

Forty years on: Advances of Audio Description in Russia

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Abstract

The presentation will give a brief overview of the history of Audio Description (AD) in Russia. It will then look in more detail at the developments and changes we see in modern times, such as the growing trend for inclusivity in society and an increasing variety of media solutions available to consumers, which is reflected in the recent changes in state legislation and regulations governing the film, television and interactive media industries. It will cover different approaches that co-exist in the industry as well as current processes that aim to establish overall standards for access services providers. Specifically the paper will look at currently available access services, resources, technological solutions and training opportunities. It will take recent case studies of voluntary projects, regional initiatives and some commercial services that engage target audiences, and analyse their impact. Finally, the paper will conclude with authors' views and aspirations for future developments in the area of access services.

Key information from this paper is chronologically presented in the poster, which is based on authors' personal experiences of working in the AVT industry and having overseen the rapid change in diversity of the audiences for film, television and interactive media. Such increasing demand for access services combined with the more recent changes in legislation, making accessibility service provision mandatory, resulted in an apparent shortage of trained professionals and training services in this field.

The authors will share their unique stories:

Alexey Kozulyaev represents RuFilms - a company that provides the service and runs a training school (The RuFilms School of Audiovisual Translation). It is a corporate response to challenges of the market demand for accessibility services and lack of trained professionals.

Ivan Borshchevsky is a linguist, clinical psychologist, audiovisual translator and audio describer; a member of the Audio Description Association (UK) and the Audio Description Worldwide Consortium, who is an experienced professional in the field.

Olga Davis is a freelance audiovisual translator and former Russian Language Editor for Discovery Channel, London, who recently completed training courses in AD and SDH, and participated in voluntary audio description projects.

These stories look at three different levels of involvement in access services provision, and for that reason, a combined examination of their experiences ensures a good spread of activities and outcomes to analyse and share with the wider community.

1 Introduction

For quite some time Russia has been somewhat off the radar for the communities of global AD researchers and practitioners. In fact, AD emerged and existed, in certain forms, in Russia for almost half a century. Perhaps, its moderate autonomous development went unnoticed by the world, because even internally AD hasn't been recognised as a form of audio-visual translation. In fact, it's only recently that Russian scholars of translation and researchers began to accept audio-visual translation as a form of translation. The definition of the AD process has been too broad, which has led the industry astray.

Furthermore, this perception of tabula rasa resulted in real setbacks for AD practitioners, and the most recent significant example was the fact that Netflix initially dropped any AD offerings to Russian viewers on the basis of the lack of audio describers in the country. Actually, this perception is wrong, but there are certain historical reasons for its emergence. The article aims to dispel some of the most frequent and widely circulated myths about the state of AD in Russia. It is a long and interesting story, and not without controversy, but things are beginning to change.

2 History and development

Audio Description (AD) has a rather long history in Russia. It is a common belief that radio dramas and radio broadcasts in 1920s were the forerunners of the modern-day AD. However, there were lesser known activities that have anticipated AD.

During the silent film era, in Japan, there were performers who provided live narration for silent films (both Japanese and Western ones). They were called *benshi*. The *benshi* stood to the side of the screen and related the story to the audience. They also provided translation for foreign films. A Russian martial arts researcher Vasili Oshchepkov¹ who spent many years in Japan studying judo had also mastered the art of the *benshi*. For several years he screened films in Sakhalin, an island in the Far East of Russia, acting both as a projectionist and a *benshi*.

First attempts to describe live events to blind and deaf spectators were made as early as the 1930s. Olga Skorokhodova, a blind and deaf scientist, teacher and writer, described several episodes of "watching" several dramas and films with the help of a translator². She also compared several approaches to the description of stage performance. However, no general principles had been developed.

The year 1978 is considered the official birth date of AD in Russia. In 1978, *Cleopatra*, the 1963 American epic historical drama, was screened in Moscow with Russian audio description. The film was described by

Anatoly Chechetin, an actor, who is, therefore, considered to be the first Russian "official" audio describer. In 1980s, a number of so-called "audio films" were produced. These "audio films" were shown throughout the USSR until the 1990s. However, there was no theoretical background behind these audio descriptions. (The first attempt to formulate general principles of the audio description process was made in a book for parents of a blind child in 1989.³) After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, "audio films" production was cancelled.

In the early 2000s Russia has seen the revival of interest in AD. S.N.Vanshin, director of the Reacomp Institute, proposed to train a group of describers to describe films during film festivals. He invented a Russian term "typhlocomenting" for the audio describing process and published the first guidelines based on his author's concept. S.N.Vanshin also initiated a campaign to replace the term "audio description" with the term "typhlocomenting". He then obtained the patent both for the method described in his book and for the term "typhlocomenting" itself. At the same time, efforts were made to separate "typhlocomenting" from the widely-accepted international approach to the process (for instance, S.N.Vanshin emphasises that "typhlocomenting" is not a form of translation, thus rejecting the opinion of leading experts in this field).

Since then, two organisations in Russia have been providing "typhlocomenting" for films and live performances: the Reacomp Institute and the All-Russia Society of the Blind. In addition, many enthusiasts and volunteers have been promoting AD in social media.

In 2015, a group of audiovisual translators (working for RuFilms Company, LLC, Moscow) began studying the international experience in this field and promoting the widely-accepted scientific approach to AD. On a practical level, RuFilms Company became the third provider of AD and access services in Russia. In 2016, the First International Conference on Audiovisual Translation was held in St Petersburg, organised by RuFilms Company with cooperation of several Russian universities. Among others, three reports on audio description were presented during the Conference.

In 2016 and 2017, one of the authors of this paper, who is also a member of the Audio Description Association, delivered several lectures about AD at two leading universities: Moscow State Linguistic University and St Petersburg State University of Aerospace Instrumentation. As a result, the first Master's thesis in the Russian Federation was upheld by the latter in May, 2017.

3 Methodology and different approaches to AD

Currently there are no commonly accepted official AD guidelines in the Russian Federation. Therefore, a number of approaches are applied by different AD providers.

Because the process used by the Reacomp Institute is patented, it is very difficult to obtain access to it for any outsider in order to study and analyse. But analysing films, described using this approach, that are available in the public domain, one can draw a conclusion, that mostly their principles do not differ from those listed in international guidelines. However, the main characteristic of their approach is that “typhlocommenting” is not considered to be a form of translation (intersemiotic translation, R. Jacobson) which contradicts the international views and experience, although the author obviously used international literary sources for developing his concept. Therefore, films appear to be described according to subjective preferences, rather than standardised criteria. The approach applied by the All-Russia Society of the Blind differs from the one described above. We were not able to find any written explanation of their principles. The descriptions made by the Society lack quality and seem to have little regard for the comprehension of the films by the target audiences. One of the main features (and errors) is that they try to use every second of silence in the original soundtrack to fit in sentences of describer’s narration, dividing them freely to fill the available time, thus making understanding more difficult, and misleading viewers as shown below (see Table 1).

Table 1.

A fragment of a film described by “typhlocommentors” of the All-Russia Society of the Blind (an Oscar-winning 1984 film *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*).

Character	Timing	Soundtrack	What is demonstrated on the screen
Katya	07.31	You say Tonya’s life is bad, mine is bad, too.	Katya and Ludmila are walking along the street. They pass a young man who is giving a hug to his girlfriend.
Describer	07.33	Police Community Support Officers...	
Katya	07.34	What do you call “life”?	Police Community Support Officers approach the young man.

Police Community Support Officer	07.35	Stop hugging! You’re in a public place! Don’t you know that?	The young man takes away his arm.
Describer	07.39	...address the young man...	Katya and Ludmila are still walking along the street followed by two young men.
Ludmila	07.41	And your chemistry is such a boring science.	
Describer	07.42	...who placed his hand..	Katya and Ludmila pass large shop windows.
Ludmila	07.42	You deal with boring formulas.	
Describer	07.43	... on girl’s shoulder.	Ludmila is adjusting her clothes and stumbles.

The third approach is applied in practice by describers of the RuFilms Company. They use the ADLAB Audio Description Guidelines edited by A. Remael, N. Reviere and G. Vercauteren⁴. In addition they communicate with international AD providers and follow researches in this field.

4 Training and Opportunities

RuFilms was among the first Russian companies to respond to the market requirements for AD for Russian and foreign films and the growing demand to make their content accessible by such prominent Russian customers as Aeroflot In-Flight Entertainment, Yeralash Kids’ Productions as well as Netflix, which is currently retesting the AD production in this country. But in order to fulfill the assignments adequately, the RuFilms Group (AVT service provider and School of AVT) needed to develop teaching curricula for both stand-alone and university-based short courses so that prospective audio describers could be found and trained. As the School has been very active in the AVT teaching field since 2011 and has a partnership network of 11 national universities all over Russia, it managed to develop such courses, read by Ivan Borshchevsky and Alexey Kozulyaev. In 2016 the School ran on-site courses at the Faculty of Humanities of the St Petersburg State University of Aerospace Instrumentation (SUAI), and at the Moscow State

Linguistic University (MSLU). Also, several courses on AD and digital accessibility were held online, with more than 50 people attending. AD courses were also incorporated into the system of on-the-job training of the RuFilms Group.

Development plans for 2018 envisage expansion of AD training and incorporating it in the curricula of several

5 Related Work and Personal Journeys

Accessibility services are very important for the community, because they provide equal access for all groups of population. The authors not only render professional services in the field of accessibility, but also participate in socially relevant activities pro bono.

Alexey Kozulyaev pioneered the idea of adding on AD and SDH as socially important services in the projects RuFilms did for Aeroflot, thus putting a lot of audio described titles into the Aeroflot in-flight entertainment programs. RuFilms became the first company to offer the AD services compliant with the European Accessibility Act. The Company also made a considerable effort to lobby the 2016 Russian DIgital Accessibility Bundle that enabled Russian filmmakers to get refunds from the budget for all expenses on providing AD and digital accessibility.

Ivan Borshchevsky has been working in the field of accessibility since 1994. Since 2015, he has been working with RuFilms supervising the Accessibility Division. He described several films and TV shows, including Yeralash, a Russian children's comedy TV show. He also provided AD for the State Darwin's Museum (Moscow). He also gathered a collection of described films in several languages on his personal website. Earlier this year his initiative was recognised when his site won the first prize at the 7th Festival World of Equal Opportunities (<http://mirrv.ru/>). Although, ideally, all films should be described, description of silent films is even more important, because there is no audial information that would somehow help blind and visually impaired viewers understand the plot is available there. Ivan organised hours of silent films to be described, published the AD to these films on his web-site and shared them with the Describe It to Me Internet project (опиши-мне.рф). He also delivers lectures on AD in several leading universities of Russia.

Olga Davis has been working in the field of AVT since 2003, but only this year became more involved specifically in studying AD and SDH (at UCL, London and Rofilms AVT School). Having finished the Fundamentals of Audio Description course (offered by Rofilms School of AVT), she described two figure

skating performances for the voluntary Internet project Describe It to Me.

6 Conclusion

In the country where social inclusion is gradually becoming a norm, where more and more accessible media solutions are available to consumers - from in-flight films with SDH subtitles to an audio-describing mobile phone app - we finally see the changes in Russian state legislation that should support further development of this trend. In March 2017 an amendment was passed to the legislation governing the film, television and interactive media industries that makes it mandatory for filmmakers and distributors who receive government grants to provide access services (SDH and AD), as well as physical access to the premises and necessary equipment for accessible screenings. This will inevitably be followed by the need to address the question of developing industry standards for professionals in access service provision, and will be a driving force for more research and training opportunities in this area.

References

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