

English Applied Linguistics PhD Program

Graduate School in Linguistics

University of Szeged

# **Non-Professional Subtitling in Iran: A Study on Quality, Motivation, and Audience Perception**

PhD Dissertation Summary

**Milad Mehdizadkhani**

Supervisor:

**Dr. Erzsébet Barát**

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# 1. Introduction

Dubbing is the practice of replacing the original language of a film or TV show with a different language, and it is a common practice in Iran. Due to Iran's strict censorship regulations, scenes containing political or controversial content may be removed completely or replaced with more appropriate alternative scenes. This type of censorship can be applied more easily through dubbing since the dialogue can be changed without altering the visual content. However, fansubbing, a type of non-professional subtitling, has allowed Iranians to bypass these restrictions and access a wider range of media. Iranian fansubbers typically work on popular TV shows and films from countries such as South Korea, Japan, and the United States. Nevertheless, the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance decided to grant permission to Iranian official and online video-service providers such as Namava and Filmio to subtitle overseas AV products.

As the subtitling industry in Iran continues to grow and evolve, it is interesting to see empirically how the quality of the professional subtitles and fansubs differ. Furthermore, most Iranian studies in the field subtitling have only focused on the linguistic and cultural aspects. However, far too little attention has been paid to the reception of subtitling, particularly fansubbing, in the Iranian context, and it is not apparent empirically why Iranian fansubbers do subtitling and why Iranian audiences watch them. Finally, regarding the statement of the problem, this study investigates the following main problems: (a) there has been no empirical comparison between the quality of Persian professional and fansubs, (b) there has been no academic investigation of the motivations for subtitling among Iranian fansubbers, and (c) there has been no academic investigation of the reception of fansubbed television programs by Iranian audiences.

## 2. Aims and Research Questions

In this project, the following objectives are addressed: (a) to determine the quality of Persian pro- and fansubs, (b) to identify the main categories of motivations and reasons for subtitling among Iranian fansubbers, (c) to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of Iranian fansubbers regarding the quality of professional and fansubs, and (d) to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of Iranian viewers regarding the activity of fansubbing and quality of fansubs. The three research questions are as follows:

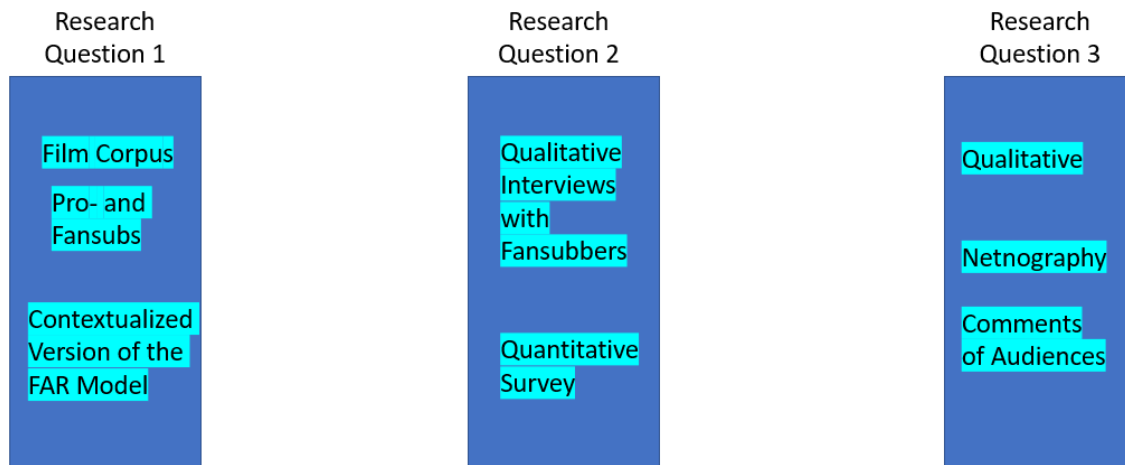
1. How good is the quality of subtitles in my sample produced by the Iranian fansubbers and professional subtitlers using the FAR framework (Pedersen 2017, 2019)?
2. What are the motivations for doing the subtitles of the Iranian fansubbers in my sample?
3. What are the audiences' expectations of and comments on the fansubbers' translations?

### 3. Thesis Outline

This project consists of seven chapters and is organized as follows: The first chapter presents the topic under discussion as well as ethical considerations. In the second chapter, theoretical perspectives on AVT are discussed, ranging from AVT to discussions on fansubbing and reception studies. In the third chapter, the methods and analytical procedures employed in the study are described in detail. Chapter 4 explores the quality of subtitles produced by the Iranian fansubbers and professional subtitlers and discuss the findings with the previous research. Chapter 5 is concerned with the motivations and reasons of the Iranian fansubbers behind doing the subtitles. Additionally, it discusses the results from the interview questions as well as the survey addressing the reception of Iranian fansubbers in the bigger scale. Chapter 6 is concerned with the perceptions of and value judgements of Iranian viewers about fansubbers' translations into Persian. It also discusses the fieldnotes, archival data from the website [film2movie.ws](http://film2movie.ws), and elicited audience's opinion about the subtitles provided by fansubbers. Chapter 7 provides concluding remarks, theoretical and pedagogical implications as well as implications for practice. It also discusses the limitations of the study and provides recommendations for future research.

### 4. Methodology

this project was designed as a mixed-methods and triangulated study in which data was collected and analysed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The research instruments used in this research comprised a combination of building a film corpus, designing questionnaires, making interviews, and an extensive document analysis of viewers' comments (netnography). An overview of the study's design can be seen in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** *The methods used in relation to the three RQs, respectively*

## 5. Findings

Since professional subtitlers often maintain a quality control process to ensure accuracy, consistency, and readability, the quality assessment results showed that professional subtitlers performed better than fansubbers in terms of functional equivalence, acceptability, and readability. The results of the interview and survey revealed that the low quality of the current official subtitling and dubbing in Iran can be attributed to a lack of respect and recognition for subtitlers. Additionally, they felt that the translators selected for the official translations were not solely based on their qualifications. In addition, there was a strong emphasis on providing free fansubs to users, and the reasons for translating for free included religious reasons, good intentions, and charges for official translation services. According to the results, some fansubbers believed that working in a team was beneficial, while others preferred to work alone. It was important for those who preferred to work alone to maintain their independence and freedom when translating. Although most fansubbers feel some connection to the fansubbing community, there is no clear consensus regarding the strength of this connection, or whether they prefer it over other types of communities. The study also revealed that fansubbers gain satisfaction from seeing their work reach a wide audience and being appreciated. Based on the results of the netnography survey, fansubbing was considered an acceptable method of free online content sharing, and Persian viewers appreciated that fansubbers took the time and effort to translate and subtitle the shows they enjoyed. There was

a mixed opinion among viewers regarding the quality and speed of the Iranian fansubs' creation. While some viewers appreciated the high quality of the fansubs and the speed at which they were created, others expected more and compared the Iranian fansubbers to others from other countries. As a result of the study, some audiences expressed their gratitude by naming their favourite fansubbers or groups. In addition, some users believed that the website provided subtitles, when in fact it only uploaded films.

## 6. Conclusion

It is important to note that this study proved that triangulated studies are useful in Translation Studies (TS) as the findings can be cross-validated, laying the foundation for future studies regarding the (non) professional subtitling reception in Iran. It is highly recommended that TS and audiovisual translation (AVT) scholars use netnographic methods in other domains of research, including Interpreting Studies. In addition to the theoretical implications of the thesis that could be useful for the research purposes, the findings also have application implications for film translators, subtitling directors, subtitlers, and other agents involved in the process of subtitling since the thesis extensively discussed the issue of quality, expectations and needs of viewers and fansubbers. Additionally, the first two research questions shed light on the shortage and weakness of official subtitling in Iran. This study did not consider the division among fans, avid viewers, otherwise known as superfans, and daily viewers. Despite the fact that these categories are not mutually exclusive, and that individuals can move between them depending on their level of interest and dedication to a particular series or franchise, further research can be conducted to compare their opinions and comments in terms of fansubbing. Netnography findings may not be generalizable to a broader audience in some cases. Moreover, some online activities or discussions may be restricted, private, or difficult to access, especially in my case, where the website's administrators review the comments in accordance with the website's policy. Among the primary limitations of the present study was that it did not address deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences. In order to better understand the needs and exceptions of this large group of subtitling receivers, new methodologies should be formulated. In order to understand the motivations of fansubbers behind creating the fansubs, the study's survey was subjected to a variety of validations; thus, it may be used for future studies by Iranian and international researchers, provided that cultural consideration is taken into account when the survey is applied in very different contexts. As a result of this

scholarly inquiry into fansubbing and reception, it is hoped that interest will be piqued in the notion of reception, which has been absent from much of the discussion in TS and AVT to date.

## 7. List of Author's Publications

### 7.1 Publications connected to this dissertation

Khoshsaligheh, M., Ameri, S., & Mehdizadkhani, M. (2018). A socio-cultural study of taboo rendition in Persian fansubbing: an issue of resistance. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 18(6), 663-680. doi: 10.1080/14708477.2017.1377211

Khoshsaligheh, M., Ameri, S., Shokoohmand, F., & Mehdizadkhani, M. (2020). Subtitling in the Iranian mediascape: Towards a culture-specific typology. *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language*, 8(2), 55-74.

Mehdizadkhani, M., Nowruzy, A., & Shokoohmand, F. (2019). Dubbing Linguistic Taboos of Pulp Fiction into Persian: A Comparative Study of Translations by Students and Professionals. *Language and Translation Studies (LTS)*, 52(1), 109-128. doi: 10.22067/lts.v52i1.80700

Mehdizadkhani, M., & Khoshsaligheh, M. (2021). Insertion or voice-off in rendition of graphic codes: An experiment in Persian dubbing. *Visual Communication*, 20(1), 81-99. doi: 10.1177/1470357219838599

Mehdizadkhani, M., & Khoshsaligheh, M. (2017). Translation of graphic codes: The case study of two official Persian dubbed versions. *Language and Translation Studies*, 50(3), 49-69.

### 9.2 Other publications

Chen, L., & Mehdizadkhani, M. (2022). Disney's Two Versions of Mulan (1998, 2020) and Twitter: A Reception Study in Terms of (Im) politeness. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 51(6), 595-610.

Ebtehaji, E., Moghadas, M., & Mehdizadkhani, M. (2023). Rendition of Planting and Payoff in Localized Films: A Case Study. *Media and Intercultural Communication: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 1(2), 74-96.

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- Mehdizadkhani, M. (2018). معرفی کنفرانسهای برگزار شده در ترجمه دیداری شنیداری [Introducing AVT conferences]. In Neynava, S.S, & Khoshsaligheh, M. درباره ترجمه دیداری شنیداری [On *Audiovisual Translation*] (pp. 157-168). Rahnamaye Andishmand Press.
- Mehdizadkhani, M., & Chen, L. (2023). Chinese audiovisual translation: Strategies and solutions applied in multilingual films. *FORUM* 21(1,), 96-114.