Inclusive theatre-making:
Participation, empowerment and well-being

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Abstract & Keywords

English:
The article discusses the natural move away from traditional, barrier-centred notions of accessibility and how events towards more inclusive paradigms and practices with the people, not for the audiences, at their core. After defining the notion of inclusive theatre-making, it introduces the concept of verb in acts in the world as well as the tools and scales that can be used to measure it in relation to participation in inclusive theatrical practices. In order to promote advances in the study of people's reactions to, and appreciation of, inclusive strategies and activities in the field of media accessibility, the notion of well-being is here tested and explained through the results of an experiment carried out in Italy in 2019. The ultimate aim is to stimulate researchers to move beyond the evaluation of immediate, or short-term effects of access and inclusion, towards a comprehension of the long-term effects on their lives.

Keywords: accessibility, audiences, disability, models of disability, well-being, participation, theatre studies.

1. Introduction

In many a discipline, pivotal changes, such as the recognition of new research avenues, have been classified in terms of turns: the cultural turn in translation studies (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990) is, for instance, one outstanding example of a major change that hit the relatively young discipline in the early Nineties and that retained its expansion thereafter. In the field of audiovisual translation (AVT), traditionally seen as a subdiscipline of translation studies but de facto being today largely independent and broad enough to have several sub-avenues itself, a pivotal turn is connected with the appearance, and rapid ascent, of media accessibility studies at the turn of the century. Previously researched within rather distinct disciplines areas such as information technology, engineering, economics and the media, media accessibility became part of the theory and practice of audiovisual translation when two of its main types (subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing, audio description for the blind) started being seen as modalities of translation proper and, crucially, as professional services. In the decade when media accessibility boomed within AVT and expanded rapidly, another turn gradually emerged: the interdisciplinary turn.

The exponential growth of media accessibility within the realm of AVT evidently, along with the centrality of the notions of proliferation and individuals around a move away from barrier-centred approaches to the provision of services. Accessibility started being seen as a broad concept between translation studies and many other disciplines, while a recognition of the underlying complexity was shared by researchers, the fundamental requirement of accessible-turned-inclusive texts, events, performances. And this is precisely where the shift lies: what have traditionally been seen as the primary end-users, now become more and more regularly co-designers and co-producers of services, texts, events and performances. The shift has deep roots, but it is still largely under-researched, especially in domains such as inclusive theatre-making.

Moreover, as media accessibility reaches its own maturity, it also witnesses a paradigmatic change that is already shaping research in tangible ways. More importantly, such a change is a result of the mutual evolution of the research field as well as the practice. In many parts of the world, to a matter of fact, both steps have recently evolved from more traditional barrier-centred approaches (Romero-Fresco 2019), then proceeding more or less in creating access with, from a reactive to a proactive approach (Bogdanska-2020). With this change, that has to date seen many attempts at labelling it — as always happens when new research avenues and new practices take shape — the main tenets are being re-moulded, revised, re-opened, amongst the many attempts at redefinitions, amplifications (Di Giovanni 2018), co-accessibility (Greco and Raya 2020), creative accessibility and inclusive accessibility (Bernard and Racine 2015) and some more, all of them recently pointing to a creation of the interactional complexity increased hegemony and several verbs lies. This is in line with the nowadays regular role of experiments, of services once reluctantly hard-won, and of all those essential inputs that are the circle of experimental research by evaluating whether the direction taken is truly beneficial to end users of different types.

In the following sections, we will explore the shift from accessibility to inclusion, define inclusive theatrical practices (inclusive theatre-making), reflect on the notion of well-being and apply it to the evaluation of an inclusive, multisensory theatrical experience.

2. From accessibility to inclusion: a shift

As we have observed, the study of accessibility within audiovisual translation has seen considerable development over the past years, most notably towards interdisciplinary pathways. We have seen, for instance, how many new and lively directions have been taken thanks to the interaction with psychological (Fryer and Freeman 2012; 2014; Walczak and Fryer 2017), sociological and sociological and philosophical (Neves 2016; Greco 2018), political and institutional (Greco and Matamala 2018) theories.

The term accessibility, today used perhaps too widely across the disciplinary and experiential spectrum, generally implies a movement away from conditions of total or partial privation and disadvantage, towards states of fuller and more positive enjoyment of experiences or contexts. As such, accessibility can be described in terms of movement from a negative to a positive state, where the condition of access is established by means of the removal of barriers, as well as the definition of accessibility proposed by the WHO on their website (which defines accessibility as the removal of barriers that prevent interaction or access, partial or total) is built around a negative-to-positive. If we move to the opposite end of the spectrum, the notion of inclusion presupposes a positive state to begin with: in a nutshell, when we come to diverse needs, in as many contexts and circumstances as possible, thus clearly moving beyond the concept of intended points of entry for all. It is therefore in relation to a series of services that have to be open to all (of the public, the nature, the content, the experiences, the media and the messages) that we can begin to grasp the full meaning and value of inclusion. As opposed to accessibility, inclusion can only aim for a positive, constructive pathway and outcome, although possibly not universal.

All these principles are further discussed by observing, through the lens of an experiment, how shifting from the notion of accessibility to that of inclusion as a point of departure for the designing and developing of theatrical experiences can lead to more positive life conditions, i.e. an increased satisfaction, empowerment and well-being. But before moving to discussing this experiment, and defining its guiding principles, it is worth further inching to delve further into what is inclusive theatre-making.

3. Inclusive theatre: provisions and applications

In 2008, a team of British scholars working on applying the principles of universal design to the study and improvement of the quality of life of the elderly, defined the concept of inclusive design (Waller and Clarkson 2009), although the expression had previously been used, in more general terms, with reference to the planning of spaces and places (Imrie and Hall 2009). As is the case for universal design theory, but with even more emphasis, inclusive design places at its core the people, their different abilities and ages, as well as their rights to participating in events, activities and services. And if universal design is associated with core branding accessibility (Universal Design — inclusive design takes a step further in proposing to dismantle the very principle of the key elements: the concept of 'design for all'. As we read in one of the main texts by Hannah, Imrie and Luck: "The inclusive design process requires a critique of the methods and the bases of knowledge in both theory and practice [...] inclusive design is not focused on enabling disabled and non-disabled people to participate alike, thus redefining participation itself in terms of 'services' and processes, rather than focusing mainly on products or built environment" (Di Giovanni 2011: 4).

Besides the great relevance of inclusive design principles for the building of a framework to define and operationalise inclusive theatre-making and the related activities within the realm of AVT, a reference is due to previous work by Pablo Romero-Fresco, with his definition of accessible filmmaking (2019). With the aim to highlight the importance and the need for accessibility to cinema, and film in general, Romero-Fresco refers to the accessible filmmaking to define a thorough consideration for access to film, from its very early stages and as a post-production concern as often happens still today: "Integrating access services into the creative process of filmmaking yields many benefits. It often reinforces the ability of the filmmaking process to stimulate thought and critical reflection, as well as its enjoyment, by so many individuals as possible including persons with different needs. It is important to highlight that if you are not only apply to the primary notion of a performance, but it is extended to all those members of the creative, technical and artistic team involved in the making of a performance (director, actors, set and costume designers, light and sound technicians, and so forth), as well as to the persons who are to represent the performance into performance (be it the deaf, the blind, the elderly).

In line with the principles of inclusive design, the essence of inclusive theatre-making is precisely that everyone — artists, creators and audiences — participates in as many of the phases involved in the making of a performance as possible. Participation is one of the main keywords: it is participation that leads to inclusion, and inclusion is in turn associated with empowerment, that is a second, major keyword for inclusive theatrical practices as discussed below. In this sense, inclusion moves from a core position towards a plus-value. Although widely shared theatrical modality is in many fields across the disciplinary spectrum. One interesting set of notions and methodologies comes from community development theory, where the centrality of inclusive social and cultural engagement (collaboration at many levels (including the personal and the artistic), as well as empowerment, are explored to promote strong collaborations. A recent study on the theoretical foundations for participatory theatre came in this context, has been conducted by the British theatre scholar Sheila Preston (2016), and focuses on "the concept of theatre for development, on the conception of participation, involvement, inclusion (Prentki and Preston 2009). As underlined by Preston, the use of the word theatre for the development of entire small and large communities, increasing awareness, taking people with different abilities out of their home and into theatres, building new relations and opportunities for many. By way of introduction to the notion of participation and its many nuances, Preston refers to the words of Frank Coppetiere in New Normal theatre: [...] "the essential issue of participation is the degree to which different disciplines feel able, and the degree over the power that the overall space, or even that shared with others, to co-construct the production. Is in this way rather than merely contributing to a vision under someone else's artistic vision, that participants lead to empowerment, via a true inclusion. By the same token, inclusion of differently abled persons in their activities and, most importantly, by implementing strategies for inclusion at the level of planning, fundraising and also recruiting.

Working more specifically within the realm of inclusive studies, inclusion has been a key issue for quite some time and from several studies. In this context, participation has been connected to audience expansion and their integration into the production. One eminent contribution to this approach has been provided by Caroline Heim in her book *Audience as Performer*, which starts with the following premise:

> Audiences are extremely versatile and adaptable performers, and their repertoires of actions are often influenced by the socio-cultural milieu. [...] In the theatre, there are two troupes of performers: actors and audience members. (2016: 4)

In the statement above, Heim underlines the importance of the sociocultural context in which audience's and performer's move, but most of all she places the characters and the audience on the same level in the production of a show: Heim talks about two troupes to direct "which must under the aesthetics and performance mode as a performer, both the troupes as well as the other troupes" (2016: 33). The two troupes also want costumes for their performances, and move from being strangers in getting to know each other. [...] and apply at their entrance [...] at the interval in which they become audience members in the opposite direction, as an engaged performer is at their fullest extent. Considering both the audience and to perform at their co-construction theatre, from any performance change at the audiences and, therefore, therefore comfort with performer in discourse. Is Heim explains, [...] in the case of audiences, shall and some ways, they move from being strangers to getting to know each other in ways similar to the process of actors bonding as a company [...] in a performance of theatre themselves.

In both Heim and Fischer-Lichte highlight, the metaphor of the contagion helps to clarify that "the experience of a performance arises from what happens among the participants" (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 62), i.e. a co-presence that is a unique event and changes for participants. All these notions (co-presence, liveness, feedback loops) come together to shape the concept of inclusive theatre-making, and can usually be extended to the participation in a performance, as both spectators and co-creators, of persons with disabilities. Before moving on to analysing one such experiment and the reactions to the measurement of well-being in relation to it, here is a final quote from Heim about the role of the audience:

> In the event of a performance, they are true co-producers. Participation leads to collaboration and, more often than not, collaborative. Not only does the audience write the play quite as much as the author does, during collaboration the audience writes the play quite as much as the actors. [...] Collaboration can be transformative. (Ibid.: 147-148).

Participation means collaboration which becomes transformative, something that is, by default, almost always positive. Inclusive theatre-making is thus introduced as much the participation of as many individuals as possible in the planning stage, the implementation and the enjoyment of a performance, which gives rise to fruitful and innovative collaborations. Increasing everyone's awareness of the issues at stake on the one hand and of the strengths to build the new opportunities on the other, and empowering people on the different as far as inclusion. It therefore generates empowerment.

In the following section we will concentrate on deaf and hard of hearing people, blind and partially-sighted people, but also people with no sensory disability as well equal together. Considering both of them as performer-spectators, and measuring whether they participate in theatrical activities that increases their sense of well-being.

4. Inclusive theatre and their relation to well-being

As anticipated, one of the main assumptions of this article is that the move from traditional notions of accessibility to that of inclusive brings with itself a shift of perspective: if accessibility normally implies moving from a negative condition towards a neutral/positive state, inclusion should have at its core the notion of enhanced positive states, i.e. states a notably higher quality of life. Such quality of life, in today's parlance, is encapsulated within the much-debated, ample notion of well-being, which is itself subject to many constructive and thorough research.

Amongst the many interdisciplinary pathways established within media accessibility research this past decade, one having as its core psychological concepts and methodologies to measure people's reactions to, and reception of, services and processes, has been particularly fruitful. It was by exploring such concepts, as immersive measures, of affect and enjoyment, for instance, that several scholars were able to bring forward new perspectives, but also quantify and qualify the receptive of accessibility services (Fryer and Freeman 2014; Walczak and Fryer 2017; Ramos 2015; Di Giovanni 2018). As for well-being, this well-established primary move but well-established concept should be at least one step ahead in this line of studies, as we discuss below: hence its relevance within our research.

To date, however, little research has endeavoured to explore the actual short, medium or long-term benefits provided by participation in inclusive practices in the context of media, theatre and live events, at least within the field of AVT. Yet, once the paradigmatic move towards inclusion is acknowledged, once the focus is on people's diverse abilities and their potential as performers, it becomes paramount to move beyond short-, or even the measurement of immediate, short-term reactions to services, towards a comprehension of the effects produced by inclusive in the long term. Whether it is immediate effects (reactions, appreciation) or longer-term (well-being), their measurement must not only be fully reliable, but it also requires a step further into the exploration of a selection of available tools and established scales. As we shall see, measuring well-being has never been an easy endeavour: it is surrounded by many constraints and also some controversy. This experiment provided, in an anticipation of our work in the future, as far as the participation in inclusive, multisensory theatrical activities is concerned. Those principles, however, along with the tools used and the small results obtained, will only be presented after a necessary, albeit brief, overview of the notion of well-being.

Precisely by virtue of being a subjective measure, SWB is associated with the respondents' own evaluation of their experiences. Although personal evaluations can be influenced (as we shall see) by many factors, including cultural background, knowledge and physical condition, international research based on the application of quantitative scales along the SWB continuum, together with questionnaires, has shown that results are generally homogeneous and lead to extremely interesting findings (Diofearu and Bartiopo-Cargh 2020). Although SWB can be further articulated in a number of sub-components and parameters, each of them a potential object of research and study, the subdivision that is most relevant for the purposes of an experiment such as ours, focusing on participation in a theatrical event, is the one which establishes a distinction between positive and negative aspects. In more detail, the two main dimensions along which the distinction was made rely on a polynomial-quasi-constant need over the years and widely applied, with a recent strategy that is the so-called "PANAS Schedule" by researchers by Watson, Clark and Tellegen (1988). Developed in the wake of a prevalence and systematic consideration of experiential variables and the affective modes are provided in this particular, considering the two different dimensions are most clearly identified in the experiments. As we detail below, the second step of this particular experiment (see section 5.2) was structured as an attempt to quantify, through simple and straightforward questions, the degree of well-being experienced by the participants in our theatrical experience, along with their reactions and impressions concerning the event.

5. The well-being questionnaire and its application to inclusive theatrical activities

5.1 When, where, what, with whom

Between 30 July and 12 August, 2019, groups of blind/partially sighted, deaf/hard of hearing as well as sighted and hearing individuals of different ages were involved in the planning, organisation and enjoyment of inclusive operas performances, tactile and sign language tours and, last but not least, multisensory experiences at the Ventimiglia theatre in Macerata. This year-round project, labelled "InclusivOpera" ... , the year-round inclusive operatic-opera project for over a decade (2009-2022) is coordinated by the writer of this article. As is customary for our activities, the opera performances were given to all the people who took part in this initiative, and especially those participants who have been involved in the production of one, as of yet, the planning, organisation and enjoyment were carried out in conjunction with many inclusive, multisensory theatrical activities.

On 30 and 31 July, blind/partially sighted and sighted individuals co-participated and participated in a multisensory experience featuring the following elements: a) a violin, a cello, b) a male singer (baritone), c) a scent of spices and aromas for an olfactory experience connected to Aida, d) six tactile maps reproducing the stage and settings for the production of Aida. Participation in the whole experience was co-participatory and inclusive in the broadest sense: participants were all required to interact with the musicians, singers, technicians, in order to become aware of how the elements (sounds, settings, situations, smells) and all the choices that had been made over time contributed to the making of the opera. On 30 and 31 July, deaf/hard of hearing and hearing individuals participated in sign language tours and live audio descriptions of the stage and settings. With a view to measuring the reactions to, and the impact of, inclusive participation on the well-being of participants, all participants were asked to complete a questionnaire after the experience. A group of 29 people, including blind/partially sighted and sighted, deaf/hard of hearing and hearing individuals, were involved in these different activities and accepted to take part in our well-being survey.

As we can see at first glance, our participants were relatively young and balanced in terms of gender. For the sake of the analysis here reported, we will consider them broken into two groups: persons with disabilities (nine together), here compared to persons with no disabilities (twenty). Although the sample is small, as is often the case in studies within the media accessibility domain, the data collected during our experience enabled us to make some observations and draw some conclusions. Furthermore, results from a group of 9 people with disabilities who participated in the inclusive theatrical activities at the Ventimiglia theatre over more than two years, were collected.

5.2 Results

As anticipated, persons with sensory disabilities were involved in the planning, organisation and implementation of the multisensory experiences that were tested through the general well-being questionnaire. In particular, the two blind and two deaf persons were able to work with musicians, singers and technicians for several hours, well before the performances took place. The same, two blind and two deaf persons also participated in a Macerata in 2017. These measures enabled us to assess the potential benefits of active participation in inclusive activities, and to compare people who had a more or less active role as co-performers. In the questionnaire, which had the general well-being questionnaire at its heart, their support and general satisfaction were also requested, along with their expectations and subsequent appreciation. Again, with a view to comparing the potential (for some) higher effects of participation on well-being, but also in the light of other research pointing to the importance of participation for inclusive theatrical practices, we structured the first set of questions as follows (Fig. 1):

Figure 1. Structure of the general well-being questionnaire

For the sake of our experiment, the questionnaire was limited to a set of the 12 questions above, to which 3 open questions were added. An Italian version of the general well-being questionnaire was used, validated through a short pilot test. The 5 numbered questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 appear both in the first section, on a scale from 1 to 5:

1. Mi sono sentito/a felice
2. Mi sono sentito/a entusiasta/o
3. Mi sono sentito/a a agio
4. Mi sono sentito/a rilassato/a
5. Ho apprezzato la compagnia delle altre persone
6. Ho parlato con le altre persone
7. Mi sono sentito/a coinvolto/a
8. Mi sono sentito/a entusiasta/o di tornare
9. Mi sono sentito/a parte di un insieme
10. Mi sono sentito/a accolto/a
11. Ho riso con le altre persone
12. Mi sono divertito/a

The five scores were translated as 1 (Not [none of the time]), 2 (Rarely [not very often]), 3 (Sometimes), 4 (Often [rather frequently]), 5 (Always [most of the time]). The three added open questions were asked to elicit further information and an attempt was to structure the second part of the questionnaire mostly along the lines of the PANAS Schedule, as well as to relate them more directly to participation and inclusion. To this end, the questions designed to further disclose the feelings towards and perceptions of the experience. The three open questions were:

1. Secondo te cosa ha funzionato?
2. Cosa ti ha lasciato?
3. Cosa potresti funzionare meglio? ...

Participants in the experience described above were asked to fill out the questionnaire in the least that followed them and that preceded the enjoyment of an inclusive, multisensory theatrical performance. The three open questions were described above, however, the questionnaire that preceded this article described below was structured quite differently. Moreover, a result from a group of 9 persons with disabilities who participated in the inclusive theatrical activities over more than one year, were collected.

As we can see at first glance, our participants were relatively young and balanced in terms of gender. For the sake of the analysis here reported, we will consider them broken into two groups: persons with disabilities (nine together), here compared to persons with no disabilities (twenty). Moreover, results from a group of 9 people with disabilities who participated in the inclusive theatrical activities at the Ventimiglia theatre over more than one year, were collected.

5.3 Results

As anticipated, persons with sensory disabilities were involved in the planning, organisation and implementation of the multisensory experiences that were tested through the general well-being questionnaire. Below we show the data collected from our participants. Figure 2 shows the results related to the general well-being of persons with disabilities, for 12 questions:

Figure 2. Overview of the results obtained for each of the nine closed questions

As we can see, virtually all questions scored highly positive, with the only one providing an average value below 4, i.e. "I felt relaxed". On a scale from 1 to 5, most participants felt happy, at ease and involved (questions 4 and 8), felt valued (questions 7 and 9), enjoyed the company of others (questions 2 and 5) and, overall, had fun and enjoyed themselves (question 12). Particularly high values are those related to whether our respondents felt involved in the experience and felt part of a group: this is of course especially significant in relation to our work on participation and inclusion, which leads to empowerment. Below we show the data obtained from the group of nine persons with disabilities who had participated in the experience for 1 year or more:

Figure 3. Results from these 6 participants, who were aged 14 to 81

As we can see, the scores for all questions are in this case higher than those recorded for the group of 9 questions (i.e. talked to the other people during a considerable increase (+1.3%) compared to the result obtained for the first group. Participation in the experience for longer periods of time resulted in a higher degree of well-being: virtually all questions scored over 4.5, with the only exception being question 6 (related to talking to the other people). Again, if we separate the results obtained for persons with disabilities from those obtained for the whole group of participants, including individuals with no disability, we can see that the two are comparable. Below we show the data collected from the 20 individuals with no disability who participated in the experience:

Figure 4. Average scores obtained from the persons without disabilities

On the whole, average scores are very high also for the group of participants with no disabilities, with the only exception being question 6 again (talking to other people). Moreover, as with participation for longer periods of time, persons with no disabilities are comparable to those of participants with no disabilities: these individuals attributed higher scores to their participation in the inclusive, multisensory theatrical activities in which they took part, along with persons with disabilities, than the group of individuals with no disability who had only participated once (not discussed here). As we have just seen, results show that participation in inclusive, multisensory theatrical activities increases the sense of well-being of persons with disabilities, especially if participation is repeated over time and/or if it is more active, i.e. entails participation in the planning and organisation stages of the experience. Whether the increased well-being can be related to the social interaction that such activities offer, or to the sense of achievement deriving from active participation, or to both, is something that future research, with larger samples, could help us further clarify. However, there is no doubt that participation in inclusive theatre-making increases the well-being of all participants, thus empowering them in their own abilities and in their relations with others.

6. Conclusions

As Heim rightly (2016: 4) said, in the words of Frank Coppetiere frequently in relation to theatre: a house is sometimes the theatre itself, the theatre. It is only because of inclusive practices and participation that the co-construction of a show, or of a theatrical experience as a whole, generates positive states that can be enjoyed by all. These are the underpinning principles of inclusive theatre-making, which we have discussed in this article.

As we have seen, psychological approaches to the evaluation of accessibility and inclusion in the realms of media and theatre have been greatly beneficial in opening up new research avenues, both methodologically and theoretically, within audiovisual translation. This is where the notion of well-being, as a core concept of psychology and sociology, fits in: it represents a crucial step in the evolution of this direction, in offering an opportunity to evaluate satisfaction in participation-empowerment and overall life improvement in the long term.

The questionnaire here used to measure the general sense of well-being deriving from the participation in inclusive, multisensory theatrical practices, but also in more traditional inclusive operatic performances, is but a first attempt at exploring the potential for well-being within our inclusive theatre and media activities. As such, it needs further refinement, both in structure and in its application to larger samples, before any solid conclusions can be reached. Nonetheless, the overall results obtained, although based on a small sample, point to the general positive impact of inclusive theatre-making on the well-being of all participants, and especially those with sensory disabilities. More needs to be done in this direction, by offering an opportunity to researchers to move beyond the evaluation of immediate, short-term effects of access and inclusion, and towards a comprehension of the long-term effects on people's lives. Inclusion, participation, empowerment and well-being are all interconnected and, in a certain sense, inextricably linked notions: exploring them together will help us move forward, both in research and in practice, towards a more inclusive world.

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Notes

[1] See https://www.azteclima.org/specials/inclusive-theatre (accessed on April 2022).

[2] See https://www.who.int/health-topics/disability (accessed on April 2022).

[3] See https://www.inclusivopera.org (accessed on April 2022).