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AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The Italian Fansubbing
Phenomenon

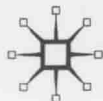
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Audiovisual Translation in the Digital Age: The Italian Fansubbing Phenomenon

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Introduction

Abstract: *A methodological overview of the multi-layered approach employed in the investigation of the theory and practices adopted by the Italian fansubbing communities is provided in this section. Much has been drawn from the systems theories related to translation, in particular from Toury's Descriptive Translation Studies (1995) and Chesterman's subsequent studies regarding norms (1997), with special reference to the notion of "expectancy norms". In addition, the different approaches pertinent to the ideologies under examination within the field of Translation Studies, including the dichotomy between "domestication" and "foreignisation" examined by Schleiermacher (1813), Lewis' "abusive fidelity" (1985), Venuti's concept of the translator's "visibility" (2008) and Nornes's "abusive subtitling" (1999) have all concurred to clarify the orientation adopted by the fansubbing communities for their translations.*

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"An expansion of crowd-sourced translation risks obscuring the essential, but already underappreciated distinction, between subtitling a movie and translating its words."

(Paletta 2012)

The above quotation was chosen as a brief example illustrating the prevailing opinion concerning the fansubbing phenomenon worldwide. Both academics and professionals can be rest assured that we might agree with this statement to some extent. Yet, the purpose of this study is not to demonstrate the superior quality of fansubbing over subtitling, since the aim is to explore the origin and evolution of the amateur translator's practice and beliefs, with particular reference to the impact that this phenomenon has had on audiovisual translation methodologies in Italy.

The inspiration behind this research into amateur translation came long before the PhD career path became a viable option for me. At that time, I was enrolled in the MSc programme in Scientific, Technical and Medical Translation with Translation Technology at Imperial College London (ICL). When the time came to decide on a topic for my final dissertation, I immediately thought of fansubbing as the most attractive option, since it represented a new research field with considerable potential.

The fansubbing project had, in fact, started three years earlier in Italy: I had been following the movements of fansubbers from their inception, so that I was already familiar with their practices and methodologies, and considering my background as a teacher of English and a subtitler, they obviously exerted a strong fascination over me. Unfortunately, I was forced to focus on another topic as far as the master's dissertation was concerned, since I realised that a longer period of investigation was mandatory for a field of audiovisual translation which was largely unresearched till five years ago. In fact, four years ago, when the PhD research project started, the first and foremost difficulty encountered was the absence of a substantial review of literature on the subject matter. I, thus, embarked on a long journey in search of relevant material not only on the same field of study, but also on correlated areas of research that might be of use to the project. It was thus that I came into contact with Media Studies, to find that various academics had studied the phenomenon of fan translation from an angle other than linguistics, namely from the point of view of the fans. The discovery was enlightening since I came to realise that, in order to understand fansubbing

thoroughly, I had to shift my perspective from the point of view of the researcher to the perspective of the fan. This is, then, the story of a PhD candidate who became a fansubber.

Initially, I approached ItaSA by emailing them in order to take the test as a would-be-fansubber. As a result, I was sent a link to a video, a file with time codes and a link to the subtitling software necessary for the process. When it was ready, I submitted my translation and had to wait a week before finding out I was selected by ItaSA as a junior translator. A tutor assisted me during the trial period in which I was to produce a certain number of translations for the community. The worst part at first was the mastering of a variety of subtitling software programs which required long hours of practice, and in that particular phase of my research I could not find enough time to explore these aspects. As a consequence, my contribution to the community lasted only a few months, and I decided to leave it because I was unable to perform as many translations as required from me.

After a year, during a visit to the department of Humanities (Imperial College London), I decided that it was about time to get in contact with the other fansubbing community: Subsfactory. Upon successful completion of the entry test for translators, I became a SIP.¹

A helpful tutor introduced me to the community and a proficient “master syncher” taught me how to cue the subtitles using the customised software. The trial period was hard, as I spent long hours attempting to master the timing process using open source resources, certainly less user-friendly than the professional ones I was already accustomed to. Yet, after a couple of months I became a fully-fledged “master subber”.

The community was pleasantly welcoming and I found myself at ease with them.

Once I was part of the fansubbing machine, I was able to grasp how the organisation operated from the inside, namely the motivation behind their work, their passion as fans, along with their desire to learn English and share the fruit of their work with fellow fans. I also discovered that the fansubbers at Subsfactory took their “job” very seriously, showing a profound respect for the hierarchy (the revisers and administrators of the site) and particularly for the responsibility associated with the fansubbing process. Admittedly, I started to develop a dual personality: the researcher on one hand, and the fansubber on the other. Retrospectively, despite the considerable commitment required, I believe that participating in the community as a full member allowed me not only to collect valuable information about the fansubbers’ workflow and organisation, which would otherwise have

been impossible for me to obtain, but also to develop a wider perspective concerning the phenomenon.

The present research study builds on prior research concerning amateur translation conducted by Bogucki, and found in Díaz-Cintas and Anderman's *Audiovisual Translation: Language Transfer on Screen* (2009). In his paper, *Amateur Subtitling on the Internet*, the author affirms that the rise of crowdsourcing was due to the widespread use of internet technologies, thanks to the advent of Web 2.0, the so-called "web revolution" giving rise to a new audiovisual translation mode, that of amateur subtitling. After a brief overview of the phenomenon, Bogucki made it clear that the problem with fansubbing,

lies not so much in squeezing the gist of what the original characters say into 30 or so characters per line [...]; the problem, it seems, lies mostly in the quality of the source material and the competence and expertise of the translators.

(2009:50)

In the concluding remarks of his paper, the author ultimately deems the work of fansubbers to be unfeasible, since the lack of access to original scripts makes their work highly unpredictable, while their linguistic incompetence severely undermines its credibility. However, he also argues that if amateur subtitling were to reach near-professional standards, the resulting fansubs could be subjected to translation quality assessment and thus contrasted with professional subtitling. Since the quality of Italian fansubbing translations has greatly improved with time, being produced under conditions almost comparable with those found in a professional environment, as well as fulfilling the requirements proposed by Bogucki, continued research into the field was felt to be appropriate.

The phenomenon under analysis, in which emphasis is placed on the amateur translation of American TV series, has mainly emerged as a response to the demands of fans, primarily as a means of avoiding the long waits between seasons due to bureaucratic processes, as well as an alternative to dubbing, which is nowadays perceived as an outmoded, unreliable and ultimately unsuitable mode of audiovisual transfer. The key factor in the phenomenon under analysis is the growth of the Internet, with its almost infinite storage capacity, enabling anyone to watch, download and upload a wide selection of content. This is the reason why, during the past decade, with the widespread use of the Internet, along with the advent of Web 2.0, younger generations of Italians have come into closer contact with American

culture. Being exposed to US TV programmes in their original version on a daily basis, they began to perceive that the Italian dubbed versions, addressed to a stereotyped, homogeneous and monolithic audience, had undergone a process of “nationalisation” (Danan 1999), which was no longer acceptable.

According to Cantor and Cantor (1986), “programmers care primarily that their product appeals to large numbers of viewers [...] and care little about the meanings, significance, or ritual that television fulfils as a cultural product to a core audience of dedicated fans”. Italian fans have, in some way, felt betrayed and grossly underestimated by the policies of these dubbing companies. They have felt compelled to take the lead in the current Internet revolution by gradually developing into organised communities capable of creating their own alternative modes of translation for themselves. Guided by the subculture surrounding fandom, fans have abandoned mainstream broadcasting channels in order to experiment with unconventional pathways built by grassroots networks of fans, the most popular of all being ItaSA (www.italiansub.net), immediately followed by Subsfactory (www.subsfactory.it).

In this book, the phenomenon of Italian fansubbing is examined from its origins until now (see Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6) in order to understand the profound transformations experienced by Italian audiovisual translation to date. The focus of this research project primarily involves the context within which the fansubbing revolution began, followed by a review of the fandom and “co-creational labour” (Banks 2009) seen from the perspective of Media Studies. According to Banks, formerly passive TV consumers have ended up becoming the primary actors in a major revolution, a collective subculture able to resist the hegemony of more powerful institutions (Jenkins 1992).

Having contextualised the phenomenon from the angle of Media Studies, in the third chapter the driving forces at the roots of this practice are examined, namely the creation of the first online communities, their hierarchical structure and the roles adopted by fansubbers along with the protocols and the technicalities employed in order to edit, produce and release the fansubbed versions of the shows. In Chapter 4, the comparisons between subtitling and fansubbing norms are investigated, as well as the ideological aspects of this phenomenon.

In the light of the theories propounded by Lewis (1985), Nornes (1999) and Venuti (2008), relevance is given to the approach employed by fansubbers, an approach which relates to “foreignisation” and “target-orientedness” as opposed to “domestication”, which is the

guiding principle of mainstream subtitling. The last section in the chapter focuses on subtitling based on brand new guidelines deriving from a hybrid approach to both fansubbing and mainstream practices. A “hybrid proposal”, resulting from the merging of both the professional and the fansubbing worlds, should aim to take into account the needs of the viewer, while striking a balance between professional standards and common sense. A set of norms with these features might, indeed, be welcomed by a wider audience of Italian viewers who might choose to opt for subtitling instead of dubbing.

In Chapter 5, a number of case studies have been described in order to examine the main features of amateur subtitling, providing evidence for the evolution of the communities under analysis in terms of quality and workflow organisation. The first case study focuses on *Lost*, a sci-fi TV programme with a complex, nonlinear storyline developed with an extensive use of the “flash-sideways” technique and a multiple narrative perspective device known as “polyphonic narrative” (Cate 2009). The case study in question is a comparative analysis of episode 1 of the second season and episode 1 of the final season of *Lost* aiming to identify the key features of fansubbing and trace the evolution of amateurs’ methodologies over time.

The second case study addresses the topics of censorship and humour, as well as the *défaillances* of both fansubbers and professionals. It is an analysis of the pilot episode of *Californication* (first aired on *Showtime* in 2007), a US TV series treating the life of a novelist *à la* Bukowski dealing with a writer’s block as well as battling with his addictions: sex, drugs and alcohol, a set of hot topics expressed in a rather explicit language. Through a set of examples based on the failings of professional audiovisual translators, there has also been an attempt to emphasise and discuss the reasons for the deepening crisis in the subtitling market, as well as the current transformation in the role of the subtitler. Awkward though the failings of professionals may be, they clearly indicate that the sphere of professional translation is undergoing a critical phase, or as Gee and Hayes put it, “the crisis of the experts” (2011:44). Thus, the conclusions derived from this study transcend a merely qualitative linguistic analysis to encompass a wide range of sociological aspects relating to the status of professional translators and the professional opportunities facing translators in the future.

The book concludes with a consideration of fansubbing and the new avenue of research connected with this study. By way of conclusion, it

is argued that Italian fansubbing has led to a redefinition of subtitling standards by both professionals and academics. Indeed, the reshaping of subtitling norms – a hybridisation of approaches, merging professional and fansubbing conventions – might be advisable and is likely to happen in the future, and it might also represent an interesting trend concerning research into Translation Studies, and Audiovisual Translation Studies in particular, which is likely to be forthcoming in the future.

0.1 Context and methodology

The process of devising a methodological framework for the research is dealt with in the introductory chapter of this book. The multidisciplinary approach adopted here necessitated an investigation of different theoretical and methodological approaches, since the study includes both empirical and speculative components, namely the theoretical investigation concerning norms in mainstream subtitling and fansubbing, and the linguistic observation carried out in the comparative case studies described in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. Therefore, the speculative and practical nature of the project needed to be contextualised and placed within definitive areas of research within Translation Studies as a discipline.

The motivating force behind this research study was if, and to what extent, fansubbing has influenced audiovisual translation practices in Italy. It also includes the dominant inquiry posed in this project, the question which is recurrent in every section of the book, which we have attempted to answer from a cultural, sociological and professional perspective. The first step involved in the process was the selection of the audiovisual material to be investigated, material which included a large archive of fansubs (belonging to ItaSA and Subsfactory), videos and DVDs with multilingual features needing to be scanned in search of salient features peculiar to fansubbing, as well as being useful in order to make parallels with subtitling. Needless to say, the data collection stage proved to be relatively long and laborious, since it involved viewing three versions (ItaSA's, Subsfactory's and DVD version) of the same audiovisual product several times.

In order to exemplify the empirical methodology adopted during this phase, a screenshot has been included, showing the organisation of a number of videos and text files as they appeared on the computer screen