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Experimenting with AD for in house TV series: *THUIS*

An example from Flanders

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ABSTRACT

Audio description (AD) for television holds specific challenges. This article analyses the genre-bound features of the Flemish TV series *Thuis*, a new hybrid soap, and explores the options for tailor-made AD guidelines to optimise its AD process and product. It suggests turning some of the series' more mechanical features, typical of soaps, into advantages for the AD scriptwriting process, thereby allowing for a greater systematisation of AD scriptwriting and a more efficient exploitation of the series' website. It is expected that the AD strategies developed for this very specific Flemish context may be adaptable to other TV series with similar genre-specific features. In fact, as is pointed out in the conclusions, some of the suggestions made in this article regarding the use of TV websites are already being implemented.

KEYWORDS

Media accessibility, audio description, AD strategies, TV series, soap opera, work flow.

1. Audio description at the Flemish Public Broadcaster

The Flemish public broadcaster, Vlaamse Radio en Televisie (VRT, Flemish Radio and Television) started providing audio description (AD) in 2012 even though there was no legislation regulating AD provision for television at the time, and there is none today. Instead, the broadcaster operates under a *Beheersovereenkomst* or management contract with the Flemish government and the contract for 2012-2016 stipulates that VRT must improve access to its programmes in order to reach as broad and varied an audience as possible (VRT website). With regard to access for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VIP), the contract states that VRT must provide audio-subtitling (AST) and audio description, the latter only for fiction series. The contract does not specify any AD quota nor does it provide extra funding to support the access service. In brief, it is left up to the broadcaster's translation, subtitling and media access department, which provides interlingual open subtitling, subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH), Flemish Sign Language (online), live-subtitling, AST and AD as well as other forms of text production, to determine what is feasible. At the time of writing, the team had broadcast six different series with AD between 2012 and 2015: *Witse* (season 9, crimi, 2012-2013), *Wolven* (*Wolves*, season 1, drama, 2012-2013), *In Vlaamse Velden* (*In Flanders Fields*, mini series, drama, 2014), *Vriendinnen* (*Girlfriends*, mini series, drama, 2014-2015), *De Ridder* (season 1, crime series, 2013-2014), *De Ridder* (season 2, crime series, 2015), *T.* (season 1, crime series, 2015).

Until now VRT has opted to audio-describe popular crime fiction programmes or high profile VRT-produced drama series, which allows them

to write and record the AD in house and liaise with both producers and directors about content-related decisions. In addition, the broadcaster organises annual accessibility forums for its target groups, for experts from universities and other official bodies. At these forums the public provides feedback on current accessible productions whereas the VRT team unveils its plans for the future, trying to incorporate any requests from its target groups. In 2015 there was a demand for documentaries with AD rather than fiction series only, for foreign language films, and also for the very popular VRT series *Thuis* [At home], the topic of the present paper.

Thuis poses many challenges, the major logistical one being that it is broadcast daily, five days a week, which was not the case for the previous series broadcast with AD. One result of this high broadcasting rhythm, is that the production is often completed last minute, which means that there is little time for writing and recording the AD. The question that the AD-providers of the VRT accessibility team therefore asked me was: how can AD-writing be done most efficiently with a limited staff and budget, while ensuring that quality does not suffer? They also wondered whether guidelines could be developed that would allow for teamwork since that was deemed essential to ensure on-time delivery of the scripts. The teamwork envisaged would consist in having different audio describers work on the same episode independently, after which their respective AD scripts would be merged into one. In order to make this possible and to ensure uniformity, guidelines would have to be devised that clarify what can be relegated to the website, how the introductory sequences and the teaser should be dealt with, and what must be included in the AD of the series proper. Those were therefore the research questions I set out to investigate, using eight trial ADs from the 2014-2015 *Thuis* season, provided by VRT¹. The numbers used in the quotes in this article refer to the eight said episodes. Two of VRT's audio describers, Ludo Schats and Winnie Angiën wrote the eight AD scripts intuitively, using their experience as screenwriters and audio describers, while trying out what they defined as more interpretative, narrative descriptions and more neutral shorter ones, as well as mixtures of the two. The present article is an extensive version of the report that I wrote for the translation department of the broadcaster on the basis of my own analysis of these episodes, the AD scripts and the recordings of the trial ADs. In follow-up research, the tentative suggestions I make in this article will have to be tested on a relevant sample target audience.

2. Starting point and hypotheses

The European ADLAB-project developed strategic guidelines for recorded AD, aiming to cover as many different film and television genres as possible. Its guidelines (Remael et al. 2015; ADLAB) offer audio describers insights and concepts that help them make the right choices when deciding what to include or not in their AD script, and how to translate the (mostly) visual filmic content into words². The starting point of the ADLAB guidelines is that

like ‘translation proper’, traditionally considered to be interlingual translation as defined by Jakobson, AD is a decision-making process that starts from detailed and careful contextualised source text analysis, moves on to the assessment of target audience needs, and results in the determination of micro- and macro-level AD strategies. Similarly, the present article, which reports on a piece of rather ‘utilitarian’ applied research carried out in collaboration with the Flemish Public Broadcaster to fill a very specific need (see previous section), aims to analyse the challenges that *Thuis* poses in order to offer solutions that may simplify the audio-describer’s decision-making process. In other words, source text and target text functions are taken into consideration to determine what can and should be described, and to decide whether it is desirable and feasible to try and preserve the same functions in the target text and how. This may come across as rather ‘prescriptive’ for an academic publication, however, the findings it offers are meant as options, to be further contextualised and tested in practice both for this and for other series.

In brief, my main hypothesis or starting point is that given the nature of *Thuis*, it should be possible to design AD strategies that will allow audio describers to tackle its specific challenges more quickly and more efficiently, i.e. to narrow down the number of choices to be made when deciding whether and how to audio-describe the scenes of a given episode. An additional hypothesis is that, since this is a VRT in-house production that also has a very popular website, input from the production team and good use of the series website, including provision of audio introductions (to date only used for the theatre in Flanders), should considerably improve the quality of the accessibility achieved, while facilitating the task of the audio describer (see also Fryer and Romero-Fresco 2014). The approach discussed below therefore also takes AD from post-production into the production-stage of the programme (Romero-Fresco 2013).

3. The soap genre and *Thuis*

3.1 Soaps and their offspring

Originally, soap operas were a form of serialised (radio and) television drama broadcast daily, usually in the afternoon. The genre goes as far back as the 1930s in the USA. The classic TV soap opera was shown throughout the year, five days a week and its target audience was the American housewife. Soap opera stories were about ordinary people and the events in their daily lives. They were usually set in the present, often in domestic environments and they focused on social and family relationships. Structurally, one of their most prominent features was that the serials did not have a beginning or an end, and that they regularly incorporated cliff hangers to keep the audience hooked. In addition, their narratives were usually slow and they incorporated flash-backs, repetitious dialogue and other devices to repeat crucial information and allow the audience to miss

episodes without losing track of the different intertwining story lines. Other characteristics were paucity of action, a limited number of locations, and the prominent use of dialogues to communicate information. Finally, such serial dramas allowed the audience to acquire intimate knowledge about the characters' lives, to identify with them and become really involved in their stories (Cantor 1983: 19-24). The genre is often considered to be a conservative one, with little artistic merit, and anything but fodder for intellectuals. In the past decades many publications on the different features of the classic soap and its daytime audience have actually announced its demise (see for instance Allen 1986, Beck 2012, Ford et al. 2011).

However, it seems that the genre has adapted to new times, thematically for instance, and that some of its features have also seeped into other, newer prime time television series, or as Ford et al. (2011: 7) write:

Over the past several decades, primetime television has increasingly incorporated elements of serialized storytelling popularized on television by the soap opera, [...] Many popular primetime series, from action/adventure to science fiction to comedy, share soap opera's focus on ongoing characters, storylines that carry over from one episode to the next, and a predominant focus on an ensemble cast of characters and the development of those characters and their relationships over time.

Another feature once thought typical of soaps, the creation of fan communities that span generations, is also being given a new lease of life by contemporary serialised TV series through the establishment of fan websites, and online fan communities on social media (Ford et al. 2011: 8). This relatively new practice creates bonds between audience members and interaction between the producers of the series, the actors and the viewers. Such active participation in the TV series world is encouraged by contemporary television stations producing the series as they provide elaborate and interactive websites, churn out merchandise, and organise live events at which fans and actors can meet – a practice that is also pursued by the makers of *Thuis*. The bond that is thus established between the series, its fictional characters and their audience is an extension of a phenomenon originally connected with the daytime soap opera:

Because soaps draw upon and "spill over into the experiential world of the viewer" (Allen 1983), they are easily integrated into viewers' everyday lives. Indeed, because soaps are so accessible and familiar, many viewers invest substantial time and energy in following them (Harrington and Bielby 1995: 43).

One major difference between the classic daytime soap, today's serialised TV drama, and *Thuis* in particular, resides in its increased cultural standing, which is in its turn connected to the diversification of its audience. Whereas traditional soaps were considered to be "a primarily 'feminine' format, most primetime serials are [...] what we might regard as a 'hybrid' of masculine and feminine television" (Ford et al. 2011: 9), and features that were once key elements of the soap opera, are surfacing in a slightly modified form in

a great variety of TV series, from legal dramas to action series. These include both the serial plot lines and the focus on “interpersonal relationships, intimate conversations, romantic and family conflicts, domestic settings, emotionally aware and sensitive male characters, and professional and powerful female characters” (Ford et al. 2011: 9).

3.2 About *Thuis*

The Flemish Wikipedia page devoted to the TV series *Thuis* classifies the series as a Flemish soap (Thuis, Wikipedia). It was first broadcast on 23 December 1995 and had its 20th birthday party on 23 December 2015 with a major live event. *Thuis* is the most popular and longest running TV series ever broadcast by VRT, with an average of one million viewers. Like traditional soaps, the series takes place at a limited number of locations and is constructed around a limited (but increasingly numerous) number of characters. These have changed over time, only a few of the original ones remain, and they do not all feature in every episode, however, their specific story-lines intertwine. They all know each other, they have a history together and their stories focus on their personal and professional problems, love triangles, intrigues, long-standing feuds etc. In other words, *Thuis* falls within Ford’s category of the prime time series that has incorporated soap characteristics with a “predominant focus on an ensemble cast of characters and the development of those characters and their relationships over time” (2011: 7).

At the same time, *Thuis* can hardly be considered a true example of the classic soap opera genre. The series was created at the end of the twentieth century and its themes certainly are not ‘feminine’³. To my knowledge, there is no in depth study into the demographics of the series viewers’ profile but judging from the fan websites and my interviews with audio-describer Ludo Schats and producers Elvira Kleynen and Wim Jansen (personal communication, 15/01/2015), the viewers’ ages range from “seven to seventy-seven.” The series is aired five days a week, like a traditional soap, but in a prime time slot accessible to all age and population groups.

As a result, *Thuis* has acquired a huge and diverse fan base that knows the stories, attends the occasional live events and communicates about the characters and their lives via numerous fan websites and social media, speculating about where life may take their favourite characters, as if they were their own family members. In addition, VRT itself has an elaborate *Thuis* website (Eén). This includes clips from all the previous seasons, as well as the current one, bionotes of the characters, with their photo and a short clip; and teasers, speculating about the next episodes (see also section 5.).

In brief, the series fits the mixture of soap opera characteristics with a new twist described in 3.1. It is broadcast five days a week (but on prime time), it has story lines that carry over from one episode to the next, it focuses on a range of (male and female) characters, their development and the development of their relationships. Character interaction is largely carried by the dialogues, all the encounters take place at a set number of locations and other types of 'action' are scarce. In addition, *Thuis* can count on a large and active (internet) fan community that spans many generations. At first sight, this very mixture appears to hold serious challenges for AD (especially due to the talkative nature of series), however, its soap-like characteristics and internet fan base also offer specific AD options.

4. Audio-describing *Thuis*: the challenges

4.1 Structural issues

Each episode of *Thuis* in the corpus under consideration consists of four parts: the recap of the previous episode, the presentation of some of the main characters, the episode proper and a teaser. This structure reflects the need to accommodate ongoing story lines. Needless to say, in both the preambles and the concluding sequences the editing is extremely fast. The recap sequences feature one to three-turn conversations between characters, all cliff-hangers of sorts, that highlight ongoing conflicts and relationships. Next, the credits give the first name of the character with the full name of the corresponding actor over scenes showing the characters in various situations that typify them to some degree. However, there is no dialogue (this is replaced by the series' theme song), and the short clips cannot really be linked to any particular episode. Towards the end of each episode this theme song sets in again, to mark the beginning of the teaser, which consists of even shorter snippets of character interaction from the next episode. In this teaser, one can see the actors' lips move, but cannot hear them speak. This means that even for a sighted audience it is sometimes very difficult to understand what exactly is going on. The main challenge posed by all the different introductory and concluding sequences resides in the fact that there is little or no narrative logic or dialogue for the description to hold on to.

The core episodes themselves last about 35 minutes and count 8 to 12 scenes. Most of these involve dialogic interaction between 2 to 3 characters, whereas some are built around exchanges among a larger group, usually in a specific 'group setting,' such as a café or a bar. All the scenes are very compact. Each one is devoted to a 'core event,' that is, a specific moment in an ongoing interpersonal relationship that propels the relationship into the next stage of its development. However, the interaction is never finalised, as each scene ends on an open question or an emotional cliff hanger, again, reflecting the need to optimise the suspense the ongoing story lines require. The narrative thread may be taken up again in a

subsequent scene within the same episode and then this structure is repeated. The emotional ups and downs that constitute the content of each of the scenes, and indeed of the series as a whole, are largely carried by the dialogues (as indicated in 3.2), which in their turn are supported by a limited range of facial expressions and movements. These are part and parcel of nonverbal communication and are sometimes seen as part of “kinetics,” which includes “both gestures [...] and facial expressions, but also more subtle manifestations of body language, such as postures, gazes, the heaving of a chest or even the movement of a hand hidden in a pocket” (Mazur 2014: 180). All other types of actions that the characters undertake are subservient to this emotion-driven interaction: they may enter or leave a location, move about that location, sit down, dance, or get into or out of a car. In short, such physical actions or broader movements allow the series to maintain a degree of realism, but they are basically excuses for allowing the emotional intrigues to develop (see also 5.2).

On the one hand, this means that there is relatively little action for the AD to describe apart from the kinetics. On the other hand, the time available for AD is minimal since it must be inserted in between dialogues and preferably steer clear of narratively relevant sounds and atmospheric music, while identifying and describing the locations, identifying the time of action and the characters present at the scene as well as their emotional states (see ADLAB guidelines).

4.2 The TV series audience

Popular TV series, and especially soaps, including the long-running contemporary hybrids that are broadcast five days a week, have very faithful audiences. This is certainly the case for *Thuis* (see 3.2). The requests that VRT has been receiving for an audio-described version of the series, indicates that it is also popular with VIP's, even though no accurate figures are available to 'prove' this.

Given the devotion of the *Thuis* fans to their series, it is safe to assume that they will know the characters and most if not all of their back stories, and also that this is equally true for the VIP viewers. This then raises an issue that is not particular to *Thuis* alone. Most series that are provided with AD are confronted with the question whether the typical recaps and character introductions really must be described. And if description is required: how much? It may be tedious to have to sit through the same introductions time and again, however, so does the sighted audience. Should one deprive the VIP audience of introductions just because they may come across as more repetitive when verbalised? Or because they present a serious challenge for AD due to their extremely fast editing and limited reliance on narrative logic? I will return to these issues in section 5.

4.3 Hard times

Finally, these are hard times for broadcasters, and VRT more specifically, has been subjected to substantive cuts in its public funding for the past decade or longer. This means that the dedicated team of its translation department is almost pursuing its mission against all odds, aiming to provide qualitative SDH and AD and to meet the demand of its target audiences. As a result, they are constantly revising and rethinking their work flow, which includes testing different methods to improve cost-efficiency.

Producing an AD version of *Thuis* would mean firstly, writing and recording ADs for five episodes a week, and secondly, finding ways to make the AD pay for itself, or at least to some extent. All popular VRT series are also sold on DVD, with AD if it is available. However, considering the 'talkative' nature of *Thuis*, the translation department suggested to the producers that an audio-described version of *Thuis* might lend itself to the production of an audio drama or radio play since, theoretically, in an audio-described film the original audio-visual text is replaced by a pure audio version (see Reviers and Remael 2015). However, this would only be financially viable if the AD already produced for TV broadcasting could be used. It is beyond the scope and remit of this article to go into the VRT's cost-cutting measures, and even to tackle the idea of what would be required (if anything) to turn a film with AD into an audio drama⁴. The AD solutions detailed below are mostly meant to offer solutions for a faster and effort-efficient AD work flow for *Thuis* specifically, and similar TV series, by extension. The idea of turning the described version of *Thuis* into an audio drama or even a radio play will be considered occasionally, when some alternative AD solutions are discussed since the double purpose it implicates (an AD version that is suitable for television and for radio or another form of aural recording) may have an impact on the preferred AD strategies.

5. Audio-describing *Thuis*: the solutions

One major advantage of contemporary TV series such as *Thuis* is that they already have a website with a wealth of information about the series (see end note 7). Many of the AD challenges that such series present today can therefore be met by making these websites accessible to all, not only in terms of how information is presented (a requirement for most accessibility labels) but also in terms of what additional information can be supplied.

Little or no research has been done into this matter but it would appear that a mixture of the type of information currently supplied by audio introductions for the theatre (Reviers 2014; York 2007) and the information on any TV-series website or fan website, with additional verbal information to supplement the visuals, should constitute a good first step. Indeed, from our analysis of the eight trial episodes of the series with AD

(see 1.), which did not yet make use of the website, it soon became apparent that the AD would never have sufficient time to describe all that is required efficiently without this support.

5.1 Tackling recaps, character introductions and teasers

Many TV series have recaps or at least some form of introductory sequence, even crime series such as *Rizzoli and Isles* (Tamaro, 2010) or *NCIS* (Bellisario, McGill, 2003) whose episodes have self-contained narratives. The concept of these introductory sequences is usually the same, even though not all include dialogue, and they present at least two basic challenges for AD. Firstly, they consist of very short and quickly edited shots; secondly, different viewers (newcomers, occasional viewers and fans) will have different advance knowledge of the series, which mostly matters if the story lines continue across episodes, as is the case with *Thuis*. Its introductions, with the accompanying theme song, are part and parcel of the series and even some fans will watch them, or possibly use them to hear when the series is starting. In addition, AD has a social function and making a series accessible does not only entail ensuring the sensorial barrier is bridged but also allowing VIP's to take part in the fan conversations and discussions surrounding the actors, the characters and their stories. If the aim is to provide full access, AD is required.

The AD team experimenting with the trial versions of *Thuis* looked into different ways of describing a few of the recap and teaser sequences without finding a completely satisfactory solution. Having analysed the episodes and the structure of the sequences, the best logical option, according to this author, would be to give priority to the main function of the sequences in question thereby aiming at a form of dynamic equivalence, borrowing Nida's term (1964), while ensuring the internal cohesion of the ADs verbal rendering, or its intratextual coherence, in Vermeer's terms (Reiss and Vermeer 1984). I discuss the possibilities below. Considering the limited budget of the broadcaster (see 4.3), a simpler, less expensive option (1) and a more elaborate, expensive option (2) are given. Options (1a) and (1b) can only be used once at least one episode has been audio-described.

5.1.1 The recaps

In the recap, the setting is barely visible and irrelevant. It consists of two to three-turn conversations between characters that focus on a crisis point from the previous episode that are mostly filmed in close-up. There is barely any time for the AD to introduce the conversations. According to Mazur (2014: 185) the kinesics accompanying verbal interaction can be divided into three categories:

- the facial expression or gesture is discourse-supporting, i.e. confirms the dialogue but adds nothing new (AD is not a must);
- the facial expression or gesture is discourse filling, i.e. it completes what is being said (AD is required);
- the facial expression or gesture is discourse-conflicting, i.e. it contradicts what is being said (AD is required).

However, due to the use of close-up shots the characters' gestures are often not visible and the non-verbal kinetics of the conversations remain very limited – as is the time for AD. Fortunately, the snippets of dialogue are usually chosen so as to be meaningful in themselves, like short sound bites. The AD (underlined) can therefore limit itself to signalling who talks to whom, as in example (1) ⁵:

(1) Ann and her friend Mayra: I have no problem with your pregnancy but with the way you got pregnant (3567).

And yet, in some cases, the description resorts to a more 'narrative' tactic (see 1.), rendering the atmosphere of the scene or the tension between the characters explicitly, as in examples (2) and (3), even if the dialogue is self-explanatory and needs no support,

(2) Rosa surprises Marjan: "Maya has been trying to get pregnant for some time." (3573)

(3) Marjan threatens Mayra: "Go on, laugh, you won't keep on laughing." (3573)

The reason for this additional information is the centrality of emotions in *Thuis*, which means that it may be better to enhance them, even if this is not required, strictly speaking (cf. Mazur 2014). What then, are the options for future Ads?

Options (1) (a) and (b)	Option (2)
<p>Option (1a) Use the AD from the previous episode.</p> <p>Option (1b) Use the AD from the previous episode and make the open audio-described⁶ version of the entire previous episode available through the website instead of the current non-described one.</p>	<p>Write a new AD for each recap sequence, ensuring that the interlocutors are always identified <i>and</i> that the core action or emotion expressed in the clip is either clear through the dialogue and/or named explicitly by the AD.</p>

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the different options? Since the context in which the conversations occurred (in the previous episode) is lost in the recaps, option (1a), may be problematic in terms of intratextual coherence, if the original AD relies implicitly on parts of the interaction that are not repeated here and if the turn quoted does not function independently of the (deleted) preceding and following conversational turns. The AD may present only one of the characters, for instance, because the other was identified earlier on in the conversation, whereas in the recap both interlocutors must be identified. Nevertheless, for anyone who has seen or heard the previous episode, one character introduction in combination with the dialogue may suffice. Moreover, the characters of *Thuis* often appear in the same company. In other words, if character A is talking, the presence of character B can be surmised virtually automatically – if only by regular viewers. Since *Thuis* viewers visit the *Thuis* website regularly, the financially viable option (1), should work for all, especially if the original AD also underlines the emotional content of the exchange (as in examples 2 and 3).

5.1.2 Character introductions

These extremely short clips introduce the characters and the actors, while the soundtrack features the theme song. The sequence conveys a positive and happy mood, which is supported by the lyrics that sing the praise of having *een thuis* or 'a home.' Neither the location, nor the time of the action are of any importance. There is no dialogue, nor is there any narrative context. Virtually all the characters are shown smiling and in a happy mood. The AD can allow the music and lyrics to convey this positive feeling, while briefly presenting the characters (as in example (4)), varying its phrasing in order to avoid monotony.

(4) "We present: *Thuis* with Jannes Coesens as Stan and Monika Van Lierde as Ann. Wim Stevens is Tom and Vaya Wellens, Femke."

Again, not describing these sequences is not an option: it is important for the VIPs to know who is who when they are watching the introduction, since this allows them to enjoy the series in sync with the sighted audience, especially if the characters are presented in greater detail on the series website.

5.1.3 Teasers and credits

The VRT's trial ADs did not contain any workable solutions for the description of the teasers and credits. Example (5) is therefore a fictional one, written by the author, and a fairly non-conformist type of AD. Indeed, the teasers and credits call for an alternative approach if a form of dynamic equivalence as well as intratextual coherence are to be maintained.

The basic choice is between describing the very brief snippets of actions from the next episode that follow each other on screen in quick succession, or simply reading the equally fast credits scrolling across them. This is what one test AD did, however, the credits proved to be too fast for anyone to be able to follow the read-out version. What is more, all the information pertaining to the production can already be found on the website, where it can be read with text to speech software. However, while this makes it quite simple to decide which option to abandon, it does not offer a solution for tackling the very fast and fragmented visuals of the teaser. Applying the strategy used for the introduction is no option since there are no dialogues to rely on in the teasers, the theme song is very dominant, and sometimes only one character is shown. Actually, the editing purposefully keeps the actions on screen vague and ambiguous.

This may therefore be the function the AD must try to convey through a form of ongoing narration, again, to maintain dynamic equivalence. Since the AD cannot possibly remain synchronous with the fast-changing images on screen, a narration that reveals some but not all, contains questions, leaves time for the theme song to be heard and ends in a verbal cliffhanger may be the solution. This is what the narrated AD below tries to do.

(5) Mayra doesn't look happy. How will she cope? The issues between her and Tom have not yet been resolved... and what is Lowie doing in that truck? Could he be a thief?

5.2 Tackling the *Thuis* episodes

As our discussion of the soap characteristics of *Thuis* indicated, the characters' relationships and the intrigues in which they are involved both at home and at work constitute the central interest of the series, their story lines develop from one episode to the next and most scenes are carried by the dialogue, which leaves little time for the AD.

Any yet, in order to preserve this central interest, emotions and emotional reactions must be described - even if AD traditionally shies away from describing emotions for fear of being subjective. Actually, the VRT's supposedly 'neutral' trial descriptions tended to shift into narration and interpretation too because 'pure' description turned out to be far too monotonous and yielded an AD that lacked cohesion (see also Vercauteren and Orero 2013). Moreover, in view of the idea that some of the VRT team put forward, i.e. to try out whether audio-described series could also function as radio plays or audio dramas, a narrative rather than a so-called objective or neutral descriptive style seems more appropriate⁷.

Fortunately, the very soap-like features of the series also have an advantage in that they allow the AD to develop a systematic approach (see 1.). The structure of the episodes and the scenes narrating the different

personal stories is quite repetitive and the type of emotions conveyed remains limited. Moreover, the emotions themselves are rather obvious and partly or entirely clarified by the dialogue (see also section 5.1.1). Finally, since *Thuis* is an in-house production, the directors and producers of the series are within reach if explanations are required, and the original screenplays are available (even if screenplays must always be tested against the series as filmed, see Remael 2008).

Even now, the analysis of the scenes provided by VRT showed that most if not all scenes allow for brief general descriptions just before the action and dialogue start, and towards the end of a scene, after the last line has been spoken. These brief time slots in conjunction with the information to be given on the website enable the AD to construct a frame narrative that allows for more freedom of choice for the description of the core action.

5.2.1 Audio-describing the different constituents of the episodes

All the scenes are characterised by a very compact form of narration. While a lot of things happen simultaneously, the action always focuses on one key aspect in the evolution of the relationship between two or more characters.

5.2.1.1 Beginnings

To function as a narrative framework, the opening AD of each *Thuis* scene must combine the identification of characters and setting with a brief description of narratively important action. Time of action hardly ever needs to be mentioned since the episodes usually develop chronologically and flash-backs are rare. If the dialogue starts immediately, this factual AD must be inserted at the end of the previous scene though this is usually at the expense of the description of that scene's emotional cliffhanger⁸. The examples below are from episode 3568 (scenes with 2 to 3 characters).

(6) In de keuken van <i>Zus en Zo</i> . Waldek schenkt zich een glas in. [In the kitchen of <i>Zus and Zo</i> . Waldek pours himself a drink]
--

(7) Peter en Tom in hun bureau. Nancy poetst en luistert mee. [Peter and Tom in their office. Nancy is cleaning and listens in]
--

In example (6) not only Waldek but also his wife Rosa are present, which the VIPs discover later on. She is not introduced by the AD for lack of time and because the couple run the pub *Zus & Zo* together. In other words, it is no surprise when she appears or when her voice is heard. All the same, if locations and characters were consistently linked in the audio introductions on the series website, that would further reinforce the connection between the two and reduce the need for AD (see 5.3.2). As it is, the AD gives priority to setting the scene, mentioning the location as well as the presence of Waldek, and specifying that he is pouring himself a drink. This is important narrative information, since viewers who have seen previous

scenes with Waldek (in the same episode or a previous one) know that he is emotionally unstable, which is confirmed by his drinking. The visuals convey the information about his state of mind indirectly, and the AD follows suit. The ensuing dialogue with Rosa will provide new insights into Waldek's psychological problems.

The scene quoted in example (7) features two lawyers in their office, and signals the presence of the cleaning lady, Nancy, also clarifying her function and the fact that she is listening in on the lawyers' conversation. This has to be given priority over a description of the office or the characters themselves since Nancy's eavesdropping is narratively important. She barges in on the conversation later on in the scene, commenting on the topic the lawyers have been discussing. Again, this confirms the role the website could play for character description and for adding detail to the settings, allowing the introductory AD to anticipate the action rather than to devote time to the descriptions of settings that recur and can be described once and for all on the website.

5.2.1.2 Endings

At the end of scenes, one character or other always leaves the current location. How they leave, or the meaningful kinetics of their movements, is as important as the fact that they are leaving since their behaviour is always a form of reaction to previous events and/or an anticipation of things to come (see also 5.2.1.3). The AD must therefore describe the 'how' as much as the 'what.' In the examples given, the AD does just that. For instance, the description of the way in which Ann leaves the room in (9) does justice to its 'kinetics,' suggesting, as her movements do, that there is more trouble ahead. Given the genre-characteristics of *Thuis*, it is absolutely necessary for the AD to interpret and render the final emotions generated by a given interaction, since they will determine subsequent developments, even when the characters' gestures are discourse-supporting (see also 5.1.1). The descriptions thereby confirm and strengthen the message conveyed by the dialogues even when the dialogue might suffice. Examples (8) and (9) are from episode 3572 (scenes with 2 to 3 characters)

3572

(8) Peggy trekt zich met een blijde glimlach terug
[Peggy withdraws, smiling happily.].

(9) Ann schrijdt weg en laat Mayra perplex achter.
[Ann marches out, leaving behind a bewildered Mayra]

Given the usual time constraints, the two types of information, factual and emotional, are best combined in one brief formulation at the end of the scene, except when the time must be devoted to providing the setting for the next encounter. In that case, the audio-describer does not have a choice, even though this is unfortunate since omitting the description of the

final ‘feel’ of an interaction undermines the cohesion of the different narrative lines and the build-up of suspense, while also reducing the extent to which the series could, theoretically, be recycled as an audio drama or radio play.

5.2.1.3 Core business

In order to find out whether it would be possible to formulate strategic guidelines for the core scene content of *Thuis*, I focused my analysis of the 8 episodes in the corpus on the actions that the characters perform and how/whether they are described. Indeed, time hardly ever needs to be mentioned since it is synchronous or undetermined (see Vercauteren and Remael 2014), whereas the settings can be covered by the website. My aim was therefore to find out whether the scenes could be grouped into a limited number of categories that might be helpful in determining what should be described and how, based on the types of actions central to them. This yielded seven types of ‘action’ in the broad sense of the word, six of which always seem to require AD. Depending on the time available, action IV could be ignored since it is entirely discourse-supporting and therefore also conveyed by the dialogue, I give two examples of each action in the table below.

I. A character or characters enter or leave a given location in the course of the scene, usually while expressing a narratively relevant emotion and/or incorporating a physical interaction with another character or characters.	<p>3672 Marjan wil weg maar Mayra komt binnen en verspert de smalle gang. [Marjan wants to leave but Mayra comes in and blocks the narrow corridor.]</p> <p>3568 Ze zien Lena binnen komen. [They see Lena come in.]</p>
II. A character or characters move(s) around in a given location, thereby expressing a narratively relevant emotion and /or interaction with another character or characters.	<p>3672 Olivia staat op en loopt naar de toog. [Olivia gets up and walks to the counter] (introduces subsequent dialogue at the counter)</p> <p>Yvette slikt haar woorden in als Bram binnenkomt. [Yvette bites her tongue when Bram comes in.](explains why she stops talking)</p>
III. In the course of a conversation a character reacts to a dialogue turn with a discourse filling or discourse conflicting gesture, movement or facial expression. The reaction may be	<p>3672 Toon schudt bloedserieus het hoofd. [Toon shakes his head, dead serious.]</p>

(partially) clarified by the next dialogue sequence	Rosa draait zich om, droogt haar handen af aan een vaatdoek en slikt. [Rosa turns around, dries her hands on a kitchen towel and swallows.]
IV. In the course of a conversation a character underlines his or her dialogue turn with discourse-supporting movement/facial expression/sound (the dialogue is perfectly clear).	<p>3568 "Gaaf ge mee naar de <i>Friends</i>?" [Are you coming along to the <i>Friends</i>? (a pub)] The entire dialogue (which cannot be rendered here) indicates that Lowie is very surprised to be invited along but nevertheless the AD specifies:</p> <p>Lowie weet niet wat ie hoort. [Lowie can't believe his ears.]</p> <p>3572 Waldek staat op. Dreigend naar Mayra: ... [Waldek gets up. Threateningly to Mayra: ...] (Dialogue and voice are quite threatening in themselves)</p>
V. A character's gestures typify him or her, i.e. they characterise him or her or his /her state of mind thereby supporting a given story line.	<p>3568 Waldek blijft in gedachten verzonken. Hij staart naar z'n kop met whisky. Hij giet de whisky in een plant op de vensterbank. [Waldek remains lost in thought. He stares into his teacup filled with whiskey. He pours the whiskey into a potted plant on the windowsill.] (Wadek stares a lot, is often lost in thought, and drinks too much: these are the outward behavioural signs of a problem that obsesses him during most of the episodes of a specific season)</p>
VI. Characters move around in a location in group scenes and their movements serve to group and regroup them, while signalling the beginning and end of subsequent (dialogue) interactions among the subgroups. The movements have a 'realistic' function in that they are linked to the type of location in which the (inter)action takes place.	<p>3672 Femke heeft het druk met opdienen. Luc stevent op de toog af. Tot Paulien: (dialogoog) [Femke is busy waiting on the tables. Luc heads for the counter. To Paulien: (dialogue)]</p> <p>Yvette zit nu aan tafel met een glaasje port. Jana komt binnen met 2 reiszakken. Yvette tovert breed glimlachend een sjaal tevoorschijn. [Yvette is sitting at a table now, with a glass of Port. Jana comes in, carrying</p>

	two travel bags. Yvette smiles and conjures up a scarf, out of nowhere]
VII.A character's action causes a sound or a silence that is difficult to identify or explain for VIPs	<p>3568 In haar flat pakt Nancy boodschappen uit. [In her flat, Nancy unloads her shopping.] (Sound of objects being placed on a hard surface)</p> <p>3572 Even weten ze niet wat te zeggen [For a while, they do't know what to say.] (AD clarifies a long silence)</p>

It goes without saying that the above-mentioned types of actions are sometimes combined. The extent to which this happens is linked to the compactness of the scenes. An important factor determining the presence of action type II, for instance, is the number of characters in the scene. Especially in group scenes, the characters' movements across a given location serve to connect them to each other in different constellations.

Overall, it is always the same three key questions that must be asked when deciding which actions to describe, keeping in mind that much information is contained in the dialogues and that much additional information can be placed on the series website.

These key questions are:

- What is the factual information required (e.g. who exits or talks to whom)?
- To what degree does one want or need to enhance the drama of a given scene?
- How can facts and atmosphere be combined most efficiently to promote conciseness, narrative functionality and coherence?

To conclude, I feel that what the analysis and description of the types of actions in *Thuis* does most of all is provide its describers with a clearer overview of the types of actions and, especially, interactions, to watch out for and include in their AD, which would hopefully speed up their decision-making process. Given the nature of the series, it might be better to even include the discourse-supporting kinetics of category IV in the AD, time permitting.

5.2.1.4 Exceptions

In some cases, but these were surprisingly rare in the case of *Thuis* (there was only one example in the 8 episodes), there will be absolutely no time

for AD in the course of a given scene because the characters are simply talking all the time. In this particular scene (from episode 3568), however, the 'framing' AD, at the end and the beginning of the scene sufficed.

INTRO Tom stapte de loft binnen. Judith ligt gekleed op bed. [Tom enters the loft. Judith is lying on the bed, fully dressed.]	CONCLUSION Duim omhoog en glimlach van Judith [Judith raises her thumb and smiles]
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The introductory AD signals that Judith has a problem, which the audience already knows because this scene links up with previous ones that have dealt with the family issue that is worrying her. Moreover, the core dialogue explains – again – what the trouble is, and in the course of the exchange Tom, her partner, manages to cheer her up, as the concluding AD confirms.

It is to be expected that such scenes will occur in any talkative TV series. However, the combination of dialogue and framing AD, focusing on narratively salient facts in the introduction and narratively salient emotions in the conclusion, should work in most cases. Nevertheless, it does happen that there is no time even at the beginning of a scene to give the required minimal factual information about the characters and the setting, unless the filmmakers take the need for AD into account when editing the series. However, since the number of *Thuis* locations is limited and since the characters are linked to these few locations, VIPs that watch the series regularly should be able to catch on soon enough. For others, the series website can solve the problem if it takes care to link the characters with their most common locations as well as with family members, partners or close friends, when giving their back stories.

5.3 The *Thuis* website

5.3.1 General remarks

Thuis already has a website that contains a lot of information about the series and is also very popular (see end note 7). Even in its current form it is partly accessible for VIPs that have the required text-to-speech software. The focus of the current brief analysis will be on the measures that could be taken to optimise the functioning of the AD.

At the time of writing, the website consisted of four pages:

- Home
- Characters
- All videos
- Previous seasons

The home page hosts the current episode as well as a number of changeable interactive features that allow fans to discuss their favourite characters, for instance. The page entitled *Characters* contains a survey of all the current characters with a captioned photo that has their name, grouped in 'families.' A click on one of the photos takes the user to a short clip from a previous unnamed episode featuring the given character in a short conversation with others, and a written bionote. *All videos* contains clips of individual scenes from the current season and *Previous seasons* has older clips. However, if one does not know the series it is virtually impossible to 'place' the clips in the series' history. Catering more consistently for inclusive design, as suggested below, would allow VIP's to use several of these website features as an audio introduction. More specifically, the current character descriptions and the accompanying introductory clips (see 5.3.2) could be made more functional. An accessible search function would also allow users to find character descriptions more quickly. Right now, the only way to find a given character is by browsing the website.

At present, neither the episodes featured on the website nor the aforementioned clips introducing many of the characters have AD, since none is available as yet, but once AD is provided for the broadcasts it could also be added here.

5.3.2 Suggestions for the website:

5.3.2.1 Character bionotes: current state of affairs

Since the series has been broadcast for 20 years, some characters have come and gone. However, for a newcomer to *Thuis* who is exploring the website it is rather difficult to make out which characters featured on the site are still prominent in the series and which ones belong to the series' past. On the other hand, the organisation of the characters in families is quite useful since it groups those who are likely to appear together. As for the content of the bionotes – there appears to be room for improvement.

A random example

Simone Backx (actress: Marleen Merckx) (Eén. Thuis. Backx).

Simone is de dochter van Yvette. Samen met Frank heeft ze één zoon, Franky. Enkele jaren geleden maakte ze kennis met haar vader Stan, een jeugdliefde van Yvette. Simonne heeft altijd een goede band gehad met de intussen overleden moeder van Frank, Florke, en haar man Rogerke. Voor een luisterend oor kan ze terecht bij haar beste vriendin Julia.

In het verleden heeft Simonne al heel wat slippertjes van Frank met moeite door de vingers gezien. Toch bleek ook voor haar de verleiding te groot wanneer haar ex-man Herman zijn laatste dagen met haar wou doorbrengen. Frank zette haar aan de deur, maar ondanks alles kwamen de twee weer samen.

Op het trouwfeest van Franky werd Simonne aangereden door Femke. De revalidatie blijkt zwaar, maar ze bijt door. Ze ontpopt zich zelfs tot een echte

zakenvrouw en neemt samen met Peggy het taxibedrijf van Leo over. Na een volledige revalidatie stapt ze zelf ook terug in een taxi. Terwijl haar eigen zoon laat weten dat hij in Amerika zal blijven, biedt ze een thuis aan voor Lowie, Jana en Bram.

[Simonne is Yvette's daughter. She and Frank have one son, Franky. A few years ago she met her father Stan, who was one of Yvette's puppy loves. Simonne has always had a very good relationship with Frank's mother, Florke, who has meanwhile passed away and with Florke's husband Rogerke. When she needs someone to talk to, she can rely on her best friend Julia.

In the past, Simonne has always turned a blind eye to Frank's numerous affairs. However, when her former husband, Herman, wanted to spend his last days with her, the temptation was too strong and Frank left her. In spite of all this the two are together again.

At Franky's wedding, Simonne was hit by a car, driven by Femke. The revalidation is difficult but she is strong and holds on. She develops into a regular business woman and takes over Leo's taxi company with Peggy. After a complete revalidation, she too gets into a taxi again. Her own son informs her that he will remain in America but she creates a home for Lowie, Jana and Bram]

On the positive side, Simone's short bionote reflects the main interests of *Thuis*: the characters' daily lives at home and at work, the ups and downs in their relationships and the intrigues in which they are entangled. In that sense, this particular biography serves its purpose: it allows the reader to contextualise Simone, and find out who her friends, family and partner are, or were. In an indirect manner, the bionote also contains some information about Simone as a person: she is generous, brave and kind.

However, whereas the information that the website explorer receives is very detailed, it goes back well into the history of the series and is rather unstructured. Having read the text one or twice, I personally, found it very difficult to mentally summarise it. It seems that the bionote offers the information that will be known to long-term fans of the series but does not cater to newcomers or VIPs that would benefit more from a shorter, more focused biographical summary. In addition, the bionote contains no information about Simone's appearance, the way she dresses or her age, nor about the locations in which she is most likely to appear (apart from the taxi company she runs). In other words, it does not contain the type of information that is usually included in audio-descriptions but cannot be included in the AD of *Thuis* for lack of time, and would therefore be very useful (cf. 5.2.1.4).

5.3.2.2 The supporting bio-clip: current state of affairs

The film clip introducing Simone is meant to complement the introductory bionote. Even without AD it could provide useful information for VIPs since the clip might allow them to link the character in the clip to a voice. More specifically, the clip accompanying Simone's bionote consists of a short conversation between her and her rather unreliable partner, Frank, an

important person in her life. However, whereas prospective viewers might expect to see and/or hear Simone in this clip, it is actually Frank who is dominant throughout the dialogue. In addition, the scene hardly functions on its own. Some of the history of the characters detailed in the above-mentioned bionote is required to make sense of the interaction, which shows Frank entering Simone's flat with a bunch of flowers and delivering a speech to apologise for his misbehaviour. Simone barely gets a word in edgewise.

Even keeping in mind the limited financial means of most broadcasters today, there are a few options for improvement, some of which are quite simple, some of which involve greater expense.

5.3.2.3 AD-friendly bionotes and biographical clips

Like in section 5.1 I shall propose different options: a less costly option (1) and a more pricey option (2). The additional note with the bio-clip (which could be given in either of the two suggested places) would contextualise its dialogue.

Bionote	
Option (1)	Option (2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leave the bionote as it is and add a short character description. • Add the locations in which the character is likely to appear. • Add a very brief note on the bio-clip, giving it some context. <p><u>Example:</u> At Simone and Frank's, a few years ago. Frank has to make amends.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that the Thuis website complies with the Anysurfer norms, which VRT tries to do for its website generally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rewrite the bionote, restructuring it and reducing the number of words, making it easier to memorise and adding a short character description. • Add the locations in which the character is likely to appear. • Add a very brief note on the bio-clip, giving it some context. <p><u>Example: the same</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that the <i>Thuis</i> website complies with the Anysurfer norms, which VRT tries to do for its website generally • Add a recorded version of the bionote, read by the actress playing the part.
Bio-clip	
Option (1)	Option (2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leave the clip as it is and add a brief caption, giving it some 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose another, more appropriate clip (in this case),

context, unless this has been done in the bionote (cf. above).	<p>one in which Simone herself features more prominently and add a brief comment, giving the clip some context, unless this has been done in the bionote (cf. above).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place an audio-described bio-clip on the website (based on the existing AD once this is available or using a tailor-made one).
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Both options remedy the issues pinpointed in the current character bionote and bio-clip.

6. Concluding thoughts

As was indicated in the introduction, the present article is an expanded version of a report that I wrote for VRT. Following requests from their VIP audience, the VRT accessibility team is considering whether it would be feasible to provide AD for the popular prime time TV series *Thuis*, broadcast 5 days a week, and even to promote it as an audio drama or radio play. With this in mind, they wondered whether guidelines could be developed that would allow for team work with alternating audio describers working on the same episode or across episodes, after which their respective AD scripts would be merged into one. In order to make this possible and to ensure uniformity, guidelines would have to be devised that made it clear what what could be relegated to the series website (which for the time being does not have audio introductions), how the introductory sequences and the teaser should be dealt with, and what information would have to be included in the AD of the series proper.

Thuis falls into the category of TV series discussed by Ford (2011) as prime time series that share a considerable number of characteristics with the soaps of the past (see 3.). These soap-like features in combination with some of the contemporary features of *Thuis*, more specifically, the modern-time online equivalent of the soaps' broad fan base were found to pose both a challenge and provide opportunities for AD.

Either a partial (and less costly) or more thorough (and more costly) reworking of the *Thuis* website would allow it to function as an audio introduction and would allow the AD to focus on the core business of the series: a limited number of typical character interactions (as discussed in 5.2.1.3.) in a limited number of locations. The backstories of the characters, their relationships and the detailed description of the locations with which they are most associated could be included on the website (5.3.2), taking into account the needs of VIPs in terms of the information

to be given and the organisation of this information. The systematic approach to the AD for the opening and closing scenes (5.2.1.1/2.) would support the thematic and structural development of the series and would, like the 7 types of (inter)action categories (5.2.1.3), allow for quicker and more uniform decision-making. A solution was also offered for the introductory and concluding sequences of *Thuis* and it was pointed out that more time could be provided for AD through editing in those cases where the dialogues starts at the very beginning of a scene, if AD were to become a truly integrated part of in house productions. Likewise, even small changes to the existing website could make a significant difference.

At the time of writing, VRT has not yet starting producing an audio-described version of *Thuis* – even though the plans have not been shelved. However, our joint pilot research shows that cost-cutting and efficient solutions for team work can be found. In fact, as I mentioned in the introduction, VRT has meanwhile started to apply some of the above suggestions to the website of *T*, one of its most recent crime series, broadcast with AD in 2015 (Eén. T.)⁹.

Whereas most AD guidelines (see Rai 2010; Vercauteren 2010; Remael et al./ADLAB 2014) try to cater for all types of film or TV productions, what VRT needed was: tailor-made strategies for the AD scriptwriting of a very specific modern soap series that they expected would have to be written by a team respecting very tight deadlines. The aim of the present project was to analyse the 8 episodes put at the disposal of the author as well as the series website with a view to devising such strategies. As a result, the suggestions made in this article may come across as somewhat ‘prescriptive’ in tone, a feature that is sometimes frowned on today.

Nevertheless, the suggestions have been made with a view to respecting the spirit and focus of the series, while keeping the option of promoting the series as an audio drama or radio play in mind. They try to make the most of some of the series’ structural features to allow the AD to ‘frame’ the events while respecting or even enhancing the emotional development of the many storylines. All the same, the above is only a first analysis, reception research will be required to test the feasibility of the approach and the quality of the AD it yields.

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Notes

¹ The audiovisual translation department of VRT and the University of Antwerp have a long-standing research collaboration and were both partners in the European project (see ADLAB website).

² Starting from a survey and critical analysis of existing national prescriptive guidelines (such as discussed by Vercauteren 2010; Rai et al. 2010), as well as European practice in AD in Flanders, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, and the UK, the EU-funded Life-Long Learning Project, ADLAB, produced European guidelines based on needs analysis, textual analysis, and the development and testing of alternative AD solutions. The ADLAB strategic guidelines are currently available as an e-book in open access and in book form in English and German. Translations into other European languages, e.g. Dutch, are being prepared. The project leader was the University of Trieste.

³ The last episode of the 2014 season made the news because its cliff-hanger was the suicide attempt of one of its male protagonists. This appears to have shocked numerous viewers and prompted the Flemish Minister of Culture to comment on what he called the producers' "ill-advised decision," pointing out that it had dramatically increased calls to the Flemish suicide telephone line (De Standaard 2015).

⁴ Ongoing research at TricS, the research group of the Department of Applied Linguistics/Translators and Interpreters at the University of Antwerp is focusing on the comparative study of radio plays and AD. However, that will have to be the topic of another publication.

⁵ All translations of examples are my literal translations from Dutch.

⁶ I use the term 'open AD' in the sense in which the term is applied in subtitling. Open AD is broadcast or made available automatically with the audio-described production whereas 'closed AD' must be activated by the user, for instance, by clicking on a website icon and/or through the use of speech technology.

⁷ There is extensive and inconclusive literature about the difference between radio plays, audio books and audio dramas that is beyond the scope of this article. The possibilities for new (hybrid) aural forms of drama created by the internet are discussed by e.g. Dann (2014).

⁸ The analysis of the test ADs supplied by VRT showed that it would virtually always be feasible to provide time for AD at the beginning of scenes by slightly adapting the editing. Since *Thuis* is an in-house production that is definitely a possibility – it is, in fact, an option that could be considered for all in-house TV productions, moving the provision of AD one step closer to universal design.