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Fan Audiovisual Translation

Luis Pérez-González

Fan audiovisual translation (Dwyer 2018) encompasses three modes of mediation. Romhacking involves accessing a video game's ROM (read-only memory) data to localize its spoken and written language components (Muñoz Sánchez 2009). In some cases, translation hacking may be part of a wider process of modding, whereby fans tamper with the graphics and even the sequencing of game tasks or levels (O'Hagan 2009; O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). Although the contribution of language to the overall semiotic fabric of video games, and by extension the need to produce various language versions of each new release, has grown significantly since the turn of the century (O'Hagan 2018), romhacking remains relatively under-explored in translation studies. Fandubbing and fansubbing, the other two widely recognized modes, were originally conceived to facilitate the translation and non-commercial distribution of Japanese *anime* films and TV series or dramas (Díaz Cintas and Orero 2010; Pérez-González 2006). These modes of fan audiovisual translation, understood as the dubbing and subtitling (or subbing) of audiovisual content by fans for fans, have been adopted to mediate other genres across a wider range of linguacultures. While fandubbing and fansubbing originated at the same time and have capitalized on the affordances of digitization in similar ways, the former has developed on a smaller scale and is widely regarded, together with romhacking, as a minor type of fan audiovisual translation (Dwyer 2018:446).

Historical development

Early fansubbing activity, driven by the global success of Japanese animation films or *anime*, dates back to the early 1980s and has "an extensive prehistory that connects to earlier forms of informal and specialized translation practice such as live interpreting and diverse forms of titling and captioning" (Dwyer 2018:438). American TV networks – the first to import and broadcast *anime* shows in the 1960s – originally opted for dubbing as the most effective tool to "alter the [original] stories and characters to suit the perception of the tastes of American children and their parents", often by Americanizing Japanese names and removing most culture-specific elements (Cubbison 2005:52). Crucially, dubbing also enabled American broadcasters to minimize the disruptive effects of the strategy they chose to broadcast *anime* shows – i.e. producing episodes by cobbling together fragments from unrelated *anime* series, which often required making up dialogue that matched the new narrative or helped to fill long periods of silence in the original productions (Ruh 2010:35). This mediation model, which allowed American viewers to enjoy *anime* shows for over a decade without being aware of their foreign origin (Furniss 1998), was discontinued in the mid-1970s. Just as dubbed *anime* series began to find popularity in major European markets, domestic campaigns against the perceived violence of original Japanese narratives (ibid.) led American

broadcasters to put the dubbing of new series on hold. *Anime* shows became thus confined to less mainstream channels, where they were aired with subtitles (Leonard 2005). Faced with this abrupt termination of dubbed *anime*, fans turned to VHS commercial content brought directly from Japan, “often via US soldiers stationed at military bases or through fellow science-fiction fans and pen pals” (Dwyer 2018:439). Copies of these videotapes were distributed by post to be screened in science fiction conventions all over the USA and in meetings of the growing number of fan clubs that quickly emerged around the country (Patten 2004).

As fan communities became aware of the extent to which *anime* shows had been altered to meet the expectations of American viewers, they opted to produce their own translated versions, rather than continuing to distribute original *anime* material. Their translations aimed to facilitate fellow fans’ access to *anime*’s idiosyncratic imagery, the interpretation of Japanese obscure cultural references, and the appreciation of genre-specific narrative conventions (Cubbison 2005:48) – a development some specialists have described as a form of resistance to Western popular culture (Newitz 1994). As the technology to produce their own subtitles did not become available until the early 1980s, early fan communities resorted to translation methods used during the silent and early sound film eras, including “translation booklets and synopses to accompany *anime* tapes and screenings”, as well as “live, spoken translation” during screenings at fan gatherings (Dwyer 2018:439). 1986 saw the emergence of rudimentary fansubs produced using generator locking technology, but the first widely distributed laserdisc fansubs did not become available until 1989 (Leonard 2004, 2005). It was, however, the growing ubiquity of the Internet during the 1990s that transformed fansubbing into the global phenomenon it is today. Digitization allowed fandom communities to appropriate raw video captures of the content they chose to subtitle, either by ripping original DVDs or simply downloading raw broadcasts shared by fans via peer-to-peer file sharing interfaces, often within hours of *anime* shows being broadcasted on Japanese channels. Apart from providing geographically dispersed communities of fans with the tools and resources to gain continued access to new material, digitization facilitated the distribution of their subtitled versions on a massive scale through new and decentralized, peer-to-peer information protocols such as BitTorrent (Pérez-González 2006).

While early *anime*-centric fansubbing – a phase encompassing the analogical mass-media era and the early stages of the digital culture – sought to resist the deodorizing translation practices imposed by the American media industry and the concealment of Japaneseness that they entailed (Leonard 2005), the emergence of post-*anime* fansubbing during the first decade of this century reflects the unprecedented hybridity of the digital media ecology. In this deterritorialized environment, fansubbing communities have begun to cluster and continue to coalesce around non-Anglophone media genres, ultimately fostering the flow of audiovisual content among languages that hold a peripheral status in the media industry (Hellekson 2012; Hu 2010; Jirattikorn 2008; Tauro 2002). Although these fansub groups are driven by different agendas, a large number have opted to concentrate on bringing “subtitled US television content to fans in the shortest turnaround times possible” (Dwyer 2018:441). Detractors of speed subtitling as a means to garner “sub-cultural brand-like capital” (Denison 2011:456) regard this development as “a shift in the fan culture from responsible to more profligate piracy” (ibid.:460). By contrast, supporters of this new mediation paradigm are attracted to its fan empowering potential, as it effectively enables them to circumvent the

geoblocking and stepped release strategies that the industry has used to maximize the profitability of US dramas across the world.

The same technological developments that steered the transition from *anime*-centric to post-*anime* fansubbing in the mid-noughties, i.e. during the transition from the electronic to the digital culture, also enabled the emergence of fandubbing. Although the feasibility of fandubs had been denied until that point (Kirkpatrick 2003), the production and distribution of fandubs before 2005 are documented, though they were not yet produced “on the same scale as fansubs, and the[ir] quality may not be similar to [that of] commercially-produced dubs” (Hatcher 2005:122). Scholarly accounts of early fandubbing activities associate this translation mode almost exclusively with the revoicing of *anime* (Dwyer 2017), but fandubbing is now used across the world to mediate a wide range of genres and languages (Nord et al. 2015; Wang and Zhang 2016).

Fan audiovisual translation as co-creative labour

Fansubbing and fandubbing projects are typically executed by virtual communities that capitalize on the affordances of networked communication to exploit their members’ skills sets or collective intelligence (Levy 2000). In these participatory sites, linguistic competence, which does not necessarily equate with translation competence, is only one form of expertise mobilized to undertake this form of co-creative labour (Banks and Deuze 2009). The organization and structure of fansubbing groups, for example, is based on a clear distribution of roles, including but not limited to raw provider, translator, timer, typesetter, editor, encoder and distributor (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006; Pérez-González 2006). Similar arrangements are in place in fandubbing groups, which run various types of tests and cyber-auditions to recruit new translation and voice talent on an ongoing basis. The sustainability of fansubbing communities is predicated on the work of recruiters tasked with sourcing and sharing resources to train new members. Videoclips of the group’s next projects are often made available online to prospective applicants, who can use them to “identify the character they feel best suited to dub, and rehearse until they become familiar with the prosodic idiosyncrasies of their *alter ego* on screen” (Pérez-González 2014:232; original emphasis). The assessment of auditions, the casting of voice talent and the management of the voice-recording workflow are other roles held by experienced group members.

As members of these networks, individuals reach beyond their immediate physical environment and join geographically dispersed communities of interest to explore and enhance their affinity with fellow fans. This development is reflected in recent theorizations of fansubbing and fandubbing communities as “deterritorialized social imaginaries that not only transcend national boundaries, but signal the emergence of new discursive spaces of audienceship” (Li 2009:9) built around a shared identity. By providing a platform to negotiate intersubjectivity, communities of fan audiovisual translation have profoundly transformed the logic of the media marketplace, as shown by the surge in numbers of volunteers who have taken on intensive forms of free or immaterial labour like subtitling and dubbing since the 1990s (Pérez-González 2013). The need to forge robust “imagined transnational communities” (Jirattikorn 2008:52) to oppose the industry’s homogenizing translation practices was the key motivation of *anime*-centric fans, who contributed their skills, time and genre expertise (O’Hagan 2008) in an entirely altruistic manner. However, post-*anime* fandom

communities “exist in a liminal state between resistance and complicity” with the industry (Booth 2015), as illustrated by their more ambivalent mediation practices. Indeed, while some of these fansubbing groups are still driven by the need to undermine regional content lockouts and other restrictions on media content, their predominantly playful or mundane agendas are more likely to generate dynamics of competition and commodification, particularly when their expertise is co-opted and monetized by media conglomerates (Denison 2011; Hills 2017; Wu 2017).

Research themes

Research on fan audiovisual translation has concentrated primarily on the interventionist nature of fansubbing and its formal experimentation. The influential distinction Nornes (1999) established between corrupt and abusive subtitling revealed the restraining impact of commercial subtitling techniques such as condensation, omission, domestication and homogenization vis-à-vis the more exuberant strategies favoured by fansubbing groups. Unlike corrupt (professional) subtitlers who adhere uncritically to mainstream subtitling conventions and are complicit in denying viewers the opportunity to experience the Other, their abusive counterparts (fans) “translate from and within the place of the other by an inventive approach to language use and the steady refusal of rules” (ibid.:29).

Hatcher (2005), Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez (2006) and Pérez-González (2006, 2007) have provided comprehensive overviews of how abusive approaches play out in practice. In order to enhance the viewer’s experience of the foreign original, fan subtitles often blend in with the aesthetics of the source text. The field(settings and events), tenor (relationship between diegetic characters) and mode (e.g. prosodic or dialectal features pertaining to speech delivery) of the original also inform the choice of fonts and colours. Ultimately, the visual styling of the subtitles aims to maximize the viewer’s enjoyment of the original material, even when the formal dimension of the subtitles does not allow for a smooth reading experience. Nowhere is this more apparent than in those frames where subtitles are diluted within the pictorial fabric of the audiovisual text (Pérez-González 2007), to the extent that some may even go unnoticed by viewers. By creatively exploiting the materiality of subtitles, fans seek to deliver the sort of immersive spectatorial experience that their audiences expect.

Experiments with various compositional parameters such as number, layout and positioning of subtitles in a film or drama episode are also common in fansubbing. A greater cognitive effort is required from viewers to process the higher number of subtitles they are relentlessly presented with, often outside the default subtitle display area at the bottom of the frame. This is best illustrated by the use of headnotes (Pérez-González 2006, 2007) –snippets of text placed at the top of the frame delivering information that complements the content of traditional subtitles. Whether they are used to clarify the meaning of culture-specific references, assist viewers with the interpretation of ambiguous utterances, or elaborate on various aspects of the context, headnotes represent a major departure from mainstream subtitling conventions (Ortabasi 2007). By incorporating non-diegetic content, headnotes boost the subtitlers’ visibility within the frame. Although some viewers may regard this form of intervention as a contamination of the film or drama they are watching, scholars have hailed its potential to “turn the film into an experience of translation” (Nornes 2007:177). The emerging body of eye-tracking research seeking to gauge how much effort is required to

process abusive subtitles (Caffrey 2009; Orrego-Carmona 2015) should yield a better understanding of the spectatorial experience that fan audiovisual translation delivers.

Inventiveness and boldness are less central to post-*anime* fansubs. As Dwyer (2012:220) notes, the culture of speed subbing would appear to have “traded the experimentation (and attendant regulation) enabled by *niche* anime markets for broad accessibility”. But while this speed-driven development reduces the scope for translator visibility, it opens up new avenues for the negotiation of affinity among viewers. One example is the expansion of Chinese *danmu*, i.e. the dynamic superimposition of viewer’s comments on the film they are watching and discussing, rather than under or next to the film display area (Howard 2012). The direct intervention of viewers in the spectatorial experience of fellow audience members may be perceived as disruptive, but it ultimately serves to open up new sites for the exploration of intersubjectivity, thus broadening the scope and impact of abusive practices.

The communities that coalesce around fan audiovisual translation groups have also become an important research theme. Underpinning the body of scholarship published to date on this issue is the premise that the significance of fansubbing cannot be fully understood simply by scrutinizing subtitles or proposing taxonomies of innovative subtitling strategies. Research goals include gaining a better understanding of the interplay between the entrenched demands of community structures and individual potential for innovation, establishing whether digital technologies facilitate or hinder communication and negotiation processes among community members, and gauging how and whether the interaction between fans and viewers influences collective practices (Li 2015; 2017); these goals are pursued by using netnographic methods (Kozinets 2010). By gaining covert or overt access to their chosen communities, researchers are able to draw on various sources, such as archival data — including community policies, protocols or subtitling stylesheets, but also repositories of electronic communications between groups members that, in some cases, date back to the inception of the community. They are also able to gather elicited data from surveys or interviews with fansubbers and generate other data in the form of fieldnotes or reflective journals. Despite the complex ethical issues raised by studying digital media content, netnography will continue to yield further insights into collective decision-making processes, the collaborative construction of collective identities and the genealogy of new practices in fansubbing groups.

As Dwyer notes, one of the most distinctive traits of fan audiovisual translators has traditionally been their involvement in the “unauthorized and unregulated exploration of new technologies”, which has allowed them to “proactively mine new platforms and protocols in order to unlock emergent, often unforeseen capabilities” (2018:436). Unsurprisingly, the evolving relationship between fansubbing/fandubbing and copyright law has prompted a great deal of navel-gazing introspection among fan audiovisual translators, some of whom have campaigned to be acknowledged and recognized as ratified players by established stakeholders in the media marketplace. Various scholars have chronicled the changing perception of fan activities since the turn of the century (Kirkpatrick 2002; Leonard 2004; Hatcher 2005; Leonard 2005; Lee 2011; He 2017). Early conceptualizations of ‘fannish work’ as piracy have been gradually mollified as a result of various disciplinary developments such as the emergence of fan studies as a domain of scholarly enquiry and of the advocacy from fan organizations to redefine fan activity “as legal and transformative” (Organization for

Transformative Works, n.d.). Although occasional court decisions continue to rule that the translation of audiovisual content without the permission of rights holders amounts to copyright infringement, fansubs and fandubs are now more widely tolerated and, in some cases, actively promoted by distributors and broadcasters; Dwyer (2012, 2017) provides an account of the role played by fansubbing in the global success of the Korean website Viki. Recent calls for “a cooperative approach that encourages copyright owners to exert a degree of control over their fan creators” without preventing them from “unleash[ing] their potential” (He 2017) are clearly consistent with the growing co-optation of fan audiovisual translators by corporate players (Wang and Zhang 2017). Although the relevance of this debate to translation scholarship might not be immediately apparent, future developments will reveal its potential impact more fully. As O’Hagan (2008:179) cautions, translation scholars and professionals “can no longer afford to overlook the fan translation phenomenon” in light of the demonstrated power of fans to redefine professional translation practices and audience expectations.

Future directions

Research on fansubbing and fandubbing shows that non-representational mediation strategies are beginning to supersede the referential approach that has traditionally underpinned professional audiovisual translation (Pérez-González 2012, 2014). Indeed, the centrality of affective play in the fan media landscape has led to the emergence of mutant forms of fan audiovisual translation such as ‘fansubbing’ and ‘fundubbing’ (Chaume 2013; Nord et al. 2015; Wang and Zhang 2016; Zhang 2013), understood as forms of mediation where the original dialogue is replaced with a parodic or humorous target language version. But, as is also the case with other forms of fannish transformative work, interventionist translation modes such as fansubbing and fandubbing often combine mundane sensitivities with the expression of more critical or activist concerns. Scholars working across different geographical and cultural contexts (Izwaini 2014; Khoshsaligheh et al. 2018; Pérez-González 2014; Saadat 2016; Wang and Zhang 2016, 2017) have explored this growing hybridity and documented how fans translate well-known audiovisual works in popular culture to resist political censorship or religious oppression. As fansubbing and fandubbing continue to accommodate shifting participatory practices of resistance and intervention, research on fan audiovisual translation is bound to draw more systematically on the conceptual network and premises that support the study of self-mediation by media sociologists.

Further reading

Dwyer, T. (2012) ‘Fansub Dreaming on Viki: ‘Don’t just watch but help when you are free’, in S. Susam-Saraeva and L. Pérez-González (eds) ‘Non-professional Translation’, special issue of *The Translator* 18 (2): 217-243.

Broadens the scope of research on fansubbing by exploring the geopolitical implications of this phenomenon beyond the domain of anime subculture.

Dwyer, T. (2018) ‘Audiovisual Translation and Fandom’, in L. Pérez-González (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Audiovisual Translation*, London & New York: Routledge, 436-452.

Explores the evolution of fan audiovisual translation, from the origins of fansubbing and fandubbing to the most recent developments.

Pérez-González, L. (2006) 'Fansubbing Anime: Insights into the butterfly effect of globalisation on audiovisual translation', *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 14(4): 260-277. Delivers a comprehensive overview of early fansubbing practices pertaining to the *anime*-centric tradition.

Pérez-González, L. (2014) *Audiovisual Translation: Theories, methods, issues*, London & New York, Routledge.

Explores the relevance of media sociology theory to the study of fansubbing as a form of self-mediation.

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