Audio description of taboo: a descriptive and comparative approach

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Abstract
Audio description is an emergent Audiovisual Translation modality which aims to provide accessibility to blind or partially sighted people. In this article, we focus on one of the most universal taboo topic, sex, and how it is audio described in commercial films. Following a descriptive methodology, we tackle the sexual references present in films with audio description in English and Spanish, and find out the way and manner in which taboo elements referred to sex cross the intersemiotic barriers. Firstly, we identify the sexual elements in the films (sexual acts, sexual organs, nudity etc.) and the strategies used to audio describe them: using taboo language, euphemization or even omission. Then, we highlight the differences in the way sexual references are described, trying to determine the reasons which led the describers to make those decisions.

Key words: Audiovisual Translation, Accessibility, Audio description, Sex, Taboo, Self-Censorship.

1. Translation, audio description and taboo: an outstanding issue

1.1. Audiovisual translation and taboo

Taboo has been traditionally defined as something prohibited or excluded from use because it is considered improper or inadequate. Taboo topics include sex, illness, scatology, religion, racism or death. But we cannot forget that taboo has a culture-specific component as, in fact, "any kind of conduct could be considered taboo by a community since the judgement that a particular conduct is taboo is specific to that society, behaviour and culture" (Soler-Prado 2013: 123). In other words, what could be considered taboo in a society could be not perceived in the same way in another one, and have a higher degree of social acceptance. In this vein, there are some issues which can be universally considered taboo, as sex, and others which have a different degree of tolerance depending on the society, as religion, use of expletives, or scatology. Translation of taboo appears to be a huge challenge for translators, due to its cultural and ethical component.

Several studies have been carried out on taboo language and Audiovisual Translation, particularly on subtitling (Díaz Cintas 2001; Scandura 2004; Ávila-Cabrera 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b; Baines 2015) and dubbing (Pujol 2006; Soler Pardo 2013; Beseghi 2016), even if, as stated by Fuentes-Luque, the study of taboo is a taboo itself (2015), despite its undeniable interest in Translation and particularly in Audiovisual Translation. All these studies generally describe the strategies used to translate taboo, which range from omission to attenuation or dilution of the taboo language in written as well as in spoken words (Díaz Cintas 2012; Taylor 2006; Scandura 2004). This is particularly true in subtitling "as a consequence of the intersemiotic shift from an oral to a written code because politeness norms are more restrictive for the written word than for speech" (Baines 2015: 437). But we can also find manipulation (Zanotti 2012), deletion or self-censorship in dubbing. According to Soler-Pardo, the dubbing into Spanish of the American film *Reservoir dogs* (Tarantino 1992) has omitted half of the insults present in the original version, leading to a more formal

text (2013: 127), even if, as we know, we are dealing with a written text to be said. The reason which could explain these manipulations could not only be the protection of the audience by the translator but also the decisions made by the distribution companies (Zanotti 2012: 355-356).

1.2. Audio description and taboo

Audio description (AD) consists of an accessibility service which provides verbal explanations of the relevant aspects of a film, TV series, opera, museum, etc. and which allows the blind or visually-impaired to have access to those visual elements in a similar way and at the same time as a normal viewer. In this sense, Orero defines AD as "the descriptive technique of inserting audio 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" (2005: 7). Considered "an integral part of Audiovisual Translation" (Díaz Cintas 2008: 7), AD has gained interest in research in Translation Studies in recent years. The number of papers, conferences, works and PhD studies on AD has considerably grown in the last two decades[1]. But apart from awakening interest in academia, AD has also become a professional and social concern, and accessibility has become a priority for the media. For example, the Spanish TV has considerably increased the hours of AD per year from 27.6 in 2011 to 121.9 hours in 2014 with the groups Mediaset and Atresmedia having reached the highest percentages of AD (CESyA 2015: 77-78).

Research has focused on descriptive studies on the way several elements of films are audio described: characters (Ballester 2007), facial expressions (Mazur 2014), intertextuality (Taylor 2014), time (Vercauteren 2012), cultural references (Maszerowska and Mangiron 2014), or special effects (Matamala and Remael 2015), for example. But there is an issue which has not been studied in depth, at least until now. The AD of taboo, expressed by means of images in movement, still remains an unexplored area.

As far as we know, research on AD has not focused on taboo yet. A few papers do mention the issue though, focusing on sex because "sexuality is one of the most tabooed aspects of human existence" (Jay 2000: 85, in Soler-Pardo, 2013). Sanderson carries out a comparative analysis of the AD in English and Spanish of Almodóvar's *Broken Embraces* (2009) and observes noteworthy differences in the way sex scenes are rendered by both audio describers. He points out "the uses and customs of a precise sociocultural context" to explain the limitations in the verbalizations of sex as a taboo topic (Sanderson 2009: 33). Fryer also studies sex and AD (2016:144-146) and determines the describers' choice between "anatomical specifics [terms] and playground obscenities" when describing sex scenes. Sanz-Moreno (2017) studies self-censorship in a descriptive study of the AD of sex scenes in nine films audio described in Spanish. The author concludes that there are clear alterations when a describer verbalizes sex scenes. Conventional sex scenes are described using the translation techniques of description or amplification, whereas when there is an unconventional sexual act or a homosexual sex scene, the AD tends to omit or not give many details about it (2017: 60).

2. The use of strong language in Audiovisual Translation

Using strong and vulgar language is generally avoided in Translation. In terms of Gambier, translators respect "norms of good usage (avoiding elements considered extremely vulgar or

offensive *if they appear in written discourse*)" (emphasis added) (1994: 280). This is the reason why, in most cases, translators tone down foul language and avoid using rude language in written translations (Santaemilia 2008). This is particularly true in literary translation (Santaemilia 2005, 2008; Ziman 2008) and subtiling (Mattsson 2006; Yuan 2016; Ávila-Cabrera 2015a, 2016a, 2016b), where swearwords and interjections "are often toned down in subtitles or even deleted if space is limited" (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 195). Scandura criticises this neutralization and the sterilization of vulgar words when translating, arguing that it can have the opposite effect of what the author pursued (2004: 130). But also in dubbing, as proven by Fernández Fernández (2006), Soler-Pardo (2013), Romero and De Laurentiis (2016), or Beseghi (2016), translators avoid using vulgar words, softening or even omitting them in the target text.

In the field of AD, the British *Guidance on Standards for AD* contains some specific recommendations on how to handle the AD of sex and the use of strong language. "As a general guide, the describer should try to convey the kind of sexuality (loving, aggressive, tender, tentative, etc.) without embarrassing the viewer" (ITC 2000: 33) and try to handle sex scenes sensitively, otherwise "they may be embarrassing, crude or just very dull" (ITC 2000: 31). *The Guidance* stresses the difference between TV programs or films on TV and videos. As we know, TV programs are carefully monitored by broadcasters' compliance committees that remove strong or offensive language, especially when the program is on prime time. If strong language is used in an AD on TV it is likely to be deleted. Nevertheless, the AD of DVDs or movies at theaters cannot suffer alterations. But in fact, audio describers tend to self-censor their AD and do not use vulgar words. Fryer (2016) explains that describers frequently tend to protect the audience from the harsh realities on screen (sex, violence, death, disease, etc.), and therefore the AD of sex scenes are silenced or presented using political correctness (Chmiel and Mazur 2014). In the same vein, Orero and Wharton proposed an AD script for the Spanish film *Torrente 3* (Segura, 2005). The authors refused to use slang or jargon in the AD script, even if, according to the potential audience of this film, basic vocabulary and register should have been used (2007: 168). But again, the main concern of describers is not to embarrass nor cause discomfort in the blind or partially sighted audience. Apparently, an AD can offend the audience in the same way as a written text, or even worst, as it "is received orally, usually through headphones, and so received directly in your ears" (Fryer 2016: 142). A recent reception study of Walczac and Fryer confirms that a Polish audience preferred alternative AD rather than standard AD, but some women explained that the language used to describe violent and brutal scenes was "too straightforward and realistic" (2017: 13) and expressed some discomfort. Further reception studies need to be carried out in other countries and in other target cultures, in order to confirm these conclusions.

3. Methodology

3.1. Corpus

This study is based on a comparative model. As our aim was to determine the way two describers located in two different countries, using two different languages (English and Spanish) and for two different target audiences and cultures, describe the same sex elements,

we needed to made up a bilingual unidirectional parallel corpus (Saldanha and O'Brien 2013: 68). The criteria used to select the movies were the following: 1) including a high frequency of taboo images related to sex; 2) commercialised both in UK and in Spain in DVD; 3) audio described in English and in Spanish; 4) audio described by professional audio describers. We finally selected two comedies directed by Todd Phillips, *The Hangover I* (2009*)* and *II* (2011).

The story in both films is practically the same: four friends plan a bachelor party in Las Vegas and wake up in a hotel room, having forgotten everything that happened the day before. Besides, they have lost one of their friends. They have to figure out what happened to their friend and be on time for the wedding. The second part takes place in Thailand and the structure is almost the same. *The Hangover I* and *II* were huge box office hits both in the UK and Spain. Given the plot, both films are full of irreverent jokes, strong language, nudity, sex, drunkenness, drugs, etc. Humour is conveyed by hilarious dialogues, uncommon and unpredictable situations and mad characters. However, most of the jokes are delivered by visual elements and this is something the audio describer has to deal with.

3.2. Procedure

After watching the movies without AD and culling the tabooed sexual images or scenes, we checked and transcribed the different AD versions offered in Spanish and in English[2]. We then reviewed all the pairs of AD related to the same taboo image, and identified the strategies used to render these images into words. Four strategies were detected:

1) Translating taboo images using taboo language (Taboo→Taboo);
2) Not translating taboo images (Omission);
3) Translating taboo images using euphemisms (Taboo→ Euphemization);
4) Translating taboo images using non-taboo and non-marked language (Taboo→ Equivalence).

Then we analysed the frequency in the use of each strategy in order to detect an eventual *tendency* in the AD of taboo images in two languages and for two different target cultures. Our aim is not to criticize the work of the describers, but to highlight the difficulties they have to face when describing sex, and to watch for the existence of (un)conscious self-censorship in the production of AD scripts when dealing with a taboo topic as sex.

4. Results

In our analysis, we have found 58 taboo images related to sex. In general, we observe a tendency to translate taboo images using non-marked language, following the objectivity rule set up by the AD guidelines. Nevertheless, we have also found some outstanding examples of the other three translation strategies used to describe taboo images.

4.1. Using taboo language to describe taboo scenes

In our corpus, we have observed that slang and jargon are not commonly used in the AD scripts and that, in general, the describers have used a standard, rather 'anatomic' language to describe some sexual references. In fact, the SAD does not contain obscene or vulgar words, using generalization or even omission when describing these sexual images. On the contrary, coarse and rude words have been used in the EAD script, but only in ten occasions. Although we consider this is not quantitatively a significant number, it reflects a different 'attitude' of the British describers, who use slang and strong language in AD, and seem not afraid of an eventual discomfort of the blind or partially-sighted audience. This could be explained because this vulgar language is also present in the dialogue lists of the films. In the original scripts of *The Hangover I* (2009) written by John Lucas and Scott Moore, and *The Hangover II* (2011) by Craig Mazin, Scot Armstrong and Todd Phillips, the word *fuck* appears 202 times, followed by *shit* 71 times (See Table 1). In the original versions of both films commercialized in DVD in the UK, the swear words and expletives have not been removed. The dubbed versions into Spanish contain the translation of these words and expressions[3].

	The Hangover I	*The Hangover II*
Fuck[4]	98	104
Shit	45	26
Suck	2	1
Balls	2	3
Cunt	0	2
Asshole	5	3
Ass	2	4

Table 1 *Vulgar words in the original scripts of The Hangover I and II*

Concerning the AD scripts, the EAD has used slang words to describe sexual visual jokes, although no such words have been found in the SAD (See Table 2).

	EAD
Cock	He gives the nubbin a squeeze and tastes it. It's a *cock*!
	Kimi takes off her robe and turns to reveal her *cock*.
	The lady boy sucks Stu's nipple, then rides him with her *cock* out.
Knob	Another ladyboy passes, her *knob* flapping.
Boobs	A stripper with huge fake *boobs* gives Alan a lap dance.
Ass	He slaps her *ass*.
Suck off	Somebody *sucks* Alan *off*.
Blowjob	Teddy poses like he is giving the monkey a *blowjob*.
Wanking gesture	Chow makes a *wanking gesture*
Hooker	Mr. Cho grabs a *chubby hooker*.

Table 2 *Vulgar words in the EAD scripts*

As can be seen, the EAD contains a few vulgar and offensive words to describe sexual organs (*cock, knob, boobs, ass*) and sexual acts (*suck off, blowjob, wank*). The SAD has

omitted all the references reproduced here (see 4.3.), except in two occasions: it uses a rather anatomical term "pene" (*penis*) instead of the vulgar term *cock*; and it describes the attitude of the prostitute with Alan as "se agacha hacia las partes íntimas de Alan" (she crouches to Alan's intimate parts), describing the pose of the woman instead of using the English explicitation *suck off*.

As pointed out before, omission and attenuation are the most used strategies in the audiovisual translation of taboo, especially in subtitling, because of the deeper impact the written text can have in the audience. The case of AD is completely different, as it consists of an intersemiotic translation of images into words. And even if the audience could feel offended when hearing coarse or vulgar words (Fryer, 2016), the images show explicit obscene sex scenes. In our opinion, the English describers have tried to render a taboo image using taboo language, having in mind the purpose of the image itself, and trying to provoke a similar effect on the spectators. The use of vulgar words in the EAD may embarrass a visually-impaired audience, especially if it is not used to it, but would certainly not cause much more embarrassment than that provoked by the scenes themselves to normal viewers. Therefore, as explained in the British guidelines, the AD should try to match the intention of the sex scenes. In these films, the aim of the sex scenes is clearly to provoke confusion and then laughter, and dialogue and images are combined to achieve these effects. It seems that the use of jargon should suit better the tone and style of the film, as it is likely to produce shock and laughter. Nevertheless, we consider that reception studies would be of great help in order to determine the preferences and expectations of a blind or partially-sighted audience.

4.2. Euphemization

As stated above, significant differences have been observed in the language used to describe certain sexual references in the films. While the EAD has introduced some vulgar words (see 4.1.), the SAD has used euphemisms to describe some sexually explicit references. Euphemisms are understood as "the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant" (Merriam Webster on-line dictionary). Euphemisms have been used especially to describe prostitutes or strippers in the SAD, although the EAD tends to describe them with the more precise word "stripper", which may certainly contribute to a more precise idea of what happens on the screen (See Table 3).

	EAD	SAD
Prostitutes or strippers	a cute stripper, the stripper, a stripper	varias mujeres
	A glamorous topless woman	una despampanante mulata
	some other glamorous girls	Bellas jóvenes en bikinis
	A stripper with huge fake boobs	bellas mujeres
	scantily clad women	las strippers
	topless strippers	mujeres desnudas
	---	una mujer de la noche
Sexual act	Somebody sucks Alan off	una mujer de la noche se agacha hacia las partes íntimas de Alan

	---	Tras unas fotos de un *espectáculo erótico*.
Sexual organ	---	Partes íntimas
	Reaches right down into his pants	Entrepierna

Table 3 *Use of euphemisms in both AD scripts*

When the EAD uses the particular word "stripper", the SAD uses an adjective like "young", "beautiful", "naked", and so on, along with the generalization "women". It also uses a euphemism to refer to a prostitute ("mujer de la noche"), and tends not to describe the girls' clothes (or the absence of clothes). On the other hand, the EAD always describes the women's clothes or the lack of them ("scantily clad women", "gyrating their hips in short skirts and cropped tops", "a glamourous topless woman"). Having said that the AD Guidelines' general rule is objectivity, should we consider that the use of euphemisms complies with this recommendation? There is a clear intention to soften the taboo images by euphemizing them in the SAD, using generalization and avoiding to describe them in detail. The political correctness of the SAD could be explained by the recent development of AD in Spain. The describers do not try to innovate in their AD scripts, and strictly apply the Spanish norm of AD, "using adequate vocabulary" (AENOR 2005: 7). Besides, as stated by Orero and Wharton, the SAD establishes a clear distance between the film and the AD, understanding that "the AD is not part of the film" (2007: 168). It seems that political correctness has taken over. This is something that has been observed in other modalities of audiovisual translation, as stated above. But in the case of AD, the image the receptor is going to build depends on the way the describer is rendering into words what he/she sees on the screen. Therefore, the AD is not faithful to the images of the films and may distort the intention of the director of the films.

Besides, we need to remind that the Spanish standard of AD also states: "[T]he information offered [by the AD] must be made to match the audience: children, youth, adults, etc."(AENOR 2005: 7). As far as we know, the targeted audiences of both films are young adults, and we also have to keep in mind the gender of the film. It is a comedy which attracts a loyal audience used to watch films in which obscenity, hilarious dialogues, sexual explicit scenes, drugs, prostitutes etc. are shown without any worry of causing discomfort in the audience. In fact, *The Hangover* was considered the most representative comedy of this gender[5]. As a result, the euphemization in the AD can lead to a loss of meaning and false senses (Fuentes-Luque 2015).

4.3. Omission

The analysis of the AD of sexual images in our corpus reveals that there are significant omissions in both the English and Spanish AD scripts. Table 4 contains the most striking examples.

EAD	SAD
Teddy poses like he is giving the monkey a *blowjob*.	---
The ladyboy sucks Stu's nipple, then rides him with her cock out. He *gets banged* then sobs.	En otras fotografías se ve a Stu con la prostituta travesti.

A stripper with huge fake boobs gives Alan a lap dance.	---
Another *girl is upside down on Phil's lap with her legs spread. He slaps her ass.*	En un club de striptease los chicos se divierten *rodeados de bellas mujeres.*
Chow makes *a wanking gesture.*	---
The doctor *pulls down the old man's pants*. Alan's transfixed.	---
In the lift *a man crouches in front of a woman*. The man stood quickly as the lift's door opened.	El ascensor se abre y *una pareja está dentro*

Table 4 *Omissions of sexual references in the EAD and the SAD*

According to our study, 43.1% of the visual sexual references have not been rendered in the SAD script, whereas omissions only account for 10.3% in the EAD. In other words, the EAD contains a more detailed AD of sexual jokes and images with the tendency to use different translation techniques ranging from Description to Explicitation.

It is worth mentioning that the Spanish AD Standard states that "the data provided by the image must be respected, without censoring or cutting alleged excesses or completing pretended insufficiencies" (AENOR 2005: 7). In short, the describer must describe what it is on the screen in a neutral and objective way. How can those omissions be explained then? We consider that time constraints cannot justify the deletions of the SAD, as they were the same for both versions of the AD. The describers had the same gaps at their disposal to provide the most adequate AD and, despite this, they have chosen different strategies to render the same sexual images, and the SAD has deleted the majority of the sexual references.

Scandura (2004: 125) states that in audiovisual translation, "censorship is sometimes present when dubbing and subtitling masking the deletion or replacement of erotic, vulgar or inconvenient sentences, allusions or references". We consider this to be applicable to AD too. The deletion of the AD of sex images may respond to self-censorship in order to provide a politically correct AD so as not to disturb the audience.

From the three reasons given by Scandura to justify omissions in subtitling (2004: 127), we believe that the only applicable one in this case would be to take the audience into consideration (and more precisely to underestimate the audience), given that the sexual jokes are so evident that, attending to common sense, the lack of knowledge or misunderstanding that there is a sexual reference cannot be argued. As previously mentioned, both describers had the same silence gaps to provide their AD, yet each one decided differently on the relevant sexual references to be described with the SAD not describing what was on the screen in 48% of the cases. It would seem that the Spanish visually-impaired audience needs a higher degree of protection than the English one, having in mind that the scenes can be considered taboo equally in both target cultures. However, the real question would be if we can consider that the audience of *The Hangover* is looking for protection and moreover, if the visually-impaired audience needs more protection than all other audiences.

5. Conclusions

The two versions of the AD of the sex images of both films have been described in different ways, even if they could be considered taboo in both target cultures (See Table 5).

	EAD	SAD
Taboo language	10	0
Euphemization	11	19
Omission	6	25
Equivalence	31	14
Total	58	58

Table 5 *Strategies used in the AD scripts*

Two ideas need to be highlighted here: firstly, the tone of the film is itself politically incorrect and that is precisely what the audience is looking for. The jargon and slang used, the topic, the explicit sex scenes (naked women and men, prostitutes, ladyboys showing their penis, all sexual acts like masturbation, anal and oral sex, etc.) make *The Hangover I* and *II* rowdy crude comedies and the audience can easily guess the kind of jokes and humour they contain. The omissions observed in the SAD can hardly be justified by the pretended discomfort the audience may feel when hearing a detailed AD of the film. It is probable that the audience (both normally-sighted and visually-impaired) that watches these two films is looking for amusement and laughter, and what is clear is that the viewers have all the visual information at their disposal (which is not the case for the blind or visually-impaired), and consequently the films would seem funnier for the viewers[6]. Furthermore, the English audience is being provided with a more detailed and explicit AD of sexual images. It can be argued, as Sanderson did (2009), that the social and cultural conventions of each target audience may condition, or even determine, the final AD. But sex is one of the most intercultural and universal taboo topic, and in fact we can affirm that this is true in the UK and in Spain[7]. To deepen into this interesting issue, we should focus on the figure of the describer to try to explain his or her decisions, in the case where these are known and self-conscious, and also based on the characteristics of the translation order. In our opinion, the describer is not a protector of the visually-impaired audience and omissions of the AD of sex scenes can be taken to be a patronizing attitude towards an audience with special needs. The audience of *The Hangover* is certainly an adult audience and has an idea about what it's going to see. It is very likely that it is not looking for protection, but simply for fun and amusement, and the AD should convey humour in a similar way as it is perceived by the normal viewers. The audio describer should therefore be a bridge between the original text (the film) and the audience, and facilitate any relevant information, always keeping in mind that the aim of AD is to reproduce the same or similar effects to those produced for a normal viewers' audience.

Secondly, the AD should also consider the context in which it is going to be heard. If the AD is going to be on TV, as already mentioned, rude language would most probably be removed, especially if it is broadcasted before watershed; but if the film is going to be watched in the cinema, then it becomes a collective experience, shared with normal viewers; the omission of the AD of certain visual jokes could cause confusion, discomfort or even anger to the blind or visually impaired if a visual joke appears on the screen and the audience laughs at it but they cannot understand what is happening because the AD has omitted this reference. In a case like this, omissions would have the opposite effect to that desired.

Notes:

1 Cabeza-Cáceres (2013), Ramos (2013), Fresno (2014), Rodríguez Posadas (2013) and Soler Gallego (2013), just to name a few, have recently published PhDs on AD in Spain.
2 We will use SAD to refer to the Spanish audio description script and EAD to refer to the English audio description script.
3 Although we have not carried out a study of the translation of *fuck or shit* in these two comedies, the Spanish versions of both films have translated or adapted these two swearwords in the dubbed version.
4 *Fuck* used as interjection, verb, noun and the derived forms *fucker* and *fucking*.
5 See http://blog.rtve.es/estrenos/2013/05/resac%C3%B3n-la-consagraci%C3%B3n-de-la-comedia-gamberra.html
6 Reception studies on humour and AD should be carried out in order to confirm this hypothesis.
7 In the UK, *The Hangover I* was rated for persons aged 15 and older because it contains "strong language and sex references"; *The Hangover II* was also rated for persons 15 or older as it contains "very strong language, strong sex references, nudity and drug use". In the USA the film was rated R (Restricted, with no one under 17 admitted without an accompanying parent or guardian) for "pervasive language, sexual content including nudity and some drug material". In Spain, the film was rated for persons older than 18.

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