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Language as access: transposition and translation of audiovisual texts as a vehicle of meaning and a gateway to understanding.

The world of audiovisual texts, within the wider field of multimodality in general, is one where the 'crucial relationship between meanings, contexts and realisations' bears very careful examination. First of all the blending of various semiotic modalities (sound, image, music, gesture, etc.) provides a rich array of meaning-making resources to be analysed as an integrated whole in products such as films, television series, advertisements, etc. (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, Baldry & Thibault 2006, Taylor, 2006). The translation of such texts can often reveal further insights into the meaning-making potential therein. Thus the first element of access discussed in this paper is that of providing viewers of foreign language audiovisual products with an accessible version in their own idiom.

However, while this aspect has already received attention in linguistic circles, including SFL, there are two areas which, I believe, are relatively new to our discipline. These are the provision of intralingual (and interlingual) subtitles for the deaf and hard-of-hearing and audiodescription for the blind and sight-impaired. Both these methods provide access to those who for many years were (and in many cases still are) excluded from vital instruments of modern communication. Research in these areas has concentrated on meaning in an entirely new way, and one which can only be realised properly with the full participation of the deaf and blind themselves. As the paper will show, the needs and expectations of these subjects are not always predictable. There is also a net distinction to be made between providing access to the hard-of-hearing and sight-impaired who find themselves in these circumstances through age or illness, and those who are deaf or blind from birth who inhabit an entirely different culture.

Thus the purpose of this kind of subtitling and of audiodescription is to provide receivers with access to those semiotic modalities that are denied them, in an attempt to provide in some way the same blend of resources that are perceived by the normal audience. An audiovisual text is thus transposed for a different set of viewers. Secondly these products can then be translated, and a whole new set of criteria come into play (cf. The Pear Tree Project, designed to explore differences in the perception of visual material in different cultures).

This paper will therefore address these issues by looking at the methodologies involved and assessing what the 'access' situation is in various parts of the world today.