*.

As is generally the case with audio description, the available time dictates the length and the richness of the script. Since the films chosen for this analysis contained many elements of quick action, only succinct, often one-word descriptions for plot punctuation could be provided.

5.2. Setting perception

Usually, crime films and scenes of murder are shot in very low light (cf. Keating 2010). This adds to the atmosphere of mystery and increases the suspense. Sparsely lit interiors where the plot develops, sinister city corners where the action takes place, sharp contrasts between gritty surfaces and sudden pools of light — all this serves as an additional layer to the story line, a conspicuous visual complement to the narrative. The audio descriptive counterparts of these features of light are presented in the table below.

SETTING PERCEPTION
Hurries along the street in the dark
Creeps along the darkened corridor
Dark basement/alley/street
Dingy basement
Unlit country road
Gloomy corridor
Dimly lit corridor
Smoky gambling room
Dim
The sky is filled with swollen dark gray clouds
Sunlight floods in through the entrance door and washes over the walls

A thin sliver of daylight filters in through a mesh window
Light seeps in through the windshields
Shadowy flyover complex
Shrouded in mist
Trashcans cast long shadows
Gleaming skyscrapers under gray sky
Gray wintery street
Ben stands in the shadows by the door
Glittering cityscape of Las Vegas
In the light of wall-mounted candelabras
Iridescent lights glance off the black body of the limo
Neon-lit Street
Floodlit stadium
Orange street lights
Brightly lit terminal
Blue lights flashing
Under pulsating strobe lights
Glittering silver tunnel walkway
Garish light fitting of orange and red bulbs
Dazzling Las Vegas skyline
Lights gleaming on the horizon
Vertical lines of blue and red lights adorn...
A pyramid bejeweled with blue lights
Strobing rays of orange lights
Bathed in muted amber light

Table 3. Audio descriptions of the settings shaped by luminance

As was the case with plot punctuation, the visual mood of the corpus films was not always carefully described. This was particularly the case with the symbolic meaning of some colours (e.g. silvery blue for cold, yellowish green for misery and decay). On the other hand though, the heat of the settings conveyed by the use of colour filters was often, though not in a consistent manner, marked by descriptions of the colour orange and its variations (*bathed in muted amber light*, etc.) However, most of the guidelines for AD encourage the description of any colour, particularly because of its potential to evoke effective connotations in the target audience. For example, according to the ITC Guidance (2000: 21), "[g]reen is fresh, the colour of renewal and nature in spring. Red is the colour of fire and heat, exuberant and overt, blue is more reserved, yellow is the colour of the sun and ripe corn, etc. […] Colours have meaning and should be described." Furthermore, the conducted analysis revealed that the descriptions of the dramatic visual mood of the scenes were very repetitive and lacked variation. Most of the interiors were referred to as *dark*, *gloomy* or *dingy*. This runs counter to what the ITC Guidance (2000: 13) states: "[s]etting the scene is an essential part of audio description.

[…] Any word that appears too frequently in a description, becomes a distraction […].".

Also, when talking about the visual mood of the settings, it should be noted that very often it is the original audio of the film that supports its style. Scenes where the protagonist follows a villain will frequently feature clearly audible sounds of breathing or footsteps creeping down an empty corridor. In those instances, following the ITC Guidance (2000: 14), "[t]he programme should be allowed to breathe from time to time, allowing the soundtrack and atmosphere to come through."

5.3. Character perception

Lighting moulds characters. This effect is obtained by means of a skilful combination of four major lighting features: quality, direction, source and colour (Bordwell and Thompson 1990: 134). As a result, the director can "control the look and functions of a shot [and] [...] enhance the expressive potential of the film" (1990: 137). After all, as Wharton and Grant (2005: 10) observe, "[h]ow could we consider a film's presentation of a character without considering the way in which that character is lit and photographed?". In the case of crime films, appropriate use of luminance can help the audience recognise the bad characters and distinguish them from the good ones. The table below illustrates the instances of explicit descriptions of character-defining lighting.

CHARACTER PERCEPTION
Silhouetted against the flames/the rising sun/the bright white rectangle of sunlight/the orange glow of distant street lights
Sunlight framing his silhouette
His own figure
He watches from the darkness in the doorway of her apartment
Steps out of the shadows
He is standing in the weak light radiating from the CCTV monitors

Table 4. Audio descriptions of character-defining lighting

Despite the large potential of luminance "to sculpt the characters' features" (Bordwell and Thompson 1990: 134), the analysed audio description scripts make very few explicit references to the ways in which this impact is exerted. Also, this category revealed the greatest number of inconsistencies in describing (or not) the relevant technique. In the corpus material most descriptive attention was paid to backlight, verbalised usually by means of the phrase *silhouetted against [...]*. However, the techniques most commonly used to shape characters were the combination of soft and hard luminance, as well as sidelight. While no literal references to these features of light were observed in the analysed material, other modes of verbalising them were identified instead. These will be discussed in detail in Section 5.5.

5.4. Eye guidance

As Brown (1996: 12) observes, "[l]ight directs our *focus*." This function is usually accomplished by the juxtaposition of lit and shaded spaces or by means of the use of spotlight. A sole item lit on the background of an otherwise dark surface immediately attracts the attention and allows the audience to infer that it will be important for the action (cf. Bordwell and Thompson 1990: 279). The audio descriptive counterparts of this technique are presented in the following table.

EYE GUIDANCE
He walks towards a security light gleaming in the darkness
Towards a flashlight
Steps into a pale shaft of light
Spotlit tables
The earrings sparkle in the half-light
Helicopter's searchlight cuts through the darkness
Light from windows washes over her face
Lightning flashes illuminating Frank
Headlights glaring through the rain
He uses the light on his gun to peer into the gloom
Floodlights illuminate the building entries
A shadow moves along the wall
Light shines through the hole in the floor to Joan's tearful eye
Harsh light from the train carriages glows in the windows

Table 5. Audio descriptions of lighting as eye guidance tool

The majority of the audio description fragments quoted above indicate both the source of the light (*light from windows*, *light on his gun*, *a security light gleaming in the darkness*) and the object subject to its impact (*tables*, *her face*, *building entries*). In this way, the AD corroborates the 'luminic existence' of the relevant item on the screen and walks its users through the setting, drawing attention to plot-significant elements.

However, this category also featured some inconsistencies. For example, in the film *21* (Luketic, 2008), when the main character enters a casino, he sees rows of black jack tables lit by hanging lamps. The audio description of this fragment refers to the tables as *spotlit*. Later in the film, the same protagonist is seized by the casino authorities. They keep him in a dark basement, where the only source of light is an overhead lamp dangling from the ceiling. In this instance, however, in spite of a similar effect, the AD only mentions the general characteristics of the setting (*tied to a chair in a dingy room*).

5.5. Other descriptions for image expression

While Sections 5.1., 5.2., 5.3. and 5.4. of this paper illustrate the immediate verbal references to light and contrast, this part addresses the alternative ways of rendering the information identified in the compiled corpus. As it turns out, lighting does not necessarily have to be referred to in terms of its intensity, direction or source. Often it can be expressed by means of verbs and adjectives, the facial expressions of the characters or even the prosody of the describer. Table 6 presents some relevant examples.

OTHER DESCRIPTIONS FOR IMAGE EXPRESSION
Ben looks thoughtful
Pensively
Forlorn figure
Ashen face is a mask of mystery
Haunted expression
Haggard and anxious
Long tired face
Disconsolate, pallid Ben
His head bowed
Deserted wharf/train station
A bound man is bitten in the face
A figure in White
Steely-eyed
Frank cuts an imposing figure
They freeze seeing Frank
With a look of grim determination
Hostile, mistrustful glance
Determined look
Glances up at him nervously
Cox gives Jack a hard look
Face hardened with resolve
Cold glance
Unnerved
Watches horrified
Discretely slips into (Hill's darkened office)
Peers into (a dark room)
Erika's face crumples
A fine film of perspiration glistens on his face as he regards her
Sweat glistening in the half light
Drying tears glistening on her cheek
Becomes aware of something going on in the linen cupboard
Bright white light flashes and fills the screen (daydreaming)
Frank has emerged

Table 6. Other audio descriptions for image expression

As mentioned in Section 5.3., lighting quality and sidelight are common tools in crime films for character depiction. The analysis of the corpus material reveals that these techniques are very often implied by means of the description of the facial expression or look of the relevant protagonist. Phrases such as *pensively* or *he looks thoughtful* serve as the descriptive counterparts of "softer lighting [that] blurs contours and textures and makes for more diffusion and gentler contrasts between light and shade" (Bordwell and Thompson 1990: 134). On the other hand, *hard look*, *disconsolate* and *cold glance* correspond to "bold shadows and crisp textures" (*ibid*.) cast by a hard light.

Another descriptive strategy was to verbalise the details visible on the screen as a result of the use of sidelight. These included, for instance, *a fine film of perspiration glistens on his face as he regards her* or *drying tears glistening on her cheek*.

An interesting alternative is used for the halo effect. While, technically, it highlights the edges of the silhouette of the relevant character, the ADs analysed in this study provided the following expression: *Frank cuts an imposing figure*. *They* [the villains he is about to confront] *freeze seeing Frank*. (*The Punisher*, Hensleigh 2004). This implies that there is indeed something heroic about Frank, something to be afraid of.

Also, the use of vivid verbs constitutes a popular strategy for luminance rendition. Words such as *creep* or *slip*, combined with adequate voice intonation, can be indicative of the action taking place in a mysterious setting.

5. Conclusions

The principal aim of this article was to study the importance of light and contrast patterns for film and to investigate the position these assume in the structure of an audio descriptive text. One of the principal conclusions of the conducted analysis is that even though the existing guidelines for audio description seem to recognise only the plot punctuation function attributed to lighting, the AD scripts of the corpus films also proved to verbalise, albeit with varying focus, such features of luminance as mood setting, character moulding and attention guidance. Therefore, it is safe to say that the rendition of lighting in audio description requires more rigour, consistency and attention. Raising awareness amongst the describers about the variety of functions and set-ups lighting can assume could prove helpful when drafting future AD scripts. This paper can be considered a first step towards such systematisation, in that it provides a preliminary compilation of the existing solutions for the AD of lighting. Next, a more comprehensive set of further recommendations based on the technical aspects of use of luminance could be drafted. Such a catalogue should aim to introduce more variety into the descriptions of these tools and could, in

the end, become a useful guide, especially for beginner describers. For the sake of representativeness, the compiled corpus material included audio descriptions developed by two different providers. It could be, however, of potential academic interest to study whether there are differences in the descriptive approaches to luminance and contrast depending on who prepared the script.

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Biography

Anna Maszerowska holds a master's degree in Applied Linguistics from the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland. Currently, she is member of the CaiAC research group at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Her PhD focuses on the incorporation of cinematographically relevant light and contrast patterns into audio description scripts. She also participates as a researcher in the European Project *AD LAB: Audio Description. Lifelong Access for the Blind. 517992-LLP-1-2011-1-IT-ERARMUS-ECUE*. E-mail: Anna.Maszerowska@uab.cat.