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Audio Description: Phenomena of Information Sequencing

Content

1 Introduction

The following article is a revised version of a lecture held at the 2007 Vienna Euroconference on LSP Translation Scenarios on May 1st. It raises the question of whether Audio Description is a form of translation and discusses some of the inherent specifics of that question, which so far has not been systematically researched. Within this general framework it discusses the RASU project (Research on Audio Description at Saarland University) directed by the author at the ATRC of Saarland University on the relationship between Translation and Audio Description. This article will give a short overview of the project and reports on initial differentiations made in the project. It is written to share and discuss the problems raised rather than to provide definite answers.

2 Problem Statement

Audio Description makes theatre, movies and TV programmes accessible to blind and visually impaired people: It provides a narration of what is seen and describes the action, body language, facial expressions, scenery and costumes of the players. The description must fit in between the dialogues and must not interfere with important sound and music effects.

On the one hand, therefore, Audio Description is to provide as much information as possible and on the other hand it needs to be brief and precise when transferring the visual dimension of a film or a play into sound. These are the critical questions: What has to be described? When do you describe? And how do you describe?

They make up the Audio Description dilemma: the trade-off between additional information (transferring 'what' from the visual to the acoustic and 'how') and the time and space limitations within which this can be done in a film or play.

This continuing conflict underlies all Audio Description processes and raises the question as to whether there are any theoretical tools by which translation decisions relating to the 'What' and 'How' under 'adverse circumstances' (Braun 2004) may offer support and provide possible solutions or reasonable strategies. The following article suggests that Audio Description is a kind of translation and as such is accessible to theoretical thought in translation (cf. Benecke forthcoming (1)). Within translation theory, Audio Description is here placed within the scope of information sequencing and to the related question of coherence (Hatim/Mason 1990, Gerzymisch-Arbogast/Mudersbach 1998, Mudersbach 2004).

3   The RASU Audio Description Project

3.1 Background

The project arose form a series of Audio Description seminars held by the author in conjunction with Elmar Dosch (Bavarian Blind Union), Heidrun Gerzymisch-Arbogast and Jan Kunold (ATRC, Saarland University) in the summer semester of 2006 and the winter semesters of 2005/06 and 2006/07. Experience during these seminars showed that many problems in Audio Description were similar to the problems discussed in the translation classes:

- The problem of subjectivity, i.e. different people seem to 'see' different details in the film just as students reported that written texts were understood differently by them. This led to the question of how such different perceptions could be made transparent to other people (intersubjective transparency)
- The problem of choice and decision-making, i.e. as with translation processes where not every detail can be transported from a source text to a target text, it soon became clear that not everything that was 'seen' by a viewer of a play could be transported into the Audio Description – a problem that is much more serious in Audio Description than in translation because of the space and time limitations. This problem led to the necessity of decision-making processes in translation and Audio Description.
- The problem of language choice among several possible variants which again exists in both Translation and Audio Description but is aggravated in Audio Description due to the adverse conditions.

3.2 Data

These impressions led to the idea of

(a)   systematically analyzing an existing Audio Description in terms of the 'what' was actually described, 'when' it was audio described and 'how' it was described
(b)   investigating whether the principles established for the in**tra**lingual Audio Description would also apply to in**ter**lingual translation (in the sense of Jacobsen 1959).

The project was initiated in the winter semester of 2005/06 and continued through to the summer semester of 2006 and the winter semester of 2006/07. It involved 34 students during the three semesters and was financed by Saarland University and Bayerischer Rundfunk in conjunction with the Gerzymisch Foundation. Under analysis was the film 'Sams in Gefahr' (The Slurb in danger) and its authentic Audio Description authorized by Bayerischer Rundfunk who offered to provide the written description. The students formed three groups and analyzed the Audio Description according to a specified roster developed from information sequencing parameters with a focus on 'thematic leaps' (Danes 1970). From the results of these analyses it soon became clear that additional differentiations had to be made and a more specific roster was developed by the author. The considerations lead to a revised roster and the problems surrounding the establishment of the roster categories are described below.

4   A Roster for Audio Description Analysis

As a general framework for the Audio Description analysis, the Theme/Rheme model of Mudersbach (1981) in its application by Gerzymisch-Arbogast (1987, 2003, 2005) was taken as a basis.

From this model the following parameters were used to analyze the first minutes of the "Sams in Gefahr"[1] and its Audio Description (attached) in relation to different communicative partners, scope of attention, theme and rheme:

4.1   Communication Partners

In contrast to 'normal' communication description, the following communication levels were differentiated in the analysis:

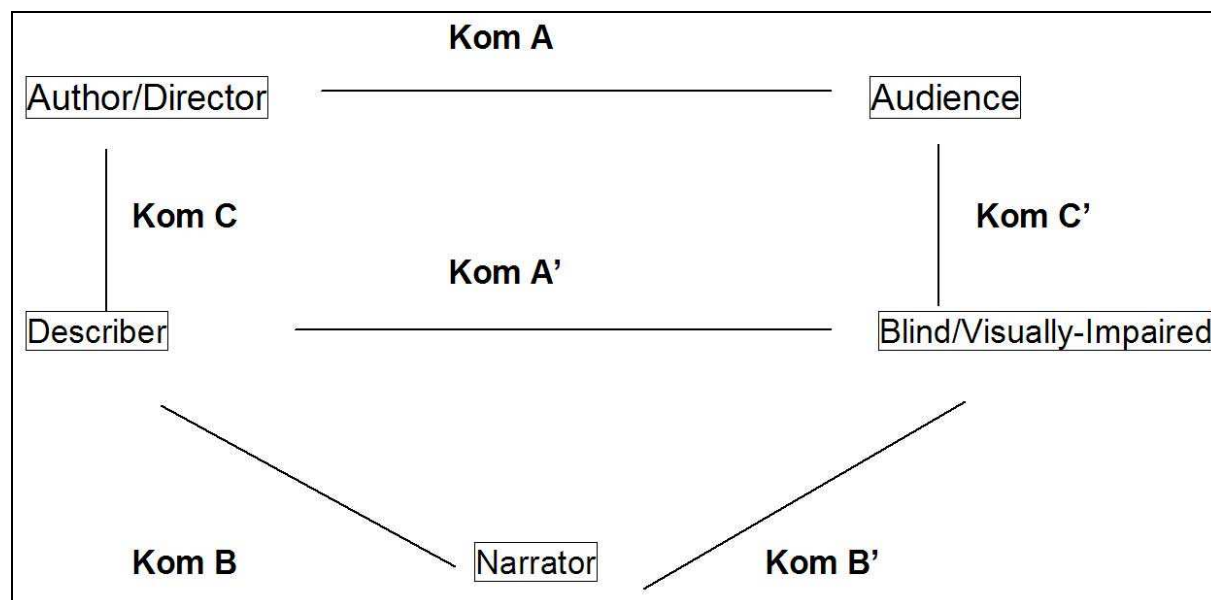*Fig. 1:   Communicative Levels in the Audiodescription of 'Sams'*

In the Audio Description process we find six different levels of communication:

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[1] "Sams in Gefahr", Constantin Film, Collina Film 2003, produced by Ulrich Limmer, directed by Ben Verbong, written by Ulrich Limmer and Paul Maar based on the book by Paul Maar.

4.1.1 Communication level *Kom A*

An Audio Description is based on a film or a play, therefore, the first thing we have to examine is the communication between the author or director of the film/play and the expected or assumed (sighted) audience. This includes conventions of story telling in films known to both sides to assure that there is a high level of basic communication between the author/director and the assumed (sighted) audience that makes the understanding of film or play possible.

4.1.2 Communication level *Kom A'*

Based on the conventions of *Kom A*, the describer will develop the text for the blind and visually- impaired audience. To guarantee that this level of communication works, he has to face the problem that there is a widely heterogeneous audience: There are people that were born blind without any memory of images, and there are people with a relatively intact memory of images – people who turned blind or visually impaired later in life, and there are visually impaired people who still see a little bit. To reach all of these three target groups with their special needs is the basis of a good Audio Description.

4.1.3 Communication level *Kom B*

This is the communication between the describer (in most cases represented by the director in the sound studio) and the narrator. This is a very special form of communication which is controlled by time codes, key words and the description of sound effects. Non-written verbal advice given by the director concerning the way and speed of narrating are also part of
Kom B. Although this information is not directly available to the blind and visually impaired audience, because it is only implied, it is the precise realization of the specific advice given by the director that makes the Audio Description (more) successful.

4.1.4 Communication level *Kom B'*

The realisation of what was communicated on level *Kom B* is represented on level *B'* – the communication between the narrator and the blind and visually impaired audience. Again, this is non-written communication; the audience receives the information by spoken words. Therefore, the way the narrator presents the text, the speed s/he delivers and the sound of his/her voice are important aspects here.

   An Audio Description may not be perfect in its written form; however, it may be significantly improved by a good narrator. On the other hand, a bad narrator may downgrade or even destroy a well written text.

4.1.5 Communication level *Kom C*

This may be the most important level of communication for an Audio Description: the relation between the author/director of a film or play and the describer. If the communication on this level is successful, it certainly upgrades the quality of the description. But in the praxis of day-to-day work this is not always the case. As a matter of fact, this communication level is by far the most neglected one. Normally, the describer will only contact the production team when there is a problem s/he cannot solve alone; e.g. in case of a lack on special knowledge for documentaries or in case of a lack of understanding or possible

misunderstanding of what is happening in the picture[2]. It is a simple truth than only few directors care about the description of their films or even know that there is one.

4.1.6 Communication level *Kom C'*

Kom C' is a phenomenon that is little analysed to date, the communication between the sighted and the blind and visually impaired audience – although this is an ideal of a well-done Audio Description: Where you are sighted or not, there may be a high level of everyday communication between sighted and non-sighted people about a new movie release, the TV movie from last Sunday or the theatre play you just watched.[3]

5 Communicative Levels analyzed in "Sams in Gefahr"[4]

Communication partners in *Kom A* are the makers of the film (writer and director) and the target group, i.e. mainly children. This had to be kept in mind while writing and filming in "children's language" and producing childlike effects.[5]

In *Kom A'* the describer deals with blind and visually-impaired children. This is a very special challenge. These children have normally a smaller memory of images, because they were born blind or they simply had a shorter period in which they could see – compared to grown-ups who sometimes had the whole youth to fill their memory of images. The describer therefore has to be very careful not to rely on too much pre-supposed knowledge and has to describe in more detail – if the gaps between the dialogues allow that.

The Audio Description text starts with *Kom B*, the communication between describer/sound director and narrator: This is opening information in the film about the authors and editors, about the year the description was made and it is at the same time a kind of briefing for the narrator: It advises him/her that "keywords stand in quotation marks", "effects stand in brackets", that "s" means "read fast", double "s" "read very fast" and other information.

The time code refers to the position in the film where the description should start.[6] In brackets follows the information about a sound effect, that can be heard just before the description starts. It is here that *Kom A'*, the communication between the describer and the blind and visually impaired audience, starts with:
The logo of Constantin film, a fast running filmstrip
Obviously, there is no verb in the two elliptic sentences, the theme is not explicit, it seems we have just fragments without the possibility of distinguishing themes and rhemes. The

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[2] Examples are the work on the German mountain climbers documentary „Am Limit" where the describer had direct e-mail contact with the main protagonists or the comedy "Oedipussi" where I myself had a telephone call with famous German director/comedian Loriot.

[3] A German guy born blind describes this effect after seeing the documentary „Am Limit": "I talked to an old couple after the film, the man himself is mountain climber. He was astonished how detailed I could tell him what happened in the film before. That was integration at its best!"

[4] Based on the script of the Audio Description (written by Monika Buhtz, Petra Kirchmann and Sabine Ziehm for Bayerischer Rundfunk in 2003, edited by Bernd Benecke and Elmar Dosch) together with the dialogues and the sound- and music effects of the film.

[5] This film, however, wants to be attractive to grown-ups too. They mostly pay for the cinema visit and are invited to see the film together with their children. Therefore, they are provided with some special grown-up-jokes too.

[6] The time code is a kind of clock, that allows to identify exactly every picture or frame in the film: 01:04:07:22 means that you find the frame One Hour, Four minutes and seven seconds from the beginning, the 22 is the number of the picture within the second. Films on DVD/Video and TV have 25 frames per second (the time code counts from 0 to 24), films in the cinema have 24 frames per second.

description also assumes that both communication partners know about the convention that a film begins with a logo. Otherwise there would be no sense in this, because the info actually implied is:

(On the screen appears) the logo of Constantin Film (and not of another company).

The part in brackets is unnecessary because that is what Audio Descriptions is supposed to do: Describe what is on the screen, this is the basic convention!

The second part of the statement above gives more details, the information implied is:

The logo of Constantin film is a fast running filmstrip.

If it were explicit as this, we could analyze a theme (the logo) and a rheme (the filmstrip). It is interesting to note that the other way round would also make sense:

A fast running filmstrip, it (theme) *is the logo of Constantin film* (rheme).

6   Theme/Rheme characteristics

6.1   Assumed knowledge in the communication with the blind and visually impaired

The following time code 00:02:16 offers an 'easy' theme and rheme assumption: *Constantin film* is considered the theme and the second part of that sentence the rheme. Interesting here is that the describer implies in his communication with the blind and visually impaired audience a very important and common convention: The audience has to know that this is the description of written text on the screen.

For this to be clear to the blind or visually impaired audience, the describer would have had to first state:

Written letters appear…

The problem of dealing with assumed knowledge in Audio Description is handled in a different way at time code 00:02:41- for a good reason: The describer decided to tell the audience about the unconventional way the written text is presented:

In front of a black screen: Red letters come floating and form the word "Slurb".

This way it is communicated to the blind or visually impaired that it is not a "real" scene which is played by actors but that the scene is an animation.

6.2   Time code changes and Theme/Rheme

Looking at theme and rheme, we find a theme ellipsis with *In front of a black screen* and *Red Letters,* then split rhemes *(come floating, form the word "Slurb")* in the first sentence. *Underneath (the letters)* represents a theme in the second sentence, and *the words "in danger"* represent the rheme. *The letters* become thematic after the next time code with *fireworks* functioning as rheme. This rheme then becomes the theme in the following sentence (as *sparks* are related to *fireworks*). The next time code begins with a hypothesis: *The blue globe* was not mentioned before, but this thematic leap can be closed by the hypotheses implied in the isotopic chain: "Stars" mean "space", this includes "Earth", which is synonym to "blue globe".

6.3   Introducing 'intended hyper descriptions'

Time code 00:03:00 introduces a very special Audio Description convention: Not only the names of the director and the actors (as the sighted audience reads them on the screen) are mentioned but also the names of their characters in the film.

I will call this an "intended hyper description": Whereas in the film one just reads "Ulrich Noethen", the Audio Description adds the information "as Bruno Taschenbier". This is more than just describing what is on the screen: an intended hyper description introduces a holistic connection that is at that moment not made explicit in the film itself.

But why can we say 'intended'? What is the intention? The hyper description counterbalances a deficit which blind and visually impaired people have when the actor first appears on the screen and is first called "Bruno Taschenbier". The sighted audience identifies him immediately as the (well known) actor Ulrich Noethen and can imply "Ulrich Noethen plays Bruno Taschenbier". For blind and visually impaired viewers this implication is hard to make (it is possible only when an actor has a very significant voice). Therefore, the audio description intends to make this implication explicit for the blind and visually impaired. The intended hyper information also allows to identify the social relations between the characters more easily which is usually welcomed by the blind and visually impaired audience.

Theme/rheme identification is relatively obvious in statements like *The Slurb* (theme) *is played by Christine Urspruch* (rheme). The names of the characters (which are known from the adapted book or the first film of the Slurb series) are the themes, the names of the actors the rhemes: *Christine Urspruch* (rheme) *as The Slurb* (theme). All the themes in the following sentences are hypotheses relating to the hypertheme 'Cast':

6.4 Changing focus of attention

With time code 00:05:33 the Audio Description changes: For the first time in this film a keyword from the film is given as a starter for the narrator. The introducing words of the Slurb (where it talks about the events of the first film of this series) end with the Phrase *for more than ten years.*

The description that follows opens up with a change in focus of attention – which in the Audio Description normally accompanies a scene change. This happens in two ways:

- First, the physical place of action changes, there is no space with stars any more, now we have a park with a school building. This means the unrealistic animated story with flying letters through space changes to a natural surrounding with a castle, lawn, children, a man and a woman.
- Second, there is a change in the soundtrack: We hear no music anymore, and we get a very realistic sound design with voices of children, singing of birds and others. So even for the Audio Description it is obvious that this is no animation but a real film and the describer decided not to give an extra hint or advice on that.

The result of the theme and rheme analysis shows a theme ellipsis with *a big school building in a park area* und a thematic leap (closed by a hypothesis) with *a woman in fancy clothes*. The missing links in that communication would be: (isotopic chain <u>*underlined in italics*</u>): the *building* will have a *parking lot* with *some cars*, *in one car* sits a woman.

The theme of the next sentence *Herr Taschenbier, the man with glasses* seems to carry two pieces of information. The describer chose again to give an intended hyper description to counterbalance the deficit which blind and visually people have at this point: For the sighted audience it is obvious that the man with glasses is Taschenbier because we see a picture of him when the Slurb said „Papa Taschenbier" in his introducing speech.

This is not possible to transfer in the Audio Description, because at this point in the Slurb's speech there is no gap for a description and the Audio Description talks about the man with glasses before his picture appears. Some blind or visually impaired people might conclude this relation but it is not easy. Therefore the describer decided to introduce the hyper description at that point.

The result of this last point is essential: An analysis of an Audio Description is only useful and possible in combination with the film soundtrack and the film dialogue. We realised that the theme necessary to make a message meaningful is often in the film dialogue before the description.

Our description now shows a change in the focus of attention: the gym of the school. It is interesting to note that the combination of the Audio Description *One kid is bare-footed* and the dialogue *Martin Taschenbier. Come forward* allows the (correct) hypothesis: *Martin is bare-footed* and *Martin is the slender red headed boy*. The Audio Description here does not explicate the possible hyper description saying "Martin, the slender boy" because the hypothesis can be made without it.

6.5 Introducing Character Fixation

With time code 00:07:53 we discover a very typical change in the naming of a person for German Audio Description – which I will introduce here as *character fixation*. This is again the result of the close interaction between the Audio Description and the film dialogue:

The man who appears in the gym is first named *the sports teacher*. The describer did this by summarizing the optical (he is the only grown up with the kids in the gym) and acoustic (he shouts and gives advice) details given in the scene, seen from a local coherence point of view. But the describer knows from his/her global holistic view that this could only be an interim character fixation, the 'sports teacher' is an important character for the film as a whole and needs to be given a proper name. So when Taschenbier calls the sports teacher *Daume*, the Audio Description changes to *Daume, the sports teacher, stops*. Why this redundancy? The intended hyper description is essential, because Taschenbier's not so clearly spoken sentence could be misunderstood: *Leave it to the caretaker, Daume* could mean that the caretaker might be Daume. The Audio Description clarifies this with the double information and then changes the next time the sports teacher appears to simply saying *Daume passes by on roller skates*. The character fixation is completed.[7]

In the film 'Sams' it is difficult for the blind and visually impaired audience to realize (during the whole film) the character fixation of father and son Taschenbier. In the film dialogues both are sometimes called by their first names (Bruno for the father, Martin for the son) and sometimes by their family name only. The describer therefore had to clearly differentiate consistently between Taschenbier (character fixation of the father) and Martin (character fixation of the son) so as to avoid confusion in the blind and visually impaired audience.

Time code 00:08:31 opens up into a new focus of attention – and again in two ways: Physically we move to the living room of the family. And we also move to the next day. But the description t*he next day* is not taken from the image (there is no writing on the screen) – it's a logical coherence-establishing conclusion, a very special form of the intended hyper description: Father Taschenbier invites the school kids to Martin's birthday for *tomorrow afternoon*. Now Martin is sitting in front of his birthday cake, so this is his birthday, so this is tomorrow. Although the logical coherence is quite easy to establish, a *hyper description* has to be introduced because in the previous scene we find Martin *at night at home*. A description just giving the information about the physical change into the living room would leave out the change of time (which, given the different lighting conditions, is obvious for the sighted audience).

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[7] The phenomenon of an interim character fixation (the sports teacher, the man with glasses) und its later adjustment (Daume, Taschenbier) is a speciality of German Audio Description. The main intention is to give the blind and visually impaired audience not more information than the sighted people have (Dosch, Benecke 2004). In other languages persons are named right from their first appearance (Benecke 2007).

7   Summary

The comments on the RASU project analysis of "Sams in Gefahr" presented in this article were intended to give an introduction into the many problems of Audio Description that have a potential translation dimension. This was here portrayed with respect to the descriptive tools of theme and rheme or focus of attention. The exploration of different communication levels is to reveal multiple relations between the communication partners in the Audio Description process.

Within this framework it was noted as fundamental that Audio Description delivers a very special kind of text, which can be investigated only together with the dialogues and the sound- and music effects of a film or play. This idiosyncrasy calls for the creation of new terms, i.e. here the differentiations of *intended hyper description* and *character fixation*. This is, however, just a first step in relating Audio Description with translation, i.e. considering Audio Description as a kind of (intralingual) translation with multiple dimensions. The result could be an added value for both sides: Audio Description could find new ways of structuring and systematising practical work by using translation tools. Translation theory would profit from new problems for reflection by which it could optimize its methods and define new models.

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9   Appendix: Audio Description „Sams in Gefahr" (Minutes 0-7)

Buhtz/Kirchmann/Ziehm	**Red Benecke/Dosch**
Audio-Description	**Sams in Gefahr**
Stand: 4.12.03	

".."   = Stichwort im Film
(..)   = Geräusche, Musikakzente
s   = schnell
ss   = sehr schnell
 #   = über Szenenwechsel

00:02:07
(nach Zischgeräusch)
Das Logo von Constantin Film, ein schnell laufender Filmstreifen.
        The logo of Constantin Film, a fast running filmstrip

00:02:16
**Constantin Film (T) präsentiert eine Ulrich Limmer Produktion der Collina
Filmproduktion und der Constantin Film. (R)**

00:02:27
**Vor schwarzem Hintergrund: Rote Buchstaben schweben ins Bild (R 1') und und bilden
das Wort 'Sams'(R 1''). Darunter (T) in gelb die Worte 'in Gefahr'(R).**
        **In front of a black screen: Red letters come floating and form the
        word "Slurb". Underneath in yellow the words „in danger"**

00:02:41
(Feuerwerksgeräusch)
**Die Buchstaben (T 1) zerplatzen wie beim Feuerwerk (R 1). Funken (R1 = T2) sprühen
und verwandeln sich in glitzernde Sterne (R 2).**
        **The letters burst as in fireworks. Sparks are
        spraying and reshape as shining stars.**

**Die blaue Erdkugel mit dem Mond schiebt sich davor. Buchstaben sausen als Kometen
durchs All und setzen sich nacheinander zu den Namen der Schauspieler zusammen.**
        **The blue globe and the moon move in front of them.
        Letters swish like comets through space und form one after the
        other the names of the actors.**

00:03:00
Ein Film (T) von Ben Verbong (R)
mit
ChrisTine Urspruch (R) als das Sams (T)
Ulrich Noethen als Bruno Taschenbier
Constantin Gastmann als Martin Taschenbier
Ina Weisse als Margarete Taschenbier
Armin Rohde als Anton Mon

Eva Mattes als Annemarie Rotkohl
Dominique Horwitz als Fitzgerald Daume
Jasmin Tabatabai als Frau Müller-Klessheim

00:03:38
Mond und Erde entfernen sich. Andere große, runde Planeten tauchen auf.

00:03:47
Ton: Eckhard Kuchenbecker
Schnitt: Alexander Berner
Musik: Nicola Piovani
Kamera: Jan Fehse
Drehbuch: Paul Maar und Ulrich Limmer frei nach dem gleichnamigen Roman von Paul Maar
Produzent: Ulrich Limmer
Regie: Ben Verbong

00:04:06
Mehrere Fotos (R 1 = R 1' + R 1") kommen nacheinander ins Bild. (T 1 = Es kommen ins Bild) Auf dem ersten (R 1' = T 2') ein Mann mit Brille (R 2'), auf dem zweiten (R 1" = T 2") das Sams (R 2"). Es (= das Sams = R 2" = T 3") ist klein, hat rote Haare, einen dicken Bauch und eine flache Rüsselnase (R 3"). Es (T 3") trägt einen hellblauen Taucheranzug und Flossen an den Füßen (R 4").

00:05:33
„Schon seit zehn Jahren."
(über Kinderstimmen)
Ein langgestrecktes Schulgebäude in einer Parkanlage mit großen Rasenflächen. Kinder in grauen Schuluniformen gehen darauf zu. Eine Frau in Kostüm steigt aus einem blauen Cabrio und eilt zum Eingang. Herr Taschenbier, der Mann mit Brille, schaut zu ihr.

> **A big school building in a park area. Children in school uniforms move towards it. A woman in fancy clothes gets out of a blue cabriolet and runs towards the entrance. Herr Taschenbier, the man with glasses, looks at her.**

00:05:52
„Morgen, Herr Taschenbier."
(über Klappenquietschen)
s Taschenbier steht neben einer Büste, öffnet eine Klappe in ihrem Rücken und legt einen Schalter um. Über dem Eingang geht eine Leuchtschrift an: „Am Anfang war das Wort." # In einer Turnhalle. Schüler stehen aufgereiht vor einem Sportlehrer. Einer ist barfuß.

> **In the gym. The school kids are lined up in front of the sports teacher. One kid is bare-footed.**

00:06:11
„Martin Taschenbier. Vortreten!"
> **Martin Taschenbier. Come forward!**
Ein schmaler Junge mit Brille und roten Haaren tritt vor.
> **A slender red headed boy with glasses steps forward.**

00:06:24
„Exakt!"
Der Sportlehrer hält Martin ein Kletterseil hin, das von der Decke hängt. Martin geht langsam darauf zu. Er stellt sich auf Matten unter dem Seil und blickt nach oben.

00:07:53
„Du hast meine Turnschuhe vergessen."
Sein Vater legt bedauernd den Kopf schief. Der Sportlehrer geht vorbei.
The sports teacher passes by.

00:08:08
„Ich bin hier der technische Leiter."
Sportlehrer Daume bleibt wieder stehen.
Daume, the sports teacher, stops.

00:08:17 (teilweise über Lachen)
Auf einem Tandem fährt Taschenbier eine Straße im Park entlang. Martin sitzt hinten. Daume überholt sie auf Rollschuhen.
Daume passes by on roller skates.

00:08:26
(Lachen von Daume)
Am Abend bei Martin zu hause. Er liegt im Bett und weint.
At night at Martin's home.

00:08:31
(Schniefen)
Am nächsten Tag.
The next day.
Martin sitzt im Wohnzimmer allein vor einem gedeckten Tisch mit einer Geburtstagstorte. Sein Stuhl ist mit Blumen geschmückt. Seine Eltern stehen hinter ihm