Speaking Over the Words: Realizing Text into Audio

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Sound Intentions

Sound is the medium of movement. One can remain on a page or freeze a film, but try to freeze sound, and silence is the result. Sound moves people; it is the human warning system when the body sleeps. Sound is "primal"; it is the basis of our communications and the first available sense of a fetus to the outside world.[i] Attempting to translate or adapt something into sound presents a plethora of concerns and challenges. This article situates this range of audio productions based on written texts, and explores how the process of transformation can be understood as both 'translational' and 'adaptational.' It will put forward a tentative model for understanding the dynamics of transforming a written text into audio form, taking into account what forms of audio production are currently available and how further study can open inroads to exploring audio productions.[ii] However, the model itself has distinct limitations, which will be explored in the second half of the article. The article will conclude by considering where future studies of text to audio production might lead. My main focus of interest centers on audio productions that have been taken from a print-first text, but even that discussion will need to include some exploration of written texts, radio, and even, film. The goal is to look at material intentionally written for the reading audience and consider how such material has been re-presented for a listening audience.[iii] My purpose consists of raising questions concerning the adaptation and translation of text into audio.

Translation vs. Adaptation

While the difference between translation and adaptation is perpetually subject to dispute, I offer a working definition with respect to audiobooks. Translation is concerned with fidelity issues; in other words, reproducing the written text in the audiobook with very few alterations or structural changes. By contrast, adaptation responds to the dynamics of the new form; utilizing the conventions of the medium – in this case the audiobook - to enhance the experience of listening to the story. This distinction is largely based on James M. Welsh's introduction to the 2010 collection *Redefining Adaptation Studies*, which reflects on the relationship between translation and adaptation.

In truth we could bypass any distinction between adaptation and translation by stating that all audio productions are adaptations, in the sense that they omit publishing information, such as the text on the cover and back of the book, the table of contents, page numbering, notations, bibliography, index, maps, and other supplemental material. Though this may be considered to be the paratext of the book, some of it such as footnotes, maps, charts, etc., still hold an important element in the rendering of a text.

However, ruling out the translational aspect on such grounds could prevent us from considering the relationship between audio productions and their written source-texts. There has been considerable dispute about whether the experience of listening to an audiobook constitutes "reading."[iv] The National Endowment for the Arts included audiobooks as "reading" in their *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* in 2004; if this claim is to be accepted, then the book and the audiobook are approached as similar in terms of experiences. A listener, just like the reader, is exposed to the words of the written text and in the case of the unabridged audiobook will be exposed to all the words of the text. In terms of the definition proposed above, this notion speaks to translation issues. However, this is certainly not the case with some audiobooks, which embellish their source-texts with sound effects, music and additional voices. With this in mind, perhaps we should not look for absolute distinctions between translation and adaptation, but rather look at audiobooks in detail and evaluate them according to a sliding scale of translation to adaptation. In this model, a low-dynamic audio production is likely to be more of a translation, while a high-dynamic production adapts the source-text by incorporating multiple elements of sound. In this way, the terms adaptation

and translation depend on the degree of alteration to the source-text; how much of it is actually reproduced in as words in sound (low-dynamic) as opposed to sound effects (high-dynamic).

The following passage from Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* can provide a good example of how this works in practice:

> As soon as Tom was back we cut along the path, around the garden fence, and by and by fetched up on the steep top of the hill the other side of the house. Tom said he slipped Jim's hat off of his head and hung it on a limb right over him, and Jim stirred a little, but he didn't wake. Afterwards Jim said the witches bewitched him and put him in a trance, and rode him all over the State, and then set him under the trees again, and hung his hat on a limb to show who done it. And next time Jim told it he said they rode him down to New Orleans; and, after that, every time he told it he spread it more and more, till by and by he said they rode him all over the world, and tired him most to death, and his back was all over saddle-boils (Twain).

A translated audio production might reproduce the passage word for word read by a single narrator, who makes various thematic points through emphases, pauses, and pace. But even then, we are presented with difficulties: sound is dynamic. A good way to illustrate this is in the line, "I didn't say you stole my money." Depending on where the emphasis is placed in that seven-word sentence, seven different meanings can be rendered. Walter J. Ong pointed out is that sound is the one medium that is defined by movement: "There is no way to stop sound and have sound […] If I stop the movement of sound, I have nothing—only silence, no sound at all" (32). Speed, loudness, accent, tone, among other factors could influence how a person experiences the words. Elke Huwiler exemplifies this point in her article, "Storytelling by sound: a theoretical frame for radio drama analysis." She identifies "[t]he voice as a sign system […], which also includes the idiolect of a character (individual linguistic choices and idiosyncrasies), as well as the way of pronouncing (accents, dialects) and the intonation (the structure of emphasizing words or so-called melodies within the uttered sentences)" (53). The narrator in an audiobook often makes syntagmatic choices for each word (under the guidance of a director). In this context, the narrator must consider the precise delivery of the words (and its implicit meaning generated by the narrator's choice), which is similar to how the translator must select the right particular word, often from a range of potential synonyms.

An adaptational approach maximizes the sonic elements of the text using multiple voices, sound effects, even a musical score.[v] It might look something like this in a version of *Huckleberry Finn*:

> **Narrator** [*in an established "Huck" voice*]: As soon as Tom was back we cut along the path, around the garden fence, and by and by fetched up on the steep top of the hill the other side of the house.
> **Tom** [*Distinguished voice from Huck by the same narrator or a secondary voice*]: I slipped Jim's hat off of his head and hung it on a limb right over him, and Jim stirred a little, but he didn't wake. Afterwards Jim said …
> **Jim** [*Distinguished voice from Huck and Jim by the same narrator or a tertiary voice*]: The witches bewitched me and put me in a trance, and rode me all over the State, and then set me under the trees again, and hung my hat on a limb to show who done it.
> **Tom**: And next time Jim told it he said …
> **Jim:** They rode me down to New Orleans …
> **Tom:** And, after that, every time he told it he spread it more and more, till by and by he said …
> **Jim:** They rode me all over the world, and tired me most to death, and my back was all over saddle-boils.

In this case the presence of distinct voices reduces the necessity for speech-indicators. Other sound-oriented cues could actually be introduced – for example, the sound of Huck and Tom walking, which

might direct the listeners' attention away from individual words within a sentence. A translational approach to audiobook production is restricted to one voice imbued with vocal dynamics that render additional meaning and emphasis. In contrast, the dramatization of a text into audio relies more heavily on multiple inputs of sound beyond the narrator's voice.

Audio-Production Range

In discussing audio productions of written works, there are three main categories: text-to-speech, unabridged narration, and audio dramatization.[vi] All of them employ the kind of strategies outlined above: the translational end of audio production involves a single narrator, while the adaptational form employs different types of sound-effects. Text-To-Speech audio translation has largely emerged due to digital technology: the computer is fed text that it reproduces through its sound card and audio outlet (speaker, headphones, etc). While it can often be considered flat and lacking expression, the computer programmer can choose how to express certain words with more force than others. This technique has been employed by firms such as Amazon with their text-to-speech devices attached to e-readers such as Kindle: some authors felt threatened by this development (believing that it might infringe copyright issues), but in truth it is not as effective as a dramatized reading. This distinction has been pointed out by Neil Gaiman:

> [I]magine a world in which someone sits with a novel on the screen and carefully codes every character and tone of voice, every emotion [....] An audio book, read by someone who's good at it, is an audio book, an experience that's different to, sometimes complementary to, the words on the page. A computer reading to you is a computer reading to you (Gaiman).

A narrator-based translation is one in which a narrator employs different vocal dynamics to provide aural cues to the listener about intent and meaning. Within the audiobook industry, these talented vocal performers are recognized through awards from the Audio Publishers Association (APA) and their "Audie Awards" for some thirty categories. AudioFile Magazine, a magazine about audiobooks, also provides "Earphone Awards" annually for talented narrators. Though narrators have been voicing audiobooks since the 1930s through the good offices of the American Federation for the Blind, they only became visible from the 1980s onwards with the explosion of interest in audiobooks for libraries and consumers and the rise of the cassette. Sometimes they achieve celebrity status: both Stephen Fry and Jim Dale have consolidated their reputations through reading the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling, for Bloomsbury in the United Kingdom, and Random House in the United States.

Multiple narrators may be enlisted to perform a translated text, a technique often done to emphasize different points of view such as in Max Brooks' *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*, or in anthologies. This strategy provides a more complex translation for listeners, as each character shift produces a different narrator and thus a shift in aural direction; this technique moves the text further down the continuum towards an adaptation.

However many are familiar with adaptational audio performances – especially those produced for the radio such as Orson Welles and Mercury Theatre's *War of the Worlds* in 1938, CBS Radio Mystery Theater's productions of *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, or the BBC's radio dramatizations of Douglas Adams' books, *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* and *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*. Such texts rely on a mixture of voice talent (usually more than one, depending on the story), sound effects, and a musical score. One company, Graphic Audio describes this technique aptly through the slogan: "A Movie in Your Mind." The adaptation process reconstructs the narrative in the new medium; and is popularly referred to as an "audio drama," rather than the "audiobook," a term which inclines more towards the translational model. It has to be said that this discussion is a sketchy one: to understand fully the distinction between translations and adaptations, we would have to consider how texts have been transformed. This is a difficult process: no less than twenty published recordings of Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* have been commercially published, while three can be found on Librivox.org. A full analysis would require a

thorough study of each of these works, which is beyond the scope of this article. Rather I have tried to relate discourses of translation and adaptation in relation to major forms of audio production.

Sound Problems

The model offered above has its limitations. For example, how do we approach the various versions of Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*? The first audio version was a 12-episode BBC Radio Drama airing in March 1978. The writer Douglas Adams followed it up with a novel in 1979 and four more sequels. During the early 1990s, Douglas Adams narrated the entire novel series unabridged for Dove Audio.[vii] In 1995, Adams performed at the Almeida Theatre in London, a performance that was recorded and sold as an audio CD, cassette and eventually, a digital audio file. After Adams' death in 2001, Random House Audio (who had the audio copyright) hired Stephen Fry to narrate *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* for release in conjunction with the film in 2005, while issuing the other books in the series with Martin Freeman as the narrator.[viii] Finally, from 2004-2005, the BBC produced *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy: Tertiary, Quandary and Quintessential Phases*, three mini-serial productions of the last three books of the series, with Adams playing a character.[ix] This was done by splicing in his audiobook narration of Agrajag into the BBC production.

In tracing this history, the relationship between translation and adaptation becomes rather complicated: one production feeds into another. The concept starts as a radio show, and then becomes a book, audiobook and a live performance. The books are subsequently transformed into another radio series that includes extracts from the audiobook.[x] While the audiobooks – with Adams, Fry or Freeman as narrators - could be considered translational, what can be made of a radio drama that splices that translation (embodied in Adams' voice) into its structure?

Two productions of Homer's *The Odyssey* also challenge to the working definitions of adaptation and translation. On the one hand, there is the BBC Radio production that was published in 2004 in the United Kingdom and in the United States four years later, incorporating a full cast, sound effects, and a musical score. However, in 1996, Penguin Audiobooks released an unabridged reading of Robert Fagles' translation of *The Odyssey*, narrated by Sir Ian McKellen. This version is distinguished by McKellen's well-polished pronunciation and strong projection. But should McKellen's performance be considered an adaptation, a translation, or something altogether different? *The Odyssey* was originally created within an oral culture: on this view, the McKellen audiobook falls outside the framework, in the sense that it uses the actor's voice to re-create a situation similar to the way in which Homer's audience might have consumed the work.[xi]

The BBC dramatization can be approached as an adaptation, using sound to its maximum power, but in doing so, it may lose some of this connection to its original form. By transitioning it into an audio-drama adaptation, it could be argued that the BBC have ignored the form of the source-text altogether. Given that *The Odyssey* is composed in dactylic hexameter, a purposeful sounding meter for performance, a one-person rendition of the Homeric in this case might prove more dynamic.

The transformation of some texts into audio form offers particular challenges. For instance, how can a purposeful blank page be recreated in sound, as in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Laurence Sterne? Naxos Audiobooks offers one solution by providing this prefatory note for listeners:

> **Please note**: In print, *Tristram Shandy* is filled with visual, typographical, and compositing jokes - pages that are completely blank, pages that are completely black, misplaced chapters or chapters consisting only of their title, squiggly lines to indicate waving a stick, and much more besides. This audiobook tries in a variety of ways to match Sterne's invention with aural equivalents ("Download.")

This raises the question of how translation and adaptation can be used when transforming a written text into an aural format. Victor Pelevin's *The Helmet of Horror* offers another good example: the novel is a retelling of the myth of Theseus and the Labyrinth, but told by people stuck in rooms with

only a discussion board/chat-room to interact with one another.[xii] This means the entire story unfolds in text typed by the characters, using "ALL CAPS" to indicate yelling, and the occasional smiley face emoticon. The audiobook adaptation draws on a full cast of narrators, one for each character within the story. In the book, the character's username is present before each contribution to the conversation; in the audiobook, instead of repeating usernames, the distinct voice attributed to the username speaks. As people enter or exit the conversation, the sounds of a door opening or closing are played, while smiley face emoticons are represented with a ringing sound. In the story, whenever characters share personal information, it is not revealed but communicated by x's ("xxx. I live in xxx and I'm a xxx" (Pelevin 10)). In the adaptation, whenever these x's come up, the narration switches from the character speaking to a deep voice intoning the x's in the corresponding amount. The effect turns this production into something radically different from its source-text.[xiii] A translational approach would have a singular reader narrating the entire performance; however, an authentic adaptational approach would also entail a singular narrator. If the story is taking place within a chat-room, then all voices are the same. The only thing that changes would be the emphasis when all caps are used. That is, to aurally represent the story in an accurate manner it would be required to be toneless and dry, which would simultaneously render it uninteresting to listeners.

The early *Star Wars* abridged audiobooks illustrate two additional problems: the first concerns the issue of abridged (or unabridged) audiobooks that utilize music and sound effects. In the case of *Star Wars* books, several of the early abridged audiobooks included sound effects and a musical score taken directly from the *Star Wars* films. These sounds were sporadically employed, particularly during battle scenes; they certainly elevated the audio experience, but were introduced at the expense of large amounts of the story. The mass market edition of *Star Wars: The Thrawn Trilogy Volume 3: The Last Command* by Timothy Zahn is over 400 pages, whereas the audiobook runs to only three hours. A standard length book of 100,000 words calculates into about 250 pages and falls somewhere within the vicinity of 10-12 hours; so it is evident that the story was significantly stripped of content.

What complicates this further is the second issue; the use of Anthony Daniels as narrator, returning to the *Star Wars* franchise after having played C-3PO in the films; this tactic has been used on numerous occasions and its use is compelling. Random House Audio released Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* in unabridged audio with Jeremy Irons (who was also working on the 1998 film adaptation) as the protagonist, Humbert Humbert. The presence of such voices can create intertextual aural experiences for listeners and thereby shifts the productions further down the scale towards adaptation.

Extra-Textual Concerns

There is also the issue of visually-oriented material such as charts, drawings, footnotes, graphs, indexes, maps, and pictures that do not necessarily have a comparative audio equivalent. Some audio productions bypass this by including the supplementary information on a CD in digital form, or a link to a website. Other audio productions omit them altogether, or find sonic alternatives. In the audio production of *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* by Susanna Clarke, the narrator announces the footnote and its number, reads the footnote, and then adds "end footnote" before returning to the story. In reading, the reader can choose what words, phrases, and sections to focus on; but when time-length replaces space-length objects, that is dynamic replaces static form, sifting through a production is more problematic and less accessible. Leaving footnotes on the last disc or putting them on the website can break up the narrative flow. Providing them in the narrated text makes the task of listening more difficult for listeners. Such technical details may seem incidental to the study of translation and adaptation, yet they are important elements that may ensure a clearer understanding of audiobook's content.

Genre is also something to consider within this discussion. Fiction-based genres seem more suitable for both audiobooks and audio dramas. However, nonfiction genres, such as history, biography, and political writings (at least at this point) do not seem particularly suited as audio dramas.[xiv]

The Future of Audio Production Studies[xv]

The above examples demonstrate some of the complications that might be involved when considering an audio production as either a translation or adaptation. Perhaps they can be addressed if we focus on two distinct issues to do with audiobooks - technological development and narrative influence. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, abridging a text for audio production was the dominant practice for consumer-audio productions. Since the primary means of listening was cassette, and each cassette lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, abridgments were the most cost-effective strategy. Unabridged audiobooks were mostly sold to libraries, while abridged audiobooks could be found at bookstores. As a result producers tended to focus on abridgements – greatly reduced versions of the source-text either read by a narrator or performed by a full cast. This practice still prevailed during the compact disc era. In the early 2000s, the rise of digital audio made unabridged audiobooks extremely accessible, bringing down the costs to compare with physical books. With MP3 CDs that can hold twenty hours of sound or downloadable audio files, the cost of production, storage, and delivery shrank significantly and therefore, the unabridged version became dominant.

The explosion in popularity of audiobooks also redefined the relationship of the source-text's author to the target text. Authors transformed their characters into audiobook narrators, while regularly hand-selecting their narrators for the audiobook versions. Stephen King had this to say about Frank Muller, an award-winning narrator that King often hand-picked:

> In the course of our association, Frank recorded the first four *Dark Tower* books and I listened to them, all sixty or so cassettes while preparing to finish the *Gunslinger* story. Audio is the perfect medium for such exhaustive preparation because audio insists that you absorb everything. Your hurrying eye or occasionally tired mind cannot skip so much as a single word. That was what I wanted, complete immersion in Roland's world and that was what Frank gave me. He gave me something more as well, something wonderful and unexpected. It was a sense of newness and freshness that I had lost somewhere along the way. A sense of Roland and Roland's friends as actual people with their own vital inner lives. When I say that Frank heard the voices in my head, I'm speaking the literal truth as I understand it. And like a rather more benign version of the doorway cave, he brought them fully back to life. The remaining books are finished; this one in final draft, the last two in rough and in large part, I owe that to Frank Muller and his inspired readings (King et al. *Wavedancer*).

With this in mind, King had often insisted on unabridged translations of his books into audio form.[xvi] More importantly, Muller's presence as an award-winning narrator also redefines the source text's author towards the audiobook. John Grisham describes Muller's voice as "my interior voice. His readings are so good his voice becomes mine." (King et al, *Wavedancer*).[xvii] Increasingly authors are selecting or at least having some say in determining the narrators of their books, as well as in selecting how their works will be transformed into aural form. This process determines to a large extent where the finished product will lie on the translation-adaptation scale previously mentioned. Converting a written text to sound is not a simple process; it takes a complex range of decisions and considerations about whether the text is to be translated or adapted, while reflecting on the benefits and drawbacks of each. Even then, a production can blur the lines between these categories. Ultimately, different audio productions serve different purposes.

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[i] Lance Eaton, "Behind the Mike: Barbara Rosenblatt." *Library Journal.com*, 1 May 2010. Web. 1 Jun, 2011.

[ii] The distinction between "radio dramas" and "audio productions" will be elaborated further on.
[iii] A product that is largely re-created for a listening audience from a published written is largely known in the US (and increasingly throughout the world) as an audiobook. The usage of the term as one word (audiobook) or two (audio book) varies, though increasingly has been used as one word.
[iv] Typing in "Is listening the same as reading" (with quotations) into Google provides 74 hits while "Is listening to the book the same as reading" (with quotations) returns 46. This question (and discussion) can be described in numerous other ways to discover further debates abundant on the internet.
[v] Later, the article will discuss that there is a range here; that productions are not so easily placed into these two categories.
[vi] Abridged audiobooks will briefly be discussed at the end.
[vii] Author's performance of their text is not always a guarantee for success as will be discussed later. However, Adams' experience in radio did make him among the exceptions.
[viii] Freeman played the main protagonist, Arthur Dent in the 2005 film.
[ix] The original radio series ended somewhere in the middle of what would be Adams' third book, *Life, the Universe, and Everything*. The new radio series integrated some of that but also focused more on where the books went than the original series.
[x] It's complicated even further since in 2009, Eoin Colfer wrote *And Another Thing…,* an official sequel to Adams' series. The audiobook was read by Simon Jones (one of the original voice actors on the BBC radio series in 1978) and there was a BBC radio production of this as well in 2009.
[xi] As said previously, presence was another part of the story-teller/bard's performance. Physical presence can influence the story, but its absence does not prevent a full experiencing of the narrative.
[xii] At times, the format is not entirely clear. It seems like a chat but also uses hints that it could be a message board. What is clear is that all communication is mediated through the computers.
[xiii] Based upon personal interviews with several narrators and directors, narrators usually read between 9,000-10,000 words per hour.
[xiv] Though some nonfiction material towards children is certainly dramatized and the rise of edutainment in television may very well influence a rise in documentary audio-dramas.
[xv] Parts of this section were adapted from the presentation "Voices in My Head: Stephen King's Dynamic Relationship with Audiobooks," at the 2009 Joint Conference of Popular Culture Association & American Culture Association.
[xvi] In the 1980s and 1990s, King often used Brilliance Audio for publishing his audiobooks. A cassette will have two tracks on each side (4 tracks total). The two tracks are used to create the stereo sound heard in headphones (the tracks have the same sounds on them). Rather than creating stereo sound for their listeners, they used each track to load on more narration and then provided listeners with a small plug for their players to turn into a particular track. This turned cassettes into 4-6 hour, maximizing how much they could cover.
[xvii] King spearheaded the Wavedancer Benefit, a fundraising event held in New York City's Town Hall on Muller's behalf in February 2002. He, along with Pat Conroy, John Grisham, and Peter Straub—all of whom had Muller narrate their books in the past—came together to perform readings and pay tribute to Muller. It was a significant moment in the audio industry to have the "authors" rally to the support of narrator.