Audio description guidelines – a comparison
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Introduction
In 2007, Gert Vercauteren published his comparison of audio description (AD) guidelines, Towards a European Guideline for Audio Description, in which he suggests the creation of one European AD standard. Three years later, the Royal National Institute of Blind People came up with A Comparative Study of Audio Description Guidelines Prevalent in Different Countries (Royal National Institute of Blind People 2010), a document that provides a good overview of the similarities and differences in AD standards. The present paper compares guidelines from Australia, France, Germany, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The aim is to critically analyse them and pave the way for a set of rules which, if followed, would produce a universally “good” audio description (AD). As the various guidelines from the above countries do not adhere to a uniform structure, we need to align them first with the help of an overall theoretical framework, before we can match them against each other.

Theoretical framework
A theoretical framework outlining the potential audio description techniques is ideally based on the audio description process. Here, it is important that any guidelines should target not just the audio describers but the whole audio description team, which also includes the AD narrator and the sound designer. They all need to be aware of the fact that the ultimate result of their efforts ought to benefit those for whom the audio description is made: blind and partially sighted people. We can distinguish three steps: first, answering the question of what AD should cover; second, coming to terms with how to express AD in writing; and third, recording the audio description text or performing it live. It should be clear that, while usually the second step depends on the first and the third on the first two, the question of whether or not an AD text is performed live has strong repercussions on the preparation of the previous steps. These three steps remain the same for all kinds of audio description: creating AD for a film is – at this global level – not different from making a museum audio guide or describing a modern dance performance. The differences become apparent when we consider the contents of each step.

The question of what AD should cover is best captured in Joel Snyder’s phrase “The visual made verbal” (Snyder 2008, p. 191). Other guidelines instruct the audio describer to “describe what is there” (Independent Television Commission 2000, p. 9) or to “Describe what you see” (American Council of the Blind 2009, p. 7). Joe Clark adds to this the more precise “Describe what you observe” (Clark 2007a). What AD might cover are the following aspects of the visual:

1. form: characters, places, text or any other shape or object;
2. motion: action, time or anything that moves or is indicated by movement;
3. colour: including the skin colour of characters;
4. sound: visual sound, i.e. sound that is identified only visually;
5. (camera) perspective: bird’s-eye view, zoom, point of view, special effects;
6. supportive information: additional information, shifted information.

The advantage of such rather abstract criteria is that they cover all kinds of audio description. However, not all of these criteria will be equally relevant: the audio description of a dance performance, for example, will not require specification of a particular perspective; the audio guide of a museum showing traditional paintings will not have to refer to sound and motion.
The last criterion, supportive information, covers any information that is added specifically for the audience of AD or has been shifted from its place in the original film or play to an earlier or later point in the audio-described version – if for convenience or due to technical necessity or just to provide essential information when it is needed. In other words, shifted information is additional information not with regard to the film or play as a whole but with regard to a particular scene. Any aspects to be described in the above categories can be analysed along a cline from “no description” to “full description”. The result is a pattern that is more or less characteristic of a particular audio description type or film genre.

The question how to express AD in writing is central to the whole audio description process because it is here that the decision (made in the first step) of what to describe takes effect and the foundations are laid for an adequate recording or live performance. To create the AD text, the audio describer has to tackle the following issues: narrative perspective, language, and timing. For each of these issues, we can specify sets of contrasting features that reveal the range of options from which the audio describer has to choose. In the case of narrative perspective, these contrasting features are: third-person perspective vs. non-third-person perspective and without explicit perspective vs. with explicit perspective (e.g. “we see”). As will be seen in the discussion of the various guidelines, it is always the first element of these contrasting pairs which is generally regarded as the recommended AD standard. This is also true of the language-related features: at a lexical level, we may contrast words with specific meaning vs. words with unspecific meaning; at the level of syntax, it is simple sentences vs. complex sentences; the pair factual vs. interpretive reveals a stylistic contrast; in terms of tense, there is present tense vs. non-present tense. When it comes to timing, the central issue is describing between dialogue vs. describing over dialogue. Somewhat less significant, but still a matter of discussion, are the alternatives expressed in the contrastive pair describing before a particular event vs. describing after a particular event. While theoretically referring to any event occurring on the screen or on the stage, this opposition has been discussed especially with regard to sound events.

The final step from text to audio deals with voices, tone, and speed during performance, whether live or recorded. Again, the general standard is reflected by the first item of the following contrastive pairs. With voices, the oppositions are one describing voice vs. more than one describing voice (usually two), and an inconspicuous describing voice vs. a conspicuous describing voice (for example, that of a famous actor). In the case of tone, the three juxtapositions objective vs. subjective, neutral vs. partial, normal vs. special should be regarded as the varying aspects of one and the same feature: a normal tone is usually also neutral and objective, just as a partial tone cannot but be special and subjective. For speed, we can contrast: slow vs. fast and constant vs. varied.

Comparative analysis

On the basis of the above framework, we can now analyse and compare the various audio description guidelines. In detail, the analysis covers:

1. United Kingdom: ITC Guidance on Standards for Audio Description, published by the Independent Television Commission, now Ofcom, in May 2000 – Ofcom has since published a more succinct set of best practice guidelines for audio description: in its Code on Television Access Services (Ofcom 2006), audio description features as one television access service among others;
2. USA: Standards for Audio Description and Code of Professional Conduct for Describers based on the training and experience of audio describers and trainers from across the United States, published by the Audio Description Coalition in June 2009;
3. USA: Organizing Principles, published by the American Council of the Blind in 2003;
4. USA: Audio Description Standards, published by the American Council of the Blind in 2009;
5. Ireland: BCI Guidelines – Audio Description, published by the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland in 2005;
6. Australia: Audio description background paper, published by Media Access Australia in September 2010;
7. Germany: Qualitätsstandards für die Erstellung von Hörfilmen, published by Hörfilm e.V. Vereinigung Deutscher Filmbeschreiber in 2005;
8. Germany: Wenn aus Bildern Worte werden – Durch Audio-Description zum Hörfilm, published by Bayerischer Rundfunk in 2004 (first ed. in 1997);

It is clear that the content of these documents depends very much on three factors: the length of the document, its general focus, and the preferred AD target. Thus, the three longest texts, the ITC guidelines and the two audio description standards of 2009 from the US, comprise more than 30 pages. With regard to general focus, it is interesting to note that not all documents deal with AD standards as their first concern. The Audio description background paper from Australia, for example, goes into some detail about the technical aspects of how AD is delivered through the various media, looks at audio description costs and turnaround times, discusses the situation of AD in Australia and elsewhere, and lists the names and websites of companies that provide commercial audio description services in Australia. The audio description guidelines appear only as a draft in the appendix of the background paper. Even if the general focus is on audio description standards, the preferred AD target can vary. While the British and Irish guidelines – compiled by television and broadcasting commissions, respectively – clearly focus on TV, as do the Australian standards of Media Access Australia, “Australia’s only independent not-for-profit media access organisation” (Media Access Australia 2010, p. 2); the German and French documents also include, explicitly or implicitly, the cinema and DVD as target media for AD. Most comprehensive in that respect are the guidelines prepared by the Audio Description Coalition in the USA, guidelines that “reflect audio description’s origin as a means of making live theatre performances accessible” (Audio Description Coalition 2009, p. 1). Here, the general discussion of AD standards is based on audio description for the theatre, with additional chapters discussing standards unique to the various other applications of AD, namely, live description, dance, opera, films and videos, museums and exhibits. However, unlike the guidelines from the UK and, to a lesser degree, those from Ireland, the Audio Description Coalition document does not discuss different programme categories for television.

After this overview of the general differences between the guideline documents, we will now compare them in detail with reference to the framework established above, finding out where they agree and highlighting any exceptional views and opinions. As regards the amount of what AD should cover, all guidelines are in line with Joe Clark’s catchy reminder: “Describe when necessary, but do not necessarily describe.” (Clark 2007a) In other words, audio description should make effective use of the space available, but at the same time leave enough room for the film’s atmosphere to shine through. Dosch/Benecke (2004, p. 27) state that the noise, music, and sometimes even the silent moments of a film should be retained; yet, in their experience, their descriptions have become more and more detailed over the years, because their audience asked for more information. The US guidelines point out that “[d]escription should not fill every available pause” (Audio Description Coalition 2009, p. 2)
and that AD is “an exercise in what not to describe” (American Council of the Blind 2009, p. 5). Similarly, the UK document emphasises that “[t]oo much detail can become fragmented in the listener/viewer’s mind rather than giving a strong overall impression” (Independent Television Commission 2000, p. 14), that it can be “exhausting or even irritating” (ibid.) and can “dilute the mood of a scene” (ibid. 15).

There is wide general agreement on what should be included in audio description in terms of form, motion, colour, sound, (camera) perspective, and supportive information. While form, motion and (camera) perspective are often sweepingly discussed using more concrete film-related expressions that are usually self-evident; colour, sound, and supportive information are not always specifically referred to. The brief quality standards listed by Hörfilm e.V. (2005), for instance, do not make any reference to colour, and the other German guidelines by Bernd Benecke merely imply the description of colour when giving examples: “sie hat kurze rote Locken” [she has short red curls], “ein Kleid ist nie schön oder hässlich, sondern rot oder blau oder war auch immer” [a dress is never beautiful or ugly, but red or blue or whatever] (Dosch/Benecke 2004, p. 24). By contrast, all AD standards from the Anglo-Saxon world (UK, US, Ireland, Australia) discuss the use of colour in audio description, if only to settle the ethnicity issue. The Audio Description Background Paper from Australia, for instance, does not explicitly mention colour but instructs the audio describer to “note ethnicity when it is essential to plot or character” (Media Access Australia 2010, p. 11). The UK guidelines, on the other hand, devote a whole chapter to colour and ethnicity, emphasising that “people who are blind from birth [....] understand the significance of a particular colour by its association” (Independent Television Commission 2000, p. 21). Colour association might be the reason why, in the French guidelines, Laure Morisset and Frédéric Gonant tell the audio describer to complement colours with a qualifier: “citer les couleurs qui peuvent être complétées d’un qualificatif” (Conseil supérieur de l’audiovisuel 2008, p. 4).

As regards sound, the different guidelines state almost unanimously what might be considered common sense: “[d]escribe what is causing any unidentified sounds” (American Council of the Blind 2003). Often they also include the corollary that obvious sounds should not be described. Both German guidelines do not specifically mention the description of sounds. The British AD standards, however, discuss the description of sound in some detail. They agree that describers should not describe what is obvious, yet, point out that “[t]here will always be opposing views” (Independent Television Commission 2000, p. 18). The discussion as to whether supportive information should or may be provided focuses on the anticipation of such information rather than on any additional information that is not revealed to the sighted audience. While the American guidelines are very strict about withholding information until it appears on the screen (or on the stage), the UK guidelines are more flexible in that respect as the following quotations demonstrate:

Describers in the US are not encouraged to add anything or offer any information that is not apparent on the screen at that moment. (Independent Television Commission 2000, p. 15)

Surprises should, ideally, come at the same time for all audience members. If characters’ appearances or actions, hidden identities, costumes, sight gags, sound effects, etc. happen as a surprise to sighted audience members, don’t spoil the surprise for listeners by describing (and revealing) them in advance. (Audio Description Coalition 2009, p. 7)

‘Support information’ can help to minimise confusion. (Independent Television Commission 2000, p. 16)

The last quotation comes with an example of a truly additional piece of information. Referring to a woman police officer in the film The Bill who mentions the CID and SOCO,
the UK guidelines recommend that “SOCO” be explained in the audio description. In an otherwise rather positive comment on the ITC guidance document, the Toronto-based journalist and author Joe Clark heavily criticises this practice: “If a sighted viewer has to sit there and wait to figure out what SOCO refers to, so should a blind viewer.” (Clark 2007b) Giving such additional information might be seen as condescending and is, therefore, frowned upon by some. According to the UK guidelines (cf. Independent Television Commission 2000, pp. 16–17), a character may be named in the audio description before his or her name is mentioned in the film, as long as there is no mystery attached to that name. While Dosch/Benecke (2004, p. 23) take a similar view, the Audio Description Coalition requires that the describer should “[u]se a character’s name only when sighted audience members know the name” (Audio Description Coalition 2009, p. 7). What is important in this context is that any anticipation – whether of specific events or character names – must not give away the plot.

Narrative perspective is not a central issue with audio description because, in general, the AD narrator is supposed to be neutral, objective, and self-effacing. The two German guidelines do not explicitly discuss this point; all other standards which are primarily geared to film and television state that the term “we see” should not be used, with the possible exception of children’s programmes (cf. Independent Television Commission 2000, p. 13). Another general feature is the third-person perspective, mentioned in the American Council of the Blind’s Audio Description Standards (“Use third-person narrative style to show neutrality and noninterference”; American Council of the Blind 2009, p. 8) and in the French Principes et orientations (“décrire à la troisième personne”; Conseil supérieur de l’audiovisuel 2008, p. 4). However, there are some exceptions to these rules. The Audio Description Coalition’s Standards for Audio Description, generally written with a stage play in mind, recommend that the audio describer “[u]se the first person when the director has created a ‘first person’ point of view as a means of including the audience” (Audio Description Coalition 2009, p. 3). That this would also apply to AD in films is shown by one of the examples provided: ‘‘the shark swims toward us,’’ not ‘‘the shark swims toward the camera’’” (ibid.). Another exception can be found in Dosch/Benecke. Listing the first audio-described DVD of Bayerischer Rundfunk, “Bibi Blocksberg”, published in 2003, they write: “Schauspieler Ulrich Noethen spricht die Beschreibung aus der subjektiven Sicht von Bibis Vater, den er im Film spielt” [the actor Ulrich Noethen speaks the description from the subjective perspective of Bibi’s father, whom he plays in the film] (Dosch/Benecke 2004, p. 34). Here, a central character of the film is at the same time also the audio narrator.

Concerning the language features – lexis, syntax, style, and tense – there is little disagreement: the major difference between the guidelines consists in the detail provided. In three guideline documents (those of the Audio Description Coalition, Hörfilm e.V., and Dosch/Benecke) the use of the present tense seems to be too obvious to require explicit mention – here, any AD examples given will prove the point. All other guidelines specify the present (simple) tense – sometimes in conjunction with the present continuous (see Independent Television Commission 2000, p. 12, and Broadcasting Commission of Ireland 2005, p. 3) – as the tense to be used.

The style of audio description should be factual, not interpretive. This means describing what can actually be seen without inferring any moods or attitudes. It also implies that any separate actions, events, or images should not be summarised but described one after the other. Not to come up with exchangeable descriptions for different situations and in order to facilitate reception (cf. Dosch/Benecke 2004, p. 24), the words used have to be precise and appropriate, matching the film or show. Filmic expressions (as well as stage directions) should be avoided or used with care (this recommendation is not explicitly given in the UK guidelines and the German guidelines by Hörfilm e.V.). Interesting in this context is the caution against using
technical terms and explaining them: “Trust listeners [....] to grasp the meaning of the material and the description. Don’t condescend, patronize, or talk down to listeners.” (Audio Description Coalition 2009, p. 4) Though written with a theatre performance in mind, this also applies to film. Except for the French guidelines, which just state that complete sentences should be used (“utiliser dans la mesure du possible des phrases complètes”; Conseil supérieur de l’audiovisuel 2008, p. 4), the other audio description documents specify that the syntax should be simple, particularly, if the description is for a young audience. At least, this ought to be the conclusion from what is written in the British and Irish guidelines, namely, that “sentence construction should be suited to the age group for which the programme is intended” (Independent Television Commission 2000, p. 29, and Broadcasting Commission of Ireland 2005, p. 4). That, for an adult audience, the syntax may be more complex is not explicitly mentioned. The two German guidelines demand short, clear sentences irrespective of the age of the target audience.

The question when to describe is easily answered: between lines of dialogue. This practice is recommended by all AD guideline documents. Still, some guidelines are more rigid in their expression of this rule than others. While the Independent Television Commission states as one of its “three golden rules to description” that the describer should “never talk over dialogue or commentary” (Independent Television Commission 2000, p. 9) and the German quality standards issued by Hörfilm e.V. (2005) instruct the audio description artist to describe in the pauses between dialogue (“Die Beschreibung erfolgt in den Dialogpausen”), all other guidelines – though subscribing to the same practice – leave a loophole to deal with situations when describing over dialogue cannot be avoided. As the Audio Description Standards of the American Council of the Blind’s Audio Description Project put it:

> Descriptions are usually delivered during pauses between lines of dialogue or quiet moments, avoiding other critical sound elements. But since it is more important to make a production understandable than to preserve every detail of the original soundtrack, the describer will speak over dialogue and other audio when necessary. (American Council of the Blind 2009, p. 16)

In his critique of the UK standards, audio description expert Joe Clark even would like to see the golden rule jettisoned: “There are plenty of occasions when it is absolutely necessary to describe over dialogue. This so-called golden rule should be removed altogether” (Clark 2007b). That “[d]escriptions are usually delivered during pauses or quiet moments” (Clark 2007a) appears to be rather a matter of course.

The audio description for a particular sound event to be described can come either before or after the event. Only a few standards provide guidance in this case. Chris Mikul of Media Access Australia writes: “If a description must fall on either side of a sound, it is better for it to be before the sound than after” (Media Access Australia 2010, p. 12). And the Independent Television Commission gives the somewhat ambiguous advice: “Usually a sound effect, or the event leading up to it, is described just before it happens: [here comes an example of a burglar dropping his sack.] Sometimes it can be even more effective after the action” (Independent Television Commission 2000, p. 18). The second alternative is followed by a passage in which the description of a train pulling out of the station is suspended to increase the effect produced by the chuffing sound of the engine. The upshot of this issue seems to be that the audio describer has to assess the situation and decide for him- or herself whether to describe before or after the sound.

The third stage in the creation of audio description, the performance, gets usually less attention in the AD guidelines than the task of writing the description. Yet, as much as good audio description needs a suitable AD text, it depends on an adequate reading of that text. The questions raised in this context concern the voice of the AD narrator, its tone and speed.
While the French audio description guidelines are the only ones that recommend a recording with two voices—one male, the other female—thus to indicate change of time or place or the use of subtitles (cf. Conseil supérieur de l’audiovisuel 2008, p. 5); the other guidelines focus on voice quality, if they discuss the issue at all. Here is what some of the audio description standards have to say:

Occasionally, celebrity or other voices may be used for the final recording but it is important for the writer to be present to ensure that the tone of [sic] delivery are what was intended. Where a documentary is being audio described which has its own narrator, it is helpful for the audio describer to be of the opposite gender to the narrator, to avoid confusion. (Independent Television Commission 2000, p. 8)

The narrator’s voice should complement the material—it should be distinct from the voices of the characters and/or the program’s narrator and mixed to sound as natural to the work as possible. (Audio Description Coalition 2009, pp. 14-15)

Narrators’ voices must be distinguishable from other voices in a production, but they must not be unnecessarily distracting, as with recognizable celebrity voices. (American Council of the Blind 2009, p. 12)

The dilemma for the AD producer is to find a voice that stands out from those of the cast, but does not draw attention to itself. That there is no one right solution to the problem becomes particularly obvious in the German guidelines by Dosch/Benecke. While generally advocating the selection of a narrator from the team of AD writers, they also point out that, with some films, a professional narrative voice might be preferable. Thus, the audio description team at Bayerischer Rundfunk evidently changed their type of narrator in the course of time from a neutral commentator to an AD narrator who assumes a more creative role within the film. (Cf. Dosch/Benecke 2004, pp. 25-26.)

What has been said about the selection of the narrator anticipates to some extent the discussion about the tone of voice to be used. The general tendency is patent: the audio description voice should be integrated into the film but at the same time remain clearly distinguishable as an additional narrator. This is how the American Council of the Blind puts it:

Allow the performance to set the tone and rhythm of the description, remembering that the performance, not the describer, should be the focus. Just as the describer should not assume a detached, lecturing or clinical tone, the describer should not attempt to project him- or herself into the performance as another performer. (American Council of the Blind 2009, p. 12)

As regards speed, the American Council of the Blind specifies 160 words per minute: the description should “flow casually” (ibid.). In a similar vein, the British guidelines recommend: “The description must not be hurried; every word should be clear, audible and timed carefully so that it does not sit uncomfortably close to incoming dialogue” (Independent Television Commission 2000, p. 10). Generally, the speed of an AD performance, whether live or recorded, is a common-sense criterion that need not be—and in most cases is not—explicitly mentioned in the guidelines.

Critical comment and conclusion

The comparative analysis of the various audio description guidelines has revealed strong similarities but also a few differences. While the theoretical framework on which the analysis is based covers the analytical criteria from a factual point of view, it does not account for the stylistic features of the guidelines themselves. One interesting distinction that can be made in
this context is the way in which some guideline documents express their rules and recommendations. Compare, for example, the following two passages:

An audio describer needs to have a thorough knowledge of a program in its entirety to ensure that the AD script accurately conveys all the important action in it. (Media Access Australia 2010, p. 3)

Le descripteur transmet non seulement les informations contenues dans les images, mais aussi leur puissance émotionnelle, leur esthétique et leur poésie. [The describer conveys not only the information contained in the images, but also their emotional power, their aesthetics and their poetic quality.] (Conseil supérieur de l’audiovisuel 2008, p. 2)

The matter-of-fact style of the Australian guidelines contrasts with the vague aspects of emotion, aesthetics, and poetry included in the French AD document. While the first quotation seems to imply that creating audio description is just a question of knowing the rules, the second gives the impression that audio description is a kind of art. This contrast begs the question as to whether AD guidelines should be, or should pretend to be, absolutely clear about the rules for audio describers.

Rigid rules are, perhaps, more authoritative and, thus, more readily obeyed; yet, they fail to do justice to the varied and changing manifestations of the AD target, particularly, film. Consider the rule to “[d]escribe at the same time as the action unfolds” (American Council of the Blind 2003): while in the cinema (and the theatre) simultaneity of effect for visual and AD elements is a must, it is less crucial for media such as the DVD. Audio description guidelines should specify rules always with the proviso that there are cases in which they can be, or even have to be, disobeyed. One example of such a proviso is given by the Audio Description Coalition: “In reading and practicing these standards, words like ‘never’ and ‘always’ must be applied with common sense.” (Audio Description Coalition 2009, p. 1) Dosch/Benecke are even more explicit:

Jeder Film, den man beschreiben will, ist etwas Neues, Einmaliges; eine frische Herausforderung, auf die sich Erfahrungen aus vorhergehenden Beschreibungen möglicherweise nur beschränkt anwenden lassen. Deshalb können die kommenden Regeln [...] ein nur sehr grobes Gerüst vorgeben. [Every film to be described is something new and unique – a fresh challenge to which the experience gained from previous descriptions may apply only to a limited degree. That is why the following guidelines represent but a very basic framework.] (Dosch/Benecke 2004, p. 19)

Considering the positive experience of the audio describers from Bayerischer Rundfunk with a subjective first-person narrative perspective, we would favour more flexible guidelines, particularly with regard to film – guidelines that do not stifle artistic enthusiasm but take into account the characteristics of the film to be described. The less dialogue there is in a film, the more can audio description experiment with, for example, narrative perspective.

Closely linked with narrative perspective is the question of tense. If they do not evidently take it for granted, guidelines specify the present tense as the tense to be generally used in audio description. This is understandable if we assume that the AD narrator should not disrupt the narrative perspective of the film but (as a medium whose impersonality creates narrative immediacy) merely describe what is there. A change of tense – using past tense, for instance – would establish a strong narrative perspective in which the audio describer took on the role of a true authorial narrator, thereby overthrowing the narrative structure of the whole film. That in a standard audio-described film, the narrative element is provided by the film rather than the audio description has been discussed in detail by Ulla Fix and Henrike Morgner (2005) in their essay “Narration im Hörfilm – Theorie und Analyse”. We would argue, however, that this distribution of narrative and descriptive roles should not be understood as a rule that is
cast in cement (harking back to a corresponding expression by Bernd Benecke in Dosch/Benecke 2004, p. 26) but as a general guideline from which to depart may be the ultimate challenge of the audio describer as an artist.

What is perhaps most irritating in relation to audio description standards is that they usually lack a sound argument for the rules they put forward. Consider the rule that interpretive descriptions should be avoided. The Audio Description Standards of the American Council of the Blind for one claim that

- the best audio describers objectively recount the visual aspects of an image. Subjective or qualitative judgments or comment get in the way—they constitute an interpretation on the part of the describer and are unnecessary and unwanted. (American Council of the Blind 2009, p. 9)

As if recognising that calling a subjective description “unnecessary and unwanted” is not a particularly convincing argument, the authors of these guidelines add: “Let listeners conjure their own interpretations based on a commentary that is as objective as possible” (ibid.). This is not convincing either, though it does seem to put the visually impaired listener on a par with the sighted viewer; for, in effect, the audio description can never be as comprehensive as the moving image it tries to capture, thus, leaving the visually impaired person at a disadvantage. Referring to the possibility of providing additional information to the recipient of audio description, Heike Jüngst (2005, p. 158) asks: “Warum soll der Rezipient des Hörfilms nicht auch einmal einen Verstehensvorteil haben?” [Why not once give the recipient of the audio-described film the benefit of easier comprehension?] This is not to say that there are no advantages to a detailed objective description compared with a shorter, more inclusive and, perhaps, subjective description. Yet, only Dosch/Benecke provide a good argument in favour of the detailed objective approach. The following passage about the description of facial expressions has already been referred to above:

- Statt solcher 0-8-15-Begriffe [...] sollte man sich die Zeit nehmen, die wirklich wichtigen Gesichtsausdrücke (und nur diese!) differenzierter zu beschreiben. Das bleibt besser hängen und verhindert, dass Situationen austauschbar werden, weil man immer auf die gleichen Ausdrücke zurückgreift. [Rather than using such run-of-the-mill words, you should take the time to describe in more detail those (and only those) facial expressions that are really important. This practice facilitates reception and ensures that situations do not become exchangeable, which they would if you always fell back on the same expressions.] (Dosch/Benecke 2004, p. 24)

The ultimate reason to be given when justifying audio description rules should always be one that relates directly to the preferences and needs of the visually impaired target audience. Reminders such as Joe Clark’s “Let’s not play favourites” (Clark 2007b) – referring to the practice of giving blind listeners information that the sighted viewers do not have – are out of place if they are grounded in an audio description principle for its own sake.

Our comparison of the various AD guidelines from different parts of the world has revealed that the rules proposed for audio describers are certainly more or less appropriate for most audio descriptions. However, rather than restricting the scope within which the describer is expected to work, they should provide a general strategy, an inspirational challenge that makes him or her think about creative alternatives. This can be achieved mainly by reformulating the individual rules more tentatively and anchoring each one of them in a sound argument that reflects the needs of the target audience. The AD guidelines should not help to confine audio description to its actual practice but leave room for change and development. The ideal audio description guidelines would consist of a set of well-founded rules for each AD application (television, cinema, theatre, museums) with several suggestive sample texts in
the language to be used for the description. If presented online, they should also include suitable film excerpts.
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