

BOOK REVIEW

THE INFLUENCE OF FANSUBBING ON THE AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION INDUSTRY IN ITALY

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Audiovisual Translation in the Digital Age: The Italian Fansubbing Phenomenon, Serenella Massidda, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 136 pp, €54.99 (hardcover) ISBN: 978-1-137-47036-2, €46.00 (e-book) ISBN: 978-1-137-47037-9

A fascination with fansubbing was the impetus for Serenella Massidda to dip her toes in the world of amateur Italian subtitlers throughout her postgraduate career, “infiltrating” their communities with the objective of understanding their practices, ideologies and structures. *Audiovisual Translation in the Digital Age: The Italian Fansubbing Phenomenon* is the culmination of the insight gleaned through these experiences. Massidda’s stated aim for the volume is to explore the influence of fansubbing on audiovisual translation in Italy, as well as the effect of the norms of fansubbing communities on professional practice, all contextualised within the transformations brought about by the advent of Web 2.0. The democratisation of media access and production, coupled with an unprecedented bidirectionality in feedback between consumers and producers, paved the way for the emergence of fansubbing communities and their growing ability to exert pressure on the media industry. The author finds that this influence has led to transformations in both the prevalence and nature of dubbing in Italy, the speed with which official subtitles are released and the practice norms adopted by professional subtitlers, but it has also been accompanied by falling professional rates and by ethical and legal quandaries. Although these conclusions are soundly argued and substantiated, Massidda frames her study as an attempt to identify general features of fansubbing as well as the evolution of the practice over time. However, it is disputable to what degree her objects of study, namely the Italian fansubbing communities ItaSA and Subsfactory, are representative of the generality of the fansubbing universe.

The book opens with an examination of the concept of Web 2.0 and the concomitant democratisation of media access and production, increasing influence of consumers and fansubbers on multiple aspects of media production, transformation of consumers into producers, and increasing fusion of work and play. In addition, the author discusses the legality of fansubbing in relation to copyright laws, and the difficulty in distinguishing between piracy and the indirect promotion of media products. The author attempts to

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make a conceptual distinction between fansubbing and crowdsourced translations along legal and ethical lines; however, her descriptions fall prey to a lack of accuracy and objectivity. Massidda's characterisation of crowdsourcing as "copyright holders exploit[ing] the digital labour of specialised users to make a profit" (p. 18) is misleading on two counts. First, she ignores the widespread use of crowdsourcing in open-source projects that are free to use, modify and distribute, the most prominent of which are the various distributions of Linux. Second, her lexicon is unnecessarily value-laden: the use of the word "exploit" disregards any potential consent and freedom of voluntary participation on the part of translators. The characterisation of fansubbing as an ethical activity on the basis of its being "an unselfish activity, a form of social disobedience, and a reaction to professional translations that do not meet fans' needs" (pp. 18-19) is also debatable and is certainly not as definitive a matter as is presented.

The subject of the brief second chapter is the controversial choice between subtitling and dubbing, the history of dubbing in Italy and the challenge to the dominance thereof in the Italian market posed by the globalisation of the film industry, as well as the ever-tightening noose around the professional subtitler's neck as a result of the "rise of the amateur" (p. 33), decreasing rates and unreasonable deadlines.

Chapters 3 to 7 constitute a survey of the origin and development of fansubbing in Italy up to the publication of the book.

The first of these chapters analyses the evolution of the "philosophy" of Italian fansubbing communities, whose principal focus has shifted from Japanese anime to American TV programmes, and thereby examines the emergence in Italy of the first such communities as well as their hierarchies, roles and workflow. The author finds that the opposition by fansubbers to the "deculturalisation" inherent in dubbing foreign media replicates Mangiron and O'Hagan's conclusion that "[fan translation] approaches seem to swing between reverence for the source text and the desire to remain faithful to it" (2013, p. 302).

Chapter 4 compares the practice norms of fansubbing communities with those of professional subtitlers. Furthermore, through the lens of the theories of Lewis (1985), Nornes (1999) and Venuti (2008), the author considers the ideological aspects of fansubbing and concludes that fansubbers prioritise "foreignisation" and "target-orientedness" over "domestication", which is the approach generally favoured by professional subtitlers.

A justified concern, given the narrow national focus of the book, is the degree to which the findings therein can be universally applied. However, Massidda's findings do align with those of Mangiron and O'Hagan (2013), as cited above. In addition, in a similar vein as the Italian fansubbers who decry dubbing for its "domestication" for wider appeal, Wang (2017, p. 166) cites Ding (2013) as stating that while official subtitles in China may have universal appeal, they "make one feel like one is chewing wax", particularly because of their sanitisation. Furthermore, government censorship or outright banning is a far more relevant concern in China and, with the ease of access to foreign media via the Web, is a

powerful impetus for fansubbing. It appears evident that socio-political context is a determining factor in the emergence of fansubbing and in the norms adopted by such communities, but loyalty to the source, albeit with varying objectives, seems to hold promise as a universal characteristic.

A hybrid approach based on meeting viewers' expectations, which would bring the two norms closer together and potentially appeal to a wider audience, is also set forth in chapter 4. In light of the partially pedagogical objectives of fansubbing in China (Wang, 2017), an approach that entails tailoring subtitling norms to viewers' expectations offers the necessary flexibility and contextual adaptation.

Chapters 5 and 6 attempt to identify the principal characteristics and track the evolution of the methodologies of fansubbing by performing a comparative analysis of two episodes of *Lost*. The fansubs and corresponding official subtitles are contrasted to gauge their quality, and the merits and drawbacks of the methodologies of both parties are discussed. Massidda also considers the repercussions of fansubbers' aversion to dubbing and professional subtitling and proposes that professional subtitlers may often be guilty of "legal plagiarism", as the influence of fansubs on the final official subtitles is evident.

There are a couple of typographical errata in the official subtitles (pp. 68, 71) presented in chapter 5. It is unclear whether they are attributable to the author or to the original subtitlers. The former is more likely, as other categories of errata in the professional subtitles are discussed at length. Considering that the integrity of the subtitles is paramount to the focus of the study, this sort of carelessness is an unfortunate oversight.

The closing chapter contrasts fansubs and professional subtitles of the American TV programme *Californication* and concludes that professional subtitlers, as opposed to fansubbers, are plagued by an inability, for several reasons, to reproduce the essence of the original dialogue, particularly in reference to foul language and political correctness. The failings of professional subtitling identified in the aforementioned case studies segue into a more sociological analysis of the profession which considers the status of and opportunities for professional translators.

The book reads well, although it occasionally falls victim to an awkwardly structured sentence or incorrect vocabulary, which could have been remedied by a (more) capable editor. Massidda identifies some of the study's limitations and signals various avenues for further research. In consideration of the relatively clearly drawn boundaries of the volume, it would serve any researchers who wished to develop its findings, contrast their own findings transnationally or study the phenomenon of fansubbing in Italy in particular. It is, however, to be kept in mind that the cross-contextual applicability of Massidda's observations remains tenuous and should therefore be approached with the due caution.

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