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Audio Description for Voiced-over Films: the Case Study of *Big Fish*

Introduction

Bearing in mind that the first cinema screening of an audio described film took place only in October 2006, it is impossible not to appreciate the achievements which Poland has made to this date when it comes to the implementation of audio description[1]. More audio description is now made in Poland than ever before, not only in the area of feature films, which this article dwells on, but also in theatres, museums, art galleries and other areas where different types of works are made accessible to people who are blind or visually impaired. Having said that, it should also be noted that the current situation is far from satisfactory. Apart from problems related to finding the sources of financing for audio described

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[1] For more information on history and state of art of audio description in Poland see: Chmiel, Mazur, 2011; Szarkowska, Jankowska, 2012; Jankowska 2013.

products, respecting the recently amended legislation by television broadcasters[2] and a general lack of public awareness of accessibility issues, audio description to foreign films is still in its infancy and foreign films are rarely chosen to be audio described. This stands in stark contrast with the widespread popularity of foreign films on Polish television and their omnipresence in the Polish audiovisual reality. The lack of audio described foreign content results in a kind of partial accessibility.

Compared with others, the problem of partial accessibility might sound curious. However, one has to realize that the vast majority of foreign films, TV series and programmes broadcast on Polish television is voiced-over. Dubbing is used occasionally and almost exclusively for productions for children, while subtitles are available through digital television only on selected channels and films. This – combined with the fact that the proportion of programmes produced originally in Polish is quite low[3] – means that audio description, which was supposed to open doors to culture, in fact leaves the visually impaired audience with the doors ajar.

Audio description in the voice-over land

A blind person can fully appreciate a foreign film only if provided with a voiced translation of the verbal content and with an audio description of the visual content. Compared with audiences in exclusively subtitling countries, Polish visually impaired viewers have the advantage of being provided with a voiced translation of dialogues in the form of voice-over translation. Paradoxically, this advantage became a major drawback as Polish broadcasters and audio describers seemed to be unwilling to add audio description to voiced-over films.

The reluctance towards audio describing foreign, voiced-over films in Poland seems to originate from the belief that visually impaired audiences are unable to assimilate various sound tracks [Szarkowska, Jankowska, 2012: 82] and that it is easier to audio describe films that are monolingual, i.e. either originally in Polish or dubbed. In a sense, a dubbed film

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[2]   Polish Broadcasting Act (Ustawa o radiofonii i telewizji) was amended in 2011 and it now obliges television broadcasters to provide 10% of their content with subtitling, audio description and sign language interpreting.

[3]   In 2010 the percentage of programs produced originally in Poland's national public broadcaster reached 43% in TVP1 and 59% in TVP2 [KRRiT, 2010].

becomes monolingual and resembles domestic productions, where the problem of the original foreign dialogue is non-existent [Jankowska, 2008: 229]. In contrast, in voice-over there are two tracks: the original track with source language dialogues and the voice-over track where dialogues in the target language are read out usually by a male voice talent. A track with audio description would be the third track and is believed to be difficult to combine with the other two. Interestingly, during a pilot study conducted in the Special Educational Centre for Blind and Partially Sighted Children in Cracow prior to the „AD to foreign films" project[4], which this article is part of, we found out not only that 53% of our respondents preferred to watch foreign films but also that as many as 87% of them declared that multiple soundtracks would not prevent them from enjoying the film [Szarkowska, Jankowska, 2012: 85].

At the time of undertaking this study, we found only three accounts of initiatives aimed at introducing audio description to foreign films, two of which used films with voice-over and one with subtitles. As far as combining audio description with voice-over is concerned, the first attempt dates back to the late 1990s when typhlo-films[5], available on VHS tapes through the libraries of the Polish Association of the Blind, were first introduced by Andrzej Woch. Among various Polish titles offered, there were some voiced-over foreign films such as *Rio Bravo*, *Titanic*, *Horse Whisperer*, *The Magnificent Seven* and *Scent of a Woman* [Jankowska, 2013: 34]. The second attempt at combining AD with foreign voiced-over films took place over a decade later in October 2011, when *Of Gods and Men* appeared with audio description on DVD and was publically screened in the Muranów Cinema in Warsaw. Audio subtitling on the other hand was used on only one occasion prior to our study – during screenings organized by teachers from the Special Educational Centre for Blind and Partially Sighted Children in 2007 in Bydgoszcz, where both the subtitles and audio description were read out

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5   For more information on typhlo-films see: Jankowska, 2008; Szarkowska, Jankowska, 2012; Jankowska, 2013. Freezing the image whenever the commentary for the visually impaired did not fit in the gap between the dialogues was a common practice in typhlo-films and one of the reasons why they were not successful [Jankowska, 2013: 37].

live alternately by female and male teachers. Unfortunately, audience opinions on audio description combined with voice-over and audio subtitles were not collected after none of the above mentioned screenings as those events were not organized for the research study purposes.

Project on AD to foreign films

This article presents results of the first part of a larger research project „Audio description to foreign films" developed at the University of Warsaw and the Jagiellonian University of Cracow. The goal of the project was to test the feasibility of optimum solutions related to creating AD to foreign films in the following research areas: synchronizing the AD script with the translation of foreign dialogue, the influence of film genre on the feasibility of audio describing the film, optimal type of AVT (voice-over vs. audio subtitles), character identification and voicing (male vs. female voice talent).

Voice-over characteristics

In audiovisual translation three main techniques of transferring a source text into the target text can be distinguished: dubbing, subtitling, and voice-over. Voice-over is defined as „a technique in which a voice offering a translation in a given target language (TL) is heard simultaneously on top of the source language (SL) voice" [Díaz Cintas, Orero, 2006: 477]. Due to that feature some authors refer to it as half-dubbing [Ivarson, Carroll, 1988: 37]. Another characteristic of voice-over is the fact that the volume of the original soundtrack is lowered, but the original dialogues can be heard in the background when the translation is read out [Díaz Cintas, Orero, 2006: 477].

   Some authors claim that voice-over „remains slightly out of step" [Chiaro, 2009: 152] with the original soundtrack and that this is done on purpose, so that the viewers can hear a few seconds of the original speech both before and after the translation [Díaz Cintas, 2009: 5]. Interestingly, professional voice-over translators, who are often present in the studio when the recording of their VO translations is made, claim that this delay feature is rather accidental than intended. The delay at the beginning derives from the fact that the voice talents start reading

only after they hear the dialogue (even if provided with specific time codes). At the same time the translators try to keep the script as short as possible, which very often results in considerable reduction of the original dialogue. Regardless of the reason for the discrepancy in isochrony between VO and the original dialogue, the possibility of hearing parts of the original foreign dialogues is a fact in voice-over. What is also worth noting, in comparison to dubbing, in voice-over lip synchrony and perfect isochrony are not required [Chaume, 2004: 18], which gives the translator more freedom in the decision-making process.

As far as information transfer is concerned, in voice-over source dialogues are frequently shortened and condensed in the target language [Tomaszkiewicz, 2006: 118]. This phenomenon results from various factors. The major one concerns the rule that dialogues are read by only one voice talent, so when there are a few characters in one scene or the pace of conversation is very fast, the target dialogues have to be shortened so that a voice talent could read them comfortably. However, as stressed by Tomaszkiewicz [2006: 141], loss in translation is compensated by non--verbal information and images. The lack of verbal information may be complemented by character gestures, facial expressions, postures, head movements, shaking hands, nodding, proposing a toast etc. [Tomaszkiewicz, 2006: 141]. Another interesting feature of voice-over, as pointed out by Tomaszkiewicz, are omissions of verbal references to visual or verbo-visual information such as space or time. The space seen on the screen is most frequently the background for the plot and it is rarely referred to. However, when a character refers to the particular place or object that are seen on the screen, they are usually referred to in translation by use of demonstrative expressions, e.g. „Give him that. Don't say a thing" instead of „Give him this envelope and don't say a thing" [Tomaszkiewicz, 2006: 143]. Thanks to this equivalence between the picture on the screen and text, a translator may apply some omissions in the target text [Tomaszkiewicz, 2006: 144]. The sense of time is also related to what we can see on the screen [Tomaszkiewicz, 2006: 144]. Therefore, those time references that can be deduced from the pictures on the screen may be omitted in translation, e.g. the chronology of events [Tomaszkiewicz, 2006: 144], retrospections. The characteristics of voice-over presented above have important implications on the way VO is combined with AD in foreign films.

Voice-over vs. audio description

The meaning of an audiovisual text is conditioned by the coexistence of the visual and the auditory communication channels [see Gottlieb, 1998]. Audio description is to compensate for the lack of or difficult access to the visual channel. Therefore, it seems logical that it should take into consideration the information available through the auditory channel, i.e. the soundtrack and the dialogues.

In foreign voiced-over films, there are several factors that need to be considered while preparing audio description. First of all, the dialogues are shortened and refer viewers to the image for the full understanding. Unfortunately, in the case of visually impaired viewers these solutions applied in voice-over translation do not serve their functions and the audience is not able to understand non-verbal information referring to visual information on the screen. Therefore, in audio description one needs to incorporate the elements missing in VO for the purpose of visually impaired viewers. Secondly, given that the vast majority of the original dialogue overlaps with the translation read out by the voice talent, visually impaired viewers might have problems with identifying the characters, particularly in screens with multiple speakers. Finally, as the voice-talent reads with a monotonous voice and covers the voices of the original actors, it is difficult for the visually impaired to identify important prosodic elements and emotions contained in the original tones of voices.

Study material and challenges

Big Fish is an American fantasy drama directed by Tim Burton. The film was based on the novel by Daniel Wallace *Big Fish: A Novel of Mythic Proportions* published in 1998. In his film, Burton portrays a difficult relation between Edward Bloom (Albert Finney) and his son William (Billy Crudup). The film is quite unique in structure as the vast majority of the plot is told through numerous retrospections and flashbacks. This issue makes the film more difficult to follow, especially for the blind or visually impaired people. Frequently, the scenes set in the presence are followed by the scenes from the past of the main character. A viewer is immediately moved in time thanks to the pictures on the screen. Since the film is a fantasy drama, many scenes take place in a fantastic scenery

with numerous fantastic characters. Another aspect was the lively pace of some dialogues featuring multiple characters. Again, a blind or visually impaired viewer might need help in order to know who is speaking at the moment because the original track overlaps with the voice-over track. Additional issue was that if such help is needed, how the information on the speaker should be provided taking into consideration the limited time space.

Procedure and questions

The screening of *Big Fish* with audio description took place at the Polish Association of the Blind (PZN) in Warsaw on 4 November 2011. It was the first one of a series of three *November Fridays with Audio Description* („Listopadowe piątki z audiodeskrypcją") co-organized by the Polish Association of the Blind in Warsaw and the Audiovisual Translation Lab.

The film original track was in English with Polish voice-over read by a male voice talent and Polish audio description read by a female voice talent. The research procedure consisted of three steps: 1) screening of the voiced-over film with audio description, 2) a survey and 3) a focus group discussion.

The survey consisted of eight closed questions. The first five related to personal characteristics of the respondents, such as gender, age, degree of visual impairment as well as their familiarity with audio description and experience with foreign voiced-over films. The second part of the survey was devoted to the respondents' opinions related to particular aspects of the audio described film, including character identification and synchronisation, i.e. the possibility of overlapping of the AD with the original foreign-language dialogues. The multiple-choice questions were read out by sighted organizers, while the respondents provided their answers anonymously by pressing a key on special infra-red clickers[6], connected to a laptop, which allowed for the results to be displayed immediately. The results of the survey are presented in further sections of this paper.

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[6] For more information on the clickers please see http://avt.ils.uw.edu.pl/en/ad--foreign – 30.09.2013.

After the survey, a 26-minute focus group discussion took place. The discussion was recorded both by camera and voice recorder, and later transcribed. The discussion consisted of two parts. In the first part the respondents were encouraged to freely give their opinions on the audio description prepared for *Big Fish* and provide their general remarks. Then the respondents were asked about their opinions on issues such as audio introduction[7], retrospections, overlapping the dialogues, and use of direct speech rather than voice-over or audio subtitles to render dialogues in foreign films with audio description[8].

In the second part of the discussion, the participants watched four clips from *Big Fish* presenting the same scene, in which William, Josephine, Edward, and his wife Sandra are sitting at the table. They are talking quite fast and the film is voiced-over, so it is assumed that the excerpts are difficult for the visually impaired people to follow. The clips differed in terms of how the audio description was written (with or without character identification) and voiced (male vs. female voice talent). As far as the name insertion strategy is concerned – the first audio description provides information on where the characters are, who they are, and what they are doing. The second audio description gives the same information, but also indicates who is speaking at the moment by providing the names of characters before their lines. When it comes to voicing, in both excerpts, voice-over is read by the same male voice talent, but audio description in the third clip is read by female voice talent and by a male voice talent in the fourth one (his voice was substantially different from the one reading VO).

Participants

A total of 21 people came to the open screening, out of whom eight were visually impaired. In what follows we discuss only the results from the

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[7]   An audio introduction is a commentary which is normally provided through a portable device and made available before a film or a performance begins. Its aim is to supply the audience with all the necessary information to fully understand what they are going to enjoy [see: Romero-Fresco, Fryer, 2013; Szarkowska, Jankowska, forthcoming; Di Giovanni, Morettini, 2012; Remael, Reviers, 2013].

[8]   The solution has been introduced in the UK as it seemed that was hard for the visually impaired to identify speakers when audio subtitles were used.

answers of the blind and partially sighted viewers, as they are the ulti-
mate target group for AD. The sighted members of the audience were
either people interested in audio description and media accessibility or
accompanying persons of the visually impaired, which is a real-life situ-
ation as the visually impaired often have sighted family members and
friends with whom they want to participate in cultural events. The low
number of visually impaired participants results from a few factors. First
of all, audio description in Poland is still not so popular as it is in Western
countries and screenings of films with audio description are not attended
by many visually impaired viewers. Secondly, this research is a pilot
study, thus it is an initial attempt at establishing the demand for audio
description for voiced-over films in Poland and at estimating its success.
Thirdly, visually impaired people are a group that is difficult to reach and
gathering of a larger group is quite a challenge. Although the comparison
of the responses of the sighted and visually impaired viewers is very in-
teresting and worth further investigation, in this article we give account
only of the data collected from the visually impaired participants.

With regard to sight loss, the participants were either partially sighted
(7 participants) or blind (1 participant). The degree of sight loss was de-
termined by the respondents themselves. The distinction between blind
and partially sighted is important as the needs of both groups differ from
each other as far as audio description is concerned. The participants did
not suffer from any other cognitive disabilities. They belonged to two
age groups: 18-35 (three participants) and 36-65 (five participants). The
sexes were represented equally by four females and four males.

All the blind and partially sighted respondents had seen films with
audio description before the study and declared they wanted to partici-
pate in further screenings with AD, which is promising.

When asked if they watched foreign voiced-over films on Polish TV,
the majority of the surveyed (seven people) answered in the affirmative.
Only one respondent said that he/she did not.

Results

In this section we present the results from the three final questions of
the survey and from the comments from the focus group discussion. The
research questions analysed here are: (1) the participants' willingness to

watch foreign voiced-over films with audio description, (2) their preferences concerning different techniques of character identification in AD
to foreign voiced-over films, (3) the preferences concerning the voicing
of audio described foreign film with voice-over (male vs. female voice
talent), (4) the optimum solutions related to the synchronisation of AD
with VO and the original soundtrack, (5) the usefulness of audio introductions and (6) ways of marking flashbacks and flashforwards in audio
description.

Let us start with the general reception of the film. After the screening,
the respondents seemed to have a positive attitude towards both the audio
description presented and audio description in general. One of the participants admitted that it was the first voiced-over film with audio description
she had ever seen and the first voiced-over film she had watched in the
last dozen or so years. The respondent explained that she did not watch
foreign films because she got irritated when she did not understand what
it was about. As she continued, thanks to the screening of *Big Fish*, she finally watched a foreign film and understood everything. The respondents
that had already watched a film with audio description before were more
critical of audio description for *Big Fish* but still in favour of the idea.

When it comes to the willingness to watch VO foreign films with
audio description, 7 out of 8 respondents wanted to watch voiced-over
foreign films with audio description, while only one person declared
that he/she does not have any opinion on that. The respondents also confirmed that the perception of multiple soundtracks did not cause problems in understanding the film.

The respondents were also asked about their opinions on the British
solution for preparing audio description for foreign films, namely the
use of direct speech to translate foreign dialogue as opposed to voice-
-over/audio subtitling[9]. According to our respondents, this idea does not
make any sense in voiced-over films and would not be accepted.

The respondents were then asked about name insertion strategy, i.e.
whether viewers would find it useful if characters' names were added in

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[9]   In the UK it is sometimes difficult for the blind to find out who is speaking at the
moment, which could be due to the fact that they are not used to voice-over. That is
way the British came up with an idea to prepare audio description by use of direct
speech, e.g.: Peter came in and said: „Good morning" [Webster, 2010].

the audio description script before their utterances. We found that 7 out of 8 respondents agree that it is worth to add names of characters in audio description before characters' lines, especially in scenes with multiple speakers when characters are difficult to identify, and only 1 respondent does not have any opinion. However, during the group discussion the participants observed that the names of characters appeared too frequently and some of them were provided in scenes in which it was unnecessary. According to one of the respondents, adding names in audio description was unnecessary, because she could easily tell who was speaking at the moment, although the original track overlapped with the voice-over track. She argued that the actor who played Edward in the scene had such a characteristic voice that she could recognize it. As far as the second clip, in which characters' names were inserted, is concerned, the participant judged it irritating. She explained that the version interfered with perception of the original track of the film and disturbed her suspension of disbelief. Other members of the focus group confirmed that the name insertion strategy is unnecessary when a character is easy to identify, especially in further scenes of a film when the audience had already learned to recognise actors' voices and intonation. However, when a character appears later in a film for the first time, providing their name may be helpful. Moreover, they suggested that in situations when the name has to be repeated, it is better to use synonyms. This solution however is not recommended as it may be confusing to viewers to use more than one designation for the same character. To conclude, the participants agreed that the best solution is to provide the names of characters before their lines but in the limited number of situations when it is particularly difficult to follow the film. Otherwise, this additional information will be irritating. Therefore, each film has to be analysed individually.

Another aspect that was researched was viewers' preference regarding the voice reading audio description. The respondents agree that it is much better when audio description and voice-over are read by the people of the opposite sexes. They also admit that, of course, the two male voices are distinguishable, however, the female voice for audio description is a far better solution as it helps not to confuse the audio description script with the voice-over script.

As far as synchronisation is concerned, we asked the participants whether they would find it acceptable if the original source-language

dialogues overlapped with audio description if necessary. Again 7 out of 8 participants were in favour of such solution and only 1 participant did not have an opinion. The respondents agreed that it is better when the tracks do not overlap. However, they are aware that sometimes the number of gaps for audio description may be limited. In such case, they prefer overlapping of tracks to losing crucial information. However, when it comes to potential overlapping of the VO translation with the AD script, most participants were against such a solution, which is in line with general AD standards.

During the focus group discussion other issues were raised such as audio introductions, ways of introducing time changes, i.e. retrospections.

After the screening, respondents said that there were not enough descriptions of the surroundings, especially at the beginning of the film. However, they also admitted that they were already aware that it resulted from the limited time available for audio description. When asked about an audio introduction, the majority of the respondents agree that it is a good solution in difficult films, however, in the one that was screened it was unnecessary. One of the respondents pointed out that audio introduction should be made available only to those who would like to use it, not to everyone by default.

Another issue is retrospections, or flashbacks. According to the participants, potential retrospections should be indicated in a descriptive way through descriptions of the place on the screen or by indicating the age of a character (i.e. young Edward vs. old Edward, which was the solution applied in *Big Fish*) rather than by direct term „retrospection". However, the respondents pointed out the possibility of using of synonyms (i.e. „young Edward" and 30-year-old Edward), which is unfortunately not in line with the solutions usually recommended in AD standards where the general rule is to use the same denomination for each character throughout the film.

Conclusions

The results of this study as well as the previous study conducted in Cracow show that voiced-over foreign films are very popular among the visually impaired participants. The majority of the blind and partially

sighted participants of our study declare that they watch such films, although their visual abilities are limited.

In this study we hope to have shown that blind and partially sighted people want to watch foreign voiced-over films with audio description. Many of them watch voiced over films broadcast on Polish television anyway, so the addition of the AD track would prove to be a great enhancement to them. This is now possible thanks to digital television, where viewers can choose the extra audio track by simply selecting the right option on their remote control. Although technically feasible, this accessibility solution is not yet offered by sufficient numbers by broadcasters.

When it comes to more detailed preferences concerning voiced-over films with AD, our respondents stated that the name insertion strategy, whose main goal is to foster character identification, should be employed cautiously, as it may be disruptive in the film viewing experience and is only necessary at the beginning of the film and in scenes with multiple speakers talking instantaneously.

As regards the synchronisation of the AD script with the VO translation and the original soundtrack, it was established that the optimum solution is for the AD script not to overlap with any dialogue. Having said that, in scenes with severe time limitations, it is admissible for the AD script to overlap with the original dialogue. The respondents stated, however, that the AD script should not overlap with the VO translation. Finally, the respondents clearly stated that they prefer the AD script and the VO translation to be read by voice talents of opposite sexes.

All in all, judging by the discussions following screenings with voiced-over feature films we organised as part of the project, visually impaired viewers welcome the new solution and hope to see more foreign films with AD in the future.

We are aware of the fact that our research was only a pilot study. Our suggestions for further studies include tests with a larger visually impaired audience, more films and research variables.

What makes the authors particularly content is the fact that audio description to foreign films in Poland is no longer non-existent. We hope that this change is at least partially due to the fact that the research results were made available to stakeholders in the accessibility provision chain. Nevertheless, there still are challenges that need to be addressed,

such as the interrelated nature of audio subtitles and voice-over, which are considered very similar genres and preliminary results from our research show that they are different genres.

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Streszczenie

Audiodeskrypcja do filmu zagranicznego z tłumaczeniem w wersji lektorskiej na przykładzie filmu pt. *Duża ryba*

Audiodeskrypcja (AD) rozwija się w Polsce od 2006 r. Do niedawna filmy obcojęzyczne praktycznie nie były udostępniane osobom z dysfunkcją wzroku. Powodem braku dostępności filmów obcojęzycznych było przekonanie, iż wersja lektorska – czyli najczęściej używana w polskiej telewizji metoda przekładu audiowizualnego – nie nadaje się do połączenia z audiodeskrypcją. Uważano, że osoby z dysfunkcją wzroku nie poradzą sobie z przyswojeniem trzech różnych ścieżek dźwiękowych (oryginalna ścieżka dźwiękowa, wersja lektorska

oraz audiodeskrypcja). Pogląd ten stał jednak w sprzeczności z potrzebami i oczekiwaniami osób niewidomych i niedowidzących.

W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki badania ankietowego i dyskusji w grupie fokusowej, przeprowadzonych z udziałem odbiorców z dysfunkcją wzroku, którzy wzięli udział w specjalnym pokazie filmu pt. *Duża ryba* (2003, reż. Tim Burton) z wersją lektorską i audiodeskrypcją. Wyniki potwierdzają, że osoby z dysfunkcją wzroku chcą oglądać filmy zagraniczne z wersją lektorską i audio-deskrypcją. Wskazują jednak, że trzeba spełnić określone warunki w zakresie udźwiękowienia, synchronizacji oraz identyfikacji bohaterów, by osoby te były w stanie tego rodzaju filmy oglądać.

Słowa kluczowe: dostępność, wersja lektorska, audiodeskrypcja, audionapisy, filmy zagraniczne

Summary

Although the development of audio description (AD) in Poland has been on the rise since its beginnings in 2006, until recently foreign films were rarely made accessible for visually impaired viewers. The reason for this was that it was assumed that voice-over (VO) – a major audiovisual translation technique used in Polish television broadcasting – was impossible to combine with audio description, since blind and partially sighted audiences would not manage to ingest multiple soundtracks (original soundtrack, voice-over and audio description). The lack of AD to foreign films was also against the needs and wishes of the visually impaired community.

In this article we present the findings of a focus group discussion and a survey on AD to foreign films conducted among blind and partially sighted viewers after a screening of voiced-over and audio described film *Big Fish* (2003, dir. by Tim Burton). The results of the study confirm that visually impaired audiences not only want to, but also are able to watch voiced-over films with audio description. There are however some important issues that should be taken into consideration when producing this type of AD, such as voicing, synchronisation and character identification.

Key words: accessibility, voice-over, audio description, audio subtitling, foreign films