

## INTERVIEW WITH PABLO ROMERO-FRESCO

Lucinéa Marcelino Villela<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho, São José do Rio Preto, São Paulo, Brasil

Pablo Romero-Fresco is one of the most versatile researchers of Audiovisual Translation and Media Accessibility nowadays. He is Ramón y Cajal researcher at Universidade de Vigo (Spain) and Honorary Professor of Translation and Filmmaking at the University of Roehampton (London, UK). He is the author of the books *Subtitling through Speech Recognition: Respeaking* (Routledge), *Accessible Filmmaking* (Routledge, forthcoming) and the editor of *The Reception of Subtitles for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Europe* (Peter Lang).

Pablo is currently working with several governments, universities, companies and user associations around the world to introduce and improve access to live events for people with hearing loss. His *Accessible Filmmaking Guide* is being used by many international public broadcasters, universities and producers to introduce a more inclusive and integrated approach to translation and accessibility in the filmmaking industry. He is the leader of the projects “Media Accessibility Platform” and “ILSA: Interlingual Live Subtitling for Access”, funded by the EU Commission, and of the international research centre GALMA (Galician Observatory for Media Access), for which he’s currently coordinating 9 research projects on live subtitling and accessible filmmaking. His first documentary, *Joining the Dots* (2012), was screened during the 69th Venice Film Festival as well as at other festivals in London, Poland, France, Switzerland and Austria and was used by Netflix as well as schools around Europe to raise awareness about audio description.



In this interview, Pablo explains how he achieved a multidisciplinary formation, advocates that Audiovisual Translation, Accessible Filmmaking and Media Accessibility should be studied together. He also gives example of how accessibility can be seen as a tool for empowerment and presents some details about ILSA project.

*Cadernos de Tradução (CT): What University did you graduate from and why did you choose Translating and Interpreting areas?*

*Pablo Romero-Fresco (PRF):* I graduated from the University of Vigo, in Galicia (Spain), in 2003. I chose the Translation and Interpreting degree because I liked languages in general and English in particular. At the time, I didn't know much about Audiovisual Translation.

*CT: How did you start working in Audiovisual Translation? Which of these areas you first practiced: dubbing, subtitling, voice over or audio description? Do you have a favourite one?*

*PRF:* I've always loved cinema above anything else and when I was doing my Erasmus year in Sunderland (UK), I discovered Audiovisual Translation and I thought it was the perfect fit of my passion for cinema and my interest in languages. I started working on dubbing and then moved to interlingual subtitling and voice over. After my PhD, I started working on media accessibility: mostly pre-recorded and live subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing, but also a bit of audio description. My favourite area is accessible filmmaking.

*CT: After your Undergraduate course why have you decided to do your Master in Filmmaking and after PhD in Audiovisual Translating?*

*PRF:* After I graduated I learn about the possibility of research, doing a PhD in Audiovisual Translation, and I liked the idea of research as a first step for an academic career in the field. I started working on corpus-based translation studies but as I chose an audiovisual corpus for my analysis, I ended up getting into Audiovisual Translation. My thesis dealt with the naturalness of the language used in dubbed sitcoms such as *Friends*.

Once I finished my PhD, I started teaching at Roehampton and realised that I needed more formal (both theoretical and practical) knowledge of cinema if I wanted to promote the idea of accessible filmmaking: the integration of accessibility and translation as part of the filmmaking process, instead of at the end of it, as is currently done. This is why I took a year off to do an MA in Filmmaking.

*CT:* *Currently can you combine academic and professional activities? If so how?*

*PRF:* Yes. I do a bit of (audiovisual) translation, professional training and especially filmmaking. As for the “how”, I guess just trying to make the most of the hours in the day.

*CT:* *You have a long experience in Audiovisual Translation (AVT), Media Accessibility (MA) and also Accessible Filmmaking (AFM). According to you, how is it possible that these three areas work together in order to provide equality not just for people with sensory impairments but also for elderly, people with learning difficulties and foreign viewers (non native speakers)?*

*PRF:* One way of doing this would be to adopt a wider notion of MA that encompasses audiences with and without disabilities (which means that AVT would be included within MA) and to integrate this wider notion of MA as part of the production process.

One of the aims of Accessible Filmmaking is to address the long-standing gap between film (making) and accessibility/translation in terms of research, training and professional practice or the unequal relationship between these areas (AFM and AVT/MA). How is it possible that MA, being as prominent as it is in society is still considered a mere footnote in the film industry?

The traditional distinction between AVT and MA, now challenged in different contexts, may have had a negative impact on their visibility.

We can use the example of the UK, arguably one of the leading countries in the world regarding MA. User associations such as the Royal National Institute for the Blind and Action on Hearing Loss contribute to public debate. After a long and successful campaign launched in 2017, Action on Hearing Loss managed to persuade the Parliament to discuss the need to introduce subtitling for video-on-demand content and to draft legislation that can force broadcasters to provide this service.

MA rides the wave of political correctness and equal rights and is a key issue in society. However, when it comes to cinema, the situation is very different. Accessibility is not visible within the British film industry, where it remains a side issue, tackled at the end of process, outside the control of the filmmaker, in a short period of time and for very little remuneration. As a tentative reason, it may be possible to argue that the same ghetto effect that has helped deaf and blind lobbies achieve progress and improvement within a narrow notion of MA has also singled out these groups as a minority in the eyes of the film industry.

Why not then widen up the notion of MA in order to include AVT and thus have blind and deaf audiences join forces with foreign viewers? After all, even though key conferences on MA do not mention translation, foreign viewers are the main consumers of subtitling for deaf and hard of hearing (SDH), so all groups are in the same boat. This would be a win-win scenario. Foreign viewers can benefit from the legitimacy and impact obtained by MA through legislation and human rights debates, whereas the

traditional groups included within MA (deaf and blind) will finally enlarge its size and get the strength in number they need.

*CT: Audiovisual Translation is not a new area but either professionally or academically there isn't a consensus about its status. In Brazil, for instance, many filmmakers think the best formation of an audio describer is inside broadcasting or artistic areas and on the other hand plenty of Audiovisual Translation scholars think the formation must be done inside Academy. What is your opinion about it?*

*PRF:* I think it should be a combination of both, which would involve collaboration between academia and the professional market, that is, academics and professionals working together, designing a course and delivering it. If the course neglects one of the two areas, it's likely to be less effective than it should.

*CT: Do you think that techniques of audio description, dubbing, voice over, subtitling etc should be taught in other Undergraduate/ Post Graduate courses besides Translation Course?*

*PRF:* Yes, I think that even if those techniques are normally included within Translation & Interpreting degrees, they should also be taught, perhaps in reduced courses, as part of other degrees and in other areas, such as Film and Media studies, journalism and even human rights. This is already happening in many European countries, where as per the initiative of Accessible Filmmaking, film schools include components on translation and accessibility as part of their courses.

*CT: In your practice and research you defend the connection between Audiovisual Translation and Filmmaking but you also*

*declare that “audiovisual translation (AVT) and media accessibility and its main services are still an **afterthought** in the filmmaking process” (Accessible filmmaking: Joining the dots between audiovisual translation, accessibility and filmmaking). So do you still think there is much to do to make filmmakers aware of the importance of media accessibility?*

*PRF:* Yes, awareness is the first step, necessary but not sufficient. Firstly, awareness of the need to consider translation and accessibility as part of the production process, just as they consider other areas of filmmaking. Secondly, knowledge of how translation and accessibility impact on the reception of their films. Thirdly, development of a structure for collaboration between filmmakers and translators. This is already happening in many countries. It’s not going to replace the current industrial mode of subtitling (relegated to the distribution process, with no communication between translators and the creative team, which goes a long way to explain the invisibility of translators, their [normally] low pay, etc.), but it is being helpful for those filmmakers who want something different; for those filmmakers who want to ensure that the vision they have for their films is maintained when the films are received by foreign, deaf and blind audiences.

*CT: What is the main concern(s) of AVT nowadays in Europe and in the world (thinking about continents like Africa, Asia, and South America etc)?*

*PRF:* It’s normally quantity first and then quality. So, first, it is important to ensure that enough content is accessible (and I’m referring to accessibility here as linguistic and sensory accessibility, thus including translation and accessibility). Then, the priority shifts to quality: is this access good enough? Depending on the country, in Europe the focus could be on quantity or on quality. As for Africa and South America, quantity is in many cases still the

main focus, but also in the case of Africa, for example, accessibility can be seen as a tool for empowerment, as was the case of a film I made in the slums of Kibera (Kenya), looking at the use of film and accessibility as a tool to empower secondary school girls.

*CT: One of the main criticism the translators receive in media accessibility context (at least in Brazil) is that we audio describe or subtitle without having any kind of disability or real difficulty in viewing or hearing things. What is your view about this kind of criticism? Do you think we (professionals or researchers) must present every single AD and SDH product to its “real” audience before its release?*

*PRF:* I don't think you need to have a disability in order to work on accessibility, just like oncologists don't need to have cancer to be good at their jobs. What I think is necessary is a good practical and theoretical knowledge of the needs of audiences with visual and hearing loss. It may not be possible to work in collaboration with the real audience regularly, but I do believe translators working on accessibility must make a constant effort to be in touch with blind and deaf audiences, having the opportunity to learn about them first hand, to talk to them and understand their needs, requirements, issues, etc. This must come through theory but also through contact with them, and not just once but as constant as possible. In some of the accessible filmmaking projects we are involved in we are working with sensory-impaired consultants and it is proving to be a very enriching experience.

*CT: Joining the Dots is a very touching short documentary and presents to the audience how Trevor, a visually impaired old person, could restart his life through audio description. How did you find him? Would you briefly explain the whole idea of the documentary?*

*PRF:* I met Trevor at a conference on AD, as he is one of the main advocates in the field. I then had to make a documentary as part of my MA in Filmmaking and learnt that a policeman had committed suicide in the UK two years after losing his sight, due to the difficulty of coping with blindness. This was not an isolated incident, so I thought telling Trevor's story may give some hope to people going through this and may also help to raise awareness about accessibility and its importance in film.

*CT: The EU-funded ILSA project (Interlingual Live Subtitling for Access) has very important objectives including develop, test and validate the first training course in interlingual live subtitling (ILS). Describe more details about the first conception of the project and its scope.*

*PRF:* Accessibility has grown out of the mould in which we have placed it. We have focused on viewers with sensory impairment: blind people, deaf people, people with hearing loss, but we have found out that subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH) are actually being seen by so many more people.

I wonder whether the terms we have been using are able to comprehend the magnitude, the scope of the really wide audience we are referring to.

As I mentioned before, maybe we should rethink that and see Media Accessibility as encompassing as wide as viewership as Audiovisual Translation.

If we have live interlingual subtitles, live respoken subtitles, is this accessibility?

It is no longer just focusing on viewers with hearing loss. If the content is translated live into another language we will have in the same room people with hearing loss, people who don't have hearing loss and foreign speakers.

Internet and audiovisual media are transforming our world, but their



potential will not be realised until they become fully accessible and enable the participation of all citizens in everyday life. Audiovisual translation and media accessibility have become drivers of social inclusion and integration and have lately received recognition in the literature and in EU-funded projects (Adlab, Hbb4all).

In the area of subtitling for the deaf, a key priority for the users is to access live content such as news and public events. Live subtitling through speech recognition, known as respeaking, has consolidated as the preferred method to provide live subtitles around the world over other methods (stenotyping, velotype) that are deemed to be more costly.

Migration streams and the increased multilingual composition of societies have led to a growing demand for access to live content in a foreign language. Live subtitles produced by respeaking are mainly intralingual, which means that there is an urgent need to train professionals who can produce interlingual live subtitles (ILS) with this technique, thus providing access to live content not only for deaf people but also for foreign audiences, including migrants and refugees.

The aim of ILSA is to design, develop, test and recognise the first training course for ILS and to produce a protocol for the implementation of this service in three real-life scenarios: TV, the classroom and the Parliament. The curriculum and training materials will be flexible so that they can be integrated in different learning environments, not only for Higher Education translation students but also for professionals already working in translation and accessibility.

The ILSA consortium includes four Higher Education Institutions (UVigo, UAntwerp, UWarsaw and UVienna) and three non-academic partners (the Galician Parliament, VRT and Dostepni.eu). ILSA is also supported by 25 associated partners from five continents, thus ensuring the involvement of virtually every leading stakeholder in the field and the widest possible reach of the ILSA's impact. The dissemination of the results will also be facilitated by three key actions: the production of a short film illustrating the ILSA

training programme, the collaboration with the accessibility-focused radio station Fred Film Radio (which will reach 6.7 million people a year through 25 European language channels) and the inclusion of ILSA in the EU-funded MAP, the first online platform on media accessibility that will reach the key stakeholders worldwide.

This is a critical moment for media accessibility. Given the growing demand for access to live content in a foreign language, ILS will be produced sooner or later. What is at stake is the quality of the product. Only through a research-informed comprehensive training programme such as the one proposed by ILSA will it be possible to ensure that this new service meets the required standards regarding the product and the working conditions of the professionals involved.

## Referências

Romero-Fresco, Pablo. *Subtitling through speech recognition: Respeaking*. St. Jerome Pub., 2011.

Recebido em: 05/12/2018

Aceito em: 10/04/2019

Publicado em maio de 2019

---

Lucinéa Marcelino Villela. E-mail: [lucinea@rocketmail.com](mailto:lucinea@rocketmail.com). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9145-518X>