AUDIO DESCRIPTION GUIDELINES: UNE 153020 STANDARD AND NETFLIX STYLE GUIDE

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Abstract: The rise of streaming platforms has led to an increase in the number of products in the audiovisual sector. A large amount of information is transmitted through this type of products, which at the same time are a popular source of entertainment, so it is essential that everyone can have access to them. This article presents a study focused on one of the most popular media accessibility services: audio description (AD). It provides a classification of different aspects to be considered when providing AD in accordance with different international guides, as well as a comparison between the AD standard applicable in Spain, the UNE 153020, and the guidelines of one of today's streaming giants, Netflix. The final aim of this study is to determine whether the two guides could be compatible when it comes to developing an AD in Spain.

Keywords: audio description; audio description guidelines; media accessibility; audiovisual translation; UNE 153020; Netflix.

1. Introduction

Over the last few years there has been a drastic change in the audiovisual world, and the appearance of streaming platforms has been a key factor in this change. As a result, it is now possible to watch many more content whenever and wherever one wishes (Soto, 2023). As the amount of audiovisual content increases, so does the need to provide access to it for people who, due to different sensory impairments, are unable to access it.

Audio description (AD) is one of the essential media accessibility services, as it allows visually impaired people to enjoy audiovisual content. Therefore, over the last years, more and more countries and companies have been establishing their own regulations and guidelines to provide basic standards to determine how a proper AD should be provided.

Given the lack of an international standard that establishes common guidelines for different countries, the study shown in this article aims to present some parameters for comparing the different guidelines, so that it is possible to know which aspects should be emphasized when audio describing an audiovisual product. As already stated, the audiovisual world has been revolutionised by the rise of streaming platforms. Thus, this study likewise intends to use the taxonomy of different aspects of analysis created to make a subsequent comparison between the Spanish standard for AD, the UNE 153020 Standard, and the style guidelines of one of the largest streaming platforms today, Netflix.

The latest GECA OTT Barometer published by the Spanish audiovisual consultancy GECA (2023) in April 2023 shows that Netflix is, alongside Prime Video, in the top

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positions of the ranking of platforms with the highest percentage of users of Subscription Video on Demand services in Spain. Specifically, Prime Video is at the top of this list for the first time since the GECA Barometer was launched, beating Netflix by 1.3 points (67.3 points for Prime Video compared to 66 points for Netflix). As the data shows, Netflix is currently one of the leading streaming platforms in the country. It may thus be interesting to observe what aspects this audiovisual giant considers when audio describing its products and compare them with the Spanish standard.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Media accessibility and audiovisual translation

In today's globalised and intercultural world, where information moves globally and quickly from one region to another, the audiovisual sector is of great importance. Indeed, as Talaván, Ávila-Cabrera and Costal (2016: 147) point out, most information is nowadays transmitted through audiovisual media, leaving behind other media such as printed books or magazines. It is therefore of particular importance that everyone has access to such information. In cases where linguistic impediments prevent a group of people from accessing or understanding a piece of information, it is translated. Likewise, when a group of people, due to sensory impairments, cannot access such information, then it must be adapted so that they can enjoy it. This is known as Media Accessibility (MA).

Bearing all this in mind, one can take Greco's definition of MA, which defines the discipline as “concerning access to media and non-media objects, services and environments through media solutions, for any person who cannot or would not be able to, either partially or completely, access them in their original form” (Greco, 2019: 18).

As Bardini (2016) indicates, this MA is a form of audiovisual translation (AVT). Or vice-versa, AVT can be a form of MA. Díaz Cintas (2005) states that, “whether the hurdle is a language or a sensory barrier, the aim of the translation process is the same: to facilitate the access to an otherwise hermetic source of information and entertainment”, the only difference between them is the intended audience. However, in more recent years Greco (2018) explains that MA is wider than AVT and it should not be reduced exclusively to one discipline or sub-discipline of Translation Studies. It is an interdisciplinary field where different areas merge, including translation studies and AVT. This MA must be developed following a Universal Design. As Ellis (2016:41-42) explains, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of the United Nations (UN CRPD) defines this concept as follows:

> “The design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. ‘Universal design’ shall not exclude assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities where this is needed” (United Nations, 2006).

Accessibility services are quite diverse. Among all of them, Richart-Marset and Calamita (2020) highlight subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH), audio description (AD), respeaking, sign language interpreting, live subtitling, web accessibility, easy to read language, etc. This study focuses on one of the disciplines that were

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pioneers in the field of accessibility, as Richart-Marset and Calamita (2020) state: audio description.

2.2. Audio description

As already mentioned, AD is one of the first MA services that were ever developed. Remael, Reviers y Vercauteren (2015: 9) define it as follows:

> "AD is a service for the blind and visually impaired that renders Visual Arts and Media accessible to this target group. In brief, it offers a verbal description of the relevant (visual) components of a work of art or media product, so that blind and visually impaired patrons can fully grasp its form and content."

AD can be understood as an intersemiotic translation, as Mendoza Domínguez and Matamala (2020) defend. Thus, AD would be a translation in which the images displayed on the screen become words reproduced through a spoken text. In other words, it is a translation from the visual channel to the auditory channel. This intersemiotic translation can be performed on a product produced in the same language as the AD or on a product which has been already interlingually translated (Mendoza Domínguez & Matamala, 2020).

Even though AD is a service thought for those people with visual impairment, the range of potential users of this service is considerably wider. AD can enhance the experience of anyone who wishes to have a clear perspective of a visual event or product, such as museums, theatre, television and cinema. In addition, it is also a useful tool for improving children's reading and writing skills (Snyder, 2005).

2.3. AD regulations, standards and guidelines

There is no international agreement on the legalisation of AD. In his research on this issue, Reviers (2016) distinguishes three different types of AD measures based on the European countries she studied:

- National/Local laws, for both public and private broadcasters.
- Sector-driven laws, which are specific agreements for AD on broadcasted products.
- Different types of measures to promote AD on other areas apart from film and television: theatres, sports events…

Reviers (2016) also mentions that regulations in different countries also differ in terms of enforceability: certain regulations require quotas of audio-described material, while others merely state that an AD must be provided. Apart from these regulations on AD, many countries also have guidelines that establish the best practices and standards for a quality AD (Reviers, 2016). As Orero (2012) explains, there are three main types of sources of AD data:

- Public guidelines
- Company/Training guidelines
- Commercially available AD material in DVD format

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According to Tor-Carroggio and Vercauteren (2020), in Europe the tradition of creating guidelines of AD dates back to 1997, when Benecke and Dosch published the German guidelines *Wenn aus Bildern Worte Werden. Ein Handbuch fur Filmbeschreibe*. Later, in the year 2000, the *ITC Guidance On Standards for Audio Description* was published in the UK by the Independent Television Commission. As Reviers (2016) stated some years ago, these ITC guidelines are still the most widely used in Europe. Further on, the review of the guidelines on AD provided by Tor-Carroggio and Vercauteren (2020) includes the drafting in Spain in 2005 of the UNE 153020 Standard *Audio description for visually impaired people. Guidelines for audio description procedures and for the preparation of audio guides* by the the Spanish Association for Standardisation and Certification (AENOR), as well as the writing of the *Charte de l'audiodescription* by Morisset & Gonant in France in 2008. The ITC guidelines, the UNE 153020 Standard and the *Charte de l'audiodescription* are all included in this study along with other European guidelines, as well as with US guidance. Therefore, it is important to briefly put the situation regarding AD guidelines in the United States into perspective as well.

As Packer, Vizenor and Miele (2015) mention, there are many guides available online and from a large number of sources for AD in the United States. Among all of them, it is important to highlight the role played by the Audio Description Project launched by the American Council of the Blind, also in 2009, as indicated by Snyder (2022). In addition to various projects to help promote and improve AD in the country, this Audio Description Project established national guidelines or best practices that will hopefully lead to the development of a certification programme for professional describers in the United States.

3. Hypothesis, objectives and methodology

As it has been explained previously in this article, different countries or entities may have different standards and guidelines in order write their AD. This study focuses on the Spanish context and, more in detail, in the Spanish audio descripted films available on Netflix. In Spain, the UNE 153020 Standard for AD regulates this practice. Nonetheless, Netflix has its own style guide. The key idea and the main hypothesis on which the whole study is based is the possibility of both guides complementing each other when it comes to audio describing a Spanish film or series. Thus, in this study two quite opposite realities converge, the Spanish audio described films with a mostly Spanish audience versus a platform with an international nature and a worldwide audience such as Netflix.

Bearing all this in mind, the main objective of this study is to examine the similarities and differences between the two standards to determine whether both could be applied when producing the Spanish AD. To be able to compare both AD guidelines more accurately, the first part of the research consisted of compiling and analysing different AD regulations or guidelines from different countries, in order to establish which aspects are most commonly dealt with. A total of 9 guidelines from 5 different countries and 2 international guidelines were selected. These are the following ones: the UNE 153020 Standard (Asociación Española de Normalización y Certificación, 2005), the ARCOM guidelines (ARCOM, 2020), the CSA guidelines (Morisset and Gonant, 2008), the ARD+ guidelines (Norddeutscher Rundfunk, 2015), the FFA guidelines

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(Filmförderungsanstalt, 2017), the ITC guidelines (Independent Television Commission, 2000), the Ofcom guidelines (Ofcom, 2021), the FCC guidelines (Federal Communications Commission, 2020) and the ACB guidelines (American Council of the Blind, 2003), as well as the Netflix Style Guide for AD (Netflix, n. d.) and the ADLAB project guide (Remael, Reviers and Vercauteren, n. d.). All of them are shown in this table:

GUIDELINES	COUNTRY	YEAR	NATURE	PUBLIC/ PRIVATE
UNE	Spain	2005	Association	Private
ARCOM	France	2020	Institution	Public
CSA	France	2008	Institution	Public
ARD+	Germany	2015	Various	Both
FFA	Germany	2017	Institution	Public
ITC	UK	2000	Institution	Public
OFCOM	UK	2021	Institution	Public
FCC	USA	2020	Institution	Public
ACB	USA	2003	Organization	Private
ADLAB	International	2011-2014	Research Project	-
NETFLIX	International	- (v2.5)	Company	Private

Table 1. Guidelines for the comparison

As it can be observed, the nature of these AD guides is diverse: different years, different natures and different countries. Most of them are guidelines from institutions, but there is also one from an association (UNE), one from an organization (ACB) and one from a company (Netflix). In addition, the ADLAB guidelines have also been included, guidelines resulting from the project on AD research: *ADLAB. Audio Description: Lifelong Access for the Blind*, funded by the European Union under the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) and conducted between 2011 and 2014.

Four of the countries involved are European: Spain, France, Germany and the United Kingdom. In Spain the UNE 153020 Standard prevails. For the other countries, two standards from each have been selected for this study. It should be noted that the guide designated in this article as ARD+ is a guide created by the nine German regional public broadcasters that cooperate within the framework of ARD (the consortium of public broadcasters of the Federal Republic of Germany); ORF (Austrian national public broadcaster), SRF (Swiss public broadcasting corporation) and ZDF (German public television channel), as well as Deutsche Hörfilm gGmbH (German limited liability company dedicated to AD for arts and culture), Hörfilm e. V (association of German-speaking film scriptwriters) and audioskript (production company for accessible films). Thus, both public and private entities of different natures were involved in the preparation of this German guidelines. Besides the guidelines from the four European countries, two AD standards from the United States have also been included.

Once analysed the 11 guidelines, the different aspects addressed by each of them when creating an AD were identified, and the differences and similarities were

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established. Furthermore, in the second part of the study, a table was prepared with these aspects to finally compare the UNE 153020 Standard and the Netflix guidelines.

The results obtained for both the first part of the study (the analysis of the 11 AD guidelines) and the second part (differences and similarities between the UNE standard and the Netflix guide) are shown below.

4. Results

The final aim of this study is to compare the UNE 153020 Standard and the Netflix guidelines more specifically, following the comparative parameters that have been established as a result of the analysis of the 11 previously mentioned guidelines, to determine whether the two guidelines could be complementary when developing an AD in Spain.

4.1. Comparison of guidelines

Based on the analysis of all the 11 guides and the aspects they address for writing an AD script, a total of 21 parameters or aspects for comparison have been established, divided into 6 categories. The following table shows all of them:

<table>
<tr><th colspan="4">ASPECTS</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Info. Provided</td><td>Prioritize information</td><td rowspan="4">Environment</td><td rowspan="2">Spatio-temporal settings and scenarios</td></tr>
<tr><td>Objectivity & additional information</td></tr>
<tr><td>Consistency</td><td>Shapes and sizes</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="7">Language</td><td>Intertextual references</td><td>Colours</td></tr>
<tr><td>Film language</td><td rowspan="6">On-Screen Text</td><td rowspan="2">Subtitles, signs, messages...</td></tr>
<tr><td>Proper nouns & pronouns</td></tr>
<tr><td>Verbs & verbs tenses</td><td rowspan="2">Titles & credits</td></tr>
<tr><td>Syntax</td></tr>
<tr><td>Vocabulary</td><td>Logos</td></tr>
<tr><td>Style</td><td>Brands</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Characters</td><td>Characters</td><td rowspan="2">Other</td><td>Sound effects & music</td></tr>
<tr><td>Expressions, gestures and movements</td><td>Type of programme</td></tr>
</table>

Table 2. Parameters of comparison of AD guidelines

On the one hand, as for the guides themselves, it can be said that the most complete (the ones that address the most aspects) are the Netflix guidelines (19 out of 21 aspects) and the ADLAB guidelines (18 out of 21 aspects), while the least complete (the ones that address the less aspects) are the ARCOM guidelines (5 out of 21 aspects), the UNE 153020 Standard (9 out of 21 aspects), and the FCC guidelines (9 out of 21 aspects). It should be mentioned here that a noteworthy fact is that the two German

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guidelines (ARD+ and FFA) deal with the same aspects and present basically the same text.

On the other hand, as far as the 6 main categories of comparative elements are concerned, it can be noted that all categories have a certain importance in almost all the guidelines, but not all the aspects included in them are equally common.

The following graph shows the different aspects of comparison and the number of guidelines that refer to them. The different colours indicate that the parameters sharing the same colour belong to the same category (green – Information provided, pink – Language, light blue – Characters, red – Environment, orange – On-screen text, and dark blue – Other).

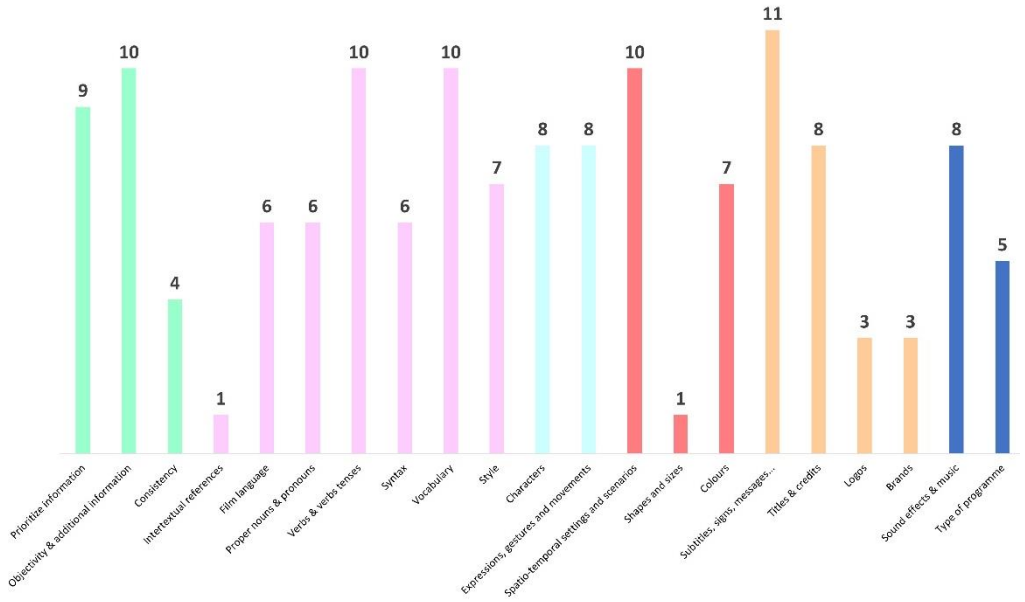


Figure 1. Comparison between aspects

Overall, most guides deal with aspects such as objectivity and given information; vocabulary and verb tenses; characters, their appearance and gestures; atmosphere and on-screen text such as subtitles, signs, messages...

However, there are other more divisive aspects, such as the treatment of the proper nouns and pronouns, the film language or the type of programme, for example. By "more divisive" it is meant that the number of guidelines that include these aspects and the number of those that do not include them are similar, so it cannot be said that they are aspects that are always addressed in this type of guidelines, as is the case for the aspects previously mentioned.

To conclude this first section of results, it is worth mentioning that there is only one aspect that is covered in absolutely all the guidelines (note that this analysis includes a total of 11 guidelines), while there are two that are hardly mentioned at all. As it can be seen in the graph, on-screen text relating to subtitles and signs is present in all guidelines. In contrast, intertextual references and the shapes and sizes of the realities

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displayed on screen are barely explained in these guidelines. Only one guide has been identified in each case that mentions how to deal with those elements when dealing with AD: the discussion of intertextual references in AD is dealt with only in the ADLAB guidelines and the treatment of shapes and sizes is addressed exclusively in the Netflix guidelines.

4.2. UNE 153020 Standard and Netflix Style Guide for AD

Two of the standards that appear in this comparison are the UNE 153020 Standard and the Netflix guidelines. The UNE 153020 Standard is the guide that establishes the practices to be followed when developing an AD in Spain. Meanwhile, the streaming platform Netflix has its own international guidelines for AD of the films in its catalogue.

Using the results obtained from the analysis of the 11 guides already discussed, the following table sets out the different aspects of comparison, indicating which aspects are addressed in each of the two guides concerned.

ASPECTS		NETF.	UNE	ASPECTS		NETF.	UNE
Info. provided	Prioritize information	✓	✓	Environment	Spatio-temporal settings and scenarios	✓	✓
	Objectivity & additional information	✓	✓				
	Consistency	✓	×		Shapes and sizes	✓	×
Language	Intertextual references	×	×		Colours	✓	×
	Film language	✓	×	On-screen text	Subtitles, signs, messages...	✓	✓
	Proper nouns & pronouns	✓	×				
	Verbs & verbs tenses	✓	×		Titles & credits	✓	✓
	Syntax	×	✓				
	Vocabulary	✓	✓		Logos	✓	×
	Style	✓	✓		Brands	✓	×
Characters	Characters	✓	×	Other	Sound effects & music	✓	×
	Expressions, gestures and movements	✓	×		Type of programme	✓	✓

Table 3. Comparison between the UNE 153020 Standard and the Netflix guidelines for AD

As a first clear result, the Netflix guide is more complete than the UNE standard, in the sense that it includes a larger number of aspects. Specifically, it covers 19 of the 21 total aspects that are present in the comparative taxonomy of guidelines. The only aspects it does not refer to are the intertextual references and the syntax when writing the AD script. In contrast, the UNE standard is simpler, addressing only 9 of the 21

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elements. The only aspect that the UNE standard does address and the Netflix guide does not mention is syntax.

It is quite remarkable that the UNE 153020 Standard does not mention anything about the treatment of aspects such as proper names/pronouns, the description of characters and their expressions or the sound effects, since these are elements which most of the times provide essential information and help to create a suitable atmosphere for watching and understanding a film or series. It is also interesting that, regarding those aspects that both guides focus on and do address, in general it can be observed that the Netflix guide is more specific and provides a little more information about how to deal with them when compared to the UNE standard.

One of the clearest examples of this is the case of on-screen text. While the UNE 153020 Standard provides just three lines about the treatment of this aspect without going into great detail, the Netflix guide provides general information, distinguishes subtitles for foreign languages and difficult-to-understand dialogue from subtitles for foreign-language songs, and also includes more specific information about the treatment of titles and credits and logos. The same applies to information on the type of programme for which the AD is provided. While the UNE 153020 Standard barely offers a single line of information, Netflix once again provides general basic guidelines as well as information for children's content and horror content.

5. Conclusions

Taking into consideration all the previous explanations, several conclusions can be drawn. In terms of the comparison between the 11 guidelines, it is clear that the difference between the ones that deal with the most aspects (Netflix and ADLAB) and the ones that deal with the fewest aspects (ARCOM, UNE and FCC) is quite wide, as the former address almost all the 21 total aspects while the latter address less than 10, that is, less than half of these aspects. This can be seen as evidence of the differences that exist when it comes to drafting an AD script.

Secondly, while it is true that the different main categories of the aspects of comparison are quite important in all guidelines, this is not the case for the aspects themselves. Thus, there are aspects that are dealt with in most guidelines, such as objectivity and additional information, verbs and verb tenses, vocabulary, spatio-temporal environment and subtitles, signs, and messages; while there are others that are hardly covered in these guidelines, such as intertextual references and shapes and sizes. This could be because the first ones are aspects that are essential for the comprehension of a film or a series, while the second ones are perhaps not so significant or are easier to assume by the final audience without the need for the AD to mention them.

Finally, there are certain aspects in which the number of guidelines that mention them and the number of guidelines that do not is similar. It is interesting, since some of them can be considered important aspects for a project, such as the type of programme or the colours of what is seen on the screen, or for a good AD, such as coherence, syntax or the verbs employed. A larger study, with a greater number of guidelines, would

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probably be necessary to establish more common parameters concerning these aspects.

Regarding the comparison between the UNE 153020 Standard and the Netflix guidelines for AD, it can be stated that the former covers many less aspects than the later. On the one hand, as far as the UNE 153020 Standard is concerned, it could be said that it is surprising in that it does not deal with certain aspects such as the description of characters or sound effects, among others, given that these are fundamental aspects in an audiovisual work. Moreover, in general, it is a rather less extensive and exhaustive standard than the Netflix guidelines.

On the other hand, it is true that the Netflix guidelines have a more international character and, therefore, could at some point lose the focus of the Spanish viewer. Anyway, having analysed it and studied other guidelines, it can be considered as a very complete and useful guide. So much so, that probably both guidelines could be complementary, being this the main conclusion of this study.

It could be convenient to think that both guidelines could be complementary when it comes to preparing an AD in Spain. To comply strictly with the Spanish standard, the UNE 153020 Standard would be necessary, as it provides the basic notions to be considered when it comes to AD in Spain. In addition, the Netflix guidelines could offer very interesting contributions, as they are more extensive and have a more intercontinental nature. By using both guides, it would be possible to produce a well-detailed and correct Spanish AD.

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