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# CULTUS

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## TRANSCREATION AND THE PROFESSIONS

2014, Volume 7

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## Strategies for the Audio Description of Brand Names<sup>1</sup>

José Dávila-Montes and Pilar Orero

### *Abstract*

*Colours, places, emotions and character traits in audio description of fictional TV and cinematic materials usually describe a degree of detail that is highly dependent on the parameter of the time available between dialogues or parts of dialogues. Actions and plot are thus narrated for the blind or the visually impaired with a varying degree of attention to detail, depending on the space (or rather, “time”) available. Beyond its merely professional dimension, audio description can be considered a mode of intersemiotic translation that entails a decision-making process comparable to that in other modes of audiovisual and interlinguistic translation. It is also able to incorporate a number of features typically related to the term “transcreation”: transporting “meaning” from an audiovisual system to an exclusively aural one.*

*Transcreation is not only a semiotic operation between disparate systems, but also a key concept in marketing and advertising. Dealing with objects in audio description, and particularly with those objects that have a clear designer imprint or branding, inevitably becomes a complex matter. This article will look at the audio description of brand names in different genre films in an attempt to account for a number of possible strategies in situations where objects, and very especially those with a conspicuous commercial brand, play an integral role in the construction of cinematic scenes, or even in the plot itself. The article will examine first some readings of objects from a semiotic perspective, with special attention to the emotional and the symbolic/cognitive implications intended on the original audience and their impingement on a transnational culture of contemporary consumerism. It then will move on to analyse some of the functions that commercially branded objects play in a film, and finally will proceed to list some examples of existing techniques used to describe such objects.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Audio description (AD) is the technique of inserting audio narration, explanations and descriptions of the settings, characters, and actions taking place in a variety of audiovisual media, when such information about these visual elements is not offered in the regular audio presentation. This ad hoc narrative can be created for any media representation: dynamic or static, i.e. from a guided city tour of Barcelona or a 3D film, to a Picasso painting. Its function is to make audiovisual texts available to all in order to avoid the risks of excluding a large sector of society whose needs require this special service to compensate for their sensorial difficulties.

The technique of AD has been around for centuries, both for blind people and for those who could not access the visual content due, for example, to lack of culture or education. This was the case in the Medieval Ages when pilgrims needed oral explanations to “read” and enjoy the visual narrative in stained glass windows. In the 20th century, with the development of silent movies, narrators were hired by cinema owners to explain the film, and to read intertitles. In those years, literacy in both film language and reading texts was not a common occurrence. In the 21st century, when culture and society have significantly moved from paper to audiovisual formats, the need for access to content is more poignant. This article begins with a brief theoretical discussion of narrative, first, and then on advertising, in an attempt to explain how different levels of meaning and functions are sought after by advertising and how these play out in movies. The article moves later into discussing possible audio-description and decision-making strategies when branded objects are involved in cinematic materials.

## **2. Objects as Characterisation and Narrative Tools**

The field of Narratology studies, among other things, the implication of objects in the construction of character identities, and also their precise placement in space. Objects, and their location, determine not just the perception but also the interpretation —understanding and cognition— of a scene as part of a film. Objects may be used for wallpaper effect, as props, or to characterise the time, period or social status of the character. They may also have very specific “roles” in how the story is constructed

from a semiotic point of view, with metonymic and metaphoric functions that “weave” the story together, by acting as visual links between consecutive scenes or as anaphoric/cataphoric references in the relation of scenes that are chronologically distant within movies: a smoking gun during a flash-back, for example, or a flag waving over a mountain after showing the marching of troops, may constitute an element indispensable to fully grasp the plot of a movie.

As crucial as they are in the construction of a narrative or in the characterization of time, space and people, objects may become a source of embarrassment when they inadvertently and inappropriately make their way into filmic materials. Some Internet sites are devoted to recounting the many blunders in films and TV series that can be seen in some frames, such as the use of a fork in Rome in the classic BBC TVI *Claudius* mini-series, or the watch Russell Crowe wears in *Gladiator*. In another movie about pre-Roman times, a baby is shown with a modern-day pacifier (*Troy*, 2004).

Movies from the Roman Empire are, for some reason, the subject of special delight for “goof-hunters”, but while the former instances in *Gladiator* or *Troy* are clear examples of production blunders that are actually irrelevant to the plot unless spotted by a scrutinizing audience, some others may have serious implications for the credibility of the movie. In *Claudius*, the emperor consents to eating poisonous mushrooms from his wife’s fork and dies. It is difficult to ascertain which of the gaffes is more detrimental to the viewers’ experience; at any rate, these three instances require an increasingly sophisticated encyclopaedia on the part of the audience: gladiators did not wear watches (easy), there were no pacifiers in the times of Achilles (nearly as obvious) and (alas!) forks are a relatively “modern” invention.

The cases above may be used as extreme exemplification of the kind of intervention that audio description may have in the dealing with objects in scenes. While it may seem obvious that the accidental watch on Maximus’ wrist will be —advertently or inadvertently— omitted in the audio description of the movie, the long, silent take during which Claudius faces the slowly advancing fork with a poisonous mushroom may become a touchstone for the cultural efficacy of the audio descriptor, who will enjoy an unusually long period of time to describe a rather static scene: “to mention or not to mention” becomes the crux for the descriptor. The particular example of *I Claudius* illustrates that intersemiotic translation is not just arbitrated by a matter of communicative or interpretive relevance,

but it is also as much of a decision-driven activity as interlingual translation may be.

While some work is already underway in how audio description constructs both camera and ideological points of view, focusing, time or the portrayal of emotions in films (Igareda 2012, Maszerowska 2012, Orero & Vilaró 2012, Orero 2012), little attention has been given to the audio description of objects, especially of objects that go beyond their (physical or narrative) function and have a brand name more or less conspicuously attached to them. The difference and implications between the Mac Book Air and a standard PC go beyond the computer description of its parts. In the movie *The Bucket List* (Reiner, 2007), laptop computers are not merely described as “portable”, with the significant loss of contextual meaning that this entails, but their conspicuous branding (Mac) is also omitted, involving also a loss of symbolic meaning that actively contributes to conforming the personal traits of the characters. They become visually related to a set of values associated with Apple products (slick, expensive and fashionable), but the relationship can’t be established if the brand is not mentioned in the audio description. As noted by Sudjic (2008, 8) “The ‘real’ things ... are calculatingly designed to achieve an emotional response. Objects can be beautiful, witty, ingenious, sophisticated, but also crude, banal or malevolent”.

Audio description, in its goal to render an interpretation of a multi-channel medium (audio and visual) into a different, mono-channel one (audio only), can take different approaches when describing objects, advertising or design. Towards those, the audio describer can take a stand that presents many shades, from the innocent to the manipulative, and also a possible attitude of actively ignoring objects in audio description as a nuisance to be avoided. All these stands have direct implications at several levels: the narrative level, the symbolic level and the ideological. But before moving on to these three categories, an attempt to describe the intricate way in which images and words interact in advertising is in order, because the audio description of brands seeks to reproduce the semantic interaction of images and words by the use of solely words.

### 3. Narrating Symbols, Narrating Brands: Audio Describing the Empty Signifier

The cognitive *dynamis* that advertising seeks to activate may be compared to how objects in filmic material contribute to the overall construction of meaning: by laying out a network of internal references and relating to aural text and actions on the screen). At this point, however, the discussion needs to turn into how would the above help to discern the relevance in the description of objects that are clearly identified, in their visual nature, as belonging to a commercial brand of some kind. Dávila (2008) discusses that brand identification is a crucial aspect of positioning:

According to Reis and Trout (1996, 54), creating an idea in the consumer's mind and associating it with the advertised product is the main key to advertising success. In this area [...] the logo and to a lesser extent the slogan become [...] "empty signifiers" in semiotic [terms]. While it may have in its origins a particular symbolic or iconic value (the McDonald's logo is based on the first letter—"M"—of the brand name), its ultimate objective, or at least its success, resides not in its *a priori* value but in its capacity to be freely associated by the user with the body of his own experiences related to the product—whether real, if he has already consumed it at some point, or fictional.

Chandler (2006, 74) discusses empty signifiers, saying that they:

[...] mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even *any* signifieds; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean..

Logos and well-established slogans aim to become such empty, pure signifiers: the almost mechanical trigger for consumption, the utmost distillation of the whole persuasive mechanism of advertising, an indicator of that "meaning" previously created by the spectator/consumer experience, a button that, by the simple fact of having been pushed before, compels a consumer to start consuming or to consume again. Brands, logos and slogans would somehow concentrate what Eco summarily states about advertising in general (1999)[1968], 273, our translation):

[A]dverts unveil their argumentation as if using acronyms, in a way that reminds us of the story about some madmen that told jokes by remembering only their numbering; mentioning a joke's number was all they needed in order to recall it and start laughing.

Perhaps because of the unprecedented pervasiveness of visual media in recent times, empty signifiers have already managed to go beyond the limits and restrictions of the actual graphic design of a logo. The very same distinctive characteristics of the product, its design, its ability to “position” itself as a “shape”, or as a “color” seem to have turned products, goods, objects, into actual “empty signifiers”. Mercedes Benz cars are no longer just distinctive because of their three-pointed star logo on their nose; Apple products are identifiable without the bitten apple, some drugs and pills are recognizable to many consumers without having to read the wording on them. The unique shape of some consumer objects identifies them already with the consuming experience, actual or forthcoming.

Talking of the design of consumer goods, Sudjic (2008, 89) states that “[t]he most successful designs are those that make simultaneous use of all these [physical] qualities, and do it with a conscious understanding of what they can do.” How would this work in audio description, where the “simultaneous use of all these qualities” is sometimes confined to a few seconds at the very most and is all subdued through a single perceptive available channel? Would this sensorial limitation void any possibility of audio description to play the “meaning-making game” that is inherent to brand-names and advertising in general? Not really. Brand designs and brand-names acquire an archetypal status that goes beyond their actual signifier (shape, design, form). They become living semantic entities. Blind people will have a limited sensorial experience of how the latest smart-phone looks and works. They may have the experience of its shape, weight and feel if they have held one in their hands. Nevertheless, this is irrelevant to their actual “knowledge” about the product, to the “meaning” that the object has managed to inject into a common, shared (and not necessarily visual) iconography.

Thus, there is no need to describe the feel and shape of a luxury car appearing in a movie: mentioning its brand may suffice in order to unleash a whole meaning-making mechanism. Conversely, omitting the audio description of a brand-name that happens to be visually conspicuous in a scene entails depriving the audience from the triggering of the machinery of associations which is, per se, a “pleasurable” experience as a cognitive process.

The audio description of brands takes place on rather uneven grounds not just when comparing different movies, but within the very same film. The movie *RocknRolla* (Ritchie, 2008), for example, constructs an atmosphere of luxury in an underworld of crime and gangsters. In part, this is achieved by conspicuously showing luxury cars and branded items. The original English audio description of the movie does not mention their brand in some cases where the “character” of the car (Bentley, Land Rover) appeals to archetypical values in contemporary society (unaffordable luxury, adventurous spirit). In a different scene, another brand of car with similar symbolic associations is instead described in detail (“They get into a waiting BMW7 series”). Back again to *The Bucket list*, some cars are described by their brand (“a Morgan”), while a conspicuous bottle of Listerine is described simply as “mouthwash”. Is there any underlying reason for such uneven treatment? Should there be one?

As with any decision-making in translation, deciding whether to audio describe a brand name is not, though, a completely “clean handed”, detached process: it has structural, ideological and procedural implications. The next sections in this article will address the ideological and procedural dimensions. It must be noted too that there may be a natural imbalance between the inherent “implicitness” of a branded item as a participating item in a scene, embedded in a whole range of additional visual stimuli, and the intrinsic “explicitness” of its audio description. The audio descriptor makes a choice—due to time constraints—that eliminates from the “imaginary screen” of the visually impaired all other elements that concur in time and space within the real screen. A selection is made of “what is” and “what is not” part of the story. Explaining the brand of cigarettes that a character draws from the pack may entail omitting the fact that she wears a diamond ring.

However, there is an inevitable decoupling between visual and auditory processing speeds due to the very nature of the stimuli: the visual may stay or may move, but the auditory, except for background effects or melodies taken as a scene-long lasting unit, is necessarily always “moving”. This decoupling will jeopardize the possibility of audio describing even very simple scenes (one hand, one diamond ring, one pack of cigarettes) if they stay on the screen for a short enough period, or if there is dialogue between the characters. The decision making and the choice may or may not have very particular implications at the most basic structural level of the viewer experience, in the understanding of character traits or action developments.

Whether it has or not such implications surely is a consideration for the audio descriptor to keep in mind. In audio description, a diamond ring must surely override the importance of a luxury brand of cigarettes. But a crunched, soft pack of unfiltered Gauloises will most likely trump most jewellery in any scene that both items share.

#### **4. Audio description of brands and ideology**

In the field of translation and ideology, Michael Cronin (2003) has (un)covered interesting aspects of the interaction of translation and globalization that are easily (if not explicitly) extrapolated in the paradigm of advertising. Somewhat positioned within the framework of post-colonial studies, Cronin resorts to the notion of “clonialism” (a hybrid term between “cloning” and “colonialism”) applied to the transcendent role of translation in a globalized world (Ibid., 34).

Cronin identifies the socio-politics and linguistics of globalization with the socio-politics and language of empire at a number of levels. In a globalized world, cloning or duplication, “same McDonald’s, same episodes of Dallas or Friends, same Disney films [...] same Microsoft Windows and same Britney Spears” (Ibid., 128), entail the gradual blurring of “otherness”. Duplication of aesthetics in consumer products, becomes then a new form of colonialism, or “clonialism” (Ibid., 128).

Along these lines, Cronin presents the notion of “neo-Babelianism”, defined as “the desire for mutual, instantaneous intelligibility between human beings speaking, writing and reading different languages” (Ibid. 59). Neo-Babelianism responds to the same spirit of reaching the sky that promoted the construction of the mythical tower, but it aims to reach a less heavenly target: not the sky this time, but the global market (Dávila 2007). The post-Babelian multilingual paradigm needs to work out its success by translating. Reluctantly, translation is recognised as indispensable and becomes a mechanical, additional cost to the building project. Translation is “accepted but only on the condition that it can be engineered to produce a pre-Babelian illusion” (Cronin 2003, 62).

Translation thus becomes homogenisation. Taking audio description as a form of translation, what would be the import of the audio description of brands in the “post-clonial” world? And what would be the ethics of audio description within the aesthetics of this “clonialism”/colonialism? Is the audio descriptor to contribute to what Baudrillard (1988) called, “the

murder of the real”, the “implosion” of ideas, systems and values into the economics of consumption? To what extent needs the audio descriptor be concerned with these notions? Is there or should there be an underlying code of ethics in the decision making that professionals need to apply in their audio descriptions of brands?

These questions are not inconsequential and their answers are likely to shape any possible procedural considerations in the audio description of consumer brands. The discussion would not constitute, therefore, a matter of ideology on the one hand *and* a matter of audio description of brands on the other, as separate, unrelated notions. It rather becomes a matter of whether *brands and ideology* are unavoidably, perhaps implicitly audiodescribed in a concurrent way. Beyond specific narratological implications, the audio description of brands does not only unleash a set of cognitive, pleasurable meaning making referential systems: it also gives free rein to a whole set of ideological mechanisms. As with the fork in the poisoning of Claudius, the audio descriptor may be faced with a difficult decision to make.

### 5. Suggested Guidelines for the Audio Description of Brands

Audio description of brands works at three levels: the narrative level, the symbolic level and the ideological. Dávila and Orero (forthcoming) analysed these functions within the film, *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel 2006).

Two opposing AD strategies were found within the same **narrative function** of brand names: omission and literal audio description. When omission was the chosen option, experimental research could be useful to attempt to identify, with an audience listening to audio description as the only input, the precise time throughout a particular film in which the eureka moment of understanding a given relationship takes place. In the movie mentioned above, identification takes place between the “devil” and “Prada”, the title of the movie and the main character “Miranda”. There is a foreseeable delay in the identification for the blind audience, due to the fact that in the very first scene of the movie the brand of Miranda’s purse (Prada, of course) is not mentioned in the audio description. The subsequent disambiguation required would be sufficient proof of how audio descriptions need to extend their awareness into considering brand names as structurally relevant narrative objects.

The second case is that of “literal audio description”. In *The Devil Wears*



*Prada*, Andy, the young woman working for the tyrannizing Miranda has an epiphany and changes accordingly: a cathartic moment in which she realizes her lack of adaptation to her professional environment. This leads her to a change in attitude, which is also reflected in the clothes she wears. During the film, she moves from anonymous woolly shapeless garments to Chanel, a style that will characterize her for the rest of the movie. The AD picked up on the brand name “literally” because it has been explicitly mentioned when the receptionist says: “Are you wearing the Ch..?”, to which Andy replies: “The Chanel boots? Yes I am”. Later on in the street, as the new Chanel Andy meets her boyfriend, the AD describes her as “with the Chanel boots”. In this approach, brands are mentioned in the audio description when the characters have already mentioned them. However, there is no apparent effort by the AD to understand or help to create or clarify the function and role of brand names, which would seem contradictory to the fact that the very essence of the movie deals with such specific themes in the life of fashionistas.

The strategy used to audio describe also affects the reception of the film at a symbolic level. Throughout the film, **two** of the main characters, the two receptionists, present quite a different approach to everything in life. This is characterised not only by their physical looks, but is also displayed through their clothing, as Emily wears “Vivienne Westwood” while Andy wears “Chanel”. What it represents in fashion terms is that Westwood is the fashion catalyzer of the Punk movement into the mainstream consumer market, while Chanel is the epitome of elegance. This portrait of characters is reinforced with an echo-effect of **symbolic relevance** that emphasizes this contrast by showing to the audience the wallpapers on their Apple computers: Andy’s has the Eiffel Tower at night (refined and stylish) while Emily’s shows a picture of nature (spontaneous and wild). These details, or narrative objects, are built into the film for a purpose and should be consequently understood and considered when drafting descriptions.

On a third level, **ideology**, the discussion could easily make inroads into issues of translator ethics and translator agency. In *Midnight in Paris* (Allen, 2011) characters appear carrying Chanel fashion complements and even a sizeable Chanel shopping bag that are not audio described. The strong stereotypical and symbolic links between the city and the fashion brand become severed when they are not audio described. However, a conscious consideration could be made about those values that an explicit

mention of the brand would entail: in a movie so intrinsically and explicitly entangled with an ironic, yet stereotypical vision of Parisian mythologies, how relevant is it to add yet another layer of self-referentiality that is solely based on a consumer brand? A significant portion of the ethical debate in the profession could easily apply to the AD of consumer brands: is the audio describer to contribute to an overarching, global tendency dictated by consumerism? Would this help to reinforce stereotypes and to dilute the traits of the particular? Or, conversely, is the descriptor entitled to deprive the blind audience of such intentional iconic redundancy on the basis of an ideological posture? The answer to this question would undoubtedly deserve a better grounded discussion.

As seen in the introduction, brand names can be used for many purposes in the narration, and also for different functions: it is the responsibility of the AD to understand why they have been chosen. Audio describers should, therefore:

- Consider the explicitness of brand names in the visual construct of the movie.
- Gauge time constraints and narratological demands in deciding whether a brand name has an overarching significance in the plot, beyond its belonging to a specific scene in the movie, and it is, therefore, worth describing.
- Establish priorities when deciding on the symbolic dimension of brand names, considering how these contribute to the characterization of personae.
- Reflect on the incidence of their activity upon cultural and economic dynamics that are embedded in contemporary audiovisual products, and establish the limits to the actual need of describing brands.
- Attempt to keep a consistent approach in their decision-making strategies that avoids inadvertent omissions, erratic results, or systematic ignorance.

## 6. Conclusion

We have demonstrated that a thoughtful analysis of the narratological and symbolic functions of brand names within the audio described movie is needed in order to enhance the audience's experience of the filmic material. Brands go beyond meaning, and transport the audience into an additional, symbolic plane in which both channels, word and image, are

intertwined as signifier and slowly realise the signified. While at the narrative level, this association of brand and the signified has less of an implicature value, in the sense that disambiguation is easier to establish, a more subtle link is created when brands feature on a symbolic level. Hence audio description, as Vercauteren comments (2007, 152), should strike “the right balance between frustrating the audience with insufficient information to follow the story and patronizing them by spelling out obvious inferences”. This principle should be applied to the audio description of brands, inasmuch as their meaning-making nature extends beyond the anecdotal and contributes to constructing imaginary and symbolic experiences in the audience.

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