Non-Professional Subtitling

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Edited by

David Orrego-Carmona and Yvonne Lee

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PREFACE

Non-professional activities have made *translation* a more social and visible activity than ever before. Technology has made it possible for like-minded people to work together towards a variety of common goals, ranging from pure entertainment to social activism. These collaborative activities have changed not only these people's lives but also the way in which we see and conceive of *translation* in general.

The perspectives in this volume explore the role played by the agents involved in the global emerging networks and their impact on their communities, as well as the opportunities their actions have generated.

This volume depicts a view of the non-professional subtitling scene from far and wide, touching upon connections between Japan and Canada, Korea and Turkey, the US and Italy, the US and China. The contributions cover a wide range of activities and operations within each non-professional subtitling community. In so doing, this volume sheds light on the complexity and variety of this burgeoning user-generated movement.

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CHAPTER ONE

NON-PROFESSIONAL SUBTITLING

DAVID ORREGO-CARMONA AND YVONNE LEE

Non-professional subtitling has come a long way since its early days. This collaborative translation practice has evolved from what was known as fansubbing in the 1980s, when fans of Japanese anime in the US engaged directly with the content by translating and sharing the animation. The advent of Web 2.0 technology saw this translation activity expand into various types of audiovisual content and genres. Subtitles produced and shared by fans are found in a myriad of formats, such as films, TV series, features and interviews. From the early 2000s, a global audience craving English content (predominantly that produced in the US) mobilised among themselves to form organised fansubbing groups. As they realised the potential of subtitling tools and the ease of communication over the Internet, the viewers took control over the content and produced subtitles shortly after the sought-after content had become available online. Soon various fansubbing communities started mushrooming across the globe, involving various regions and languages. Fansubbing communities are varied and can evolve into organised structures with well-defined workflows that ensure production quality and efficiency. The effort observed in these self-organised collective translation activities echoes what Jenkins et al. termed "meaningful participation" (2013). To this day the fansubbing communities are no longer amorphous entities looming in the shadow. As chapters in this volume show, high-profile fansubbing groups garner public attention and media publicity. Whether positive or negative, the press exposure has certainly brought non-professional subtitling out into the open.

Despite growing awareness and interest, the study of non-professional subtitling did not always sit well within Translation Studies. The first scholarly interest emerged from media studies, where fansubbing was seen as one of the manifestations of fandom (Napier 2001, Nornes 1999). When the first studies of non-professional subtitling emerged in Translation

Studies in the early 2000s, most case studies aimed at describing the seemingly nebulous translation product, all too often nit-picking the norm-defying subtitles or, in some cases, reducing it to poor-quality output and a sign of the fansubbers' lack of professional training. This rather narrow view of fansubbing assesses the subtitles exclusively by professional standards and thus fails to consider various conditions unique to non-professional subtitling. This perspective is dispersed when the production process and context are scrutinised. Web 2.0 technologies, combined with a dynamic participatory culture and the need to share and distribute the audiovisual content of interest, propel non-professional subtitling into the robust and ever-changing organic state in its current form. In their seminal paper on fansubbing, Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez (2006) explore in detail the organisation required to produce fansubs. The division of labour, gatekeeping and quality control, as well as reward by merit instead of monetary remuneration, altogether typify the *produsage* process termed by Axel Bruns (2006). The prosumer linkage is furthered by Pérez-González, where it has been claimed that fansubbing practices challenge and modify existing subtitling norms (2006, 2007). At the same time, linguistic, social and legal conditions act as fodder to individual fansubbing communities as they continue to grow and evolve. Empirical studies of non-professional subtitling offer a plethora of case studies in various languages (Bogucki 2009, Barra 2009, Massidda 2012, Wilcock 2013, Chen and Liu 2006). The external conditions mentioned above are not to be considered constraints or limitations. The creativity and flexibility envisaged in the case studies in this volume demonstrate various ways in which fansubbing communities cope with external conditions, from improving operational efficiency to the very core of survival.

What's in a name?

Non-professional subtitling encompasses a wide range of heterogeneous activities that respond to a series of cultural, social, political or linguistic needs. Some shared characteristics are considered essential in non-professional subtitling: communities of volunteers that produce non-professional subtitles come together online and use the technological resources at their disposal to create subtitles and distribute them over the Internet. Although the different approaches adopted by researchers and the varieties of case studies have helped in the consolidation of research into non-professional subtitling, they have also created a myriad of terms to refer to the phenomenon. The denomination of the phenomenon is controversial given that several umbrella terms have been proposed to label non-professional subtitling. Each one of these terms has a nuanced indication of the researchers' emphasis on the discussion and most of them overlap. *Fansubbing*, which is the first term used to refer to a non-professional subtitling, makes a reference to the subtitles created voluntarily by fans for fans (Nornes 1999, Leonard 2005, Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006) and is intrinsically related to anime and *abusive subtitling* (Nornes 1999). Given its origin in anime fandom communities, Dwyer argues that the conceptualisation and understanding of the phenomenon have suffered from an over-emphasis on anime and have produced a "somewhat lopsided view of the fansubbing landscape" (2012:219). Apart from being closely attached to anime, fansubbing is also generally considered to be "foreignising", opposing mainstream subtitling in formal aspects, and disruptive of professional practices. People thus establish a natural connection between fansubbing and anime. However, the term is also used to refer to "groups of people who translate foreign TV series that have yet to be broadcast domestically, prepare the national subtitles for each episode and spread this translation through the web" (Barra 2009:516–517). The fact that *fansubbing* has been widely used to label all non-professional practices has the potential to create confusion. These two terms are not mutually inclusive. Not all non-professional subtitling initiatives are source oriented, nor eager to experiment with abusive subtitling practices. Relying on the term *fansubbing* and what it entails obviates the variety found in non-professional subtitles and communities.

O'Hagan (2009) talks about *user-generated translation* as a hypernym that includes fan-based translations and fan subtitles. O'Hagan relies on the user-turned-translator connection with the content to define the activities. User-generated translations are the products of fan culture and constitute a part of the interactions between fans of media content. O'Hagan herself recognises the complications of settling on an umbrella term and later uses *community translation* (2012) to refer to the set of practices that are tied to online communities within the Web 2.0 context. She argues that the term nevertheless requires clarification, since it can be confusing due to its multiplicity of meanings, such as the natural link to *community interpreting*. In her view, the medium and the structure of the groups producing the subtitles determine the label. Pym (2011) revises the terms that have been proposed to name the activities of non-professional translators (*unprofessional* translation, *paraprofessional* translation, *collaborative* translation, *community* translation) and suggests using *volunteer translation* as the preferred umbrella term, which would become, by extension, *volunteer subtitling*. Pym indicates that the proposed alternatives "seem shot through with activist ideologies", while *volunteer translation* "assumes that the fundamental difference at stake is the monetary payment received (or not received) by the translator" (2011:97). Olohan also opts for the term volunteer translation, which she defines as "translation conducted by people exercising their free will to perform translation work which is not remunerated, which is formally organised and for the benefit of others" (2014:19). Fernández Costales (2012, 2013) uses both *collaborative translation* and *community translation* as umbrella terms to refer to cases in which translation is done by unpaid groups of people motivated to work together towards a common aim and whose operations are mediated by technology. Jimenez Crespo (2016) offers yet another categorisation for the phenomenon. He places *social translation* as a "top-level concept as it encompasses volunteer, collaborative, and community translations, and all of the latter are instances of the former" (2016:62). Clearly, using *non-professional subtitling* as the broader category does not fully solve the issue. Defining non-professionalism is problematic in itself due to the understanding and profiles of what a professional translator could be. In general, non-professional translation (and subtitling) is defined on a monetary basis: non-professionals do not receive and do not require monetary remuneration for the activities they perform and the translations they provide (Orrego-Carmona 2015).

The fluidity and heterogeneity of the different non-professional translation practices and the profiles of the people involved pose a significant challenge for proposing an exclusive and clear typology that applies to all instances of non-professional translation. Some flexibility is required regarding the definition of categories, given the problematic nature of creating a rigorous typology. We decided to entitle this volume *Non-Professional Subtitling* in an attempt to shed some light on the fuzziness and organic nature in the field. As can be seen in the chapters, the contributors have mostly adhered to the term *fansubbing*; however, amateur subtitling, collaborative subtitling and even social subtitling are also used to describe the practice in different settings. We posit non-professional subtitling to be used as a hypernym, without philanthropic, technological, organisational or legal aspects. These additional features, which are essential but varied and broad in the field, can be analysed in more detail at a level which offers a more granular classification of the practices. We consider that, from a professional perspective, Translation Studies could benefit from classifying non-professional translation practices as such, based on the monetary reward received by translators or the lack of. In the field of translation and interpreting, any other form of classification to distinguish between professionals and non-professionals triggers heated discussion, since any classifying feature involving academic preparation, association or prestige is also fluid and even harder to follow at a global level.

The disruptive force of non-professional subtitling

Non-professional subtitling is, by definition, a disruptive practice. First and foremost, it was born as a strategy to circulate copyrighted content within an alternative (not completely legal) framework and, as pointed out by the early studies on fansubbing, people creating subtitles for the shows did not take into account the professional standards widely accepted in professional subtitling. For them, subtitles worked in a different and expressive way enabling them to explore all these new possibilities. It is precisely this disruption of previously defined mechanisms and concepts that would enable Translation Studies to benefit greatly from studies into non-professional subtitling. As pointed out by Cronin (2012), the fact that users of translation have turned themselves into translators challenges one of the basic assumptions in our models of understanding translation: “the notion of an agent who produces a translation for consumption by an audience” (2012:100). Under these circumstances, we can no longer picture translation as an activity in which a translator should conceptualise an ideal viewer/reader in order to produce the text. On the contrary, we are facing a situation in which a self-selected group of translators produces a series of translations to be consumed by people just like them. Through their work, they produce a self-representation of themselves as a part of a target audience (Cronin 2012) to which they belong and with which they share interests, characteristics and experiences.

Exploring non-professional subtitling could help Translation Studies understand the ways in which these users of translations see and define translation. Although non-professional subtitling has been understood as non-adherent to professional standards, even consciously opposing them, new research has indicated that this is not necessarily true. Many studies draw on the fact that non-professionals tend to be extremely source-oriented and understand translation only as a linguistic exchange from the source language to the target language. These studies tend to highlight the fact that users of non-professional subtitlers are interested in the source culture and wish to engage with audiovisual products in circumstances which are similar to those of the original intended audience. While there is no doubt that such cases are common and characteristic of the phenomenon, the flexibility and fluidity of non-professional subtitling have shown that there is room for different possibilities, as some of the chapters in this volume will show. There are groups which try to replicate what they see in professional subtitling and have defined their internal guidelines taking into account professional standards of subtitling. These Pro-Am (professional-amateur) groups work under professional expectations and adapt their internal mechanisms to meet their self-defined requirements (Orrego-Carmona 2015). Their goal is to produce subtitles that are comparable to professional subtitles. However, at the same time, there are other groups which, while trying to adapt to professional standards and analysing what audiences are used to, have opted for more target-oriented approaches to subtitling. As seen in some of the contributions in this volume, certain non-professional subtitling groups abide more closely to professional standards than professional subtitlers.

Another aspect that reveals the importance of non-professional subtitling activities is the alternative distribution network their activities create. By providing translations for a given type of product, regardless of the motivations behind the translation as such, non-professional subtitling communities have become agents in the dissemination of content and have created or strengthened the links between different countries, cultures or languages. Without realising it, non-professional subtitlers have generated a significant impact by connecting the world, altering the traditionally established distribution channels and, in the case of translation, making the wider audience more conscious that translation is not a given, and it is indeed an essential part of media consumption.

Structure of the volume

This volume intends to present different lines of enquiry into non-professional subtitling. The eleven contributions offer a snapshot of the landscape as we head towards the third decade of the new millennium. While the chapters demonstrate a developmental pattern in which fansubbing communities evolve, we recognise that the non-professional subtitling phenomenon remains highly versatile and organic, subject to individual social, linguistic and cultural conventions. The chapters in this volume aim to delineate this emerging practice in Translation Studies by considering some of the key aspects, including its scope and implications. The chapters included in this volume use different methodological approaches and offer various perspectives at work in non-professional subtitling, including the agents (profiling and motivation), production and reception processes.

The first section of the book explores the agents in non-professional subtitling by presenting an ethnographic view of the landscape. Each chapter explores in detail the ways in which fansubbing communities operate and evolve. **Luis Pérez-González** puts the digitally born agents centrestage, exploring the diversity in their social background and media usage. While non-professional subtitling is considered a form of self-expression in this context, the social, cultural and technological affordances all inform different behavioural tendencies. Foregrounding this heterogeneity, the chapter then argues for methodological approaches outside the conventional translation studies framework. To understand such intricacies and complexity, this chapter evaluates and scrutinises the commonly adopted methodological approaches, including media sociology, netnography and genetic criticism. This chapter challenges the traditional conception of non-professional subtitling as merely a type of translation activity by inviting us to reimagine its boundaries with digital citizenship and participatory culture.

The following chapter continues with the netnographic approach. **Dang Li** offers the case study of a Chinese fansubbing group *The Last Fantasy* (TLF). Li assumes the role of a practitioner-researcher and joins the group. In so doing, Li obtained valuable data through participation and personal interaction with the group. This type of information is otherwise hard to collect using traditional research methods, such as questionnaires and field observation. In addition to data from an online questionnaire, the group dynamic is revealed through interactions with group members on multiple digital platforms, including the online group forum, blogging and instant messaging sites. By building a personal rapport with fellow fansubbers, Li gains insight into group members' perspectives and behavioural patterns, on which a collective group identity is based. This group identity, in turn, governs the operation and dynamic of the group. Li's chapter also reaffirms the value of netnographic studies in non-professional subtitling by the effective use of digital platforms and research tools.

In *Sub Me Do*, **Serenella Massidda** and **Alice Casarini** chronicle the rise and impact of the burgeoning fansubbing communities in Italy. The long tradition of dubbing in Italy notwithstanding, Massidda and Casarini provide a solid account of the gradual shift to subtitling through the concerted efforts of two high-profile Italian fansubbing groups. The authors attribute the popularity and success of fansubbing to its efficiency and daring foreignising approach, which breaks away from the highly domesticating dubbing tradition. The foreignising approach goes beyond linguistic aspects. The fansubbers are observed to have commented and interpreted items or expressions laden with (pop-)cultural connotations. This shift to personal expression further engages and endears fansubbing to its users. This popularity then translates into growing influence, which could rise further with the advent of media streaming services such as Netflix.

The following two chapters look specifically at the Chinese fansubbing landscape. **Zongxiao Rong** focuses on the organisation and operation of Chinese fansubbing communities. Viewed as a peer-production activity, Chinese fansubbing groups' activities, organisation and motivation are examined against existing peer-production theories. The findings suggest that Chinese fansubbing is a hybrid and fluid participatory practice which involves constant negotiations among various internal and external conditions. Two key features of participatory culture, technology and commons-based production, are challenged in the Chinese fansubbing community. Rong's findings suggest that technology and institutional powers (government initiatives) make and break the fansubbing groups in a continuous and regenerative cycle. While technology enables fansubbing, the demand for quick output and inter-group competition have driven the fansubbing groups to adopt a hierarchical structure akin to that of the market-based production process to ensure quality and efficiency. Copyright concerns have compelled fansubbing groups to collaborate with commercial organisations to ensure survival. Government censorship and copyright regulations further reduce the productive autonomy of fansubbing groups. Rong's chapter reveals that the Chinese fansubbing community defies existing understanding of peer production practices. Instead of relying on existing peer production models to understand fansubbing phenomenon, Rong's case study calls for a more focused approach that factors in contextual conditions where fansubbing communities are based. The next chapter seeks to address the operational challenges by chronicling the rise and fall of Chinese fansubbing community. **Zhiwei Wu** traces the development of the Chinese fansubbing community by retelling narratives from fansubbers, users of non-professional subtitling and regulators. These interwoven narratives chronicle the rise and fall of high-profile fansubbing groups in China. Wu argues that the rise to fame is a double-edged sword for fansubbing groups. With high web traffic comes success. Success garners attention and attention is, as exemplified by the Chinese fansubbing groups, the reason for their demise.

Also known to have lent voices to the periphery, the following chapters explore fansubbing in less dominant languages and niche cultural products. **Jasmin Esin Duraner**, **Gülfer Tunali** and **Müge Işiklar Koçak** explore the journey of Korean Drama to Turkey. Using English as the pivot language, Turkish fansubbers single-handedly led the Korean Wave in

Turkey. The popularity of Korean drama triggers a series of chain reactions, from the craze of Korean cultural products to Turkish remakes of Korean TV dramas. The impact of fansubbers is clearly seen. This chapter goes on to investigate the agents of this cultural movement by profiling the fansubbers and users of fansubtitles. It reveals and confirms the active role of fansubbers in creating and engaging with content of shared interests. **Daniel E. Josephy-Hernández** explores the fansubbing phenomenon of a niche product, *hentai,* anime with pornographic content. This genre harks back to the origins of fansubbing. The controversial nature, however, presents manifold challenges to the fansubbers. Josephy-Hernández explores the ways in which the content is made available through fansubbing and file-sharing protocols. The findings suggest that the hentai fansubbing community multitasks, producing subtitles, circulating and archiving content at the same time. In doing so, the author argues that agents involved in the process effectively perpetuate the availability of this content. As circulation and availability are subject to scrutiny with the content's controversial nature, the author then looks at two subgenres of hentai, *lolicon* and *shotacon* (underage porn), to highlight the contentious stance of hentai fansubbing. While the issues of legality and morals remain debatable, Josephy-Hernández's chapter reminds us again of the robustness of fansubbing. This drive to share a common subject of interest motivates an army of fansubbers to contribute to and engage with the community. The willingness to share the fruit of one's labour for free begs the question of the motivation behind the altruistic action. **Vedrana Čemerin** and **Marko Toth**'s contribution seeks to answer this line of enquiry by investigating the motivating factors among Croatian fansubbers. The multilingual context in Croatia provides a unique backdrop for the study of fansubbing motives. A mixed method approach is adopted to uncover the heterogeneous community. As the agents of non-professional subtitling usually assume a cyberspace persona, such an approach is efficient when analysing and cross-examining self-reported data collected from research subjects, as demonstrated by Čemerin and Toth's chapter.

The final section of this volume deals with fansubbing and its application in various settings. **Pin-Ling Chang** examines ideological manipulations in the fansubs of the popular TV series The Big Bang Theory. Through analysing critically the compiled corpus, the chapter reveals that ideological differences are embedded in translation decisions made by Chinese fansubbers. It also uncovers a unique feature that is contrary to most fansubbing traditions around the world: the domesticating tendency. While most other fansubbing norms tend to foreignise to preserve flavours that cater to the original viewing audience, Chang's case study reveals the exact opposite in the Chinese fansubbing community. **Zhengguo He** continues the impact of ideology in informing translation decisions. By comparing professional and non-professional subtitling norms. He identifies different approaches to dealing with expressions of a sensitive or controversial nature. These approaches are cross-examined with fansubbers. The discussion reveals the ways in which institutional censorship influences and shapes fansubbers' normative behaviour, culminating in self-censored subtitling with a blurred notion of accuracy. **Noa Talaván** and **José Javier Ávila-Cabrera** take non-professional subtitling into the Higher Education setting, exploring its potential in language education and translator training. This case study provides an account of an innovative teaching initiative by way of non-professional subtitling. The discussion serves as a point of departure to look at non-professional subtitling in training translators for the digital age.

As the reader will observe, in this volume, certain topics are examined from different standpoints and localities. Whether it is the fansubbing groups, operation mechanism or their influence on existing norms and conventions, this volume presents not only the variety but the complexity of non-professional subtitling by including diverse perspectives on recurrent themes. This volume also highlights some of the methodological tendencies in the body of research. Netnograpthy, for instance, has been adopted and proven to be an effective data collection method for studies targeting the digital generation. Corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis, on the other hand, help researchers make sense of the translation decisions made by fansubbers. The various methodological considerations presented in this volume have demonstrated the unique nature of non-professional subtitling: it is a translation phenomenon which rejects the binary understanding of either the product or the process. As the chapters unfold, readers are invited to think outside of that proverbial box and envisage non-professional subtitling as a node that connects translation, culture, digital media and participatory culture in the network of knowledge.

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PART I

AGENTS IN NON-PROFESSIONAL SUBTITLING

CHAPTER TWO

INVESTIGATING DIGITALLY BORN AMATEUR SUBTITLING AGENCIES IN THE CONTEXT OF POPULAR CULTURE

LUIS PÉREZ-GONZÁLEZ

Abstract

In recent years, digital media scholars have begun to acknowledge and reveal the extent to which the production and consumption of popular culture are driven by participatory practices, including amateur subtitling. A growing body of literature has drawn attention to the ways in which ordinary people are ever more often taking on the role of language brokers and adopting subtitling as a means to facilitate the absorption of some (hitherto) marginal content into the fabric of the mainstream cultural industries. This chapter addresses the theoretical and methodological challenges presented by the emergence and consolidation of digitally born subtitling amateur agencies—whether they are constituted by a single individual or by virtual communities subject to varying forms of internal governance. After exploring the ecology of such agencies and the differences in the social and material aspects of their respective subtitling practices, the chapter moves on to examine the relevance of netnography and genetic criticism to the study of subtitled popular culture in the digital context—an area of enquiry that continues to move towards the core research remit of translation studies. It is argued that these methodological frameworks can yield valuable insights into the non-professional subtitling of texts connected and concerned with quotidian and ordinary experiences. Ultimately, amateur subtitling is conceptualised as a form of self-mediation that steers us away from the translator as an individual or subject position and towards collective discursive spaces of translatorship involving complex negotiations of cultural identity and citizenship.

The changing face of amateur subtitling research

Recent research on amateur subtitling communities has exposed a range of limitations in previous work on this form of audiovisual translation (Pérez-González 2013a, 2014). Early attempts to articulate the idiosyncrasy of non-professional subtitling practices (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006, Pérez-González 2006) tended to focus on the differences between professional and amateur mediation—the scope of the latter being confined almost exclusively to the subtitling of Japanese anime. Commercial subtitling standards and conventions were thus often posited as the benchmark against which deviant non-professional practices, often less concerned with textual accuracy and fidelity than formal experimentation (Pérez-González 2007) could be catalogued. The postulation, whether tacit or explicit, of such practices as "the seed of a new type of subtitling for the digital era" (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006: 51) reveals the extent to which "*anime*-centrism has tended to produce a somewhat lopsided view" of the amateur subtitling landscape, "emphasizing its formal and textual difference to mainstream, commercial A[udio]V[isual]T[ranslation] while downplaying its heterogeneity and geopolitical complexity" (Dwyer 2012: 219).

In keeping with theoretical developments in the wider domain of digital media scholarship, however, recent studies on the involvement of ordinary people in amateur subtitling are re-directing the focus of their research agenda towards the social substratum and participatory dimension that underpin non-professional subtitling agencies—whether they are constituted by a single individual or virtual communities subject to varying forms of internal governance. In exploring and conceptualising such themes, this emerging body of literature is showing the important role that amateur subtitlers play in other areas of popular culture pertaining to the negotiation of political and engaged agendas in public spaces.

Baker (2016), for example, investigates the use of subtitling by members of Mosireen and Words of Women from the Egyptian Revolution—two collectives "providing an alternative record of events and giv[ing] voice to a broad spectrum of participants engaged in this momentous period of Egyptian history" (Baker 2016: 1–2). Conducted through the analytical lens of "prefiguration", a notion that designates "the attempted construction of alternative or utopian social relations in the present" (Yates 2015: 1) by experimenting with currently available means, Baker's study aims to ascertain whether members of her chosen Egyptian collectivities favour idiosyncratic subtitling practices that reflect the non-hierarchical, non-representational society they ultimately aspire to forge.