HONG KONG POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY
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Film Language and Audio
Description: two genres in one.
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Part One.
Film Language

1. From 'the silents' to Seinfeld
2. Brief Encounter
3. Ken Loach
4. A challenge

Hypothesis: the existence of 'filmese'

◉ Film language is a genre in itself, in that the language written in film scripts and then performed by actors differs from everyday dialogue.

(Taylor, 1999, Pavesi, 2005, Quaglio, 2009, Forchini, 2010)

Silent movies

From the days of the Magic Lantern, silent films needed verbal assistance of some kind, and this was provided (partly) by

INTERTITLES

Intertitles: 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' 1927

Phineas outwits the slave traders

Eliza escapes across the river on floating ice

Rocky Pass. Reunion of Eliza and Geo. Harris

Moonlight bathing the old Kentucky home in radiance – romance in the winged and perfumed breezes of the night

The graphics of intertitles

Multimodal texts within multimodal texts

Written language integrated with film in terms of layout and verbal and non-verbal content.

No emotive or dramatic effects (no appraisal)

e.g. The Clash of the Wolves
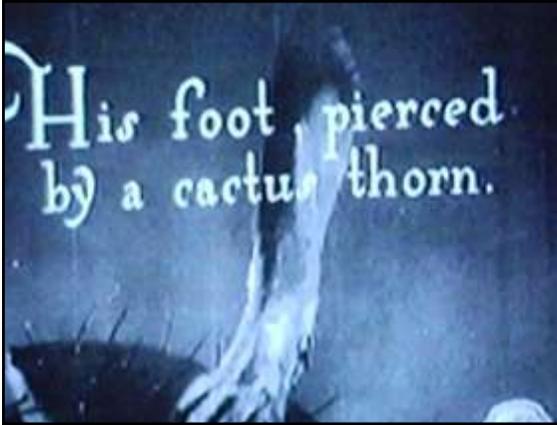
… and then along came talkies

Film is a complex semiotic event

In everyday conversation, much language use is in fact formulaic in nature, and much ordinary talk is humdrum and banal, whereas the time and space constraints of films, and the need to relate interesting, exciting or engaging stories, leads to an excess of highly pertinent, dramatic or intriguing exchanges.

Ordinary spoken language

phatic devices
discourse markers
fillers
interjections
hesitations
false starts
etc.

The theatrical tradition prevailed…

E.g. Noel Coward's 'Still Life' became…

Brief Encounter

- **Brief Encounter** (1946) is director David Lean's brilliantly-crafted, classic British masterpiece. It is one of the greatest romantic tearjerkers of all time, with a very downbeat ending.

- "Two nice middle-class people, married but not to each other, have an unconsummated love affair after a chance meeting at a railway station. She gets cold feet and he goes off to South Africa." (Maconie 2009)

Brief Encounter VIDEO

Brief Encounter

Laura (speaking about Dolly to herself): I wish I could trust you. I wish you were a wise, kind friend, instead of a gossiping acquaintance I've known casually for years and never particularly cared for. I wish, I wish...
Dolly: Fancy him going all the way to Africa. Is he married?
Laura: Oh yes.
Dolly: Any children?
Laura: Yes. Two boys. He's very proud of them.
Dolly: Is he taking them with him, his wife and children I mean?
Laura: Yes, yes he is.
Dolly: Well I suppose it's sensible in a way, rushing off to start anew in the wide open spaces and all that sort of thing. But, ha, ha, wild horses wouldn't drag me away from England and home and all the things I'm used to. I mean, one has one's roots after all, hasn't one?
Laura: Oh yes, one has one's roots.

Filmese – The Rope (Hitchcock)

A Well, come on, we don't have too much time. Mrs. Wilson will be comng back soon.

B I didn't forget. I have her key. I told her I have lost mine. How are you going to explain this'

A I am not.

(polished and rehearsed)

Video Seinfeld

… a programme about NOTHING.

Seinfeld - 'The Revenge'

● LEVITAN: Remind me to tell you what we did in Lake George. Get this … I got it all on video. (laughing)

● GEORGE: That's it. This is it. I'm done. Through. It's over. I'm gone. Finished. Over. I will never work for you again. Look at you. You think you're an important man. Is that what you think? You are a laughing stock. You are a joke. These people are laughing at you. You're nothing! You have no brains, no ability, nothing!. I quit!

Film language

Return to hypothesis:

● The 'context of situation' of a film is an 'artificially produced situation' (APS) and does not totally reflect a real situation, however much a director strives for that effect.

● It is "written to be spoken as if not written"

● It is 'filmese'.

BUT - The Ken Loach Style

dialogues based on spontaneous conversation;

in casual talk speakers effect a semantic activity, a continuous process of construction and negotiation of meaning…

… but they do it subconsciously.

The Loach Style 2

essential extra-linguistic information from the visual – through the use of 'symbols'; e.g., bleak council estates, conditions of poverty, poor clothing, etc.

characters thus interact in habitual and informal contexts and discuss everyday matters: work, family, friendship, etc.

Eggins and Slade (1997)

The paradox (of casual conversation) lies in the fact that casual conversation is the type of talk in which we feel most relaxed, most spontaneous and most ourselves, and yet casual conversation is a critical site for the social structure of reality.

Amateur actors

Since his early experience in television Loach has tried to use amateur or semi-professional actors because
"they don't think technically and give themselves completely to the film without questioning."
They are often actually unemployed people, women whose children have been taken into care, ex alcoholics, etc. who are allowed to create dialogue around the script, in the search for the "right balance between scripted dialogue and life"

Acting means REacting

Amateur actors

Loach's dialogues are consequently rich in colourful expressions, proverbial usage, colloquialisms and language variety in the form of dialectal expressions and regional accents. There is a high expressive content (love, anguish, desperation, etc.)

"If yer a worker it rains stones seven days a week"

But all this begs the questions…

IS IT REALLY REAL?

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experiment

The use of the following discourse markers in
Loach films (My name is Joe, Raining
Stones, The Navigators) and in the Cobuild
corpus was subjected to comparison.

Well, but, so, now, then, You know, I mean

Loach vs. Cobuild

Discourse markers	Cobuild corpus	Loach films
Well	246	220
But	366	230
So	342	210
Now	120	80
Then	162	105
You know	264	240
I mean	192	170

Loach vs Cobuild
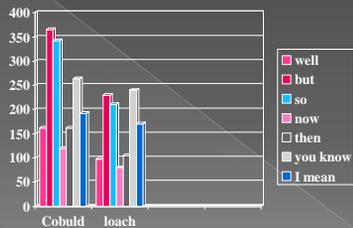
Insert video Raining Stones

Raining Stones - script

Anne - What's up?
Bob - Nothin.
Anne - Then what you snappin' for?
……
Anne - I told you last night it'd be summat liike
    that. Something's wrong, isn't it?
Bob - I've had the van nicked.

Raining Stones - transcription

What's up?
Nuthin.
What yer snappin' at me fo?
……
I told yer last nigh it was gonna be summat li
    tha.
What is wrong with you?
I've had the van nicked.

Language varieties

Dialect

Sociolect

Film language

Translated film language
    (dubbing/subtitling)

Language varieties 2

Dialect

Sociolect

Film language
script
transcription

Dubbing

Subtitling

gradual

dilution

Language varieties 3

Dialect

Sociolect

Film language

Dubbing

Subtitling

specific
to
generic

Language varieties 4

Dialect

Sociolect

Film language

Dubbing

Subtitling

localisation
foreignisation
neutralisation

BUT

a challenge

Forchini 2010

› The America Movie Corpus
› The Longman Spoken American Corpus

Study of 'real movie data', i.e.
transcriptions of films not scripts.

› applying Biber's Multidimensional Analysis

Forchini

- "… both face-to-face and movie conversation are informal, non-narrative, situation- dependent and not highly persuasive. Consequently, since these are all factors linked to the spontaneous nature of conversation (cf. Biber, 1998), it can then be concluded that also movie language has a significant amount of spontaneity."

'you know'

- The expression 'you know' appears in both domains though occurences are higher in the spoken corpus (0.35%) than in the movie corpus (0.15%). But it has extremely similar patterning.

- More interestingly, 'you now' is the most frequent 2-gram in both domains.

- And 20 out of the 30 most frequent 2-grams in movies correspond to the spoken language data.

Film genre

- Multidimensional analysis shows that "comedies have 3 dimensions out of 5 in common with face-to-face conversation whereas non-comedies have 2."

- Thus discrepancies can still be detected but the question is not as clear-cut as we once thought.

How is a film text read?

- Films can be read at three levels (Monaco, 2009)
- Physiological
- Mental
- Psychological

Physiological

- Efficient and extensive saccadic patterns
    Follow camera movement, etc, as director wished.
    How viewers view dynamic scenes

    Eye-tracking
        a technique which enables us to record and observe the mechanisms of the human visual system

Eye-tracking

Through the recording of the movements of the eyes it is possible to establish where a viewer is looking. This allows us to make hypotheses on, for example, the distribution of the visual attention of a viewer.

Reading

Eye-tracking was first used to investigate reading processes. It was discovered that reading is not a question of movement from left to right in linear fashion, but takes place through rapid jumps (saccades) followed by fixations.

Saccades last an average of 26-60 milliseconds and occupy 10-15% of reading time.

Saccades & Fixations

A saccade embraces roughly 10 letters.
The first fixation is not on the first word.
Some words are passed over.
Some are re-read.

People read in a holistic way, identifying, decoding and combining letters in words, words in larger items and then in meaningful syntactic structures.
Cf. John Sinclair

Patterns

Viewing patterns are dictated by the objective of the viewer.
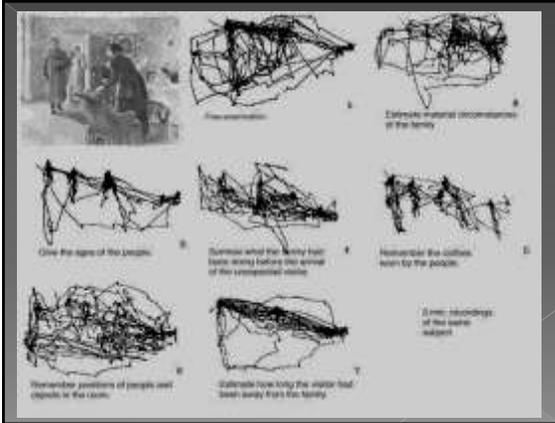
Reading Images (pace Kress & van Leuwen)

Eye-tracking can also tell us a great deal about the strategies used to 'read' images.

It tells us, for example, which seem to be the most salient and informative parts of a picture.

… reading images

Gaze is concentrated on the faces of the people.

The human face transmits essential information for global understanding (Brown, Huey, Findlay 1997, Theeuwes, Van der Stigchel, 2006)

Example 1

In the first example the most important element is shown to be the face of the lady facing the camera, but also the hands of both ladies which inform us of the action taking place.

Example 2

When a single figure is shown in close-up, the main facial features that are focussed on are the eyes, nose and mouth.

There is also some fixation on the watch, suggesting it is a potentially informative element.

Reading multimodal texts

With multimodal texts, similar strategies seem to be used to those regarding monosemiotic texts.

Example 1 (One Hour Photo)

In the first example the spoken words (reproduced as subtitles) are heard off-screen.
The viewer alternates attention among the salient elements on screen i.e., the moving of the teddy bears and the subtitle. The fixations are clear.

Example 2 (Notting Hill)

In example 2 the characters are speaking to each other on-screen. At the precise moment of this shot, the figure on the left is speaking.
As is usual in cases of rapid conversation, the viewer focusses particularly on who is speaking and on the mouth of who is speaking.
But also in this case the gaze moves between the picture and the subtitle.

And now

Audio Description

Briefly AD is the process that
   "transforms visual information into words,
   transforms the visual into spoken language,
   completing in this way the sounds and
   dialogues of films".
(Lopez Vera, 2006: 1)

Plan

1. AD features;
2. Little Dorrit;
3. The Pear Tree Project (different perceptions);
4. SFL observations;
5. Where do we go from here?

Video Little Dorrit

Little Dorrit

- 1808 Marshalsea Debtors Prison (+ subtitle)

- The doctor shows the baby to a boy and girl

- Old discs spinning on lengths of thread in the darkness – (list of names) BBC Little Dorrit by Charles Dickens

- 21 years later

Little Dorrit (cont.)

- A neatly dressed man in his 20s with short brown hair unlocks a small wooden door.
- Wearing a smart grey dress and white pinafore, a straw bonnet and light blue cape, Amy climbs through the door carrying a wicker basket and walks into the busy streets outside.
- She passes a horse-drawn carriage and two men in top hats on their way across a bridge.
- A tiny figure dwarfed by its enormity.

SFL observations

An SF grammar is "a grammar that respects the speakers' right to make up their own minds about how they choose to talk (or write): at the same time it makes speakers explicitly aware of the choices they have available, so they can make an informed decision about the options they choose."
(Martin, Matthiesen & Painter, 1997)

The Pear Tree Project

Walter Chafe's famous 'Pear Tree' film was shown to homogeneous groups of 20 year-old female university students in twelve countries. The students were asked to watch the six-minute film and then write a description of what they had seen.

The purpose was to ascertain whether different nationalities/cultures/languages perceived images in the same way.

This would impact on strategies in audio description and particularly on the translation of audio descriptions.

Trieste 2

- In addition to a wider survey of 12 different nationalities including an Italian sample, a second Italian test was carried out in Trieste.

- The findings of the separate Trieste survey are to be seen in the light of the wider aim of the whole Pear Tree Project, which was to assess, as explained above, whether cross-linguistic or cross-cultural differences across Europe were statistically significant or not.

- The findings of the Trieste investigation would be compared to those of the other nationalities, but also to the other Italian group, to see whether the observable differences or similarities were in any way culture bound.

topics

- theme choice and development
- clause type
- appraisal

Theme choice (Trieste 2)

- 1. The song of the rooster. (Canto del gallo)
- 2. We are in the open countryside, … (Siamo in aperta campagna, …)
- 3. The video opens on a countryside scene: (Il video si apre con una scena campestre:)
- 4. We are in the countryside. (Siamo in campagna.)
- 5. It is early in the morning a pearpicker has already filled three baskets, (E' mattina presto, un raccoglitore di pere ne ha già raccolte quasi tre ceste,)
- 6. A rural scene, … (Scena rurale,)
- 7. A farmer picks some pears from a tree and puts them in three baskets at the bottom of the tree. (Un contadino raccoglie pere dall'albero e le mette in tre ceste poste ai piedi dell'albero.)
- 8. The scene opens on a landscape, … (La scena si apre con l'inquadratura di un paesaggio,)
- 9. In the countryside a man is picking some pears from a tree, … (In una campagna un contadino sta raccogliendo le pere da un albero,)
- 10. The video opens on a countryside scene. (Il video si apre con una scena campestre.)

Theme breakdown

- NOUN: 11
- PRONOUN (1st person)   2
- PLACE ADJUNCT   4
- TIME ADJUNCT   2
- 'THERE IS'   1

nouns

the picker	2	A farmer; A man
the rooster's song	1	
the film/video/scene	4	
simple noun phrases landscape	4	eg., A rural
Pronoun (We)	2	

other themes

place adjuncts	4
time adjuncts	2
'There is'.	1

- This breakdown in English reflects the original Italian pattern exactly, in that there are no forced translations, except for the very first sentence in which the song is thematised in Italian and a more natural version in English might have read 'A rooster crows', thematising the bird, but here the rules of comparative syntax come into play.

Theme choices across languages

A similar breakdown was then observed regarding the English transcription of the eleven other groups in the project (Afrikaans, English, Catalan, Flemish, French, German, Greek, Irish, Italian, Polish and Spanish). The theme choice in the first clause was thus elicited from 213 texts.

THEME	A	E	C	Fl	Fr	Ge	Gr	Ir	It	P	S
A man	7	12	6	8	7	9	2	10	5	3	5
film	8	5.	1	5	3	0	2	4	10	7	7
Allusion to film	0	0	3	1	1	0	0	2	1	2	1
There is	4	2	2	1	0	0	0	1	2	0	0
Time adjuncts	2	0	4	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
It is	1	0	1	0	2	0	1	0	0	1	3
I	1	1	0	1	0	0	4	3	0	0	1
We	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0
You	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
A farmer	1	1	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
The story	0	0	0	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	1
A cock	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Someone	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
A boy	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
The most noticeable thing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Pears	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
A hispanic pear picker	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

Most favoured theme choices

- A man
- A film/video/scene

Significant differences

Afrikaans	4 existential clauses (totally absent in 5 groups)
Spanish	predicated theme 'It is…'
Catalan	most time adjuncts
Irish	most place adjuncts
Greek and Irish	personal pronouns

Individual theme selections

Polish	Pears…
Irish	The most noticeable thing…
Spanish	A Hispanic pear picker…

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Differences

- Culture bound?
- Linguistically determined?
- Random personal choices?

And what does this mean for audio description research?

THEME CHOICE in the AD of 'The English Patient'

Nouns and noun groups	302
Circumstantial	
adjuncts of Time	38
adjuncts of Manner	26
adjuncts of Place	62
Pronouns (3° person)	239
Non finite clauses	77

Cf. Trieste

In percentage terms, the noun and pronoun themes in the audio description accounted for 72%, roughly the same as in the Trieste sample, whereas there were no non-finite clause themes in the latter.

Cf. country for country

Looking at the larger picture, in all 213 texts the theme choice for the first clause was a noun or pronoun in 169 cases, almost 80 % and therefore broadly similar to the other findings. Looked at country for country, there is again close proximity in the use of nouns and pronouns as themes, at least for the opening clauses. There were, however, no non-finite clause themes.

Non-finite clauses

It would seem that this particular grammatical construct is specific to audio description and not to simple off-line descriptions such as those resulting from the Pear Tree Project.

Or they simply don't occur in initial clauses.

Warning

This is, however, a minor warning sign that, in some respects, descriptions and audio descriptions are different sub-genres, and not all variables are comparable.

But…

… this is not enough to invalidate further investigation and, indeed, the next stage in the analysis was to observe all the theme choices in all the clauses in all the twenty texts in two sets of examples, namely the randomly selected Flemish group and the first Italian group.

Theme type	Noun s	3° person pronouns	Time adjts	Place adjts	Reason adjts	2° person pronouns	1° person pronouns	There is/are	Manner adjts
Flemish	247	388	166	18	12	11	11	9	6
Italian	97	145	113	18	4	3	1	4	

Theme choice in the Flemish and Italian Pear Film samples

When the total number of words is taken into account, we see that the Flemish students wrote a great deal more than either of the Italian groups. In fact the twenty Flemish texts totalled 7,522 words while the first Italian texts totalled only 4,426 words (interestingly, the other Italian group from Trieste totalled a broadly similar 4,733 words). When this discrepancy is factored in, some differences and some similarities can be observed.

Findings

Both groups favour nouns and pronouns as theme in roughly similar proportions, whereas the Italians tend to use more time and place adjuncts.

Cf. audio description of 'The English Patient'

In the actual audio description of 'The English Patient' the number of nouns is greater than the number of pronouns, whereas in the Pear Film descriptions it is the pronouns that predominate. This could be attributed firstly to the fact that in a short description the use of anaphoric reference through a repeated use of pronouns is sufficiently cohesive and coherent for the receiver. In a two-hour film, with many more characters and scene changes to describe, it may be necessary to use more actual nouns.

An Italian Pear Tree text

- This little boy runs away,
- he meets a little girl on the road,
- he takes her hat and then,
- as he is rushing off,
- he falls to the ground.

Cf. Italian with Italian

Comparing the two sets of data derived from the two potentially homogeneous groups of Italians (the official Pear Tree contingent from Macerata and the Trieste group) we find the following breakdown.

Theme type	Nouns	3° person pronouns	Time adjuncts	Place adjuncts	Reason adjuncts	2° person pronouns	1° person pronouns	There is/are	Manner adjuncts
Italian 1	97	145	113	18	4	3	1	4	6
Italian 2	123	149	101	14	2	2	1	2	0

Comment

As can be seen there is a substantial similarity in the choice of theme items, particularly as regards the use of the third person pronoun, time and place adjuncts and other pronoun use. There is more of a discrepancy in the choice of nouns as theme but the difference is not great. But again the figures are totals, and the differences registered between Italian and Italian must not be ignored.

Clause/process type

- Material clauses are to be expected, given the series of actions that take place;
- Mental clauses bring the describer into the discourse;
- Relational clauses refer to the situation of being or of possession;
- Behavioural clauses involve the verb 'look' or equivalents;
- Existential clauses eg. 'there are three boys standing there'

Material clauses

Multiple clause sentences such as 'In a while, a little boy with a bicycle passes by; when he sees the pears he stops, (he) gets off his bicycle, (he) puts one basket on the bike and then (he) leaves' are common.

Mental clauses

- 'I saw a tree standing in a field'
- 'You can hear an animal crying'

Relational clauses

- 'The first one is a man'
- 'On his head he has a hat'

Clause type	Material clauses	Mental clauses	Relational clauses	Behavioural clauses	Existential clauses
Flemish	604	101	69	50	13
Italian	315	55	26	15	7

Comment

The breakdown of clause type selection shows very similar patterns in all cases except behavioural clauses.

Clause type	Material clauses	Mental clauses	Relational clauses	Behavioural clauses	Existential clauses
Italian 1	315	55	26	15	7
Italian 2	351	48	24	23	4

Comment

- Again (taking the respective word counts into consideration) the figures are very similar.

- Again discrepancies are found in behavioural clauses.

- But the figures relating to the second Italian set are closer to the Flemish statistics and might indicate that the first Italian set is an exception.

Stats

Chi-square testing was applied to the figures in order to check the significance of the differences between observed frequencies and theoretical frequencies.

In order to judge whether significant differences exist between the variables examined, it is necessary to assess the expected frequency. If the distribution is similar to that expected, then any difference must be linked to chance and therefore not statistically significant.

Theme choice

With reference to theme choice between the Flemish group and the first Italian group, the chi-square calculated was much higher than the theoretical chi-square, which means that in this case the difference in choice was significant.

This would suggest that a Flemish audio describer should favour a largely nominal approach and provide fewer thematised adverbial markers than an Italian describer.

Clause choice

In the case of the other three comparisons reported here between the two Italian groups and between the Flemish and Italian group regarding clause choice, the chi-square calculations show no statistical significance.

In this case a Flemish or Italian audio describer could proceed in the same way, giving the same weight to material, mental and relational clauses.

Appraisal

The describers in the Pear Tree Project, although they were not aware that the experiment in which they were participating was designed to provide useful information for audio description practice, used very few appraisal tools.

There was some use of adjectives such as 'puzzled', 'surprised' and 'astonished' and adverbs such as 'unwittingly', 'suspiciously' and 'indifferently', but with an absolute maximum of two cases per text. Many texts contained no appraisal at all.

Appraisal?

These observations also showed that the limited use of appraisal was spread fairly evenly across the three groups of students, indicating no national or cultural preference.

Appraisal - yes

There is now a groundswell of current opinion in favour of some degree of appraisal being introduced into audio description, and the results of the Pear Tree Project would seem to support these timid beginnings.

Conclusions

But it is also evident that a number of variables do not fit neatly into national/cultural/linguistic categories and that many theme choices are common to all groups.

Conclusions

It is equally clear that individual choices can deviate from all the norms with choices like 'Pears' 'A hispanic pear picker' and 'The most noticeable thing' occurring only once and in different groups.

Conclusions

But whatever the final and exact calculations of further research will prove, for example from a study of theme and clause type choices in all of the clauses of all of the texts and from a comparison of the themes and clauses selected in the original language and those in the translations, it would seem that the main aim of the Pear Tree Project, that of eliciting strategies for audio description for all languages, has been useful.

Conclusions

A quick look at the figures would point to a few potentially different approaches to audio describing: the Polish use more detailed descriptions than the Greeks in that more Poles mention all the objects involved in the fall scene whereas only a few Greeks do so; the English differ from the Italians in their use of verb tense; interestingly the Spanish and the Catalans differ in their attributing of the causes of the fall. The Germans and Poles did not use any single noun phrases in isolation to set scenes, but some members of all the other groups do so. The Flemish differ from the Italians in the choice of theme to a significant extent.

Conclusions

The counterbalancing factor is that the differences recorded between Pole and Pole, Greek and Greek, Catalan and Catalan, etc. are noticeable enough to be relevant. Even within the seemingly homogeneous results obtained from the two Italian groups, it can be seen that one student used twenty-six material clauses in her description and another used seven. One used five relational clauses while the average was nearer to one and a half.

Impression

Thus the overriding impression is that it is not possible to formulate any definitive national/cultural tendencies, and that individual choice, regardless of nationality, is probably a more powerful force.

Any proposal for the formulation of international guidelines for audio description would be supported.

ADLAB

- Audiodescription: lifelong access for the blind
- European Union project
- EACEA - Lifelong Learning
- Erasmus Multilateral Projects – cooperation between HEI and Enterprises
- This project has been funded with support from the European Commision

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