

# Iranian Amateur Subtitling Apparatus: A Qualitative Investigation<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The number of studies addressing non-professional or amateur subtitling or fansubbing has increasingly multiplied over the past years, underlying its relevance in the present world. This is partly because a growing number of audiences worldwide now watch TV series and films with subtitles by amateur subtitlers, which are freely shared online, and Iranian viewers are certainly included. In Iran, to get around the “cultural gate-keeping” policy advocated and strictly enforced by the state in the national media system, from the early 2010s onward, numerous Persian-language websites have embarked on a new initiative whereby original, especially American TV series and films are made available for download together with their Persian subtitles. Despite the upsurge of this phenomenon in the Iranian context, there is limited literature and research on Persian non-professional subtitling. To fill this knowledge gap, this article aims to examine and analyze the different practices that are closely associated with Persian amateur subtitling. This includes building a profile of Iranian amateur subtitlers, along with an account of their working process, followed by a description of fansubbed products. The data are gathered using an open-ended questionnaire with a criterion sample of Iranian non-professional subtitlers, a survey of Iran-based video and subtitle sharing websites, and a close examination of the common features found in fansubbed Persian products, including reading speed and fansubbers’ experimentation with the original.

**Keywords:** amateur subtitling, non-professional subtitling, fansubbing, fansubbers, Persian subtitling, Iran

## El sistema de subtitulación aficionada iraní: Una investigación cualitativa

### Resumen

La cantidad de estudios que abordan la subtitulación no profesional o aficionada, o *fansubbing*, se ha multiplicado en los últimos años, lo que subraya su relevancia en el mundo actual. Esto se debe en parte a que un número creciente de espectadores en todo el mundo ahora ve series de televisión y películas con subtítulos compartidos en línea por subtituladores no profesionales e Irán no es una excepción. Desde principios de 2010 en adelante, en Irán, numerosos sitios web en lengua persa se han embarcado en una nueva iniciativa para

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sortear la política de “filtrado cultural” —defendida y dirigida estrictamente por el Estado en el sistema de medios de comunicación nacional—, en la cual series y películas, especialmente estadounidenses, se comparten para descargar con subtítulos en persa. A pesar del aumento de este fenómeno en el contexto iraní, existe poca literatura e investigación sobre la subtitulación persa no profesional. Para llenar este vacío, este artículo busca examinar y analizar las diferentes prácticas estrechamente asociadas a la subtitulación persa. Esto incluye construir un perfil de los subtituladores no profesionales iraníes, junto a una descripción de su proceso de trabajo, seguida de una descripción de los productos subtitulados por aficionados. Los datos se recopilan mediante un cuestionario abierto con una muestra de criterios tomados de los subtituladores no profesionales iraníes, una revisión de los sitios web para compartir subtítulos y videos en Irán, y un examen detallado de las características comunes a los productos subtitulados por aficionados a la lengua persa, incluyendo la velocidad de lectura y la experimentación de los subtituladores aficionados con el original.

**Palabras clave:** subtitulación no profesional, subtitulación aficionada, subtituladores aficionados, subtitulación persa, Irán

## Dispositif de sous-titrage iranien non professionnel : une enquête qualitative

### Résumé

Le nombre d'études portant sur le fansubbing s'est multiplié ces dernières années, soulignant ainsi sa pertinence dans le monde actuel. Ceci tient au nombre croissant de téléspectateurs qui regardent des séries télévisées et des films avec des sous-titres partagés en ligne par des sous-titres non professionnels, l'Iran n'y fait pas exception. En Iran, pour contourner la politique de « maintien de la culture » défendue et strictement dirigée par l'État, de nombreux sites Web en persan se sont lancés, à partir du début de l'année 2010, dans une nouvelle initiative dans laquelle les séries, en particulier les séries télévisées américaines, sont téléchargeables avec les sous-titres en persan. Malgré l'augmentation de ce phénomène dans le contexte iranien, il existe peu de littérature et de recherche sur le fansubbing en persan. Pour combler cette lacune, cet article vise à examiner et analyser les différentes formes de pratiques associées au sous-titrage en persan : le profil des sous-titres iraniens non professionnels, une description de leur processus de travail, suivi d'une description des produits sous-titrés par les fans. Les données sont collectées à l'aide d'un questionnaire ouvert comprenant un échantillon de critères provenant de sous-titres iraniens non professionnels, d'un sondage vidéo et de sites Web permettant de partager des sous-titres en Iran, ainsi qu'un examen détaillé des caractéristiques communes des produits sous-titrés par les fans, y compris la vitesse de lecture et les expériences de sous-titres amateurs avec l'original.

**Mots clés:** sous-titrage non professionnel, fansubbing, fansubbers, profil, pratique, Iran

## 1. Introduction

Iran traditionally uses dubbing for fictional programs, including TV shows and films, and voice-over for documentaries and news. In this context, foreign audiovisual programs have a central position as opposed to the local cinematic and television programs, and audiovisual translation (AVT) constitutes a vital and complex part of the translation sphere. When it comes to the agents of AVT, both professional and non-professional translators have provided translation in the sphere of Persian AVT. The former group accounts for those who are working for the state-run agencies, including the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) or for countless small privately-owned dubbing companies. The latter group, whose existence dates back to two decades ago—approximately the late 1990s (Jalili, 2001; Naficy, 2012), has engaged in underground activities wherein unauthorized copies of original programs have been subtitled and distributed online by taking advantage of readily available technology, and the Internet. In fact, “immediacy and enlarged distribution” could be understood as two main features of amateur subtitling (Orrego-Carmona & Richter, 2018, p. 64). In other words, fansubbers make every effort to release subtitles for a given program at the earliest opportunity, and to reach an enthusiastic and larger audience. Additionally, two reasons have been ascribed to the popularity of non-professional subtitling; audiences wish to access foreign audiovisual programs within a shorter time period, and they simply dislike dubbing (Orrego-Carmona & Richter, 2018).

Although the research has gradually shifted from conventional translation types such as dubbing and subtitling to new emerging modalities, including fan translation, very little research has addressed Persian amateur trans-

lation in the realm of AVT. Most research on non-professional subtitling is derived from a European and East Asian context (for example see Orrego-Carmona & Lee, 2017b). Given the fertile ground offered by this underexplored phenomenon in Iran, this article is intended to shed some light on this unauthorized and non-professional practice in Iran. What is worth exploring here is the profile of Iranian fansubbers and their working operations. This can be complemented by an account of subtitles they have shared online.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Non-professional subtitling

To date, several scholars have attempted to offer a comprehensive definition of translation by fans or non-professional translators, as well as a generic term for it. Some examples include “Abusive subtitling” in Nornes (1999), “Guerrilla translation” in (Dwyer, 2012a), “non-professional translation” in Antonini and Bucaria (2015) and Antonini, Cirillo, Rossato, and Torresi (2017b), and “cybersubtitles” in Diaz Cintas (2018). This implies that it has been very difficult to reach a consensus on a fixed term. This is perhaps because no definite and clear-cut lines have been drawn between the diverse types of subtitles that can be found over the internet (Diaz Cintas, 2018). In defining non-professional translation, Antonini, Cirillo, Rossato, and Torresi (2017a, pp. 6-8) itemize these general characteristics: the lack of proper training in translation, bilingualism (or knowing the language pairs for the translation), the lack of recruitment surrounding the work as this is done voluntarily, the lack of any payment, and finally ignoring codes of ethics or standards of the practice. For these scholars, the above features are not always true and may vary in different situations. Additionally, Dwyer (2017) defines it as “an am-

ateur form of subtitling done by fans rather than professionals” (p. 135), while Pedersen (2019, p. 2) defines it as an activity characterized by the voluntary and unpaid nature of the practice, fansubbers’ lack of professional training in translation, and the use of pirated programs for subtitling. This blanket definition is not always the case, as Antonini et al. (2017a, p. 7) stress. For Orrego-Carmona and Lee (2017a), the nonprofit-driven nature is the main feature of this phenomenon, as fansubbers are not paid or remunerated for subtitles they produce. Considering the fact that in every society translation may be understood differently, and considering the blurry boundaries between non-professional subtitling and professional subtitling in a country with no established and fixed subtitling tradition, it is reasonable to seek a definition that best fits the case of Iran, with its own geopolitical context and translational peculiarities.

Dwyer (2017) offers the broader term “guerrilla translation” which subsumes both fan translation (fansubbing) and non-fan subtitling. Non-fan guerrilla types, at times found in pirated DVDs, abound with typos and mistranslations, resulting in dysfunctional subtitling. They are intended to circumvent “media regulation and censorship” (p. 123) and are considered to be profit-driven, as the pirated product is sold to users. Fan translation, on the other hand, is known as fansubbing in AVT, as discussed earlier. Non-fan guerrilla subtitling differs from fansubbing as the latter attempts to break translation conventions and is popular for its experimental nature and unconventionality. Non-fan guerrilla subtitling, as suggested by Dwyer (2012a, p. 200), is the commercial bootlegging of subtitles that attempt to replicate and mimic “the conventions of AVT mainstream.” In other words, a conservative approach—rather than a norm-breaking approach fairly common in fansubbing—is pre-

ferred. Dwyer (2017) links the amateur quality of guerrilla translation to “the unintentional by-product of lack [...] of time, care, responsibility or expertise” (p. 126). The other difference between fan and non-fan guerrilla screen translation lies in their use of technology and the Internet; “the online labor and distribution networks” are hardly utilized by non-fans, as they largely prefer traditional approaches (Dwyer, 2012a, p. 128). Orrego-Carmona (2015) takes the issue further and introduces the binary classification of pro-am subtitling and creative subtitling. Pro-am subtitling closely follows professional subtitling norms, regulations and expectations, whilst the latter group attempts to defy professional norms and experiment through varying fonts, colors and layouts.

In the late 1990s, pirated versions of original programs, occasionally with Persian subtitles and in the form of DVDs or CDs, were sold on street corners or in media stores in Iran (Khatib, 2014, May 8; Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2016). In fact, subtitling in Iran started with a very sporadic pattern. It began in the late 1990s under the label of “Learning and Improving English.” In other words, films were unofficially subtitled and sold in media stores with the stipulated purpose of helping users to learn English. Nevertheless, this advertised goal was merely an excuse to justify selling unauthorized foreign cultural programs in the Iranian market (Jalili, 2001). Shajarikohan (2011) reports that the group *subtitling.com* imported a large volume of original films in DVD format from Southeast Asia, with Persian subtitles. In fact, the subtitles of the movies were prepared in Tehran, Iran. Then, these subtitles were sent to companies in Singapore and Malaysia to be added to the duplicated DVDs to be distributed in Iran. Seeing as it violated the distribution regulations of cultural multimedia products, the activity of this group was

halted and those in charge were arrested. In another report, Jalili (2001) adds that Persian subtitling began in the late 1990s with the sale of commercially successful American feature films such as *Face/Off* (Woo, 1997), *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) and *The Man in the Iron Mask* (Wallace, 1998) in Iran. These films were sold in the form of CDs or VHS tapes, and the scenes that were inappropriate according to Iranian culture were removed or blurred to legalize their sales. This new approach to the distribution of foreign films with Persian subtitles was widely welcomed by Iranian audiences. The report adds that the chief executive of Video Production Companies in Iran—which is in charge of authorizing distribution by media companies—denied granting any sort of license for the subtitling and selling foreign films, declaring that that these products—even with the label of “Learning and Improving English” were not legal according to Iranian cinematic regulations (Jalili, 2001). Present-day Iran is now characterized by the flow of diverse technologies, including open source or cracked/pirated software programs, and social networks that have unleashed a vast proliferation of online amateur subtitling practices. These have been strongly entrenched despite the government’s repeated attempts to shut down such activities. Film piracy has garnered much acclaim among Iranian viewers because the dubbing industry—due to strict official media regulations in Iran—does not dub every original program; the industry’s tight budget is another factor (Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2016).

## **2.2. Characteristics of non-professional subtitling practices**

Fansubbing was born in the United States in the 1980s, when broadcasting Japanese anime products had been canceled because the content was not deemed appropriate for the

young American audience (Dwyer, 2019; Leonard, 2005). Today, fansubbing is rife everywhere—thanks to the widespread availability of free user-friendly software (Bogucki, 2016; Diaz Cintas, 2015)—and includes not only Japanese animation but also programs produced elsewhere (Dwyer (2017, p. 138). Drawing on previous research on non-professional subtitling (Diaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006; Massidda, 2015; Orrego-Carmona, 2015; Pérez-González, 2014), Pedersen (2019) enumerates several features that could be linked to these products: they tend to ignore target norms, they are creative, and lean more towards the original idiosyncrasy. However, according to Jiménez-Crespo (2017, p. 181), current fansubbers tend to “comply to the highest possible degree with professional subtitling norms.” Still, in the Iranian context, Khoshsaligheh and Ameri (2017b) and Khoshsaligheh and Fazeli Haghpanah (2016) have pointed out that Persian amateur subtitling does not comply with professional subtitling regulations, and mistranslations are frequent in these products.

Another interesting issue pertaining to non-professional subtitling is fansubbers’ experimenting with the original. Diaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez (2006) talk of subtitling as “hybrid” and Nornes (1999) as “abusive.” Both share the claim that fansubbers are experimenting with the original program. For example, subtitlers experiment with the linguistic or visual codes of the original (Nornes, 1999). This may include the incorporation of notes and glosses (Diaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006; Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2017b; Pérez-González, 2007b); or the use of a wide array of techniques, involving “colours, typefaces, typography, variable length of subtitle text [...] and novel uses of notes and glosses” (Guillot, 2019, p. 37). This can also include inserting sarcastic and humorous

comments about characters, the plot and so on (Joseph-Hernández, 2017; Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2017b; Massidda & Casarini, 2017).

Other relevant features may involve typesetting, such as using different fonts and colors, as well as the delivery of subtitles on the screen including the number of lines, reading speed, and the position of subtitles on the screen (Pérez-González, 2014, p. 81). This is perhaps because the fansubbers tend to foreignize their translation to highlight the otherness of the original (Dwyer, 2017; Nornes, 1999; Pérez-González, 2014), or simply because they tend to stay close to the source text and produce a word-for-word rendering (Gambier, 2013, p. 54), which may demand a higher reading speed (Chaume, 2013, p. 114). Khoshsaligheh, Ameri, and Mehdizadkhani (2018), for instance, showed that Iranian amateur subtitlers directly translate the original's taboos into Persian, while the Persian professional AVT tends to censor these items. Such unconventional strategies in fansubbing have been linked to the creativity of the fansubbers (Dwyer, 2012b; Wang, 2017). Fansubbers' preference for a source-oriented approach could be attributed to the declared demands of viewers, who are seeking more authentic products and calling for "a revolution in the niche area of the subtitling of TV shows" (Massidda, 2015, p. 62). This source-oriented approach is not always the case of fansubbing. Recent research (Chang, 2017) suggests the opposite trend, as some fansubbers domesticate the original content using target cultural elements, and opt for self-censorship under the influence of official regulations. This suggests that the fansubbing apparatus varies in different countries.

### 2.3. Non-professional subtitlers' profiles

As to the profile of fansubbers, the existing research suggests that they are young. For ex-

ample, research suggests that in the Turkish non-professional system, fansubbers are mainly female and less than 30 years old (Duraner, Tunali, & Koçak, 2017). In the Croatian context, however, fansubbing has been found to be a male-oriented practice mainly involving people in their 30s (Cemerin & Toth, 2017). Other relevant investigations (Luczaj, Holy-Luczaj, & Cwiek-Rogalska, 2014) suggested that fansubbers in Poland and the Czech Republic were mainly male (ca. 60%) and largely in their 20s. Another interesting detail was the educational background of fansubbers, who were mainly students, and only a small portion of them studying language-related majors. When it comes to the Persian context, research shows that fansubbers of Korean programs are mainly in their 20s with an educational background in humanities and engineering (Khoshsaligheh & Fazeli Haghpanah, 2016).

As to the motivations driving people toward non-professional subtitling, Luczaj and Holy-Luczaj (2017) list the following:

- Robin Hood motivation: providing access to new programs for other people by subtitling them;
- Mission: promoting a special genre or program, such as anime, within a given country by subtitling those programs;
- Fun: enjoying subtitling the genre or program one is interested in;
- Prestige-seeking: subtitling a given program with a view to pursuing reputation and fame among viewers;
- Do It Yourself: subtitling programs without receiving any aid from the authorities;
- Language learning: developing language competency and proficiency, for example in English, when one is engaged in subtitling a program.

In their empirical study of the possible motives behind fansubbing practices, Cemerin and Toth (2017) found that fansubbers do not subtitle with the aim of exploring new experiences or alleviating boredom; they subtitle to promote “social activism,” which means making the viewers’ preferred content accessible to them. These researchers also highlighted language learning and development as a possible motive for pursuing fansubbing practices. Likewise, Luczaj et al. (2014) concluded that honing language skills appeared to be the main motive for Polish and Czech fansubbers. In a similar vein, Khoshsaligheh and Ameri (2017b) found that language learning is the main reason for Persian amateur subtitling or fansubbing, while for fansubbers of Korean programs, fun and missions are the main drivers (Fazeli Haghpanah & Khoshsaligheh, 2018).

In light of the literature reviewed so far, there are few studies on Persian amateur subtitling (Fazeli Haghpanah & Khoshsaligheh, 2018; Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2017b; Khoshsaligheh et al., 2018). The focus of these studies has been on the subtitling of Korean programs or English video games. Therefore, the present study focuses on understanding the amateur subtitling apparatus in Iran, and features that could be associated with this practice. Three research questions are explored in this paper:

1. What is the demographic information on Iranian fansubbers?
2. What are Iranian fansubbers’ motivations for carrying out amateur subtitling?
3. What are the main features of Persian amateur subtitling practice?

### **3. Method**

This study was conducted in two phases, and both open-ended questionnaires and textual

analysis were used to collect and analyze data to understand the phenomenon of Persian non-professional subtitling. The open-ended questionnaire helps to profile fansubbers, and the analysis of fansubbers’ products sheds light on their practice and complements the questionnaire data.

#### **3.1. Opened-ended questionnaires**

Given that the study is exploratory in nature and that the phenomenon of Persian non-professional subtitling is relatively underexplored, a qualitative research design was adopted (Chaume, 2018). An open-ended questionnaire was chosen over interviews for two reasons. First, Persian fansubbing is a geographically dispersed activity, and it is practically impossible to have in-person interviews with fansubbers. Second, it was important to respect the personal privacy of the fansubbers as some fansubbers were unwilling or hesitant to be interviewed by telephone or Skype, and requested that the questions be emailed to them. Considering these factors, the open-ended questionnaire was chosen. The questions in the questionnaire reflect the objectives of the study, and include seven questions covering demographic information, years of experiences in subtitling, the fansubbing process, software programs used for fansubbing, motivations for fansubbing, and the problems and challenges of fansubbing. The questionnaire was in Persian, matching the language of the respondents. Through convenience and snowball sampling, the fansubbers received invites via <https://subscene.com>, which is a main hub for Iranian fansubbers and their work. About 100 fansubbers were invited to participate in the study, but only 42 accepted the invitation and contributed. A total of 42 questionnaires were sent to the volunteers, of which 30 questionnaires were returned completed. Therefore, the analysis is based on 30 responses.

### 3.2. Textual analysis

The second phase of the study focused on describing the output of Iranian fansubbers. At its core, this text-based stage examines the translation of nine films which were subtitled into Persian by fansubbers. Because professional subtitling for fiction is almost absent in Iran, it is not possible to compare fansubbed works with professional versions. The existing literature on professional subtitling will be the suitable gauge of data analysis. The main aspect of the analysis at this stage is norm adherence, given that fansubbers are called norm-breakers. The analysis includes a comparison between the original and the translation made by the fansubbers. The analysis of several aspects, including subtitle reading speed and subtitle length, should be undertaken with the help of a subtitling program; therefore, we used *Subtitle Edit* (Version 3.5.9). This stage does not allow for any quantitative analysis but can result in emergent categories and theories. Qualitative research, says Chaume, offers “insights [...], and entices the development of ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research” (Chaume, 2018, p. 51). The films chosen for this phase include *Before Sunrise* (Linklater, 1995), *Ice Age 1* (Wedge, 2002), *300* (Snyder, 2006), *Spider-Man 3* (Raimi, 2007), *Final Destination 5* (Quale, 2011), *Ted* (MacFarlane, 2012), *Brake* (Torres, 2012), *The Imitation Game* (Tyldum, 2014) and *Deadpool* (Miller, 2016). These have been selected from a wide range of genres—science fiction, fantasy, drama, horror, and action—and over several years, to ensure that the results transcend a certain genre or time period.

## 4. Results

We will first present the results from the questionnaires, and subsequently, the textual analysis of fansubbed products.

### 4.1. Profiling Iranian fansubbers

#### 4.1.1. Demographic information

Thirty amateur subtitlers answered the questionnaire, forming the research sample through convenience and snowball sampling. The vast majority of the respondents were male as only four female respondents participated. This could suggest that Persian fansubbing is a male-oriented field. Furthermore, the fansubbers were not of the same age; the youngest respondent was 17, while the oldest was 39; the overall average age was 25.31. Most fansubbers were in their mid-20s; nevertheless, seven of the thirty fansubbers were in their 30s. As to the amount of time involved in fansubbing activity, their experiences ranged from 1.5 years to 13 years. Regarding the fansubbers' location, they were from different parts of Iran, and it is very difficult to claim that they were only from big cities. Tehran, Iran's capital, was the most representative city as nine fansubbers were living there. The analysis of fansubbers' educational background suggests that several were students of language majors. Specifically, four fansubbers were students or graduates of the translation discipline, and one was an English literature major. The rest came from other disciplines, including mechanical engineering, computer engineering, graphics, cinema, biology, physics, and so forth. It is noteworthy that a significant number of the respondents (five fansubbers) were students or graduates of computer sciences. Concerning the subtitling software that fansubbers may use, it was found that *Subtitle Edit* and *Subtitle Workshop*, along with *Aegisub* are widely used; these are free and easy-to-use subtitling programs. Oddly, two respondents mentioned that they did not use any software. They explained that they only carried out translations using the original SRT file—which can be edited using Notepad—and replaced the original



dialogue in the original the SRT file with their own translations. Interestingly, one fansubber mentioned *Subtrans* (<https://appist.ir/software/subtrans>); an Iranian subtitling software program developed by a group of Iranian fansubbers with the collaboration of several software developers. A female fansubber also indicated that she uses *Easy Subtitles*—developed for *Android*—for her fansubbing work.

#### 4.1.2. Motivations

One of the questions in the questionnaire aimed to explore the factors motivating amateur subtitlers to undertake subtitling. Table 1 illustrates the types of motivations mentioned by the respondents.

It is of importance to look at motivations more critically. The lack of a monetary reward or

**Table 1.** Motivations for doing non-professional subtitling. Created by the authors.

Motivations	Examples from the questionnaire
Language learning	"Our aim is to learn English and to keep our English up-to-date." "My aim is to learn English. The only benefit of doing it [fansubbing] is language learning. When I can learn it by myself why should I waste my money on language classes." "As I mentioned above, it is important to have constant exposure to English. As you know, you may forget the language very easily if you fail to use it. So I do subtitling to learn new things and not to forget what I learnt before."
Leisure	"In fact, I do film and tv series subtitling for learning and fulfilling my own interests and I'm more interesting in watching films than reading books." "I'm into films and cinema. I love subtitling and it's very interesting to me when I see thousands of people watch a film with the subtitles I made."
Offering a more quality translation for a previously-subtitled program	"[...] After a while, I watched <i>The Devil's Advocate</i> [1997] again with Persian subtitles because I watched it with English subtitles long before. The Persian subtitling was very bad and entailed many mistakes. Therefore, I retranslated it even though that was arduous as it had mainly dialogues—over 3000 subtitle lines (this is twice as much as a regular film). It was well worth the effort, however."
Popularizing a specific genre or artist	"I always want to get new fans to watch and hear my favorite idols' and artists' video clips and interviews." "What I do is a cultural activity and I like to lionize the works of artists who work hard to produce a quality program."
Prestige-seeking	"It's pretty cool when I see how many viewers are very impressed with my works when they say my subtitle was the best translation, I feel more confident in my life and work."
Gaining profits	"Sometimes I receive some little money from sponsors and some generous viewers!" "A number of subtitlers are now working for websites and they are being paid absolutely little. I don't think so this can be a motive for the work, at least not for me." "Translating and subtitling is a free activity which is done for our people. Yet, some receive some financial help for translations they make. To me, translation is a free work we do it just to make people happy." "I don't do any subtitling for free. Free subtitling only happens for a few films that I like a lot."
Helping viewers	"I would like to help Iranian viewers and users enjoy watching their favorite film with my subtitles." "I like to deliver the translation very quickly to others to watch the tv series with minimal delay." "It's interesting that people watch programs with our works and enjoy. The praise and encouragement we receive from the viewers make us feel energized."
Job opportunities	"I had translated countless films and tv series for free. After some online subtitling, I received an email from a DVD seller that requested the translation of several films of the 1950s and 1960s. Some months later, I received a translation request from the manager of a famous dubbing company who was looking for a translator for their documentaries. Although I still do some free subtitling, my preference is working for companies or individuals who pay for the translations they ask for."

payment appears to be an important feature of non-professional subtitling by definition (Orrego-Carmona & Lee, 2017a; Pedersen, 2019); therefore, fansubbers carry out an unpaid activity. This is also the case for many Iranian amateur subtitlers, as explicitly mentioned by some in their responses. Nevertheless, cases in which non-professional subtitling is used as a source of revenue are not rare. Additionally, the analysis of the questionnaire responses suggests that while translators may not receive any sort of monetary rewards from viewers, as they share their works on a number of subtitling websites at no cost, they make some profits another way. Some subtitlers add advertisements into the SRT files they share online. They advertise the name of film-sharing websites or websites sharing news about films, etc. Nonetheless, the time and effort they put into subtitling are not commensurate with the profits they make from such advertisements. Some amateur subtitlers are now working in the translation teams of illegal websites that share the pirated versions of original programs. Iranian authorities have tried hard to crack down on these websites due to their unlicensed activities and the content that they share, which is deemed indecent and immoral according to Iranian culture. It should be stated these film websites do not make any profits directly from subtitles, as the SRT files are shared free of any charge. Two of these websites are *Diba Movies* and *film2movie*, which also have an exclusive Telegram Channel and *Subscene* account for sharing their subtitled works. These websites sell spaces for advertisements; therefore, they monetize the activities of fansubbers, and the profits they make are reported to be substantial. However, the money given to fansubbers is nowhere near what professionals get for their work. Two fansubbers mention that:

Unfortunately, this [fansubbing] cannot be regarded as a job, the money they pay is not comparable to our time and efforts.

A while back, I used to work for King [an Iranian unauthorized film website]. After some time, I decided to give up the work as their payment was almost nothing.

Overall, it appears that in addition to non-monetary motivations such as language learning and having fun, people are attracted to fansubbing to gain some monetary benefits too. Some fansubbers are independent and do their translation voluntarily, while some are paid by illegal pirate film websites.

#### 4.1.3. Collaboration

Teamwork and collaboration are high among amateur subtitlers, but some of the respondents mentioned that they prefer to work alone. The collaboration among Iranian non-professional subtitlers differs, to some extent, from what has been found to be the case with anime fansubbing. In the latter, a large number of people are involved in the process—raw providers, editors, synchronizers, and typesetters, among other agents—and there is a steep hierarchal structure (Diaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006; Hu, 2010; Massidda, 2015; Zhang & Cassany, 2017). The Iranian case has a simpler composition, and at times, the whole process is carried out by one single individual. This is also reflected in the comments of two fansubbers:

Yes, we team up with our friends and each person is responsible for the translation, spotting and editing of his/her part.

I only have one co-subtitler and we have translated more than 10 films and he has always been responsible for revising the subtitles.

We also found that the collaboration is confined to the area of translation, by which the translation duties of a single film or season of a Netflix original TV series, are divided among

several people so that the subtitle files are prepared more quickly. For example, *The 88th Academy Awards* was subtitled by a group of ten fansubbers, as each person was responsible for one section of the program, and one person—the main translator—uploaded the SRT file on his *Subscene* page.

#### 4.1.4. Challenges of subtitling

When it comes to the challenges of subtitling, fansubbers referred to the translation of culture-specific elements, humor, idioms, and slang, among other things. Three non-professional subtitlers share the following observations:

One of the challenges is translating idioms and humorous elements which do not appear to have straightforward equivalents in Persian, especially puns or idioms that are culture-specific and require the knowledge of some presuppositions. Translating these items is very demanding and this is where creativity in translation should be tapped.

It's very difficult to find a good Persian equivalent for contemporary American idioms and slang. Given my high proficiency in Persian grammar and my interest in Persian literature, I have been capable of finding suitable Persian proverbs and idioms.

The big challenge is facing strange idioms and slang which do not have any ready-made equivalent in Persian. The *Venture Bros*, for example, had only 400 lines of subtitles for translation; yet, the time I devoted to its translation was equal to a 4000-subtitle film.

The translation challenges indicated by the respondents are quite in line with those commonly heard in the professional industry—linguistic and cultural mismatches (Guillot, 2019; Pedersen, 2011), humor (Perego, 2014), or idioms and slang (Diaz Cintas & Remael, 2007). One conclusion that can be reached here is that these linguistic challenges could

be a source of inaccuracy in translations, and researchers could choose to examine this issue in the future.

## 4.2. The fansubbed products

This section examines the results of the textual analysis of Persian fansubbed products. Currently, Persian non-professional subtitles are mainly released in the form of soft subtitles (SRT files) as far as American films and TV series are concerned. The present analysis includes reading speed, spatial and temporal constraints, readability and creativity. It is worthy of note that the aim of this analysis is not to criticize the amateur subtitling practice but to offer a general account of the fansubbing scene in Iran. Therefore, we do not judge the appropriateness of fansubbing practices, but we recommend experimental reception studies in this sphere (Abdi & Khoshsaligheh, 2018; Khoshsaligheh, Ameri, Khajepour, & Shokoohmand, forthcoming). It should not be ignored that lay viewers may understand quality quite differently from translators or other professional agents (Orrego-Carmona, 2018).

### 4.2.1. Reading speed

To examine how much Iranian fansubbers attempt to stay close to the source text and retain the original content, we use the concept of subtitling reading speed—defined as “the speed with which the reader is expected to read a subtitle” (Pedersen, 2011, p. 130)—which is closely linked to reductive or editing techniques, and can be measured in characters per second (Szarkowska, Krejtz, Pilipczuk, Dutka, & Kruger, 2016). Therefore, to adhere to a standard reading speed—say 15 cps—the content of programs at times demands reduction and condensation (Diaz Cintas & Remael, 2007). Yet, according to Pedersen (2011), subtitles in dubbing countries, including Iran

tend to display less condensation and stay closer to the original. This is also the case with Persian Iranian fansubbers, who tend to stay close to the original; therefore; in fast-paced and dialogue-heavy films or scenes, the reading speed is typically high. As is evident in Table 2, the reading speed of the subtitles is often over 20 cps, which goes beyond the recommended standard (Netflix, 2018; Pedersen, 2017). This is because fansubbers intend to “convey ‘everything’ belonging to the original dialogues” (Massidda, 2015, p. 59).

#### 4.2.2. Spatial and temporal constraints

The number of characters in each subtitle line, otherwise known as line length, is generally 36–40 maximum including spaces and punctuation, while the maximum number of lines allowed is two, which are typically projected at the bottom of the screen (Guillot, 2019). The other standard available in profession-

al settings is the six-second rule, which stipulates that the maximum time for keeping a full two-liner on the screen should not exceed six seconds. This is because viewers may start rereading them (Diaz Cintas & Remael, 2007; Karamitroglou, 1998). As shown in the examples presented in Table 3, Persian fansubbing usually violates spatial constraints, and subtitles with more than 40 characters per line are very frequent. The violation of the six-second rule standard is also common, as can be seen in Table 4.

#### 4.2.3. Readability

Readability is another important issue in the subtitling industry, and encompasses issues such as punctuation and segmentation (Guillot, 2019). Segmentation is concerned with how to correctly break a subtitle into two lines “in such a way that they are semantically and syntactically self-contained” (Diaz Cintas &

Table 2. Reading speed. Created by the authors.

Original	Subtitles [Back-translation]	tcr (Duration)	Reading speed (cps)	Film
But what was that "I am learning" bullshit?	ولی چی بود گفت که من دارم یاد میگیرم از این مزخرفات؟ [But what was that he said that I'm still learning silly talks]	00:38:18.321 00:38:20.590 (2.269)	22.92	Before Sunrise
Men are lucky we don't bite off their head after mating.	مردا خوش شانسن که ما بعد از جفتگیری کله شون رو نیش نمیزنیم [Men are lucky that we don't bite off their head after mating]	01:02:02.869 01:02:05.074 (2.205)	26.30	Before Sunrise
Can't have one of your own, so you want to adopt.	پس شما همدیگر رو قبول ندارید ، پس میخوای به فرزندت بپذیری [So you don't approve of each other, so you want to adopt it]	00:21:44.485 00:21:46.690 (2.205)	26.30	Ice Age 1
Why are we talking about it? -You're talking about it. I'm just saying, let them in.	پس چرا داریم راجع بهش حرف می زنیم. شو داری ازش حرف می زنی. من فقط میگم راهشون بندیم تو. [Why are we talking about it? - You're talking about it. I'm just saying, lets' let them in.]	01:00:21.591 01:00:24.513 (2.922)	29.77	Ted

Table 3. Characters per line

Original	Subtitles [Back-translation]	Number of lines	Characters per line	Film
I'll return you. We don't need that meany-weeny mammoth, do we?	من تو رو برمیگردونم. ما به اون ماموت فاسد-بی اهمیت نیازی نداریم، مگه نه؟ [I'll return you. We don't need insignificant mammoth do we?]	1	74	Ice Age 1
Somebody had to go Joan Crawford on that kid.	شرمنده! یکی باید مثل "جوآن کراوورد" با این بچه برخورد می کرد. (ستاره ی سینما، تئاتر و تلویزیون که نقل است فرزندانش را مورد آزار جسمی و روحی قرار می داده) [Sorry, but somebody had to treat this kid like "Joan Crawford" (The cinema, theater and television star who is said to have sexually assaulted her own children)]	3	63/52/38	Ted
Wait a minute. We kill someone, we get their life? Is that what you're telling me?	یک لحظه وایسا. منظورت اینه که ما کسی رو کشتیم، زندگیشون رو از شون گرفتیم، تا خودمون زندگی کنیم؟ [Wait a minute. Do you mean we killed someone, we got their life so that we can live?]	2	49/49	Final Destination 5

Table 4. The exposure time of subtitles

Original	Subtitles [Back-translation]	tcR (Duration)	Film
I don't think it's for us to say... whether a person deserves to live or die.	فکر نکنم به ما مربوط باشه که بگیریم کی لایق مرگ و کی زنده موننده [I don't think it's for us to say who deserves to die or live.]	01:13:10.961 01:13:17.270 (6.309)	Spider-Man 3
Its chemistry is not unlike the chondritic meteorites of the '70s.	ماهیتش بی شباهت به شهاب سنگ هفتاد نیست [Its chemistry is not unlike the meteorites of 70]	01:33:01.028 01:33:08.449 (7.421)	Spider-Man 3
...none of us deserve to die, then why is it...	هیچکدوم از ما حقش نیست بمیره پس چرا... [none of us deserve to die, then why...]	01:17:05.274 01:17:11.407 (6.133)	Final Destination 5

Remael, 2007, p. 172). For example, adjectives and nouns should not be separated, and articles should always come with their nouns. Additionally, in sentences with subordinated or coordinated clauses, each subtitle line should display one clause (Diaz Cintas & Remael, 2007; Karamitroglou, 1998; Perego, 2008). As the examples in Table 5 show, Persian subtitles have

arbitrary and poor segmentations which may hamper the comprehension of the subtitles.

#### 4.2.4. Commentaries and creativity

Research has documented that fansubbers have challenged the concept of so-called subtitler's invisibility by voicing their opinions in subtitles

Table 5. Readability

Original	Subtitles [Back-translation]	TCR (Duration)	Film
It's funny that I only ever see two of you.	خندهداره که همیشه فقط شما دو تا رو میبینم. [It's funny that I only ever see you two.]	00:45:22.521 00:45:25.208 (2.687)	Deadpool
You may have heard already they're unconfirmed reports explosion from inside the facility	همین طور که ممکنه قبلا هم شنیدیم انفجاری که تو این تأسیسات بوده تأیید نشده [As I heard before the explosion occurred in this facility was unconfirmed]	00:52:26.059 00:52:29.411 (3.352)	Brake
You're trying to break the German Enigma machine.	دارید تلاش میکنید معمای ماشین «انینگما»ی آلمانیها رو حل کنید [You're trying to solve the German "Enigma" machine mystery]	00:10:46,745 00:10:50,249 (3.504)	The Imitation Game
We're going to break an unbreakable Nazi code and win the war.	میخواهیم کد شکستناپذیر آلمانیها رو بشکنیم [We're going to break an unbreakable Nazi code]	00:31:59.083 00:32:01.319 (2.236)	The Imitation Game

or by offering commentaries concerning the names, titles, or cultural elements in the translation (Diaz Cintas, 2018; Diaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006; Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2017b; Massidda & Casarini, 2017; Wang, 2017). In professional terms, “subtitles should attract as little attention as possible” (Guillot, 2019, p. 37) but reception studies suggest that these commentaries could advance viewers’ comprehension of the original, at the expense of missing some subtitles (Caffrey, 2009). For example, allusions are abundantly used in *Deadpool* (Miller, 2016), and its Persian fansubber has offered plenty of explanatory comments in order to facilitate the comprehension and understanding of the dialogue for the Iranian viewers who are supposedly not familiar with certain concepts. Such an experiment with the original, at times, goes beyond just offering commentaries about what is heard and seen on screen. Fansubbers may add hilarious or sarcastic comments in the translations about the main plot, or a given character (Josephy-Hernández, 2017; Massidda & Casarini, 2017); these are

called “discussion bands” by Jiménez-Crespo (2017, p. 191). This is also present in Persian fansubbing—in the examples presented in Table 6, taken from *Ted* (MacFarlane, 2012), Ted says “back off Susan Boyle” to an overweight child in the original, as both the child and Susan Boyle are overweight in appearance. To make this more understandable to Iranian audience—who are supposedly unfamiliar with Susan Boyle—the fansubber used the name of female Iranian actress Rabe’e Oskouie—who is also overweight. As well as the change of reference, the fansubber inserted some more personal comments, stating in two parentheses that they did not want to offend Rabe’e Oskouie. It is worth mentioning that these commentaries do not always offer accurate information. In the same film, there is a mention of Joan Crawford—the American film and television actress. To make the scene more understandable to the Iranian audience, the subtitler inserted information about Joan Crawford in their subtitles. The information that she sexually assaulted her children, however, is ostensibly erroneous, while

Joan Crawford herself was sexually abused by her stepfather (Table 6).

In the film *300* (Snyder, 2006)—which is said to be an anti-Iranian Hollywood film and angered many in Iran—the Persian fansubber took a further step and warned the viewer of false facts presented in the film in the very first subtitle line (Table 7).

Finally but importantly, Persian non-professional subtitling appears to be comparatively less creative than in other languages. Jiménez-Crespo (2017) defines creativity in fansubbing through the lens of “the positioning, layout and font of subtitles” (p. 190). This is a key feature of anime subtitling (Diaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006; Pérez-González, 2007a). Iranian fansubbers generally release both hard and soft subtitles. Nevertheless, soft subtitles in the form of SRT files are by far the most common form for films and TV series. By consequence, Persian subtitles are not creative, seeing as SRT files do not contain any kind of formatting in terms of font, color or positioning of subtitles, as is also the case with Swedish fansubbing (Pedersen, 2019). However, subti-

tled programs and clips shared on Instagram—very short videos on entertainment issues—are very creative seeing as different colors, fonts or layouts are used by the producers. To conclude, Persian amateur subtitling is neither pro-am nor creative as per the terms of Orrego-Carmona (2015), it is somewhere between the two.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This research provides a glimpse into amateur subtitling in Iran and offers some interesting insights. Regarding the profile of amateur subtitlers who participated in this survey, the findings seem to show that Persian fansubbing is a male-oriented activity and is popular among youths; in line with fansubbing in other countries (Cemerin & Toth, 2017; Duraner et al., 2017; Luczaj & Holy-Luczaj, 2017; Luczaj et al., 2014). Additionally, the results reveal that translation and computer-related studies were the most representative disciplines among fansubbers. This makes sense considering the nature of subtitling, which requires good knowledge relating to translation and computers. More importantly, the motivations for subtitling ranged from language learning and

Table 6. Hilarious commentaries in subtitles

Original	Subtitles	Back-translation	tcr (Duration)	Film
back off Susan Boyle	گمشو عقب، "رابعه" اسکوی (توهینی به ایشون نباشه!) (باید یک بازیگر زن چاق مثال زده میشد!)	Back off, Rabe'e Oskouie (No intended offense to her!) (The name of a fat actor had to be mentioned!)	01:31:18.564 01:31:20.033 (1.469)	Ted
Somebody had to go Joan Crawford on that kid.	شرمنده! یکی باید مثل "جوآن کراوورد" با این بچه برخورد می کرد. (ستاره ی سینما، تئاتر و تلویزیون که نقل است فرزندانش را مورد آزار جسمی و روحي قرار می داده)	Sorry, but somebody had to treat this kid like "Joan Crawford" (The cinema, theater and television star who is said to have sexually assaulted her own children)	01:33:40,013 01:33:43,130 (3.117)	Ted

Table 7. Critical commentaries in subtitles

Original	Subtitles	Back-translation	TCR (Duration)	Film
---	لازم بیکره: تمامی وقایع این فیلم همش زاده تخیلات یکمشت آدم توهمی و عقده ای هستش که میخوان بگن دموکراسی همیشه برنده هستش و فارسها انسانهایی وحشی و بی تمدنی هستن	This should be mentioned that: all the facts mentioned in this film have been produced by a bunch of crazy people who want to say that democracy is always the winner and Iranians are a wild and uncivilized nation.	00:00:06,000 00:00:11,000 (5.00)	300

leisure, to receiving monetary incentives from pirate streaming sites, to sharing the enjoyment of watching a film with others (Luczaj & Holy-Luczaj, 2017). Teamwork and collaboration among fansubbers seem to work in some specific cases, such as Netflix original TV series for which all episodes of a season are released at once, or for important events like the Academy Awards, where the translation of the program is expected to be released very quickly. It should be noted that the timing of releasing subtitles highly depends on the popularity of the program as well as the numerous and repeated requests made by users on film websites. Although fansubbing workflow in general appears to be complex and engages many people (Diaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006; Jiménez-Crespo, 2017; Massidda, 2015; Orrego-Carmona, 2015), the Persian case appears to be simpler, and collaboration is reduced to the translation phase.

It was also found that subtitle files are not sold to viewers to generate profits for the fansubbers; however, the main source of revenue for some fansubbers has come from including advertisements in their SRT files. Given the fact that most Iranian unauthorized film websites are not based on pay-per-view and subscription models, one of the revenues for these websites is selling advertising space opportunities, as it seems that a large number of people regularly visit these websites to download their favorite programs and subtitles. Wu

(2017) maintains that communities “milked their fans and generated a revenue stream by selling space for advertisements and derivative merchandise” (p. 136).

As with professional subtitling and dubbing, in which the translation of culture-specific items, idioms or slang are of difficulty and require a vast knowledge of both source and target languages (Pedersen, 2011; Ranzato, 2016), fansubbers also mentioned challenges in these areas. It is noteworthy that previous studies on Persian fansubbing have shown that translations carried out by non-professional subtitlers suffer from low quality; and translation mistakes and the violation of technical issues are frequent (Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2017b; Khoshsaligheh & Fazeli Haghpanah, 2016). The issue of quality in amateur subtitling can be an opportunity for further research, especially if the analysis is equipped with a robust model (See Pedersen, 2017).

As far as the practice of amateur subtitling is concerned, it was found that Iranian fansubbers do not seem to be *Pro-Ams*, which is “a new social hybrid where a person pursues an activity as amateur, mainly for no other reason than the love of it, but follows professional standards” (Orrego-Carmona, 2015, p. 217). Jiménez-Crespo (2017, p. 181) is of the view that 21st-century fansubbers imitate professional subtitling rules and norms. Iranian fansubbers do not follow professional norms sim-



ply because they are not aware of such rules and regulations. Iran has no subtitling tradition and to the best of our knowledge, no prescriptive norms for Persian subtitling can be found online. Therefore, when there are no norms or guidelines to consult, fansubbers mainly translate and subtitle by instinct. A number of the fansubbers were students or graduates of the translation discipline and one could speculate as to whether or not they have learned any subtitling norms from their university training. AVT translation is, however, offered only in one course at BA level in Iran, and research suggests that this course is not systematically taught at Iranian universities (Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2017a) because trainers are not very familiar with the technical know-how of subtitling. Another point worth mentioning is that fansubbers may simply imitate and follow the norms—such as three dots to indicate a pause, or a hyphen to indicate two persons speaking simultaneously—that can be found in international subtitling templates, because they translate from pre-cued subtitles.

The findings of this study, gathered from a small select group of fansubbers and a small corpus of amateur subtitles, cannot be extrapolated to the whole population of Iranian fansubbers. The results may be overturned or supported in light of future evidence collected from quantitative or mixed-methods studies. The analysis was also restricted to amateur subtitling of western products; future research could therefore analyze the fansubbing of non-western products. All in all, non-professional subtitling is an uncharted area that awaits more empirical research.

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