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**DOI**

[10.1080/10137548.2019.1614975](https://doi.org/10.1080/10137548.2019.1614975)

**Publication date**

2019

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

South African Theatre Journal

**License**

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[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Franzen, R. (2019). One ear on the stage and one in the audience? – Audio description and listening to theatre as dramaturgical exercise. *South African Theatre Journal*, 32(1), 48-62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10137548.2019.1614975>

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## One ear on the stage and one in the audience? – Audio description and listening to theatre as dramaturgical exercise

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This article looks at conceptualizations of audio description of theatre performances, which commonly are provided in real-time for visually impaired spectators. While audio descriptions can be formally categorized as a type of extra-diegetic paratext, like translators' notes, they are however quite unique in their performative aspect. The article argues for a new understanding of this type of 'crossmodal' translation [Fryer 2016. *An introduction to audio description: a practical guide*. Oxford: Routledge] in regarding it as an integral part of a performance. Regarding audio description as a multisensory practice results not only in the inquiry into a format, but offers on a more philosophical level, a new perspective on the limits and possibilities of performative aspects of listening in theatre. The article builds on exercises with international dramaturgy students in Amsterdam regarding a dramaturgical take on the making-of audio descriptions (2017) and, as entrance example, on the performance *Blind Cinema* by Britt Hatzius, which draws creatively on considerations vital to the practice of audio description. Questions emerging from the study and production of audio descriptions revolve around (un)translatability and dramaturgical choices, requiring the author to consider aesthetic, cultural and sensory factors involved in the preparation and performance of audio description.

**Keywords:** translated ear; audio description; dramaturgy; theatre; listening

The cinema is dark. The film is running. The audience is seated in the cinema's plush seats. Nothing unusual. The audience members' eyes are, however, blindfolded, and to fill in on what they are missing visually, they are being whispered to by a child, sitting behind them and describing the action on the screen through a funnel into their ears. The audience is a theatre audience, the film screening is much more of a performance. German/British visual artist, Britt Hatzius, has toured the performance *Blind Cinema* to Theatre Festivals since 2015. It plays with and thereby unpacks the format of *audio description* as live commentary by making the experience of the description the central point of the performance. The story which the children tell is not a fixed one. Their performance is not rehearsed. Hums and haws are part of the performance. In this way each audience member is guaranteed to imagine a different scenario of what is happening on screen.

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The performance troubles interestingly the notion of an authoritative understanding and viewing of the artwork.<sup>1</sup> Instead, the performance does everything to invite contingencies and to increase the ‘unreliability’ of the describers as any kind of authority. Their unpreparedness and age accentuate both the audience’s dependency on the describer’s narrating skills and the individual charm and performative intimacy of this personal narration. By unpacking and deconstructing the authoritative take on the ‘right description’, Hatzius’ performance can serve to inquire more generally into the type of access, perception and transmission of the translational practice of *audio description* in performance. This performance sets up the questions central to this article: What are the possibilities and limits of this specific live translation and of translatability and what are they informed by? What are – dramaturgically speaking – relevant decisions in translating stage action into live spoken words? When does translation become mere compensation in this case and when does it become an integral part of the performance, playing productively with (un)translatabilities?

### **Audio description in this chapter**

Audio description is the name for a professional practice in audiovisual media which commonly entails a translation of visual elements, such as movements or expressions, into audio for an audience with visual impairment. A comprehensive history of audio description has, to my knowledge, not been written. While policies and practices vary greatly per country, selective practices go back to the 1970s. At an international level, however, support for audio description was only voiced in the 2000s with the first professional standards published in 2007.

The practices of audio description differ depending on the medium. Whereas audio description for film consists of the addition of a pre-recorded voice guide, in theatre it takes the form of a performed live commentary communicated to the audience via headphones.<sup>2</sup> This practice varies regionally and live broadcast via headphones is still an exception rather than a common practice. In this article I propose to focus, in particular, on the decisions behind audio description in the case of theatre. The liveness of audio description in theatre harbours particular performative possibilities. By examining the dramaturgical possibilities of enabling access to theatre differently and through alternative sensory registers, I hope, ultimately, to inspire diverse and playful (as opposed to costly and technologically often unavailable) approaches to audio description and audition in theatre.

In the literature, audio description is usually framed in professionally instructional terms or in terms of access policy. I choose not to isolate audio description in theatre as functional affordance and as a compensation for the missing moving images, but to regard those functional affordances in the broader light of translation processes. I am interested in the particular auditory stage, the ‘theatre of the mind’ which is stimulated by the commentary’s grasp on the performative situation. Whereas I acknowledge and can confirm from experience that auditory imagination plays a constitutive role for audio description, both on the part of the listener as well as the describer, I will not focus on the aspect of (auditory) imagination, which has received relevant attention in itself (Ihde 2003) and also in the context of theatre specifically (Verstraete 2009; Curtin 2014). Instead, I will elaborate on sound as the sum of what an audience hears in the performance space. In the light of the larger research project on translation in relation to performance, this article offers a closer look at

the specific dramaturgical translational processes of audio description in performance practice, challenging seldom questioned hierarchies of the senses.

My argument is simple, but the implications are complicated. From the perspective of dramaturgy, I argue for an integral look at audio described performance. In my view audio described performance needs to be regarded as performance in its own right, not as anything better or lesser than an assumed original unrestricted performance experience, but simply as part of an integral dramaturgy. Regarding audio description as the auxiliary translation would maintain a hierarchy of the senses in a way which is not conducive to a theatre experience.

Dramaturgically speaking, in audio description, a performance is translated into a new whole. It is no longer only about audition in theatre, impairment, compensation and the 'original'. It is about an integral understanding of audio described performance. In 1992, Salman Rushdie commented, in an often-quoted passage: 'It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained' (1992, p. 17). In this article, I agree with his hypothesis, but I agree with him also beyond the binary of gaining or losing. Is not one of the consequences of his coining of the phrase, 'We are translated men' (1992, p. 17), precisely that we are not distinguishable from our translations? If I speak of 'the translated ear', it is in reference to an interpretation of Rushdie's phrase according to which a translation is the result of complex processes, which do not happen just between texts, but between and within cultures, with direct effects for and involvement of the body. If, in the case of audio description, the ear becomes the central receiver of the performance, it is a 'translated ear', having undergone and performatively undergoing stages of understanding, and alternatives to that understanding, including knowledge about, and sense for, listening in theatre.

### **The translated ear**

Louise Fryer, the author of a comprehensive handbook on audio description (2016), characterizes audio description as creating a 'multisensory experience through audio alone' (2010, p. 212). This definition is given in the context of comparing audio description with radio drama. Fryer explicitly leaves the performative aspect of 'oral delivery' at that point for further research (Fryer 2010, p. 212), instead she suggests that professional describers learn from radio drama because of its limitation to the audio medium. The goal of learning professionally from best-practice examples is also shared by the authors Szarkowska and Orero in the edited volume, *Audio Description* (2014), when focusing on 'The importance of sound for audio description' (p. 121). In their chapter, the authors examine sound in relation to its ability to provide narrative clues or contradict those, or to develop its own narrative altogether, following Mieke Bal, Gerard Genette and Tim Crook amongst others. Conclusions are accordingly presented in the narrative, structuralist and functional terms. The performative situation and the role of sound in it are not touched upon.

Unlike Fryer, and Szarkowska and Orero, in the following I regard sound as more embedded in the multisensory aspect of performance. In my understanding, audio description in theatre already differs from, for example radio drama, by virtue of the co-presence of the audio describer, the described performance and the audience in the same space.<sup>3</sup>

The artistic primacy of the visual stage action in the above-mentioned texts is generally not questioned when authors focus on the auxiliary function of audio

description. Approaching audio description strictly in its supporting role, might fall into the trap of a scholarly discourse which maintains a ‘hegemony of vision’ (Morat 2014, p. 3). Instead of playing out what we might refer to as a hierarchy of senses, following historian and sound scholar Daniel Morat (2014) I propose to understand our sensory register as ‘cultural capacities’ (2014, p. 3). This perspective allows us to historicize the senses, identify dominant practices and their significant challenges. If according to Fryer’s definition audio description provides a ‘multisensory experience through audio alone’ (Fryer 2010, p. 212), then I am interested in looking more openly at the decisions made in translating the senses into audio and how this audio track performs and interacts with the live performance. From an epistemological perspective, I am interested in what audio description renders explicit about the otherwise tacit knowledge of performance practice.

I made these decisions and considerations regarding audio description the starting point of a practical workshop with Master’s level students of dramaturgy in the fall of 2017 at the University of Amsterdam, and I will discuss this below as my example.<sup>4</sup> Before I do so, I return briefly to a literature review and a conceptualization of ‘audio description as translation’, in order to clarify my goal in relation to this definition conceptually.

When I defined audio description above as a translation of visual information into sound, I did so in line with the predominantly technical focus of other authors on audio description. Yet, the definition of audio description as translation is specific in a way that is worth considering. Audio description has been categorized in interestingly liminal terms on the one hand, with many authors being based in Translation Studies. On the other hand, the actual description is recognized only hesitantly as translation because ‘unlike subtitling, dubbing or voice-over, AD does not come with a pre-existing text that needs translating from one language to another’ (Fryer 2016, p. 3). To clarify then, authors agree that translation in the case of audio description does not designate the translation of (an original) text and that it does not concern the negotiation between languages. Instead, authors agree on a form of translation that is recognized as:

[...] ‘intersemiotic, intermodal or cross-modal translation or mediation’ [...] The term ‘intersemiotic’ was coined by Jakobson (1959) to describe types of translation in which part of the context comes from information outside the translated channel. ‘Modal’ in this context refers to modes of meaning. These include spoken and written word, music and sound effects. Yet, modal can also be thought of as relating to different sensory modes: namely information received through one sense (vision) must be translated into information that can be received through another sense (audition). (Fryer 2016, p. 3)

Hence, when the audio description is called a translation, it is meant to concern ways of conveying meaning between sensory registers. In the logical extension of my above-mentioned focus on the performative and as such on the procedural, I suggest looking beyond the structuralist linguistic intricacies. How can we understand translation in this new way in its active potential of performing translation, involving translator and listener actively? The one-way-direction that is commonly associated with translation is complicated here. This is similar to the way in which theories of cultural translation have challenged previous textual concepts of translation.

Salman Rushdie’s realization that ‘we are translated men’ (1992, p. 17) is uttered in the context of conveying the experience of the postcolonial diaspora and processes of migration. Rushdie thereby wants the translation to be understood beyond the literary

tradition which would depart from an original text and result in a translation into a new language. Homi Bhabha (1994) in turn developed the idea of *cultural translation* as a development of Rushdie's idea, positioning cultural translation as a process which works with hybridity, the 'in-between' position, in particular by accepting and working with complications such as untranslatability as an integral part of the translational process.<sup>5</sup> The perspective which emerges from this complication of 'the original' is one which I understand as crucial to dramaturgical practice. It shifts attention productively to a complex movement, back and forth between stage and concept.

Hence, the exercises on audio description, as they will be detailed below, are designed to explore the affordances of a performative situation as a whole in its back and forth between situational affordances and conceptual approach.

## Practical examples

### Context of the dramaturgical workshop

The workshop on audio description was conducted with the 18 students enrolled in the MA International Dramaturgy programme at the University of Amsterdam in 2017/2018. The Master International Dramaturgy at the University of Amsterdam was set up in 2014. Through seminar sessions, practical exercises and work experience, students get the chance to explore academic discourses as well as practices of dramaturgy. None of the students the workshop was designed for is visually impaired, and regardless of great diversity within the group in terms of previous professional work experience and cultural background, none of them had any previous experience with audio description.

The study of dramaturgy in general aims to provide education on the aesthetic, cultural, political and philosophical intricacies of the medium of theatre as common to the disciplines of theatre and performance studies. It thereby provides the possibilities to apply concepts and research in professional environments. A professional dramaturg has been called the practical philosopher of theatre, often contributing research and a critical voice to the creation process of a performance (Chemers 2010, p. 3). More recent literature has responded to diversification and internationalization of the professional labour by suggesting a more procedural paradigm and has offered conceptualizations of dramaturgy as 'work on theatre' (Georgelou et al. 2017, p. 3). Dramaturgical exercises in the University of Amsterdam's core course are in principle modelled after existing working formats, and make the conceptual complications part of the group discussion.

Preceding the dramaturgy students' workshop on audio description, the class discussion involved the reading of French philosopher, Peter Szendy's text, 'The Auditory Re-Turn (The Point of Listening)', which rehearses a 'theoretical practice of listening' (Szendy 2015, p. 19). We asked: What is the point of listening in theatre? What perspective on the discipline is opened by isolating an auditory perspective on theatre? These questions formed the starting point for a theory session with the dramaturgy students as well as for the workshop on audio description.

In his text Szendy traces various 'auditory turns', and expands centrally on the notion of listening and 'thinking hearing' as *auscultation* through considerations of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida. Besides triangulating the three philosophers' thinking on listening, he considers the concept of auscultation in relation to instances of medical history, particularly around Laënnec and his invention of the stethoscope.

The latter's invention employs the use of an instrument when previously, a physician seemed 'to be listening at the tip of his fingers' (p. 21). This concept of auscultation as intersemiotic translation from a sensation in the fingertips into an instrument for listening resonated for the students with an initial conception of multisensory perception and translation processes in theatre.

### **The dramaturgical workshop**

I designed a series of exercises associated with (but by no means illustrating) questions of 'thinking listening' as in thematic dialogue with Szendy's text. The exercises are based on the method of audio description. Below I describe the set-up as well as central findings.

#### ***The setup: Warming up the ears***

To warm up the ears, I played a five-minute excerpt of a not explicitly identified historical audio recording of a theatre performance.<sup>6</sup> The task was to make an inventory of all discernible elements, with two overarching questions: What kind of performance is this? What are the markers which allow for respective conclusions?

I suggested further that the students listen for certain characteristics, such as: Can you hear when this performance was performed? What genre of theatre performance do you hear? How many performers can you identify? What can you say about the space in which it is performed? Which props do you hear? What does the audience reaction tell you? What else can you identify just by listening closely?

I picked an example from 1970, 'De kneep' ('The knack'), performed by Toneel Werkgroep Proloog, a performance designated as adolescent theatre/political theatre (*vormingstheater*). I chose it based on the consideration that it should represent some of the most extreme challenges of listening to a recording of theatre performance, such as: the excerpt contains a lot of physical action, audible but not at all points identifiable; the proximity to the recording microphone varies at the cost of stable discernibility; the action is mainly improvised which in consequence means there is no strictly scripted and systematic introduction of characters nor necessarily a fictionalization of characters at all; the performance is site-specific, so the acoustics of the (in this case) school building are demanding; and lastly, the spoken language of the excerpt is Dutch which meets the ears of mother tongue speakers in a different way than the ears of non-Dutch speakers.

#### ***Results: the collective listening effort***

The ensuing oral inventory was overall astoundingly precise. In a collective effort students were first able to identify site-specificity and the improvisational character of the performance, which together with the auditory clues on the age of (the voices of) performers as well as of the audience and the use of music turned out to be perfectly classifiable as pertaining to the 1960s. This in turn led the students to consider topics as characteristic of the historical agenda of the movement of 'vormingstheater' of the late 1960s/beginning of the 1970s. What I had anticipated as potential challenges to the experience of listening turned out to provide the most distinct clues. Not understanding Dutch, the international students were able to pay close attention to the



tone of voice and age of voice, deducing aspects of general demeanour as symptomatic for a certain genre. Yet, beyond the collective agreement of minimal audible denominators, the imagination of the exact situation varied greatly. The focus of the exercise on deducing and collecting factual information could not obscure the fact that there were clearly 18 different cognitive processes set in motion by the five-minute clip. What I found striking, although not ultimately unusual, was the tendency of individual students to go into great detail and get lost in chains of associations before the collective body of the group regularly intervened to bring the class conversation back to the factual argumentation and the group consensus on the corresponding perceived auditory markers. Together we were able to quite accurately derive information that might be described as the framing characteristics of the performance (recording), information that a translator might include in an introductory note.

This exercise was meant to be and indeed worked for some of the students as an ear-opener. They had not anticipated that they would be able to grasp as much of an idea of the performative situation as they did. The group discussion in turn was mentioned as an indicator and mirror of one's own analytical strengths but also (limits of) imagination as compared to the group. And while the precision of the findings might well be specific to the particular group of theatre students who are frequent theatre-visitors, I do claim that the auditory clues are identifiable for a non-theatre specialist audience too.

Why did we need to warm up the ears at all if the translational efforts of audio description concern the making of the very (listening) experience? The question of what one hears, how it might differ from what the fellow students heard, was crucial in order to think ahead of conveying – according to one's own abilities – a sense of visible stage action. Also, the insight that so much is already audible, led the students to realise that it is possible to fill in and describe too much.

### ***The set up: Audio description exercise***

In the next part of the workshop, I moved the attention explicitly to the professional format of audio description, starting with a quick literature review and a summary of (mainly Fryer's) basic instructions. This included questions on the 'What, Where, When and Who'.

As time in workshops is limited and I intended to not let this workshop be based on literature study but embodied experience, the second brief exercise would build on the experience of the previous exercise. It consisted of each student taking notes and drawing a preliminary individual conclusion on what audio description would have to accomplish, accounting for and drawing on one's own just discovered strengths and weaknesses. This conclusion was meant to set the bar and ambition for the audio description to come as opposed to being based on professional standards from the start.

*Audio description exercise:* I divided the group into two smaller groups, with each group working separately from each other in the next half hour, but each group working according to the same principles. Each group would work on a one-minute performance video excerpt. The video varied per group. The instruction was simple: [Each student] *Prepare an audio description script which describes the video and which can be read/ performed in real time.* After half an hour we gathered in the



same room and each participant from group A paired up with a participant from the other group B. Group B closed their eyes while the video of group A was displayed. Members of group A sat behind their partners from group B to guide group B through the video with their own prepared audio description. Later we would reverse the roles, but not before making the experience on both sides the subject of extensive discussion. The exercise left room for any interpretative detail or whatever pragmatic approach to audio description the students chose to apply. The only constraint was the one of time and the offered material.

The videos of performances that I picked were representative of some of the challenges to audio description, or the suspicion that they might be hard to translate if not untranslatable into words, in real-time.

*Performance excerpt 1* was a video of the physical comedy/ solo performance 'Plat du Jour' (1987) by Dutch mime performer, Jim van der Woude.<sup>7</sup> The scene's aesthetic organizing principle could be said to be one of 'disproportionality', visually as well as acoustically as well as in its out-of-tune-ness between sound and image. In terms of audio description it poses the challenge of so-called discordant visual and acoustic information (Szarkowska and Orero 2014, p. 122). The solo performer sits on an odd sized chair at a disproportionately high table. During the one-minute long clip, he performs two visible actions which are discordant or asynchronous with the accompanying sound. He rattles a couple of pens in a glass and subsequently pours water from a disproportionately small jug into a water glass. In both cases, the accompanying amplified sound (the rattling of pens and the pouring of water) continue well after the physical action has ceased. In both cases, the audience reaction is audible and indicates amusement. The concrete challenge for audio description lies in the handling of this discordance in the appropriate time frame. Although the scene does not present a live performance with physical co-presence of performers, audio describer and audience, the audience reaction is equivalent to a live audience in theatre experiences.

*Performance excerpt 2* was a so-called mimography, a physical theatre sequence from 1961, titled 'L'usine', designed and directed by Etienne Decroux, the French pioneer of physical theatre known as *Mime corporel*.<sup>8</sup> It shows three performers in full black body suits with white edging who sometimes symbolically, sometimes abstractly, but always complementarily to each other move to the soundtrack of the metronomically rhythmical knocking, whistling and crackling of aestheticized machine sounds. As supported by the title, the impression manifests that the performers work together as a factory machine, at times illustrating mechanical movements to depict a machine. At all points, the quality of their movement is determined by the staccato rhythm of the soundtrack. No word is spoken and the soundtrack drowns out the possibility of discerning any bodily sounds such as breath or the weight of the bodies on the floor. The video excerpt, therefore, does not bear much resemblance to the live situation of a theatre event in terms of physical presence. Yet, it represents a quite discipline-specific problem to audio description which is the fluctuating range of abstraction in terms of dance/ physical theatre. The audio describer has to decide on the detail they want to provide. To what extent is it worth describing the sequence of movement? What are the appropriate decisions on the level of abstraction and what are those decisions based on?

**Results: Getting used to auditory multi-tasking**

I suggest summarizing the results as coinciding with concepts set up previously in terms of (1) the situational and multisensory setting of sound performance; (2) challenges of audio description as text or translation with the example of three of the students' texts on 'Plat du Jour' and corresponding dramaturgical decisions; (3) the performance of translation.

*The situational and multisensory setting of sound performance:*

We repeated the exercise at the request of the students several times. Group A and B both got the chance to 'perform' their audio description for each other and respectively to listen closely to the text being performed for them. Intermediate evaluations showed, that the impact of re-orienting the senses for audio description, the sound of the performance and any other sensory input required time for acclimatization on both sides. Students adjusted in particular the spatial arrangement of describer and listener or listener and loudspeakers, and showed an eagerness to aspire for the best possible transmittance and respective absorption of information. The situation of performance played an important role and was the first subject of discussion. Before the second round the conceptualized audio description was adjusted, sometimes shortened, sometimes specified. One student, after listening to an audio description on the physical mimography, suggested that the audio describer could use touch to indicate with the fingertips the position of the dancers on the back of the audience member.<sup>9</sup> Words, in this student's experience, were barely able to cover the experience and contributed to situations remaining untranslatable. This remark in particular speaks to a more performative approach to the description itself, and to establishing an integral experience, acknowledging the performative presence of the describer as well, in a way, which would be unusual to professional audio describers.

It is hard to unify the results, because the set up allowed for quite a diverse outcome, and reflecting on the experience meant that the students had to put into words, what for many reasons might have been an untranslatable experience. Still, the level of reflection amongst the students was high and the motivation to let nothing go unnoticed was unbroken from the first exercise onward.

In terms of set up, one could notice different levels of comfort with the intimacy of a describer in immediate proximity. Some students, when reflecting on their listening experience, included a reflection on the voice of the audio describer to deduce conclusions as to the genre. This was similar to how students had deduced information in the first exercise.

This blurring of who the actors are in the perception of the listeners is remarkable. The question: 'What did you hear?' as we had asked in the first exercise, transformed consensually into: 'What happened?' as students remarked on the experiential character of this audio description setup. The translator becomes more than a triangulator of the stage/screen performance. The aspect of immediacy was mentioned as creating a clear hierarchy in the perception. And even though the exercise reverses the immediacy of stage action (here on screen instead of live) and audio description (here individually and in an intimate setting rather than via headphones), the presence of the audio describer contributes to the situation.

This evokes the question, what acknowledgement of the presence of the audio describer might be appropriate. And what are the measures of appropriateness,

considering the different needs of every person, whether visually impaired or not? The impression that remained after this first round of discussion was that the complication of describing abstract dance/physical theatre might invite unconventional measures. Furthermore, the individual contingencies are striking and manifest not only in the role of the listener's needs, but also in the agency and registers of the describer, which I will detail in the following section.

*Challenges of audio description as text or translation from the example of three of the students' texts on 'Plat du Jour' and corresponding dramaturgical decisions.*

The following are three of the scripts for audio descriptions made by students in the workshop:

**Text 1:**

'We're watching an excerpt from Plat du Jour from 1987.

The actor is sitting on a chair behind the desk. The furniture is proportioned in such a way that the adult actor seems to have the proportions of a little boy. The table is messy with lots of paper, the floor covered with newspapers.

The actor grabs for the pens standing in the glass. Playing with the sound. He withdraws his hand and makes little movements with his fingers. He touches his chin and licks his lip thoughtfully. Mumbles without sound and moves his head slightly from left to right. He takes a little glass can and pours water in a little glass, very attentively. He slowly looks over to the right and back. He touches his cheek.'

**Text 2:**

\*To be shared before the video starts

\*There is a man who is seemingly diminished in stature (and run down) sitting on an oversized narrow chair, at a one person table with papers strewn all over. There is a glass full of upright pens. Newspapers are strewn over the floor around him.

He searches with his fingers, for a pen to write with. His fingers leave the pens but continue to make the same gestures as moving in between them. He does not react to the sound continuing despite the removed action.

He licks his lips in thought. Exhales in what seems to be mild frustration. He reaches for an incredibly small jug and pours water into a glass. There is no longer water in the jug; he continues to stare at the empty jug.

He looks away exhausted by the amount of time it takes for the water to entirely empty out.

He slowly turns to face the glass again. He places his hand on his cheek to prop up his tired head.'

**Text 3:**

**Jim van der Woude, *Plat du Jour* (1981)<sup>10</sup>**

Beforehand How small he is,

on his big chair

behind his high desk.

0:05 Briefly, he rummages in his little vessel with pens.

0:19 Distaught, he looks around.

0:32 He pours water in his little glass from a small jug.

0:57 He looks around.

The scripts could hardly be more different. They display different general approaches, ranging from analytical and distant observations to minimal poetry. Also, in the way the writing is laid out they show different underlying assumptions regarding audio

description; one of the texts features time cues for the sentences to be performed. The first text, by means of an introduction, seems to let the reader in on the conditions we are to encounter. The tone is analytical at first. Then, as the description of action starts, it switches to brief indications of actions, with a minimum of qualifying adverbs ('thoughtfully'/ 'slowly' as the only exceptions). The second text includes significantly more qualifiers, even delivers interpretations of motivations, which paints an empathic picture of a situation in descriptive terms for the reader ('He searches with his fingers, for a pen to write with.'/ 'In thought'/ 'what seems to be mild frustration'/ 'exhausted'/ 'tired head'). The second text is hybrid in terms of establishing both, a fictional world of 'a man' (as opposed to the first text's 'the actor') but it also switches to more analytical and distant signposting. Both, the first and second text signpost the audio describer's analytical distance by mentioning how something seems a certain way. Attention is paid in the first instance to the description of what seems to be an overview of the situation. The scripted voice delivers programme book information as well as orientation in space and action. These aspects most deserve the title of audio 'description'.

The third text ventures to be extreme in neglecting the descriptive task of the audio description. It gives in fact no descriptive introduction to the situation, but introduces props and actions as they are being used. It is the briefest of the three texts, and consists of short sentences with time cues. The 'little vessel with pens' is simply qualified with the possessive pronoun 'his', establishing the voice of an onlooker who leaves an assumed world of fiction intact, where props belong to people, not using the designation of 'the actor' (as the first text does) or 'the man' (text 2). The third text even includes a mild affective exclamation to designate the disproportionality ('how small he is').

The three texts also show formal differences with regards to temporal organization, with indications in one case 'To be shared before the video starts', and in the last case an exact indication of timing by means of time cues.

How do the texts deal with the particular challenge of the sheer untranslatability of the central theme of disproportionality and the discordant sound? The first mentions 'a play with sound', the second describes 'sound continuing despite the removed action' and the third relies on situational description without an attempt to account for the humour in the discordance of sound and image descriptively.

How do these scripts prepare or take into account the integral performative situation, including the presence of audio describers? The third text dares to leave out information in a way a theatre text might and in terms of quantity of words alone, it leaves the listener time to listen to the performance. The first two texts show an ambition towards being comprehensive and to introduce different registers: an introductory overview register, a fictional register, and an interpretative register.

The use of several registers in one description is, in my experience, most common to professional audio description, sometimes even vocalized by different audio describers. Yet, the third text in its minimalist approach and carefully thought through solutions has particular qualities as performative text. How so, and how does it work with the very notion of a performative translation? How does it deal with listening in theatre? In its minimal interference with the performance, it does not enter into a situation of competition with the action on stage. It leaves room, makes the listener curious to know more in a way that does not ask for uninterrupted attention to the description. It depends on both performances (the one on the stage and the one of

audio description) together to allow for a distinct atmosphere to emerge without any additional qualifier of mood or explicitness in description being necessary. The question raised under the first point – what might set the bar for appropriateness and under what circumstances? – might, as the texts show, lay bare the core dramaturgical considerations in making informed decisions in line with the artistic and aesthetic concept of the performance. So if an assessment of ‘Plat du Jour’ is that the performance requires attention to small gestures and was conceived of as working with awkward silences, then the dramaturgical consideration in this case would be how to maintain these silences and frame them meaningfully with a minimum of spoken words.

Would there be an equivalent ‘vocal register’ for the audio describer of a dance performance? The experiments in this regard on ‘L’usine’ were in fact so wide-ranging that to cover them all is beyond the scope of this article. Some students indeed took the chance to talk the listener through metadata, motions, colours, spatial arrangements, associations, interpretations and possible metaphors. Others imitated the staccato of the soundtrack in their description (‘They move as one. Or one after the other. Waves.’). The listeners were accordingly invited in different ways to remain with one ear on the stage/screen.

#### *The performance of the translation*

Lastly, it is the performance of the translation, and the ensuing reflection with the students, which deserves concluding attention. What makes audio description ultimately part of the performance, and when does a description run the risk of emphasizing compensation, maintaining the hegemony of vision as I have suggested before?

As evident from the previous sections, the wording as well as the number of words in the description make a difference for the performative quality. The students debated: How much overview is necessary in order to let a listener in on a situation? They agreed, that daring to leave gaps enhances the willingness to listen and to actually draw attention to the stage (action) instead of to an interpretation. There was quick consensus on the impression that there is such a thing as filling in too much while describing. This assessment might very well be characteristic of a group of dramaturgy/ performance studies students, and the threshold of an idea might have been different for literary translators. Descriptions which in particular were assessed as exclusive and counterproductive to the particular situation were descriptions such as ‘a game with sound’ which does not let the listener in enough on the joke, nor is instructive for heightened attention to the stage.

This article’s title hinting towards the division of attention between stage and audio description was subject to debate. Both, stage action and description seemed to deserve ‘an ear’. The third text above, described as particularly performative, makes the clearest choice to establish a relationship with the stage by adding another artistic voice. The author of the first text in contrast suggests adding a touch to aid the audio description, combining the medical historical idea of auscultation and analytic listening with theatre’s possibility of making use of more than one sense in its perception. In terms of the performance of the translation, it means that the performance of the translator and the stage work use a similar register. The perception of the students was divided as to whether this contributed to a deeper understanding of what was going on. The describer in this case became an additional actor. Tone of voice mattered more. Relying on the

performativity of words rather than on the content, was perceived as the most appropriate performative translation of the stage action in this particular case.

The more descriptive an audio description became, the more registers (from awareness and recognition to affective performance) were being addressed. Was the person being described for, aware of all the registers in the situation itself? When students claimed, that an audio description worked really well for the listener, the back-and-forth between cognition, verbalization and experience diluted the clarity of delineation between actually having heard (or seen) something and having imagined something. Students tended to merge voice-over and what they heard from the stage. Part of this seemed to be because the audio describer acknowledged a certain amount of untranslatability and relied on the performativity of words and eventually touch rather than only on content and description. The role and presence of the audio describer became one of procedural reassurance and orientation.

The idea of ‘untranslatabilities’ became interesting in this context. A stage action seemed untranslatable or challenging to the describing students when situational visual comedy did not find a matching description. Yet, the experience of untranslatability from the listeners side arose, when the situation was translated just too verbosely to rely on situation and audibility of the performance itself.

What conclusions does all of this leave us with? The experiment drew the classroom into a discussion which became one of perception in the theatre more generally and audition more specifically. How aware is one as theatre audience of all registers of (re)cognition, affect, orientation while in a performance space? The co-presence of the describer granted assurance as such. There seemed to be almost never a ‘too little’ of information, but often a ‘too much description’. In the end, the opening example of the children acting as describers springs back to mind. The workshop confirmed the impression that audition in theatre is a rather fluid back and forth between imagination, information and performative presence, and an authoritative ‘viewing’ is not what an audience might ultimately be satisfied by. The complex of translation which would contribute to what we might call ‘a translated ear’ in this case, might then speak to all the above registers without ever letting the drive to be informative dominate, and instead leave space for resonance between description and perceived stage action. Ultimately, the assessments of students, of what the audio description should or should not provide as intermodal translation, is simple and appealing alike. Seeing that no audience can be assumed to come and enjoy theatre for the authoritative interpretation, the answer to the question what audio description can translate, seems to be that a dramaturgy aiming at opening the ears and attention to the entire performative situation and working with possible untranslatabilities in the performative registers, was perceived by students as most characteristically the task of the translator of stage actions into audio descriptions.

## **Funding**

This work was supported by National Research Foundation: [Grant Number 99082].

## **Notes**

1. This resonates with translation theory’s troubling of the notion of an ‘original’, as in Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator’, for example. Benjamin, W. 1996 [1921]. In this case

- what is troubled is an assumed sensory hierarchy. The vulnerability of a lack of a sense of sight is turned into a central creative strategy for a diversity of imagination and, in simple terms, a different access to theatre.
2. See, for an example, London's National Theatre: Accessed December 18, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxz23J11HLs>.
  3. I am not alone in exploring audio description in theatrical performance. Performer and scholar Amelia Cavallo discusses in her article (2015) her engagement with the artistic possibilities of audio description in theatrical performance from the perspective of her own practice. A PhD project at the University of Toronto deals with the aesthetic aspect of rhythm in audio description as well as with the dramaturgy of audio description (see Foot Conference 2017).
  4. As I am working with sound archives, the background of my interest lies in the possibility of a performative approach to metadata of sound archival objects. Which metadata become part of the document/ performance/archival object? How do you perform metadata by means of sound for sound archival objects?
  5. The idea of untranslatability in Bhabha is derived from Walter Benjamin's 'Task of the Translator' (1996).
  6. The recording is part of the audio collection of the former Theater Instituut Nederland TIN, which is based at the University of Amsterdam and contains sound recordings of – amongst others – theatre performances, but also interviews, conferences, radio broadcasts etc., all related to local theatre culture from 1900 onward.
  7. Theaterencyclopedie TIN. Accessed December 18, 2018. [http://theaterencyclopedie.nl/wiki/Plat\\_du\\_jour\\_-\\_Stichting\\_Woods\\_-\\_1986-10-13](http://theaterencyclopedie.nl/wiki/Plat_du_jour_-_Stichting_Woods_-_1986-10-13).
  8. Theaterencyclopedie TIN. Accessed December 18, 2018. [http://theaterencyclopedie.nl/wiki/Etienne\\_Decroux](http://theaterencyclopedie.nl/wiki/Etienne_Decroux).
  9. As the student clarified, this idea is based on an existing technique developed for the deaf blind by the Brazilian interpreter Helio Fonseca de Araújo.
  10. Dutch original:
    - Vooraf Klein is hij,
    - op zijn grote stoel
    - achter zijn hoge tafel.
    - 0:05 Even graait hij in zijn potje pennen.
    - 0:19 Vertwijfeld kijkt hij om zich heen.
    - 0:32 Hij schenkt een karafje water in een glaasje.
    - 0:57 Hij kijkt om zich heen.
    - De karaf is leeg.

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