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## On the Perception of Audio Description: Developing a Model to Compare Films and Their Audio Described Versions

### *Abstract*

Audio description (AD), the transfer of visual information into spoken language, has enjoyed little empirical research attention (cf. Galiano/Portalier 2010). This is in part due to the heterogeneity of target audiences, which makes it difficult to evaluate the reception of AD. This paper uses the semantic differential (Osgood/Suci/Tannenbaum 1957), a method of quantitatively analyzing affective word meanings, to compare visually impaired subjects' reception of AD films with sighted viewers' reception of the corresponding original versions. In our investigation, participants reveal how they perceive aspects of two films by providing a rating on a scale between two opposite adjectives. The results show that the main characters or concepts of the films are often perceived in similar ways by sighted and visually impaired people if the descriptive attributes are concrete (e.g. aggressive). More abstract attributes (e.g. 'beautiful') are perceived differently by the two target audiences. Our model can be used to evaluate audio description and to ensure that, where possible, visually impaired and sighted recipients have a similar experience of the film in question.

### 1 Introduction

This paper is based on two unpublished studies at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW): Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012) and Berri and Fricker (2013),<sup>1</sup> which led to the development of a model to evaluate the effectiveness of audio description. In both studies, the effects of audio description on sighted and on visually impaired participants are analysed on the basis of the semantic differential (Osgood/Suci/Tannenbaum 1957), a method for the quantitative analysis of affective word meanings and connotations. Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012) examined the effect of audio description in respect to the two main characters in the film "Happy-Go-Lucky" (Leigh 2008; *Happy Go Lucky* in the following), while Berri and Fricker (2013) examined the audio description of two different rooms presented in "The Reader" (Daldry 2008, *The Reader* in the following), and compared their results with

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Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia's (2012) findings. Both films and the respective audio descriptions are analysed in the German versions *Happy-Go-Lucky* (Leigh 2008a) and *Der Vorleser* (Daldry 2009).

In section 2 of this paper, the background of audio description is introduced and the case is made for further research and development in this field. Section 3 presents the semantic differential as a measuring instrument and proposes the use of this method in the evaluation of audio description. In section 4, the study by Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012) is introduced and section 5 presents Berri and Fricker (2013) as well as a comparison of the results of the two studies. In section 6, the results are summarised and discussed, and the outlook provides an overview of possible ways to continue analysing audio description using the semantic differential.

## 2 Audio Description

This section outlines the legal situation regarding accessibility to films. This is followed by an overview of audio description as one possible format to increase accessibility as well as a presentation of the state of the art in research.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations Enable 2015) was adopted by the United Nations in March 2006 and came into force in May 2008. The Convention is the first international treaty to specifically determine the rights of persons with disabilities and the corresponding duties of the contracting states (Eidgenössisches Departement des Innern 2015). The EU signed the treaty in 2007 and Switzerland followed in 2014 (United Nations Treaty Collection 2015). Article 30 of the Convention states that persons with disabilities have the right to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life, for example not only to have but also to enjoy access to television programmes, films, theatre and other cultural activities in accessible formats (United Nations 2015). The accessible format which will be discussed in this paper is the audio description of films.

According to Benecke (2014), audio description includes the processes of verbalising visual information and presenting it in an auditory channel to the audience. Target groups for audio description are visually impaired (in the following, the term visually impaired will be used to refer to persons who are either blind from birth, late blind or visually impaired to a high degree) (Benecke 2014: 1). Orero (2005) defines audio description 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" (Orero 2005: 7). According to Poethe (2005), the aim of audio description is to enable blind and visually impaired persons to experience films *in the same way* as sighted viewers (Poethe 2005: 33-34).

As yet, research on audio description is rather sparse (Galiano/Portalier 2010). There are some papers which focus on the evaluation of audio description. For

instance, Mazur and Chmiel (2012) proposed an objectivity–subjectivity scale for audio description after analysing sighted viewers' differing interpretations of the same visual content. Peli, Fine and Labianca (1996: 378) compared information absorption between “subjects with low vision” and “normal vision” in two short TV segments either with video and standard audio, with video and audio description, or standard audio only. However, to our knowledge, there is currently no research concerning the reception of a film by sighted persons compared to the reception of the same film by visually impaired persons hearing the audio description and the sound of the film.

This lack of research also means that guidance on how to produce audio described content is equally lacking. Guidelines which do exist are language-specific and there are currently no general international guidelines for audio description (Orero 2007: 114-115). Against this backdrop, it might be useful to examine the quality of existing samples of audio description (Berri/Fricke 2013: 3).

For visually impaired persons, television is not only a source of information but also an important popular medium on a social level (Dosch/Benecke 2004: 6). It is likely that the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations Enable 2015) will lead to a higher demand for audio described films in the future. This growing demand is an additional reason to develop methods for measuring the quality of audio description. As mentioned above, the semantic differential offers the possibility to examine and to compare the reception of audio description of films with the reception of the original film by sighted persons.

### **3 Testing Audio Description Using the Semantic Differential**

As yet, there is no systematic method to compare the reception of audio description by visually impaired persons to the reception of original films by sighted persons. In this section, the semantic differential (Osgood/Suci/Tannenbaum 1957) is presented as the basis for developing such a method. The semantic differential was coined by Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum (1957) and developed further by Snider and Osgood (1969) for use in social psychology research. In this discipline, it is chiefly employed in attitude research where it is used to gauge participants' attitudes to certain concepts (or labels), which facilitates large quantitative studies with comparable results across social strata, languages and cultures (for an overview see Heise 1970). These efforts were summarised by Grzega (2013) as a “search of labels that represented anthropologically universal ways of structuring the world” (Grzega 2013: 33). From these studies, three universal factors emerged: evaluation (good–bad), potency (strong–weak), and activity (active–passive) (referred to as EPA in the following). The semantic differential has since been applied successfully to other disciplines, for instance in the information systems field to evaluate customer satisfaction (e.g. Tullis/Albert 2008; Verhagen et al. 2015).

According to Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum (1957), the semantic differential is the attempt “to subject meaning to quantitative measurement” (Osgood/Suci/Tannenbaum



The result of a test based on the semantic differential is “a collection of check-marks against bipolar scales” (Osgood/Suci/Tannenbaum 1957: 85). These are usually depicted in a chart, listing the scales one below the other and connecting the marks set by the participants with a trend line. The meaning of a concept, for example the features of the main female character, Poppy, in Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012), is represented by each participant’s sets of check-marks on the Likert scales. The meaning of a concept to the participants as a group is represented by the set of the averaged check-marks (Osgood/Suci/Tannenbaum 1957: 87f.). An example of an averaged set is presented in Figure 2 in section 4 and in Table 2 in section 5. The averaged check-marks of the examined concepts are represented with trend lines between the pairs of adjectives and can thus be compared in detail.

According to Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum (1957), the semantic differential is “a highly generalizable technique of measurement which must be adapted to the requirement of each research problem to which it is applied. There are no standard concepts and scales; rather, the concepts and scales used in a particular study depend upon the purposes of the research” (Osgood/Suci/Tannenbaum 1957: 76). As a consequence, the semantic differential meets the requirements of studies which aim to develop new, innovative methods. As the studies presented in this paper explore, for the first time, the link between the semantic differential and the evaluation of audio description, it seems appropriate to categorize this work as such.

#### **4 *Happy Go Lucky*: Analysis of the Audio Description**

This section presents the study by Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012), based on the German version of the film *Happy Go Lucky* and its German audio description.

Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012) compare the German version of the tragicomic and colourful contemporary film *Happy Go Lucky* with its German audio description. The objective of their empirical analysis is to examine whether the effect of the film on sighted persons and the effect of the audio description combined with the sound of the original film on visually impaired persons are comparable. The semantic differential is used to analyse how participants perceive the two main characters, Poppy and Scott.

Semiotics plays an important role in the analysis of *Happy Go Lucky* and in its audio description, as the types of signs used in both are varied. In order to examine the framework of signs used in the two versions, a relevant classification of signs is introduced by Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012: 12): verbal, non-verbal and paraverbal signs. An example of paraverbal signs is prosody. Verbal signs can be found in spoken and written language, whereas examples of non-verbal signs are gestures, facial expressions, posture and sounds that are not self-explanatory. In the case of audio description, visual stimuli are transformed into spoken text.

The aim of audio description is to convey the atmosphere and the content of a film with verbal descriptions, which means reducing a complex multimedia text (film) into a text which is only audible (Fix 2005: 7). The complete audible text consists of two kinds of acoustic signs: first, the sound of the film itself (dialogue, background sound, music) and second, the description of the visual content. Descriptions should be positioned between dialogues and should not drown out the sounds in the film. This is supported by Dosch and Benecke (2004), who are considered as pioneers of audio description in Germany. The space for description is therefore limited and a large amount of information has to be delivered (and understood) in a short amount of time (Eichenberger/Oppliger/Saltalamacchia 2012: 14ff.).

The main focus of the study, the effect of audio description on visually impaired participants, is explored using Lasswell's (1971: 84) model of communication: "Who Says What In Which Channel To Whom With What Effect?" For *Happy Go Lucky*, the sender and the message are identified as in Lasswell's model, whereas the medium is split in two: the original film and the audio description plus the film sound. The recipients tested are the sighted for the original film and the visually impaired for the audio description plus the film sound.

Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012: 19ff.) link the idea of perception to Neisser's (1976) perceptual cycle, which consists of three steps: First, with an original scheme, the recipient has a specific idea of a concept. Second, in the phase of exploration, the recipient constructs different perceptions of the same concept and selects one that represents her/his idea of the concept. Third, the information received changes the original concept. Applying Neisser's (1976) model to *Happy Go Lucky*, at the beginning of the film (original scheme) recipients gain an initial impression of the two main characters, Poppy and Scott. Their impression is then influenced by the audio description (exploration). The recipients then receive more information about Poppy and Scott during the film, and with the new stimuli and impressions (information received), their original scheme of the characters is revised.

In the case of the studies presented in this paper, the question arises whether the visually impaired and the sighted participants develop and arrive at a similar conceptualization of the item in question.

#### **4.1 Test Design**

The material examined consists of the German version and the German audio description of the British tragicomedy *Happy Go Lucky*, directed by Mike Leigh. In the film, a 30-year old single woman, Poppy, works as a primary school teacher in London and is a happy-go-lucky person. Scott, her grumpy driving instructor, is a very different person, but he falls in love with Poppy. According to Kinder and Wieck (2001), the focal point of a comedy is a conflict (Kinder/Wieck 2001: 281). In *Happy Go Lucky*, this conflict is personified by Poppy and Scott, two opposite characters who often create comic or tragic situations (Eichenberger/Oppliger/Saltalamacchia 2012: 9).

The participants in the study by Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012) are between 17 and 71 years old and form two equal groups of 12 members: one group of sighted persons (4 females and 8 males) and one group of visually impaired participants (4 females and 8 males). The latter consists of nine visually impaired and of three persons blind from birth. The impairments are: visual impairment from birth, visual impairment developed in early childhood and visual impairment developed in teenage years. Contact with the visually impaired participants was facilitated by four different associations of the blind and through personal contacts (Eichenberger/Oppliger/Saltalamacchia 2012: 28).

For the empirical analysis, the semantic differential described in section 3 is used as the measuring instrument. The participants in the study are provided with fifteen pairs of opposite adjectives. Using these stimuli, they are asked to evaluate the characters of Poppy and Scott. In Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012), the adjectives were extracted from film reviews, blogs and DVD features. As mentioned in section 3, Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum (1957: 85) propose a seven-point scale with the following values: *absolutely true*, *somewhat true*, *hardly true*, *neither*, *hardly true*, *somewhat true* and *absolutely true*. For each adjective, the participants are asked to mark the point on the scale that corresponds most with her/his opinion of the character in question. Following Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum's (1957) scheme, the semantic differential for *Happy Go Lucky* contains terms that can be classified into three dimensions: characteristics, visual and judgemental. The dimensions and the corresponding adjectives with their translations are listed in Table 1.

Dimension 1: characteristics	Dimension 2: visual	Dimension 3: judgemental
aggressiv–friedfertig <i>aggressive–peace-loving</i>	neckisch–sittsam <i>mischievous–well-behaved</i>	bieder–durchgeknallt <i>conservative–crazy</i>
ordentlich–chaotisch <i>orderly–chaotic</i>	unauffällig–schrill <i>inconspicuous–brash</i>	glaubwürdig–unglaubwürdig <i>credible–implausible</i>
freundlich–griesgrämig <i>friendly–grumpy</i>	schön–hässlich <i>beautiful–ugly</i>	mitreissend–nervig <i>rousing–irritating</i>
unbekümmert–ernst <i>carefree–serious</i>	bunt–eintönig <i>colourful–dreary</i>	sympathisch–unsympathisch <i>likeable–unpleasant</i>
selbstbewusst–komplexbeladen <i>self-confident–complex-ridden</i>		originell–langweilig <i>original–boring</i>
		klug–dumm <i>clever–stupid</i>

Tab. 1: Adjective pairs for the description of Poppy and Scott (German) (Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia 2012 and authors' translation into-English)

According to Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012), the aim of determining the opposites of the chosen adjectives listed in Table 1 is not to convey the connotation of the original adjective but to find an antonym matching the features of the two main characters in the film. Before the film and the audio description are played, the participants are informed about the survey. However, it is clarified only after the viewing that the questions specifically concern the characters of Poppy and Scott. This strategy

aims to prevent the participants' perception of the film from being influenced in any way. In order to avoid distortions, the participants are interviewed in person immediately after the viewing or on the following day. Apart from the semantic differential, the participants are also asked to answer some close-ended questions referring to their general perception of the film. After the interviews, the averages of each opposite pair of adjectives marked by the participants are calculated and the graphs with the trend lines are evaluated (Eichenberger/Oppliger/Saltalamacchia 2012: 31ff.).

## 4.2 Results

First, the evaluations of the sighted with those of the visually impaired participants are compared. In the second phase of analysis, the results of the different groups of visually impaired subjects are compared with each other.

The comparison of the trend lines in the semantic differential for Poppy in Figure 2 shows that sighted and visually impaired participants perceive the character in a very similar way.

In seven out of the fifteen categories shown in Figure 2, the evaluations are congruent or almost congruent. The most significant divergences are to be found in categories (7)<sup>2</sup> schön–hässlich/*beautiful–ugly*, (8) unbekümmert–ernst/*carefree–serious*, (11) mitreissend–nervig/*rousing–irritating* and (13) sympathisch–unsympathisch/*likeable–unpleasant*.

With regard to Scott, sighted and visually impaired participants perceived this character in an almost identical way concerning the features *aggressive*, *orderly*, *well-behaved* and *serious*. The most significant divergences are to be found in the categories *bieder–durchgeknallt/conservative–crazy*, *unauffällig–schrill/inconspicuous–brash*, *schön–hässlich/beautiful–ugly*, *glaubwürdig–unglaubwürdig/credible–implausible*, *selbstbewusst–komplexbeladen/self-confident–complex-ridden*, *originell–langweilig/original–boring* and *klug–dumm/clever–stupid* (Eichenberger/Oppliger/Saltalamacchia 2012: 36ff.). Sighted participants found Scott more inconspicuous than the visually impaired (two points on the scale) and less conservative, beautiful, credible, self-confident, original and clever than the visually impaired subjects (one point on the scale).

Overall, sighted and visually impaired participants perceived Poppy and Scott in a similar way. Only three out of thirty cases show results situated on the opposite part of the *neither* line. The mental concepts of the sighted and the visually impaired participants evoked through the audio description match to such an extent that their choices in the semantic differential are identical or almost identical. All participants show similar results irrespective of whether they are sighted or visually impaired. According to the study, the participants share the same idea of Poppy and Scott after hearing or viewing the film (Eichenberger/Oppliger/Saltalamacchia 2012: 47ff.).

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers relate to Figure 2 below.

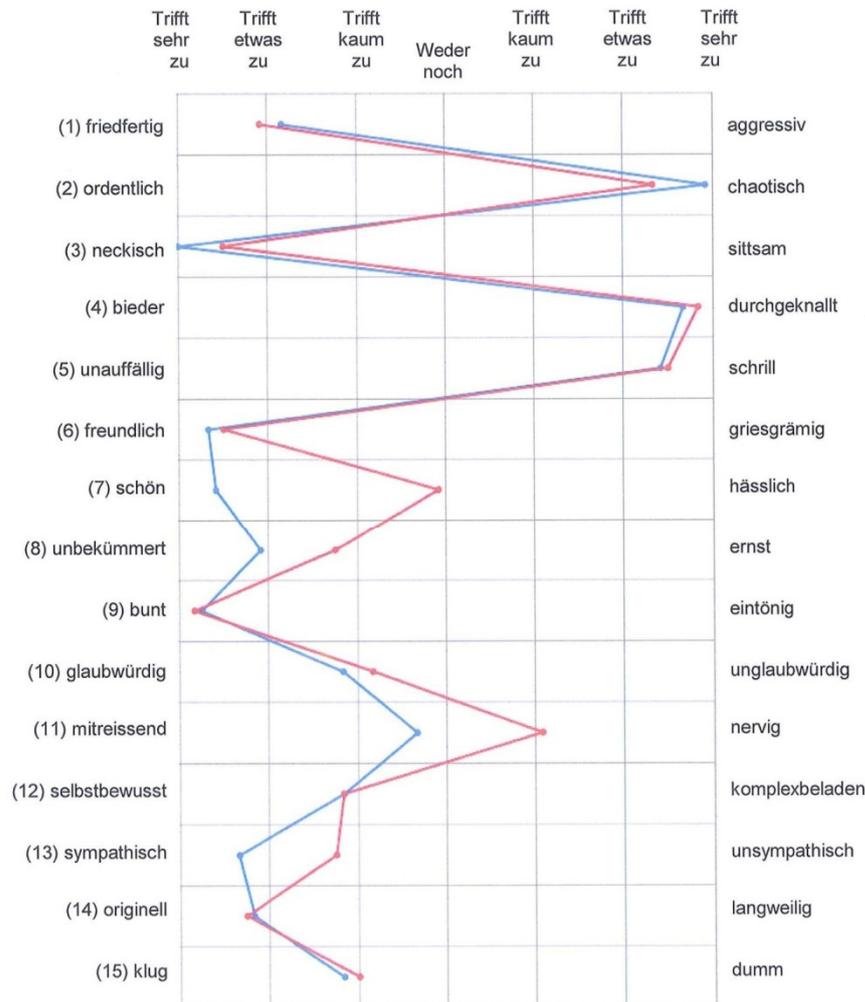


Fig. 2: Comparison of the evaluation of Poppy between **sighted** and **visually impaired** (Eichenberger/Opliger/Saltalamacchia 2012: 35)

When comparing the visually impaired with the blind from birth participants in the test, it is necessary to consider that these two groups are not the same size: three participants are blind from birth and nine are visually impaired. However, some of Poppy's characteristics are perceived in a similar way by the two groups. In four out of fifteen categories, the trend lines are congruent or almost congruent. The most significant divergences are apparent in the judgemental dimension: glaubwürdig–unglaubwürdig/*credible–implausible*, mitreissend–nervig/*rousing–irritating*, selbstbewusst–komplexbeladen/

*self-confident–complex-ridden*, *sympathisch–unsympathisch/likeable–unpleasant*, *originell–langweilig/original–boring* and *klug–dumm/clever–stupid*.

Scott is also perceived partly in a similar way by both groups. In two categories, aggressive and conservative, the evaluations are congruent or almost congruent. The most significant divergences in the dimension characteristics can be found in the following adjective pairs: *ordentlich–chaotisch/orderly–chaotic*, *freundlich–griesgrämig/friendly–grumpy*, *bunt–eintönig/colourful–dreary*, *mitreissend–nervig/rousing–irritating*, *selbstbewusst–komplexbeladen/self-confident–complex-ridden*, *originell–langweilig/original–boring* and *klug–dumm/clever–stupid* (Eichenberger/Oppliger/Saltalamacchia 2012: 39ff.).

In the *visual* dimension, the visually impaired and the blind participants show highly homogenous results with regard to the perception of Poppy. The audio track of this film in combination with the audio description seems to evoke a uniform mental idea of visual elements related to Poppy. The results for Scott in the *visual* dimension are less homogenous for the visually impaired participants. This could be explained by the fact that Scott is described in less detail than Poppy with regard to visual elements such as clothing and appearance (Eichenberger/Oppliger/Saltalamacchia 2012: 49).

## 5 *The Reader: Audio Description and the Perception of Rooms*

This section presents the study by Berri and Fricker (2013), examining the German version of the film *The Reader (Der Vorleser)*, Daldry 2009) and its German audio description.

As mentioned above, Berri and Fricker (2013) use the same method as Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012) to compare the perception of rooms in the German version of the film *The Reader (Der Vorleser)*, Daldry 2009). Again, the question is whether visually impaired participants' perception of rooms gained from audio description is the same as sighted subjects' perception of rooms through the images in the film. The results are then compared with those of Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012).

For sighted persons, approximately 80 % of the sensory perception is visual, whereas for visually impaired persons, language is one of the most important sources of information (Berri/Fricker 2013: 14). Additionally, recent studies confirm that visually impaired persons have spatial imagination (Tanış Polat 2013: 28).

In order to assist spatial imagination and the perception of rooms, audio description can be considered as multidimensional translation between two systems of signs: graphical and linguistic signs (Gerzymisch-Arbogast 2005: 24f.). From a practitioner's point of view, however, audio description aims to describe a concept at the time when it is presented in the film. This can be particularly challenging concerning the description of rooms and is not always possible, since the descriptions, as already mentioned, must not overlap with the dialogue in the film (Dosch/Benecke 2004; Benecke 2014).

The strength of the stimuli, their circumstances, and the recipients' preferences and intentions determine the perception of objects (Guski 1996/2000: 21). As a consequence, the perception of a room can vary for every individual, as previous experience influences the mental image and relevant information is gathered with selective perception (Tanış Polat 2013: 22-23).

## 5.1 Test Design

Berri and Fricker (2013) evaluate the audio description of two rooms in the film *The Reader*. In this drama, teenager Michael falls in love with Hanna, who is twenty years older and illiterate. Michael becomes Hanna's reader and she becomes his first love. One day, Hanna disappears and, many years later, the now older Michael meets her again in a courtroom where he learns about her past as a concentration camp guard in the Second World War. Berri and Fricker (2013: 22) give two main reasons for their choice of film: first, *The Reader* has been very successful, which means that the demand for accessible versions is probably high; and second, it has numerous dialogue breaks and is thus suitable for audio description. Additionally, the German audio description of *The Reader* (*Der Vorleser*, Daldry 2009) won an audience award in 2010 (Deutscher Hörfilmpreis 2010).

Two different rooms are chosen for the analysis. The first is Hanna's apartment, which is old, small, sparsely furnished and which consists of a living room, a bathroom and a kitchen. Since many scenes are set in this apartment, its furnishings are described in detail in the audio description. The second room is Hanna's prison cell, which is where many of the scenes in the second half of the film are set. As Hanna spends more than twenty years of her life in this cell, its furnishings change over time, which, according to Berri and Fricker (2013), is relevant in the audio description.

Twelve visually impaired participants (7 female and 5 male subjects between 48 and 90 years old, 5 of them visually impaired, 4 of them late blind and 2 of them blind by birth) listen to the audio description and the sound of the film and twelve sighted participants (6 female and 6 male subjects, one of them 59 years of age, the others between 23 and 30 years old) watch the film. All participants are interviewed individually by the researchers afterwards in order to fill in the semantic differential (Berri/Fricker 2013: 22ff.).

Berri and Fricker (2013: 25) claim that the ten opposite pairs of adjectives chosen for their study cover the most important aspects of the two rooms: Hanna's apartment and Hanna's prison cell. As with Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012), the participants are not informed about the actual objective of the study in order to avoid any bias. The participants are only required to evaluate the rooms by marking one point for each adjective on the scale which best represents their opinion. Like in the study by Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012), the scale of the semantic differential ranges from 1 to 7 in order to facilitate a comparison between the two studies. The participants are deliberately given the possibility of entering a neutral answer (Berri/Fricker 2013: 25). Before the analysis, however, it was pointed out that

there is no *right* or *wrong* answer, in order to avoid a high number of neutral responses. Table 2 shows the adjectives used in the semantic differential.

kühl–warm <i>cool–warm</i>	ungemütlich–gemütlich <i>uninviting–comfortable</i>
altmodisch–modern <i>old-fashioned–modern</i>	hoch–niedrig <i>high–low</i>
grosszügig–eng <i>generous–narrow</i>	schlicht–luxuriös <i>simple–luxurious</i>
farblos–farbig <i>colourless–colourful</i>	unordentlich–ordentlich <i>untidy–orderly</i>
dekoriert–kahl <i>decorated–bare</i>	unpraktisch–zweckmässig <i>impractical–suitable</i>

Tab. 2: Adjective pairs for the description of Hanna’s apartment and Hanna’s prison cell (German), (Berri and Fricker 2013 and authors’ translation into English)

The adjectives in Table 2 are chosen mainly as they are suitable for describing rooms. They are taken from online architecture and furnishing catalogues. Thus, the adjectives are applicable to all sorts of films and the analysis can be generalised and repeated. This strategy differs from the study by Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012), in which, as mentioned above, the adjectives are collected from film reviews of *Happy Go Lucky*. In the study by Berri and Fricker (2013), none of the chosen adjectives are mentioned in the audio description. This strategy is chosen in order not to influence the participants’ decisions. For the evaluation of the semantic differential, the average of each opposite pair of adjectives is calculated for each group of participants (sighted, blind from birth, late blind and visually impaired) and represented in a graphical profile (Berri/Fricker 2013: 25ff.).

## 5.2 Results

The results are presented in two phases. First, there is a comparison of the results of the sighted with those of the visually impaired subjects. Second, the results of all visually impaired subjects (blind from birth, late blind and visually impaired) are compared.

The trend lines in the semantic differential for Hanna’s apartment in Figure 3 show that the sighted and the visually impaired participants perceived Hanna’s apartment in a very similar way. Three out of ten pairs of adjectives shown in Figure 3 have nearly identical values. The remaining pairs show small differences, which never exceed the value of one point on the scale. In contrast to this, the perception test for Hanna’s prison cell shows that the room is perceived slightly differently by the visually impaired and the sighted subjects. Three out of ten pairs of adjectives clearly show different values for both groups, i.e. cool–warm, colourless–colourful and decorated–bare.

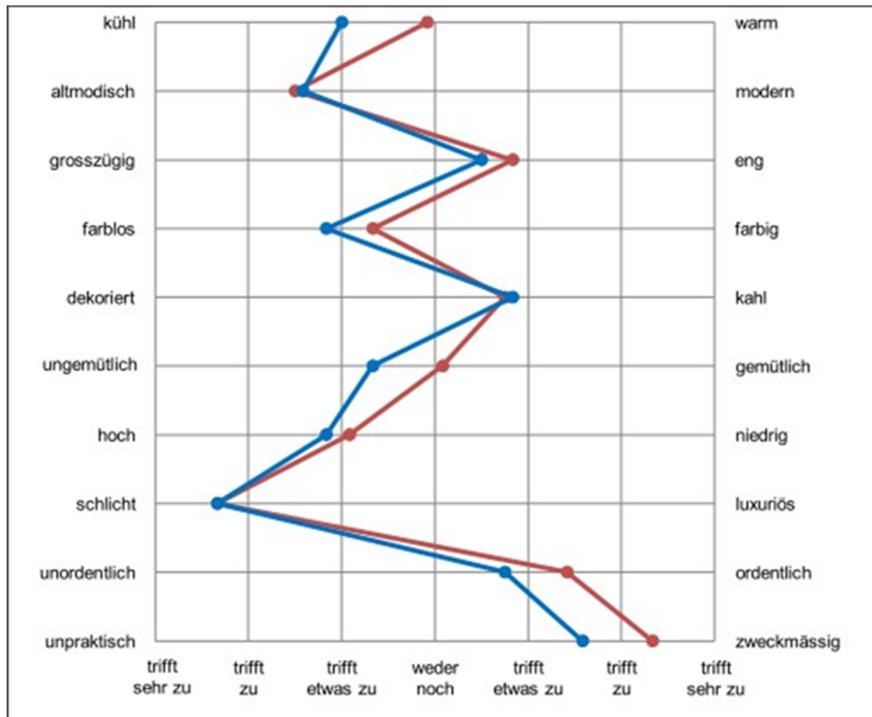


Fig. 3: Comparison of the evaluation of Hanna's apartment between **sighted** and **visually impaired** (Berri/Fricker 2013: 31)

The group of sighted subjects perceived Hanna's cell as a warmer, more colourful and more decorated space than the visually impaired subjects. This can be explained by the fact that in the audio description the prison cell is described in less detail than the apartment. In contrast to this, according to the interviewees, they do not remember Hanna's apartment as vividly as her prison cell, and they associate prison cells with negative features. Therefore, it might also be the case that both groups of participants are influenced by the frame of a prison cell when evaluating this room (Berri/Fricker 2013: 32ff.).

Berri and Fricker (2013) compare their results with Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012). Since the examined concepts (rooms and characters) and the participants differ in the two studies, only the choices on the Likert scales can be compared. Both studies are very similar, although for several reasons, there are more evaluations near the very end of the scale in the study by Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012).

First, the main characters of a film might be described in more detail than rooms in an audio description. Second, Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012: 37) took the adjectives from film reviews, which explicitly relate to the film itself. Third, the German audio description of *Happy Go Lucky* reveals that expressions are often

interpretative instead of descriptive and are placed in a syntactically prominent position, for example:

	<u>Vergnügt</u>	lächelt sie (time code 00:04:50 - 00:05:05, Leigh 2008a)
literal translation:	<u>Amused</u>	smiles she

In this case, the unmarked German word order would be: *Sie lächelt vergnügt* (Literal translation: She smiles amusedly). The interpretative expression in a marked syntactic position in the audio description clearly influences the perception of Poppy's character. The recipients, however, seem to prefer interpretative expressions, as Mazur and Chmiel (2012) point out: "in a small-scale AD reception study conducted by Mazur and Chmiel (manuscript in preparation) involving 18 respondents with sight dysfunction, the majority of the respondents (71 %) claimed that they like descriptions with evaluative adjectives" Mazur and Chmiel (2012: without page numbers).

In contrast to Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012), Berri and Fricker (2013) use adjectives from architecture and furnishing catalogues for their tests, which have no direct relation to the features of the two rooms in *The Reader* and are not directly related to the German audio description itself. This leaves more space for the participants to interpret the rooms and leads to more divergent answers. As a consequence, the study by Berri and Fricker (2013) does not show such clear results as Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012).

In Berri and Fricker (2013), two subjects are blind from birth, whereas the group of late blind and visually impaired participants consists of ten persons. Between these two groups, there is no evidence of significant divergences in the perception of Hanna's apartment (Berri/Fricker 2013: 38). It can be assumed that the participants base their evaluations of Hanna's apartment mainly on the audio description and less on their own experience or frames. Similarly, the results for Hanna's prison cell show no significant divergences within the group for most of the adjectives. A probable explanation for this is that the participants base their evaluations on frames of a prison cell. The pair of adjectives *dekoriert–kahl/decorated–bare* shows the most significant divergence, possibly because many participants are not able to remember whether the decoration is mentioned in the audio description or not (Berri/Fricker 2013: 38ff.). Nevertheless, the question remains why the group of visually impaired subjects should rely more on the audio description in the case of Hanna's apartment and more on frames in the case of Hanna's cell.

The comparison of the findings with those in Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012) shows very similar results regarding perception; that is to say that there are no significant divergences within the groups of participants who are blind from birth and visually impaired in the two studies. This gives rise to the question how the perception of rooms and the perception of characters differs for visually impaired participants. Adjectives describing rooms are often based on visual features, but this is less the case for adjectives describing characters. For example, for the pair *dumm–klug/clever–stupid*, it is reasonable to assume that in Eichenberger, Oppliger and

Saltalamacchia (2012) it does not matter if the participant is sighted or visually impaired in order to evaluate the characters of Poppy and Scott. Interestingly enough, there are less significant divergences in visual categories in Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012) than in non-visual categories (Berri/Fricke 2013: 42).

## 6 Summary and Outlook

Due to their simultaneity in perception, pictures can be decoded and understood faster than texts (Runkehl 2005: 208). This can be particularly challenging for the audio description of a film in which it is important to convey large amounts of visual information to enable the audience to follow the plot (Eichenberger/Oppliger/Saltalamacchia 2012: 25).

The study by Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012) shows that sighted and visually impaired participants describe the main characters of the film *Happy Go Lucky*, Poppy and Scott, in a very similar way. Perhaps watching a film triggers a comparable experience to sighted persons and to visually impaired persons listening to an audio description.

Berri and Fricker (2013) show that visually impaired persons using audio description create a mental image of a concept which very often is similar to that of the sighted recipients of a film. The perception for both of the examined rooms, Hanna's apartment and Hanna's prison cell, is very similar for sighted and visually impaired subjects in the study. This indicates that the results are not accidental and emphasises the quality of the German audio description in *The Reader* (*Der Vorleser*, Daldry 2009), which, as mentioned above, won an audience award.<sup>3</sup> Another peculiarity in the audio description of *The Reader* is the fact that the prison cell is hardly ever described. As a consequence, the frame for a prison cell in the visually impaired recipients' minds probably has a significant influence on the evaluations in the study by Berri and Fricker (2013).

Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012) and Berri and Fricker's (2013) results indicate that the semantic differential provides an appropriate theoretical basis for comparing the perception of an original film with its audio description as well as for evaluating audio description in general. One advantage of the semantic differential is the possibility to present the results clearly with charts which are easy to understand, even for readers without background knowledge (Berri/Fricke 2013: 43-44). At the same time, single divergences in the perception of visually impaired and sighted

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<sup>3</sup> Despite the complex plot and the numerous time warps, the participants in the study by Berri and Fricker (2013) confirm the quality of the film and their positive attitude to it. The problem of the time warps is addressed by applying a particular strategy in the German audio description (*Der Vorleser*, Daldry 2009): in order to signal the time warps, two different speakers are assigned to the audio description. The descriptions of the scenes set in the past are read by a woman, while Bernd Benecke, one of the pioneers of audio description, reads the audio description for the scenes in the present.

subjects can be isolated by means of the semantic differential and examined in follow-up studies.

As shown in the two studies presented in this paper, the semantic differential can be considered a valuable theoretical model for the evaluation of audio description. Both studies examine the effect of audio description in comparison to the effect of the corresponding film by evaluating the main characters in one case and two rooms in the other. The results, however, give rise to the question whether a study which evaluates more than two concepts, or unrelated concepts (Scott and Poppy as well as Hanna's apartment and Hanna's cell are closely related) would deliver comparable results.

Another important point to consider is the text of the audio description. In both studies, the German audio descriptions contain interpretative descriptions of the concepts evaluated. An example of this is: he frowns (description) instead of *he looks worriedly* (interpretation) or the example mentioned in section 5 above. This represents a breach of the rules in German audio description (Dosch/Benecke 2004; Benecke 2014), which recommend detailed descriptions and reject interpretations. Therefore, further research should consider the effect of interpretative audio descriptions as compared to the effect of descriptive audio descriptions.

In Eichenberger, Oppliger and Saltalamacchia (2012) and Berri and Fricker (2013), persons with different visual impairments (blind from birth, late blind and visually impaired to a high degree) show similar perceptions of the concepts tested. Tests with homogeneous groups of subjects, with the same kind of visual impairment within one group, and comparing the results of these tests, will reveal whether these findings can be generalized.

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