

Audio description and audio subtitling in a dubbing country: Case studies

BERND BENECKE

Bavarian Broadcasting, Munich, Germany

ABSTRACT

In many European countries foreign films are not dubbed but subtitled. An audio describer has to include all the written subtitles in his script and try to make the description fit in between. Dubbing countries like Spain, Italy and Germany are also used to combining audio description and audio subtitling – for different reasons. This presentation shows how audio subtitling affects the work of describers in a dubbing country like Germany. It will present examples from daily work to show how many different ways are used to deal with the subtitles.

INTRODUCTION

A new focus in the research on audio description is the interaction with the field of audio subtitling. In many European countries, foreign films (mainly with English dialogues) are not dubbed, but rather subtitled. In such a case, the work of the audio describer becomes more complicated, for he has to include all the written subtitles in his script and try to make the description fit in between. In the production process, sometimes more than one narrator is needed to make a distinction between what is subtitle and what is description. From time to time,

the describer has to introduce the name of a character being subtitled, in order to make clear who is speaking. However, audio subtitling is not a common practice only in subtitled countries: dubbing countries like Spain, Italy and Germany are also used to combining audio description and audio subtitling. Even when the (Spanish, Italian or German) dubbed version of the film is described, subtitles may appear. By analyzing four specific cases, this article will demonstrate where, why and how describers can deal with it.

CASE 1: A PROTAGONIST OF A FILM SPEAKS IN SIGN LANGUAGE

This is usually a rather easy problem to handle, because there is (exceptions are, of course, possible) no sound in the film when the subtitled sign language appears. To make what is subtitle and what is description clear, you may choose a second voice for the subtitles – normally of the same sex as the subtitled character. With more than one person talking together in sign language, a third or fourth speaker may be necessary – if the budget makes it possible. Otherwise one voice has to do more than one character. The following example from *The piano* (J. Champion, 1993, New Zealand) shows how this works. This is the English translation of the German audio description and subtitling:

DESCRIPTION:

The woman enters the tent and talks in sign language:

SUBTITLING:

And the wind said: Remember how we played earlier. So the wind took her by the hands and said: Come with me. But she refused.

DESCRIPTION:

The girl too talks in sign language.

SUBTITLING:

Mom, I have thought about it.

SPOKEN:

I don't call him Dad. I don't call him anything.

DESCRIPTION:

The woman touches her daughter's cheek.

In this example, the problem is that the girl first uses sign language and then – from one second to another – switches to spoken language. As the subtitled sign language is spoken by another person and not by the girl's voice in the film, blind and visually impaired people may get confused and not realize that both sentences are uttered by just one character.

CASE 2: A PROTAGONIST IN A DOCUMENTARY SPEAKS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

A useful example is provided by a scene from *Am Limit* (*To the limit*, P. Danquart, 2007, Germany), a German documentary about two mountain climbers trying to break the speed record in climbing up *El Capitan* in Yosemite National Park, USA. They meet two other climbers and talk to them in English, which is subtitled. In the described version all subtitles had to be spoken by one voice (different from the voice doing the audio description). To make this understandable, in some cases the describing voice had to announce who was actually speaking:

DESCRIPTION:

Two elderly mountain climbers appear. Thomas:

SUBTITLING:

American Climbers of the old fashioned style

DESCRIPTION:

Alexander:

SUBTITLING:

Your hands look like hard work.

DESCRIPTION:

One of the old guys:

SUBTITLING:

This man went up with me. He is disabled. He called me and said: I wanna go down the El Capitan. I said: But we can't go down on a wheelchair.

SPOKEN:

(All four are laughing)

SUBTITLING:

Then he went down with me! Four times.

In the editing and mixing of that scene, the audio description team tried to connect parts of the original English dialogue with the German audio subtitling, for some people may be able to understand the English and therefore recognize that the translation really corresponds to what is said in the original – something that is often done in documentaries with the voice-over. I define these connections between the original soundtrack and the audio subtitling *audio connectors*. Examples of these audio connectors in the case described are 'Disabled' (Original) – *Behindert* (Subtitles) or 'Four times' (Original) – *Vier Mal* (Subtitles).

CASE 3: A SONG IN A DUBBED FILM IS KEPT IN THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE

This kind of audio subtitling appears very often in dubbed films. Only in children's movies – for example Walt Disney movies – are songs newly recorded

in the dubbing language. But an intro-song of a *James Bond* movie or a song in a musical are usually kept in the original language, which sometimes – if the lyrics are important for the understanding – lead to subtitles which have to be spoken in the audio described version. But as the song itself is important, the blind and visually impaired audience wants to hear as much as possible of it and the audio subtitling has to be edited very precisely into the gaps between the song lyrics or over repeated lines.

Let's take as example two films by Pedro Almodóvar: *Volver* (2006, Spain) and *Hable con ella* (*Talk to her*, 2002, Spain). Both films include a very important song for the story that in the German dubbed version is kept in Spanish and therefore audio subtitled. In *Volver* the female describing voice also does the audio subtitling, which is obviously not the best way to do it. Although she tries to switch between a more neutral describing voice and an emotional subtitling voice, it is sometimes hard for the audience to follow – especially as the song is not only covered with audio subtitling but also with descriptions of what is going on while the woman is singing her song. In the editing and mixing, an audio connector is established with *Volver/Zurückkehren*, which also refers to the title of the film.

In *Habla con ella*, the audio subtitling is presented by a second female voice, whereas a man does the describing. This is much easier to understand, blind and visually impaired people can easily distinguish the description from the audio subtitling. We find audio connectors in the words *cantar/singen* and *Paloma/Taube*.

CASE 4: THE USE OF A SECOND LANGUAGE IS A MAJOR TOPIC OF THE FILM

Examples of this growing number of films are *Inglorious Basterds* (Q. Tarantino, 2009, USA) or *Babel* (A. González Iñárritu, 2006, USA). Even if the English in *Inglorious Basterds* is dubbed, the French, German and Italian parts have to be subtitled, otherwise the whole story would not make sense. *Babel*, with its blend of English, Spanish and Japanese is another example of this kind: the title-giving Babylonian language-mix has to be kept and only one language (usually the English) can be dubbed.

A further example is the German-British film *Desert Flower* (S. Horman, 2009), where flashbacks are kept in the original Somali language, that the main protagonist used to speak as a child. Sometimes it gets hard for the audio subtitler, because the four people who talk to each other in Somali need to be audio subtitled. The only solution to this problem is the use of two additional voices, a female voice for the women speaking and a male voice for the men. If it becomes too difficult to identify the character speaking, e.g. when two women or two men are speaking to each other, the describing voice has to specify who is actually speaking. In these cases audio connectors do not seem very useful, as only few people might understand the original Somali.

Another very interesting example is the German film *Im Juli* (*In July*, 2000) directed by the German-Turkish director Fatih Akin. In many of his films, German and Turkish dialogues are mixed together and Turkish dialogues are subtitled in German for the German. The audio subtitling is quite challenging because of the very frequent cases of language-mixing, e.g. speakers mix the two languages in one sentence (starting in German and ending in Turkish) or change the language from question to answer.

Combining all this with the description is a very complicated task, and it is hard for an audience to understand.

In the following example there is a man called Isa speaking Turkish and German, a man called Daniel speaking only German, and a border guard speaking only Turkish. Isa and Daniel are sitting in a car at the Turkish border and Isa realizes that Daniel hasn't got his passport:

DESCRIPTION:

Isa and Daniel in the car:

SPOKEN:

I: Get Out

D: I am not getting out

I: I told you to get out

DESCRIPTION:

A border guard:

SUBTITLING:

Are you blind? Why don't you drive forward? Get out!

DESCRIPTION:

Isa gets out

SUBTITLING:

G: He has to get out too!

SPOKEN:

I: You have to get out!

SUBTITLING:

G: What did you say?

I: That he has to get out!

G: That's what I said

I: He is German. He does not understand.

G: Ah! Deutsch, deutsch... Passport and registration papers!

DESCRIPTION:

Isa gives him his passport and the registration papers.

SUBTITLING:

I: His passport was stolen.

G: Tell this to your grandma

SPOKEN:

D: What is the problem?

I: Halt's Maul!

SUBTITLING:

G: What?

I: I told him to Shut Up!

SPOKEN:

G: Halt's Maul!

D: I didn't say anything!

SUBTITLING:

G: He can't get through without papers! Open the trunk!

DESCRIPTION:

Isa opens the trunk. The guard discovers the dead body.

CONCLUSIONS

All these examples show that audio subtitles may greatly affect the work of describers in a dubbing country. However, if the describers succeed in achieving a fine and balanced interaction between description and subtitling, this could bring a new dimension into the listening to audio described films.