




## Audio description for live performances: The role of the introduction

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## Tentative definition

An audio-introduction (AI) for live audio-description (AD) for the theatre or opera is

- usually a prepared script
- that is read out live or in recorded form before the performance or made available e.g. via a website
- and offers blind and visually impaired patrons information they need to understand and enjoy the performance they are about to attend.
- An AI can be used on its own or in combination with AD.

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## The Theatre code: Narration and Theatricality

“(…) l'on considère le théâtre **non pas comme une imitation de la vie** (...), mais comme un système qui **renvoie au réel** en le signalisant.”  
(Pavis, 1976, p. 8).

“(…) all signs are **semiotized**, they carry a more significant meaning than in real life, i.e. they are overcoded (...).”  
(Elam, 1980, p. 78).

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## Literature on AI

- Live AD: mostly publications on opera
- AI for **live** AD: mostly publications on opera
  - York (2007): “Talking Notes”
  - occasional mentions
- AI for **recorded** AD:
  - Experiments by Romero-Fresco & Fryer
  - Follow-up research by Di Giovanni

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## Guidelines

- AI only in Belgian ABCD guidelines, Spanish UNE guidelines and USA ADI guidelines
- Recurring elements:
  - description of stage/set
  - description of characters
- Differences in:
  - focus
  - length & degree of completeness
- Virtually nothing on:
  - writing style & structure of the text
  - advantages of recorded versus live

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## The corpus

Country	Theatre	Opera	Musical	Total
United Kingdom	11	2	6	19
Belgium (Dutch)	4			4
Belgium (French)	7			7
Italy	2			2
Spain		7		7
Germany	5	1	1	7
Portugal				
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>46</b>

General features, content features, functions.



## Content features (1)

Content feature	Theatre	opera	Musical	Total
Welcome word	27	10	7	45
Introduction of the describer	22	10	7	39
Audio test material	8	1	0	9
Description theatre hall	14	1	0	15
Duration/intermissions	13	2	4	19
Special announcements	6	1	4	11
Mobile phones	2	0	0	2
Closing sentence	12	5		17
Genre	21	10	7	38
Rewrite or adaptation	9	8	2	19
Translation	3	1	0	4
History of the performance	10	9	3	22



## Content features (2)

Content feature	Theatre	opera	Musical	Total
Author (writer/playwright)	18	7	3	28
Composer	N/A	9	4	13
Producer	12	9	0	21
Director	19	8	6	33
Actors	3	0	1	4
Theatre company	7	0	0	7
Credits	13	9	4	30
Synopsis	16	9	3	28
Setting of the performance	15	8	5	28
Set design	19	10	7	46
Lighting	5	2	1	8
Physical characters	25	2	7	34
Character/actor relation	12	7	2	21
Costumes	27	8	7	42
Character personality	7	2	4	13



## Content features (3)

- **Always** described: set design (= 'theatricality')
- **Standard (>80%)**: welcome word, intro describer, genre, costumes
- **General (>60%)**: author, directors, synopsis, setting of the performance, physical characteristics.
- Description theatre hall, duration, adaptation, history of performance, credits,
- **Optional (<20%)**: audio test, mobile phones, (translation), (actors (credits)), theatre company, *lighting*



## Functions of AI's

- General function: creating a framework
- Informative function
- Foreshadowing function
- Explanatory/Expressive function
- Instructive function



## AI - AD Interaction Some examples

Van de Velde:  
J'aimerais mieux de  
bouche vous le dire (sic)

Olympique Dramatique,  
Erik De Vlaminck





## Foreshadowing function

### Audio Introduction

### Audio Description

"Towards the end loud music is playing for a rather long time, while photos flash by in rapid succession. They represent historic events from the sixties and seventies: the Atomium building, Martin Luther King, images of demonstrations and violent incidents, well-known sports figures such as boxer Jean Sneyers Annaloro"

"In between the sets the actors occasionally move chairs and tables around."

"Roger, all dressed in pink, runs round the cage as if obsessed. In the background images of his life flash by in rapid succession"

(LOUD MUSIC)

"About a dozen bistro tables and chairs have now been placed round the cage in the dimly lit space"

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## Explanatory function Breaking the theatrical code

"The story is presented as a play within a play. This becomes clear because the actors occasionally start speaking as themselves, address each other by their real names and because they always change costumes on stage"

"The actors and the extras start preparing the next scene: the actor Geert assembles 5 men in a small group to the left of the cage: they now represent an audience. The extra who is wearing the nightgown stands on the left side of the cage and is holding a tray with four glasses of champagne. A white balloon is also attached to the tray. Bert and Geert position themselves behind a microphone"

(...)  
"The three actors take their leave from the extras, who pick up their baskets with clothes and disappear through the back door."

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## Expressive function



The 13 characters (...) are wearing costumes designed by Tim Van Steenberghe. The costumes are elaborate, dark affairs in which black and leather dominate. Additional pairs of sleeves have been sewn on to the shoulders. This makes the costumes extremely heavy and grotesque. Moreover the wooden hands of mannequins have been attached to the sleeves. **It is as if the characters are surrounded by ghosts who grab the characters from the dark.**

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## Concluding thoughts

- Difference with (mainstream) film/TV: theatrical sign
- Greater need for AI in theatre?
- Corpus: no template but framing function & 4 recurring functions
- Weight of each function ~ genre & concept

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## Further research

- Language & style of AI (AD)
- Reception research
  - need for repetition of AI
  - type of 'framework' required
  - Functions
  - advantages/limits of recorded AI
  - presentation of actors

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## Thank you!

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