Erasure or over-exposure? Finding the balance in describing diversity
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ABSTRACT

The shift in media access solutions from reactive to proactive approaches identified by Greco (2016) can be seen in the Audio Description (AD) of human characteristics. Drawing on research in psychology and disability studies, this article suggests that one of the affordances of vision is to recognise difference and that the ability to distinguish one performer or character from another is crucial to engagement with the source material. The challenge for the describer is that the description of these distinctions tends to rely on socially sensitive markers such as race, age, body-shape, gender and disability. An analysis of Audio Introductions (AIs) for the Describing Diversity Report (Hutchinson *et al.* 2020) shows that descriptions currently fall short both in describing personal characteristics equitably between different social groups, and by failing to use language that is inclusive and non-judgemental. This can result either in over-exposure of difference, leading to possible stigma of individual performers, or in the erasure of differences, leading to an inaccurate conception of increasing diversity on stage. To navigate this tightrope, describers need extraordinary intercultural competence. Alternative solutions are proposed that shift responsibility from describer-generated content to content generated by the performers, taking a proactive, inclusive approach.

KEYWORDS

Audio description, blindness, diversity, inclusion, integrated access, stigma.

1. Introduction

Greco (2016: 23) champions "the interpretation of accessibility as a proactive principle, and of access as a necessary requirement for achieving human rights." He deduces from this that

> [i]n the case of persons with disabilities, accessibility comes into play not because it is a special human right they possess, but because it demands that they be granted access to some material or immaterial goods so that the rights they possess qua human beings can be fulfilled (achieved, enforced, protected, enjoyed) (Greco 2016: 23).

In the case of recognition of the increasing diversity presented on stage and screen, this moves the conversation as to the purpose of access, away from engagement or enjoyment to one of inclusion, whereby an access user who is themself likely to be a member of a stigmatised or under-represented group is able to "see" themself represented. Greco (2018:211) also highlights a shift towards proactive approaches which, as he further explains in the call for papers for this very special issue of the *Journal of Specialised Translation*, make access concerns an integral part of the design process of products and services, from its very initial phases and through the active participation of users and experts.

This paper explores one of the areas in which this has been evident, namely in the terminology used in audio description (AD) when deciding what to describe, what not to describe, and how to describe it, i.e., what to include and how to phrase that description. Greco (2018: 207) also links accessibility to human rights that, as he puts it, rest "upon two intertwined grounds: human dignity and access." In this paper I argue that there is the potential for conflict between those two grounds, where the right to access held by one group (the users of AD who are most commonly but not always people who are blind or partially blind) threatens to undermine the human dignity of those described. This is in the description of human characteristics, that is those markers of identity that include an individual's ethnicity, disability, gender, age or body shape. How can a describer serve both those who rely on the AD to fully engage with the visual source material, and those who feature in that material as actors or protagonists, without exposing the same to what Elkins (1997) calls the prejudice and brutality of the visual gaze? That this prejudice and brutality is hard-wired into visual perception is explored in the next section with the intention of highlighting instinctive biases of which describers should be aware.

1.1. Audio description and the role of vision

AD is often characterised as an accessibility service that seeks to restore what is lost to an individual who has no sight or whose sight is significantly impaired. This approach has been criticised as "symptomatic of ableist concerns" and for failing to recognise "blindness gain" (Thompson and Warne 2018), yet it can be traced back to Plato who privileged the visible world over the intelligible world (Kavanagh 2004). There is no denying, however, that vision is a crucial, if only partial source of information.

Vision is, however, essentially biased, being neither neutral nor impartial. Belova (2006: 93), points to "the role of the eye in producing knowledge, scientific methods of inquiry and creating a society of surveillance and order." Citing Dale (1997: 95), she argues that the scientist's eye dissects in order to perform an

> invasive investigation, fragmentation and reorganization of the object of study, and that this anatomising urge pervaded almost all areas of knowledge, both as a metaphor and a form of representation. Thus, the critique of 'culture of dissection' presents vision as an incising, objectifying, and ordering activity aimed to seize and appropriate the other (Belova 2006: 93).

Recognising this distinction between the self and the other is a fundamental role of vision. Rozanski *et al.* (2021) point out that one of the functions of sight is to aid social recognition whereby the seer distinguishes between seen individuals in order to adapt their behaviour appropriately. This echoes the psychologist Gibson's assertion that recognition of animals is one of the greatest affordances of sight. As Gibson (1972/2014: 42) argues,

we use vision to identify whether an animal may be prey or predator, potential mate or rival, adult or young, one's own young or another's young. Moreover, it may be temporarily asleep or awake, receptive or unreceptive, hungry or satiated.

Gibson (1972/2014: 42) further recognises that "what the other animal affords is specified by its permanent features and its temporary state." "State" is one of the seven information types categorised by Piety (2004) in his analysis of AD, and it can be argued that much description centres on conveying, in words, visually apprehended information about a character's permanent features and temporary states. In the AD of live events an individual's permanent features are likely to be described in an audio introduction (AI) which is "a spoken or written text accessed prior to the performance" (Fryer and Cavallo 2021: 19). Although the AI intends to provide a description of the character, it is hard to do so without at least some description of the actor who embodies that character, which may also be apparent in the temporary states that are described as part of the "through description" (TD) as the play unfolds.

Crucial to our engagement with the source material is the ability to distinguish one performer or character from another. Naming the character before we hear them speak is one way to do this for people who need access to the image. However, for characters who remain mute but visible on stage, the describer must rely on conveying visual information to make their presence accessible. Yet, as Michailakis (2003: 215) notes, this gives rise to a paradox:

> Whatever is observed is observed by an observer who splits up reality in a certain way in order to make it visible and observable (Luhmann 1995). Whatever distinction is used, it is only one of many possible. Each distinction illuminates only certain aspects while concealing others. Without distinctions reality remains unobservable, but reality itself does not recognise any distinctions.

For example, Michailakis states that "one is not born a disabled person, one is observed to be one" (2003: 209). His position, held by many others (e.g., Gibson 1972/2014, Peschl and Riegler 1999, and Eagleman 2001), is that vision is influenced as much by the social and cultural norms of the society of which the viewer is a part, as by the objects within the viewer's gaze and their neurobiological equipment for viewing them. Eagleman (2001) suggests that the nervous system actively enhances differences such as the contrast between similar orientations, meaning that sighted people 'see' differences to be greater than they are. An example from colour categorisation, suggests that differences are further heightened by language. Goldstein *et al*. (2009: 220) point out that in Papua New Guinea and Northern Namibia, adult speakers of Berinmo and Himba respectively (languages which have no distinction between blue and green) show no evidence of better discrimination at the blue-green boundary than between colour shades within those categories but do show that effect at the boundary between colour categories that they mark linguistically (Roberson and Davidoff 2000 and Roberson *et al*. 2005).

As Arnoldi (2001: 2) expresses it, "something has been chosen, something has been focused in contrast to other possibilities." This becomes problematic in two ways. In the first, some AD users ask, if sight is so subjective, how trustworthy is a description (Fryer and Cavallo 2021)? In the second, those who are observed may be upset by the way in which they are differentiated. This is particularly the case where the distinctions mentioned relate to socially sensitive markers such as race, age, body-shape, gender or disability. In the next section, the audio descriptive language used for such markers is examined, building on research initiated by VocalEyes — a UK charity that promotes access to the arts for people who are blind or visually impaired and which initiated the Describing Diversity project.

1.2. Describing diversity

A recognition of the sensitivity around character description led to the Describing Diversity project. This was an initiative launched by VocalEyes, who wanted to make AD more equitable and sensitive as theatre itself becomes increasingly diverse. VocalEyes acknowledges increasing diversity in "the work being selected and presented, the actors on stage, those working in the creative and technical teams back stage, through to front of house, and, even more numerous — those audience members who are made to feel welcome and included" (Hutchinson *et al*. 2020: 4).

Consequently, the Describing Diversity team (Rachel Hutchinson, Hannah Thompson and Matthew Cock) analysed "the text of 26 Audio Introductions selected from VocalEyes' archive, covering a variety of genres including musicals, comedies, Shakespeare, pantomime and drama" (Hutchinson *et al*. 2020: 13). This analysis revealed "unconscious biases, imbalances and avoidance of describing physical characteristics" (ibid.). For example, "[w]hite skin was described using a rich and varied range of adjectives; black skin and hair were described using a much more limited lexical range." In addition, descriptions of disability sometimes used language "with negative connotations, focusing on departure from the norm, and the 'overcoming' of an impairment to perform movements or tasks" (Hutchinson *et al*. 2020: 13–14). In sum, the analysis shows that descriptions currently fall short on two fronts: in describing personal characteristics equitably between different social groups, and in describing them with language that is considered inclusive and non-judgemental.

1.2.1. Equitable description

It is important to note that equitable description refers to an approach that is fair and impartial. It does not mean describing every character equally in the sense of treating them the same. This is because the amount of description a character deserves will depend on the status of that character in a particular production. For example, the character of Cinderella would

deserve more description than that of a footman at the Palace, as she is central to the plot and will almost certainly be the main visual focus of many scenes. The footman's description is important, mostly for what it tells us about the status, wealth and cultural background of the Prince he serves. The footman himself will be seen but not necessarily noticed, depending on the amount of stage 'business' he is required to perform.

Minor and major characters and the actors playing them may also be important indicators of the production's casting approach, i.e., whether it be 'integrated', 'multiracial' or otherwise. For example, in her discussion of a production of the musical *Oklahoma!* (Rodgers and Hammerstein 1943) as directed by Molly Smith at Washington's Arena stage in 2010, Galella (2015: 215) recognises the power of its political message. She argues that "by producing this classic musical with a multiracial cast, Arena staged a production of *whose* American voices may sing and under *what* conditions" (original italics).

1.2.2. Inclusive description

Galella (2015: 216) deliberately uses the term "multiracial" rather than alternatives such as "colour-blind" or "nontraditional", arguing that the term 'multiracial' "avoids the not-so-blind spots of colorblindness and the false binary of nontraditional, while still leaving room for dynamic interpretations." Others have proposed terms including 'colour-conscious' and 'integrated' (see Galella, 2015: 216), although the term 'integrated' has itself been criticised for suggesting that "one group has the power to invite another to the table" (Banks 2013: 12). The important point here is that terminology has the potential to frame a political position; one which may cause offence either to those listening, those being described, or both, while the ability to recognise differences is an essential role of vision, as explained above.

1.2.3. Intercultural competence

The Describing Diversity Report (DDR) was commissioned in recognition of the need for describers to cultivate greater intercultural sensitivity and gain greater intercultural competence (2020), a skill which has long been recognised as necessary for translators (e.g., Vermeer 1989, Snell-Hornby *et al*. 1997, Katan 2004, and House 2009).The requirement for an audio describer to be able to act as an expert mediator in multicultural environments is also included by Agnieska Chmiel (2022) in her list of audio describer competencies. As Vermeulen and Moreno argue, "it stands to reason that intercultural competence is an essential dimension of communicative competence. Communication is not about presuming what is being said, but about realizing the ways in which we represent the world through our own perception" (Vermeulen and Moreno 2017: 136).

This approach is in line with the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, as developed by Bennett (1986). "The underlying assumption of the model is that as one's experience of cultural difference becomes more complex and sophisticated, one's potential competence in intercultural relations increases" (Hammer *et al*. 2003: 423). However, it is not sufficient simply to witness cultural difference. Citing Kelly (1963), Hammer *et al*. 2003: 423) claim that "experience is a function of how one construes the events. The more perceptual and conceptual discriminations that can be brought to bear on the event, the more complex will be the construction of the event, and thus the richer will be the experience." This might be said to be true for both the describer and their audience. Yet it further illustrates the paradox, that by being ever more discriminatory in order to create a richer experience for their audiences, describers risk giving greater exposure to those characteristics which define difference and may therefore offend sectors of the audience or those who are the object of the describer's gaze.

1.3. Labelling difference

Given that a sighted describer is hard-wired to spot difference, identifying which visual differences their audience should know about is only the first task; the second task is deciding how to describe or label it. It is here that issues of sensitivity arise. As Moores (2021: 28) points out:

> Identity is a very personal matter. A single label may mean very different things to different people: deafness could be a disability to one person and a defining identity to another. Every person has numerous intersecting identities, and the importance assigned to each will vary between individuals and within a single individual as they show up and appear in different situations.

For example, in the Distopias project (Fryer 2021) which was funded by Arts Council England, disabled actors were asked to imagine a world built by and for disabled people. One participant stated:

> [Disability is] one part of my experience, and there's other parts of my experience that if I wasn't surrounded by other maybe, you know, black people, or ethnic people or, you know, like people of faith as well, like I will also feel ostracised and isolated.

For this actor, disability was only one part of her identity, and not necessarily the most important part.

In most cases, a character description will involve a selection of adjectives qualifying the relevant noun. In terms of particular characteristics, the noun might be considered to be a label. The problem being that labels "are usually imposed rather than chosen and therefore socially and politically divisive" (Barnes 2000: 444). For example, an actor who considers themself to be non-binary, would not choose to be identified by a gendered noun such as woman/girl/man/boy. One method to avoid gendered labelling is to use a gender-neutral term such as artist/dancer/performer as in this example

(Fryer and Cavallo 2021: 171): "Ebony Rose Dark is a black, blind, non-binary performer…".

In addition to the adjectives chosen to qualify the noun, there is also the question of adjectival order. In English this is dictated by established usage as: quantity, opinion, size, age, colour, shape, origin, material and purpose. There is debate around the reasons for that usage. Westbury (2021: 123) citing Sweet (1898/1955) suggests there are "two semantic principles: closeness, and definiteness of denotation." Definiteness might be thought of as the degree to which a description refers to concrete sensory properties; closeness might be thought of as relevance. As Westbury explains, "Gender is more essential to an animal than its body size, so by default we have to describe a large feline with two X chromosomes as a fat female cat and not a female fat cat" (Westbury 2021: 123).

However, remembering Moores's comment on identity cited above, fat is also a very personal matter. The extent to which a describer considers a performer to be 'fat' will depend on their own experience (and possibly on their own appearance) and on the comparative visual appearance of the actor being described and others onstage. Furthermore, the adjective 'fat' has come to be associated with stigma. This is returned to in the section below.

It should also be recognised that grammatical rules are not always followed by describers. For example, if one character were described as having brooding dark brown eyes, a small thin-lipped mouth and a tanned leathery skin, while another dresses in a series of flamboyant, bright and often tasteless outfits, the first description would follow the rules, by placing the opinion 'brooding' furthest from the noun; the second description would break the rules by placing the opinion 'tasteless' next to the noun. This is, however, following the rule of closeness, since 'tasteless', while being an opinion, is nonetheless an important quality of the outfit and — by extension — the character.

Adjectival order would appear to be another way in which a describer can emphasise or lessen an awareness of difference. Westbury (2021:123) cites Martin (1969) in noting that more frequently used adjectives are likely to be placed further from the noun compared with less frequently used adjectives, postulating that this may be because "less frequent words are likely to occur in fewer contexts than more frequent words and are therefore likely to be more specific in meaning." He gives the example of the phrase "pretty blonde girls" (Westbury, 2021: 135), where "pretty" as a more frequently used term is given first. This means that adjectives increase in specificity the closer they get to the noun. According to the attention decrement hypothesis (Crano 1977: 90) "earlier adjectives would wield considerably more influence than later ones", such that AD users would be more likely to pay attention to the general adjectives compared with those

coming later in the list that qualify difference for the chosen noun. The problem with noun choice is that it often equates to labelling, which is discussed below.

1.4. Labels, difference and stigma

Penn and Nowland-Drummond (2001) recognise that labels are associated with stigma. Goffman (cited in Coleman 1986: 123) defines stigma simply as "an undesired differentness" before going on to distinguish between three "gross" types of which two are presented visually: "various physical deformities and the tribal stigma of race." For Link and Phelan (2001) "stigma is associated with five markers: labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination" (cited in Fryer and Cavallo 2021: 69). Labelling and stereotyping might be considered synonymous — at least they are intimately connected in the sense that the former leads to the latter. Both are interesting in AD in that, on the one hand, they act as a type of shorthand that may reduce the user's cognitive load, whereas on the other, "people are treated categorically rather than individually, and in the process are devalued" (Coleman 1986: 145). It could be argued that the lack of lexical finesse used to describe the physical characteristics of actors from stigmatised groups is an example of this.

Coleman (1986: 145) defines stigma as "a special and insidious kind of social categorization…a process of generalizing from a single experience." As an example, she shows how "coding people in terms of categories (e.g., "X is a redhead") instead of specific attributes ("X has red hair") allows people to feel that stigmatized persons are fundamentally different" (1986: 145). The effect is to establish greater psychological and social distance on the part of the observer from the subject of their observation. Coleman (1986) further argues that although recognition of difference is automatic and part of our cognitive architecture, its negative connotations are not. Consequently, if we recognise differences when they are socially useful, perhaps we can also choose to recognise similarities between ourselves and the stigmatised group. I suggest that this why thicker or richer AD is required to highlight more possibilities for connection. For example, audiences who themselves belong to the category described may feel a greater sense of inclusion, knowing that they are represented on screen or stage.

However, the findings of the DDR suggest that the opposite is currently the case in that description of stigmatised groups, rather than being thicker or richer is generally impoverished. In a video (IDEA, n.d.) discussing the IDEA (Inclusive Description for Equality & Access) project, Hannah Thompson, an academic who is herself partially blind explains "if [describers] don't have the words [and] if they don't have the confidence, they don't say anything and that, in itself is unethical because it means difference is erased."

The crux of the problem for describers is that on the one hand they are neurobiologically disposed to seeing difference that they may not have the intercultural competence to describe, while, on the other, by not mentioning difference, they risk erasing it, with the effect that the presence of diversity on stage becomes increasingly 'abnormal' for blind or partially blind audiences.

One further problem is that the sensitivity of particular labels can change over time. Returning to the adjective fat, Saguy and Ward (2011: 54) point out that "it is a label that has been reclaimed by 'fat acceptance activists'—who combat discrimination on the basis of body size." This is not unique to fat. As Moores (2021: 54) puts it, "From queer to crip, many terms that were once used pejoratively have been reclaimed and embodied." This points to a third issue in AD, that what matters is not only what and how something is described but also by whom. This is returned to below (Section 2.1). Having laid out the problem(s), the rest of this article is devoted to presenting possible solutions.

2. Possible solutions

The DDR lists 12 principles for describing human characteristics to improve descriptions of diversity. Principal among these is the avoidance of generalisations, for all the reasons explained above. Given that a single describer is unlikely to have a personal lexicon that includes appropriate vocabulary for all stigmatised groups (see Section 1.2.3.), one way to achieve this is through the use of privileged information.

2.1. Privileged information

Privileged information can be defined as information that is not available to all audience members. For example, a touch tour might provide privileged information as it allows certain sections of the audience to get closer to props, costumes, elements of the set and sometimes actors, than others. This may enable them to perceive details that cannot be perceived from the auditorium.

2.2. Gaining competence

One other way of acquiring privileged information, as suggested in the DDR is to "learn about what you don't know: talk to others, do some reading, follow new people on social media" (Hutchinson *et al*. 2020: 62).

2.3. Integrated or inclusive AD

A third way to gain privileged information, brings us back to Greco's (2018) observations about proactive approaches. That is to work collaboratively with companies in an integrated or inclusive manner. This can mean "involving performers in the AD process, for example, by completing a

questionnaire in which they give details of their character's appearance, including costume, ethnicity and physicality as well as their preferred pronouns" (Fryer and Cavallo 2021: 162).

While this allows a describer to select from words chosen by the subject of the description to describe themself, and has the added advantages both of extending the describer's own lexicon and using words that the describer knows the actor to be comfortable with, it does not address the issue that certain words in the mouth of a person from outside the stigmatised group may be received differently from those same words if they are owned by the speaker. For example, it is one thing for Ebony Rose Dark to describe themself as "your all singing, all dancing VIP! Visually impaired drag performer and cabaret artist, with big red lips and swinging hips!" (Fryer and Cavallo 2021: 171) and quite another for a describer to do so, especially if that describer fits the common stereotype of being a white, non-disabled, cis female. Solutions to this are either to state explicitly that this is how the performer describes themself, or to ask the performer to voice their own description. This may be edited into a recorded AI, for example, or a documentary filmed using accessible filmmaking (AFM) principles (see Romero-Fresco 2019).

To this end, the film company Biggerhouse Film (Biggerhouse Film n.d.) has made a series of documentary shorts featuring the work of arts and humanities academics who received fellowships for engaging audiences with their equality, diversity and inclusion research, funded by Arts Council England. In order to ensure the films were accessible from the start, the director asked all interviewees to describe themselves as part of the film, rather than relying on a caption to identify them (e.g., IDEA, n.d.). This guaranteed that not only did the diverse participants describe themselves with words with which they were comfortable but also that these descriptions are interspersed throughout the film, rather than a blind person having to remember all their details from an audio introduction at the start. In addition, the user can pick up information from the interviewee's voice, and by having numerous voices in the AD track, it helps diversify the sound of the AD — meaning potentially, that more minority groups are represented. Interestingly, not all these self-descriptions prioritise visually apprehended information. For example, a member of Mind the Gap, England's leading learning disability performance and live arts company, describes herself as "really happy" (IDEA, n.d.). Arguably, that is more helpful than a description of her skin colour and hairstyle for a user who perceives the world primarily through channels other than the visual.

2.4. Widening the description pool

Romero-Fresco and Dangerfield (forthcoming) propose that access should be "a conversation that must involve disabled and non-disabled people." The solutions proposed here suggest that the access conversation should extend even further to include all those who are part of the access process,

especially when the access professional is from a dominant, non-marginalised culture and the subject from a minority culture. While the objection can be raised that such solutions are only available to new or recent productions where the describer has access to members of the original creative team, a fourth possibility is to expand the pool of describers such that they are more representative of society at large.

3. Conclusion

This article began by highlighting the shift in media access solutions from retroactive to proactive approaches, as identified by Greco (2018). It has explored one of the areas in which this has been evident, namely in the terminology used in the AD of personal characteristics. The approach to AD has shifted from one in which a non-disabled access professional determines the AD to one in which the creative team contributes, in order to aid users' understanding of diversity in the described content. This article has argued that while performances and productions are becoming increasingly diverse, such diversity is not always reflected in access strategies, specifically in AD. It suggests this is because sight is hard-wired to identify difference and because the accepted hierarchy of adjectival strings in English leads to an emphasis of difference, both in the structure of how descriptions are expressed as well as by which words are chosen. The DDR has shown that describers find it hard to balance demands of reflecting diversity in a production without over– or under-describing differences associated with stigma. This leads either to over-exposure or to erasure which comes about when describers neglect to mention difference for fear of causing offence. The aim is to raise awareness of the tendency of sight and language to emphasise difference, putting describers on their guard. Suggested solutions include the use of privileged information in order to make descriptions richer and more equitable, collaboration to use the words of those being described so that description becomes less of a monologue and more of a conversation (Romero-Fresco and Dangerfield, forthcoming) and widening the pool of describers to increase the representation of diversity within access providers.

This moves the conversation as to the purpose of access away from engagement or enjoyment to one of inclusion whereby an audience member who is likely to be a member of a stigmatised group is able to 'see' themself reflected on stage as part of the diversity of the production. While the difficulties this presents to the access professional are acknowledged, possible solutions have been proposed using integrated approaches such as AFM and inclusive AD.

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Biography

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