A socio-cultural study of taboo rendition in Persian fansubbing: an issue of resistance

Masood Khoshsaligheh, Saeed Ameri & Milad Mehdizadkhani

To cite this article: Masood Khoshsaligheh, Saeed Ameri & Milad Mehdizadkhani (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

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2017.1377211

Published online: 18 Sep 2017.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 206

View Crossmark data
A socio-cultural study of taboo rendition in Persian fansubbing: an issue of resistance

Masood Khoshsaligheh, Saeed Ameri and Milad Mehdizadkhani

Department of English Language and Literature, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran

ABSTRACT

This article examined the translation of taboo language in English language films subtitled into Persian by Iranian fansubbers. Based on the results, the fansubbers’ strategies towards taboo language translation were classified into maintaining, deleting, mitigating, substituting, and amplifying. Further analysis suggested that their approach was guided by the source culture norms rather than the target culture norms as evidenced by their attempts to keep as many taboos as possible irrespective of the disapproval of the recipient dominant conventions. Such an exercise appears to be a subversion and resistance to the hegemonic doctrine and conservative ideology advocated in the Iranian society and mass media.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 March 2017
Accepted 4 September 2017

KEYWORDS

Fansubbing; taboo language; audiovisual translation; resistance; norms; Persian language

Introduction

Given the culturally unparalleled and ideologically charged constraints for the Iranian society to access foreign cinematic products, the role played by audiovisual translation (AVT) is of undeniable significance. However, there is not much evidence on the effects of power relations, ideology, censorship, or manipulation concerning the translations of audiovisual materials into other languages (Díaz Cintas, 2012b); nevertheless, in recent years, AVT has been witnessing an enormous boom in research, due to the bulk of published books, articles, dissertations, as well as publication of special issues and conference presentations (Gambier & Ramos Pinto, 2016). Additionally, AVT has
provided a fertile ground for the investigation of issues pertaining to ‘power, ideology, dominance, intervention, ethics, identity, and manipulation’ (Díaz Cintas, 2012a, p. 291) because translation is not simply ‘an innocent activity […] and the manipulation of (audiovisual) texts has been a constant over the times and continues to be rife’ (Díaz Cintas, Parini, & Ranzato, 2016, p. iii).

Without making any bold claims, it is safe to conclude that the gap between cultural studies and AVT has already been, to some extent, bridged at least by a number of recent special issues, monographs, and articles on the topic (Chaume & Marset, 2015; De Marco, 2012; Díaz Cintas, 2012b; Díaz Cintas et al., 2016; Keating, 2016; Parini, 2013; Ranzato, 2016; Soler Pardo, 2015, to name but a few); yet such connections have been formed mainly around professional translation, whereas there still exists a huge gap to be filled in terms of cultural studies involving ‘non-professional’ translation; such deficiency is perhaps due to little research interest in non-professional translation (Pérez-González & Susam-Saraeva, 2012). As accurately asserted by Fernández Costales (2013), non-professional translation has only recently received attention from translation scholars; ‘an activity usually frowned upon by academia and professional associations alike’ (p. 87).

Previous studies in the Iranian context (e.g. Ghazizadeh & Mardani, 2011; Kenevisi, Omar, & Daghigh, 2016; Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2014, 2016; Sedighi & Tabrizi, 2012) have been fairly successful in documenting the impacts of the official censorship apparatus on dubbing into Persian in both state-run and privately owned AVT companies even though the number of such studies is yet insufficient. These studies contain evidence regarding the fact that the official censorship apparatus has enforced obligations on producers to make more appropriately dubbed products which conform to the current socio-cultural concerns with emphasis on the suppression of any translations violating the codes and regulations introduced by the authorities. The descriptions stated above hold true for professional or official translations where the notions of taboo language and censorship are well intertwined. However, considering non-professional translation on the Internet, a set of scattered studies (Ameri & Ghazizadeh, 2015; Nord, Khoshsaligheh, & Ameri, 2015) have provided little evidence, implying the fact that both Persian fansubbing and fandubbing tend not to respect the conventional translation norms as for cultural and religious appropriations. Fansubbing, according to Pérez-González (2014), ‘seeks to redress the shortage and cultural insensitivity of commercial translations’ (p. 17), as fansubbers highlight the otherness of the original (Nornes, 2007).

As indicated previously, there is little evidence illustrating the Persian translation of sensitive materials – which are always toned down by the professionals in Persian AVT – such as taboo and strong language in fictional content within Hollywood cinematic products by Iranian non-professional and non-official subtitlers. In the light of the above discussions, the aim of the present research is to study translation strategies employed by non-professional translators when subtitling taboo items into Persian. This study was inspired by the fact that Iranian fansubbers are residents of a country with a dominantly conservative and religious culture where modesty is favoured and even required in public media; such a worldview in Iran is reasonably assumed to affect the way fansubbers deal with sensitive and taboo language in cinematic products.
Theoretical framework

Fansubbing

Translation, i.e. any type of linguistic and cultural mediation, generated with the help of technological advances by unpaid volunteers who have not had any training in the field is called ‘non-professional translation’ (Antonini & Bucaria, 2015, p. 7). Frequently, these so-called non-professional translators are Internet users who usually ‘operate in collaboratively structured environments’ (Orrego-Carmona, 2013, p. 130). The most noticeable form of these fan translations is known as fansubbing, the practice of which has been initially observed in the translations of Japanese animations (O’Hagan, 2009, p. 94).

Japanese animations were imported into the US before 1975, but few of such products reached their intended audience (Leonard, 2005, p. 285). In the case of those imported animations, considerable modifications were applied. As Cubbison (2005) explains the audio-visual market altered ‘the stories and characters to suit their perception of the tastes of American children and their parents’ (p. 52) since the violent and sexual content of these animations did not conform to the idea of sanitizing American children’s television of the time (Leonard, 2005, p. 285).

By the late 1970s, fan clubs were formed in the US, so that the fans could come together and watch the animations on a regular basis. Anime circulation networks became more widespread with the purpose of trading (importing and distributing) videos through vast underground networks (Leonard, 2005). However, there was still a problem regarding the circulation of animations, i.e. the ‘language barrier’ (Cubbison, 2005, p. 48). To overcome this obstacle, fans started producing their own translations so as to ‘provide a more accurate and “authentic” experience of these Japanese products’ (Dwyer, 2012, p. 229). These fans, who had no formal training, subtitled the products quite by instinct (Nornes, 2007, p. 182).

Subtitling ‘by fans for fans’ (Díaz Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006, p. 51) thus came into existence as a result of audiences’ dissatisfaction with the professional and commercial translation of cinematic products, or simply, the lack of translations for these materials (Massidda, 2015; O’Hagan, 2009). Fansubbing or non-professional subtitling has now been extended to non-Japanese products and has developed a broader definition, ‘the subtitling of television drama and films by fans involved in collaborative co-creational practices as part of networked, often transnational collectivities’ (Pérez-González, 2014, pp. 78–79). Presently, fansubbing bears a negative face, while around some years ago its impression was quite positive (Denison, 2011, p. 450). In the case of Iran, however, there exists a combination of both positive and negative views. From the perspective of the Iranian audience, the translation accuracy and technical quality of fan-produced subtitles are subject to criticism; nevertheless, they have provided free and uninhibited access to foreign cinematic products which would have little chance of immediate official translation in Iran, if at all. But from the governmental perspective, they are considered an immediate threat against the established ideological doctrines and the way of life in contemporary Iran.

The practice of non-official and underground subtitling in Iran, according to Naficy (2012a), can be traced back to the 1990s and 2000s when specially American cinematic products were being sold with such subtitles everywhere in Iran and the translation quality of these non-official subtitles were ‘inaccurate and goofy’ as if they had been
rendered using machine translation (p. 342). In the early 2000s, the new technology of CDs and DVDs facilitated the Iranian video stores and customers to easily trade uncensored versions of the products, as indicated by Zeydabadi-Nejad (2016, p. 107). Recently, however, with the ready access to the Internet, many films, with Persian subtitles, are now available online or are shared via flash memories and portable hard drives (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2016, p. 109).

In spite of the widespread, omnipresent fansubbing practices in Iran, Iranian translation scholars have only recently begun to acknowledge and recognize this issue (see Khoshsaligheh & Fazeli Haghpanah, 2016) while their presence has been lately acknowledged internationally.

**Taboo language in Persian**

Taboo can be defined as ‘the prohibition or avoidance in any society of behaviour believed to be harmful to its members’ that might lead to ‘anxiety, embarrassment, or shame’ and has been taken as an ‘extremely strong politeness constraint’, and when it comes to language, certain things are not supposed to be said or referred to (Wardhaugh, 2006, p. 239). Undoubtedly, each culture has its own taboos which might not be recognized as taboo in other cultures. For instance, while reference to alcoholic drinks is forbidden in Iranian culture and Persian language, Anglophone cultures among many others do not recognize reference to alcoholic drinks as taboo. Persian taboo language has not been well-documented and scholarly references are scarce on the topic. Arbab (2012) surveyed and classified taboo in Persian language and culture into: sex, sex and family, animals, animals and family, religion, death and food, among others; by such means, it is shown that Persian has its own taboos as well. The said article was the report of a study on naturally occurring utterances with some degree of taboo force which happen in everyday life, rather than in scripted content on public media. However, national media generally does not tend to show cases of taboo language due to the culturally or legally imposed constraints.

As a general rule, in Iran, authorization is mandatory for exhibition and distribution of any domestic or foreign cultural products, including original or translated films and literature in the Iranian market (Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2016). A set of conventions and laws have been regulated by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to control cultural products of any kind (e.g. films, books, music) and cannot permit the publication and distribution of cultural products which commit offences in regard to (1) religion and ethics, (2) politics and society, and (3) individual and public rights. Thus, in this case, taboo language is considered offensive and the official media would not attempt to make any use of it.

**Norms of AVT in Iran**

Under different conditions, translators carry out the task of translation differently and come up with different translation strategies pertaining to given text types and audiences (Toury, 2012 [1995]). Translation is understood as a social behaviour, which is determined by the socio-cultural constraints in a given society (Schäffner, 2010). For Toury (2012 [1995]), norms are ‘the translation of general values or ideas shared by a community –
as to what would count as right or wrong, adequate or inadequate – into performance instructions appropriate for and applicable to concrete situations’ (p. 63). Thus, these norms serve as standards for understating correct and appropriate behaviour including translational behaviour in a given community (Schäffner, 2010). Consequently, norms turn out to be useful for the study of translators’ behaviours. Considering AVT, however, norms may involve other definitions and possibilities. Initially, there are many agents active in the process of AVT and the translation goes through different phases and is controlled by different agents including production and distribution companies, dubbing directors or adapters who may apply their own norms (Díaz Cintas, 2004, p. 27). Secondly, works dealing with norms within AVT may ‘suffer from being over-ambitious’; in other words, some researchers may wish to cover a corpus of AVT that is too big and spans over several decades (Díaz Cintas, 2004, p. 27). Nonetheless, this does not mean that the chosen texts for analysis should be limited, as suggested by Ranzato (2016, p. 16).

Dubbing in Iran, as the main AVT modality, is carried out by two sectors, namely, the state-run companies (national television studios) and the private sector. The dubbing processes of the two are somewhat similar, although there are also a number of differences (Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2016). As stated in the previous section, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in Iran does not authorize the sale and public screenings of motion pictures if: (1) they deny, weaken, or insult the principle of monotheism and Islamic principles; (2) they deny, manipulate, or damage other fundamentals of Islam; (3) they insult the heavenly prophets, the innocent imams, the supreme jurisprudence, the ruling council, or the jurisprudence; (4) they blaspheme the values and personalities held sacred by Islam and other religions; (5) they negate the equality of all people regardless of colour, race, language, ethnicity, and belief, or if they incite racial and ethnic differences or make fun of them; (6) they negate or violate the high value of humans; (7) they encourage wickedness, corruption, and prostitution; (8) they encourage or teach dangerous addictions and earning a living by unsavoury means; (9) they facilitate foreign cultural, economic, and political influence contrary to government’s policy; (10) they express anything that is against the interests and policies of the country; (11) they show details of scenes of murder, violent crimes, and torture in such a way as to disturb or mislead viewers; (12) they misrepresent historical and geographical facts; (13) they present rough and abnormal images and sounds, in such a way that endangers the health and safety of spectators; and (14) they lower the taste of spectators through low production and artistic values (Azimi, 2010, pp. 403–405 translated by Naficy, 2012b, pp. 189–191).

According to Zeydabadi-Nejad (2010, p. 54), these redlines and codes of censorship ‘are blurred and open to negotiation’. Previous investigations into Persian dubbing broadcast by both the state and privately run companies clearly showed that dubbed films or series strictly respected the said rules, and signs of manipulation and censorship in terms of the sensitive issues like taboo language of any kind, i.e. political, cultural, or religious, can be observed (Ghazizadeh & Mardani, 2011; Kenevisi et al., 2016; Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2014, 2016; Sedighi & Tabrizi, 2012). Moreover, studies on non-professional AVT into Persian have suggested that they do tend to violate the said rules along with opting for a more source text-oriented approach highlighting the foreignness and otherness of the original text (Ameri & Ghazizadeh, 2015; Nord et al., 2015).
A review of the seminal literature on the topic showed the strategies employed by professional AVT practitioners. The survey results depict the various solutions in different AVT modalities for different languages: taboo to taboo, deletion, taboo to non-taboo, and euphemism in Persian dubbing (Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2014); euphemism, omission, and manipulation in Persian dubbing (Sedighi & Tabrizi, 2012); taboo to taboo, taboo to non-taboo, reducing the effect of taboo, increasing the effect of taboo, compensation, and manipulation in Persian dubbing (Ghazizadeh & Mardani, 2011); literal translation, loan, calque, explicitation, substitution, transposition, lexical recreation, omission, and reformulations in Spanish subtitling (Ávila-Cabrera, 2015); transfer encompassing toning up, maintaining, and toning down, and non-transfer including neutralization and omission in Spanish subtitling (Ávila-Cabrera, 2016); un-translation, over-formal translation, rendition into Putonghua and euphemisms in Chinese subtitling (Chen, 2004); and category shift, omission, literal translation, and de-swearin in Chinese subtitling (Han & Wang, 2014).

With the advent of globalization and technology in addition to the ubiquity of non-professional translation in Iran, further studies particularly with socio-cultural perspectives are necessary to evidence the various dimensions of subtitling by fans.

**Methodology**

The present study is an attempt to describe how the taboo language, according to the contemporary Iranian society and publishing guidelines, is handled in a corpus of Persian subtitles of English-speaking feature films which were translated and subtitled by fans and were then made accessible on the Internet. More precisely, this article addresses the following questions:

1. What is the taxonomy of the strategies used by Persian fansubbers in the rendition of taboo language in English-speaking feature films?
2. Do Persian fansubbers tend to observe the norms of the source or of the target language in the rendition of taboo language?

The corpus of the study comprised eight English-speaking feature films alongside their fan-produced Persian subtitles available online. The corpus was mainly selected and formed based on three criteria: (1) features in English language, (2) a wide range of taboos used, and (3) availability of fan-produced Persian subtitles. Fifty-five films (released in 2006–2016) were initially listed and selected based on the authors’ personal experiences, as well as advice and consultation with friends and colleagues. The films were in different genres including action, adventure, comedy, crime, drama, horror, and science fiction. After a careful review of the films according to the three criteria, five cases did not fit and were excluded. As an analysis of the fifty films in two languages in such detail was not possible, eight cases were selected to form the final corpus, based on a simple random sampling technique. In the random selection, ‘every unit in the sampling frame has an equal chance of being selected’ (Mellinger & Hanson, 2017, p. 11). The random selection was used to help remove any bias for or against any distinctive qualities such as genre. Eventually, the sample included *Deadpool* (Miller, 2016), *Spy* (Feig, 2015), *Inherent Vice* (Anderson, 2014), *Wrong Cops* (Dupieux, 2013), *The Hateful Eight*
(Tarantino, 2015), Black Mass (Cooper, 2015), The Interview (Rogen & Goldberg, 2014), and Grown Ups 2 (Dugan, 2013).

To study the notion of taboo language in the selected films, the analysis was based on the empirical and locally relevant framework proposed by Sharifi and Darchinian (2009) as well as the guidelines proposed by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Azimi, 2010) in which the notion of inappropriateness has been defined in terms of Persian conventions and traditions. The guidelines were consulted to establish what might be taken as taboo or inappropriate content which jeopardize authorization of the distribution of a translation. The framework by Sharifi and Darchinian (2009; translated by Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2014, p. 28) introduced the following as taboo in the original for the attention of the Persian language translators: (1) private relations between men and women whether legitimate or illegitimate and words related to them such as kissing, hugging, sleeping with, and cheating on; (2) boys’ and girls’ relations before marriage like boyfriend, girlfriend, etc.; (3) calling or naming outer sexual organs and related words; (4) words and expressions related to alcoholic drinks and drugs; (5) swearing, curse, and impolite expressions; stating features of immoral behaviours and habits like thieving, etc.; (6) issues related to religion and belief which are against those of the translator’s society; and (7) stating some political issues which are rather threatening to the translator’s society and cause some political situations to remain highly unstable.

In the first step, the original films were viewed along with their original English transcripts in order to extract the taboos. After gathering the instances of taboo, each segment containing such language was compared to its translation in Persian. To achieve descriptive validity (Dörnyei, 2007; Maxwell, 1992), the authors analysed the data independently, but later reviewed the analyses of each other and negotiated to reach an agreement in the case of a few differing views in identifying the taboos and determining the strategies used in the translation of taboo language.

The samples in the results section are presented in a particular manner for the ease of distinction and understanding. Within the text, every quoted segment from the film dialogues is italicized and enclosed in parentheses, and the taboo item is underlined. Within the tables, normal font is used to show the quoted segments, but the taboo item is underlined. Also, mere taboo items appearing in the text are enclosed within inverted commas in normal font.

Results

Taxonomy of the strategies

In response to the first research question, the source and target dialogue exchanges of the eight English feature films were compared against each other to determine the taxonomy of the translation strategies employed by the Persian fansubbers. A careful review of the coupled segments suggested the repeated use of the following strategies in the rendition of taboo language items into Persian: (1) maintaining – the taboo language item is directly translated to a taboo language item in Persian with the same force; (2) substituting – the taboo language item is translated to something which is not regarded as taboo in Persian; (3) mitigating – the force of the taboo item is reduced in the translation; (4) deleting – the taboo item is totally omitted in the translation; and (5) amplifying – the non-taboo item
with a weak contextual taboo implicature in the original is translated as a taboo in the translation.

Initially, some examples from the qualitative analysis of the corpus are presented to show how the strategies were applied, and the quantitative results are discussed later.

**Maintaining**

According to the quantitative analysis, maintaining is by far the most recurrent strategy in the corpus (see Table 7). This strategy involves a direct translation of the original taboo into another taboo item in the target culture with similar force. An indicative example can be cited from the film *The Interview* (Rogen & Goldberg, 2014). The example in Table 1 contains certain instances of taboo language which were rendered by maintaining the force of the original taboo. In this example, taboo language can be observed in various forms, including intensifiers (*the fucking helicopter*), descriptions (*hot and super sexy*), questions (*Did you get in there?*), and statements (*I fucked her in the helicopter*). All such instances are taboo subjects in Iran because they make reference to locally perceived sinful and immoral behaviour which is against the Islamic tradition predominantly followed in Iran (Arbab, 2012); thus they are in breach of the seventh rule of the cinematic regulations (Azimi, 2010).

If such language is to be presented to the public as a form of dubbing, then according to the Ministry’s instructions, it needs to be altered or simply excluded because the Iranian gatekeeping authorities tend ‘to protect the citizens from imported [indecent] ideas’ (Naficy, 2012b, p. 154). For example, ‘nudity, sexuality, and sexual relations [have been] banned outright in the society’; thus their representations or even their mentions in the Iranian public media are controlled and prevented (Naficy, 2012b, p. 154).

The example shown in Table 1 reveals that the fansubbers have fully transferred the original taboo into the Persian rendition and only in the case of intensifiers, the word ‘fucking’ was not kept in the translation.

**Deleting**

Although far less frequent than maintaining, deleting the taboo item is the second most reoccurring strategy in the corpus (see Table 7). The use of this strategy was mainly observed in the case of intensifiers. A common function of swearing in English is to emphasize and intensify a given statement using words like ‘bloody’, ‘damn’, or ‘fucking’ and a main characteristic of these swear words is that they are understood as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. An instance of maintaining from <em>The Interview</em> (Rogen &amp; Goldberg, 2014).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Context:</strong> Aaron is talking about his trip to China to see Sook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Original</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron: The fucking helicopter landed. I’m in the middle of nowhere. Two soldiers jumped out. I think I’m gonna get killed. Then, out comes Sook. I told you about her. She comes out of the helicopter. <em>She’s hot, super sexy</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David: How hot? Did you get in there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron: Yeah, I fucked her in the helicopter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David: My fucking man!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron: The helicopter landed. I was in the middle of nowhere. Two soldiers jumped out. I thought I was going to get killed. Then, Sook came out. I told you about her. She came out of the helicopter. <em>She was so pretty, super sexy.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David: How beautiful? Did you sleep with her?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron: Yeah, I fucked her in the helicopter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David: My buddy!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
taboo (Ljung, 2011). Such swear words were the most deleted items in the selected corpus; and it has to be mentioned that in Persian swearing itself is a taboo subject (Arbab, 2012; Sharifi & Darchinian, 2009). However, the frequent choice of deletion of these taboo items should not be interpreted ideologically, because the fansubbers did maintain so many other taboo items in their renditions as discussed in the previous section. This act of deletion can be better explained as a contrastive linguistic issue between Persian and English as it is not very customary in the former to use swearing in this manner. This is not to say that the Persian language does not accommodate swearing to intensify or emphasize, but evidently it does this much less than the English language does and in much more limited situations.

An instance of deleting intensifiers was found in the rendition of the question (What the hell just happened?) into (What happened? [Back translation]) in Grown Ups 2 (Dugan, 2013). As another example, (She’s highly fucking skilled) in Spy (Feig, 2015) was translated as ‘She’s highly skilled [Back translation]’. The reason for the omission of intensifiers, when used in the form of an adjective or adverb in particular, is simply a contrastive linguistic issue between the two languages.

The example in Table 2 contains certain instances of taboo language, such as ‘goddamn’ from The Hateful Eight (Tarantino, 2015), which were deleted in the fansubbed version. It is unclear why some of the intensifiers, which could readily be translated into Persian, were not rendered and were skipped over untranslated. To give an example, (this goddamn mountain) and (my goddamn letter) in the same example could be easily rendered into Persian as (this damned mountain [Back translation]) and (this damned letter [Back translation]). This also betrays the Persian fansubbers’ low linguistic competence.

### Mitigating

The third most frequent strategy is mitigating the potentially offensive expression which is used about the same amount as deleting (see Table 7). In this strategy, the force of the taboo in the original is normally toned down in the suggested equivalents. For instance, in the sample corpus (Table 3), segments (Because I don’t remember your fucking name?) and (I don’t give a shit what your name is) were rendered into Persian as (Because I don’t remember your damned name? [Back translation]) and (I don’t care what your name is at all [Back translation]), respectively. In these examples, two swear words ‘fucking’ and ‘give a shit’ were used, and although a number of Persian equivalents for the said instances with similar taboo force could be thought of, the fansubbers did not make use of the equivalents of the same force and opted for a mitigated version. It is difficult to understand why the fansubbers resorted to the mitigating strategy at times while more obvious choices were available. Perhaps, it is due to the lack of formal training of the Iranian fansubbers in translation and their unfamiliarity with the pragmatic function of taboos.

---

**Table 2.** An instance of deleting from The Hateful Eight (Tarantino, 2015).

| Context: Major Marquis punched Daisy in the face because she ruined his letter |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| **Original** | **Back-Translation from Persian** |
| John: I didn’t drag her stinking ass up this goddamn mountain just for you to break her neck on the outskirts of town. Major Marquis: You the one handed her my goddamn letter | John: I didn’t drag this slackass up this mountain just for you to break her neck on the outskirts of town. Major Marquis: You were the one who handed her the letter. |
Nonetheless, often the lack of ready-made equivalents in Persian for foreign taboo words could be the reason: for example, ‘honey-dicking’ in The Interview (Rogen & Goldberg, 2014) was simply translated as (making an ass of somebody [Back translation]) and the slang (You’re such a dickhead) in Wrong Cops (Dupieux, 2013) was rendered as (You’re such a softhead [Back translation]) in the fansubbed versions under the investigation. The difference in the functional effect of the taboo in the source text and the equivalent produced in the target text is notable.

The example in Table 3 illustrates some instances of taboo language such as ‘fucking’ or ‘give a shit’ from Spy (Feig, 2015) which were mitigated in the fansubbed version.

**Substituting**

One of the least reoccurring strategies in the corpus is substituting the taboo item in the original with something unrelated in the target text, which is almost as infrequent as amplifying (see Table 7). The instance in Table 4 illustrates an excerpt from Deadpool (Miller, 2016) and the translation in which a taboo item is substituted. In the translation, the segment (I don’t take the shits) was replaced with (There’s no benefit in it for me [Back translation]) in the target subtitle. This original taboo which is slang denotes (I’m not gonna fight with them) and here ‘shits’ is a disrespectful way of making reference to an individual or individuals. The translation is distant from the original in that it lacks any taboo force. The infrequent use of substituting strategy by the fansubbers readily leads to the interpretation that besides their disregard for official obligations, they are not ideologically motivated to reduce the taboo force. The occurrence of this strategy could perhaps be due to their relatively poor command of the foreign language and as such misunderstanding of the source text or perhaps occasional impulses.

**Amplifying**

The other of the least reoccurring strategies in the corpus under analysis is amplifying, which is used almost as infrequently as the substituting strategy (see Table 7). In the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. An instance of mitigating in Spy (Feig, 2015).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Context</strong>: Rayna and Frederick are on a flight. Suddenly Frederick points a gun at Rayna, trying to kill her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Original</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rayna: Because I don’t remember your fucking name?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frederick: Let’s just say there’s some people who really want what you’re selling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rayna: You don’t have to do this. I can give you a very comfortable life, Col…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frederick: You forgot my name again, didn’t you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rayna: Fuck. I don’t give a shit what your name is</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. An instance of substituting in Deadpool (Miller, 2016).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Context</strong>: Deadpool is trying to set up a bar fight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Original</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The bar’s owner: Remind me what good will come of this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deadpool: I don’t take the shits, I just disturb them</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
amplifying strategy, a non-taboo item in the original is rendered as a taboo item in the translation, or an item with implied taboo force is replaced with an item with a word or phrase with explicit taboo force. That is, the equivalent in the target text openly explicates an implicit, yet inferable, taboo undertone.

Several reasons for resorting to the amplifying strategy by the fansubbers could be hypothesized. Most often, the strategy was applied to explicitate an implied taboo force in the translation.

The example in Table 5 shows an application of the amplifying strategy observed in a segment from *The Interview* (Rogen & Goldberg, 2014). The table illustrates that the implied taboo in the phrase ‘all-over close-up’ is explicitated as *(We want them to come [to ejaculate] in close-ups [Back translation]).* Here the exchange relates to a pornographic issue which is an excessively forbidden taboo in the Iranian public culture, illustrating an immoral behaviour. In this example, David is taking this pornographic reference as a metaphor to illustrate the practice of their own television channel. He asserts that killing the leader of North Korea live on television is like a ‘money shot’ in pornography. Our focus of analysis is here on the phrase *(We want the all-over close-up. All over his face)* which can both make reference to the pornographic issue and the North Korean leader but the fansubbers seemed to have taken the pornographic reference and explicitated the inferred one into an obvious taboo.

Additionally misinterpretation of the original has also resulted in the rendition of an amplified taboo in the translation. To further illustrate, the instance proposed here is from *Grown Ups 2* (Dugan, 2013) in which the sentence *(I don’t got to go to the bathroom)* is rendered as *(I do not jerk off [Back translation]) in the Persian version, while ‘to urinate’ was simply meant in the original and did not relate to ‘masturbation’. The generated taboo denotes masturbation, associated with an immoral act and is prohibited in the Islamic tradition that is dominantly followed in Iran.

Another case of the application of amplifying strategy from the Persian fansubbed version of the same film can also be cited. In this example, an amplifying of taboo force – perhaps inadvertently – by the fansubbers is observed. In one scene it is seen that when Lenny is looking for his daughter’s doll, he notices a gay man and tells him *(you’re not fooling around with my wife and you got a pee stain).* This sentence was translated as *(don’t fool around with my wife and you seem to have jacked off [Back translation]) in the target language. The misunderstanding of the original led to the emergence of a taboo in the translation making reference to ‘masturbation’, an obvious taboo concept for the Iranian public audience to be exposed to.

Besides explicitating purposes or misunderstanding, the results of the analysis of the corpus indicated another function of this strategy. The analysis revealed that the
fansubbers employed amplifying as a solution to enhance the humour in the translation and make the film funnier and more entertaining for the target audience. In this regard, the Persian rendition of the sentence (they’re all lame-ass teacher’s pets!) from Deadpool (Miller, 2016) can be a clarifying example. As in the original, the phrase ‘teacher’s pet’ means the teacher’s favourite student who receives extra attention yet is not a taboo concept in Persian. Nevertheless, in the subtitle, it was rendered into Persian as (they’re all lame-ass [Back translation]) which is an obvious swear word.

To recap, the taxonomy of the strategies which the Persian fansubbers in our sample corpus utilized in dealing with taboo language, was elaborated by examples extracted from the corpus. In order to provide the overall picture, in the following section descriptive statistical information regarding the strategies is presented.

Source or target culture norms observed?

Overall in the entire corpus including both original and fansubbed versions, a total of 1156 taboo instances were identified (Table 6). It is worth noting that several taboo items were found in the subtitled versions which were absent or very implicit in the original. That is why the strategy amplifying was introduced, which encompassed 15 instances. Thus, the number 1156 refers to taboo items in both original and fansubbed versions.

As can be seen in Tables 7 and 8, the most frequent strategy is maintaining which was used 861 times (74.48%) in the entire corpus. The next most frequently used strategies by far were deleting (13.32%) and mitigating (9.43%). The remaining strategies, substituting and amplifying, were employed considerably fewer times (1.47% and 1.30%, respectively).

Persian fansubbers appeared to be mainly inclined towards the socio-cultural norms of the source culture (Toury, 2012 [1995], considering that Persian translation conventions do not accept such a number of taboo language intact transferences. Importantly, the official AVT tradition in Iran, especially dubbing, involves a different pattern as shown by earlier studies (Ghazizadeh & Mardani, 2011; Kenevisi et al., 2016; Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2014, 2016; Sedighi & Tabrizi, 2012), in that, the taboo language in the original material would be severely blocked by deleting, substituting, or at least mitigating.

Taken together, the findings on the use of strategies in rendition of taboo language seemed to point to the fact that the Persian fansubbers tended to observe the norms of the source culture as opposed to the official AVT tradition and noncompliant with publication and screening regulations in Iran. Although deleting was the second most frequent strategy, it was discussed that the omissions were not ideologically driven and the linguistic differences between English and Persian as well as the fansubbers’ limited command of the foreign language were mostly suspected to result in such omissions. Overall, the fansubbers evidently appeared to submit themselves to the norms of the source culture; hence, the second research question was addressed.

### Table 6. Frequency of taboo items identified in the corpus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deadpool</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>Spy</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inherent Vice</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Wrong Cops</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hateful Eight</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>Black Mass</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Interview</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>Grown Ups 2</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1156</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion and conclusion

The overall goal of this study was to present a snapshot of fansubbing practice in Iran in terms of translation of taboo language as well as to identify the possible regularities about the strategies employed by the Persian fansubbers. The study also explored the norm-related regularities of these strategies from the perspective of current AVT conventions in the Iranian context. Based on the analyses of a corpus of Internet-mediated fansubbings, there was evidence to conclude that the fansubbers did tend to preserve the key cultural features of the original material, taboo language here, in their Persian translation because such ‘translations are unofficial and therefore do not undergo a legal check’ (Muñoz Sánchez, 2009, p. 178). It was not unexpected that fansubbing did not follow the conventional norms of the target community as shown in other empirical research (e.g. Manchon, 2013; Massidda, 2015).

The results revealed that the Iranian fansubbing situation resembled that of the Italian scene; Massidda (2015) and Beseghi (2016) found that the Italian fansubbers opted for a faithful and uncensored version of the original, unlike the conventional official translational practice, suggesting that the priority of the Italian fansubbers was also the untapped transfer of the source cultural load. This also matches the finding of an article by Izwaini (2014) who showed that strong language is not toned down or omitted in the Arabic fansubbing. It can be evidently concluded that similar to the Italian and Arabic contexts, the Iranian fansubbers are more inclined towards a source-oriented approach and favour a more adequate translation in terms of Toury’s (2012 [1995]) initial norms. Reasonably, this could stem from the public viewers’ reaction against the cultural gate-keeping and ideological censorship established in official dubbing in the Iranian mainstream media.

We assume that the current fansubbing movement in Iran is a case of resistance to the mainstream state-supported ideology which strongly advocates modesty and chastity since ‘the post-revolution state in Iran is based on Islam as its ideology’ (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010, p. 35). A considerable portion of the Iranian people might not consciously defy the doctrine yet watch a legally banned product which counts as a practice against the established

Table 7. Overall frequency of the strategies in the entire corpus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining</td>
<td>861</td>
<td>74.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deleting</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>13.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitigating</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>9.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substituting</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amplifying</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1156</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. Frequency of the strategies per original film.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Deadpool</th>
<th>Inherent</th>
<th>Vice</th>
<th>The Hateful</th>
<th>Eight</th>
<th>Spy</th>
<th>Wrong</th>
<th>Cops</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Mass</th>
<th>Grown Ups</th>
<th>The Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deleting</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitigating</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substituting</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amplifying</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ideology and doctrine (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2016, p. 110). Although Zeydabadi-Nejad (2016) approaches the topic from a reception perspective, the same perspective can be applied to agents facilitating such prohibited activities and products against the government’s doctrines. That might be the reason that fansubbing is sometimes considered a locus of activism and resistance against any type of conservative practice like censorship (Antonini & Bucaria, 2015). As Nornes (1999) rightly states, fansubbing is rejecting and refusing the practices of professional subtitling in which a very strict target-oriented translation is preferred. In a similar vein, Strowe (2013, p. 137) adds, ‘if conformity to norms indicates an acceptance of existing power narratives in a culture, then the subversion of those norms represents a resistance of power’.

It should be noted that the practice of fansubbing was indeed born as first and foremost a resistance to the repression of the Japanese audiovisual products in the US (Leonard, 2005). Although the Persian dubbing tradition produces appropriated and ‘culturally odourless’ (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 27) translations as far as the taboo language is concerned, fansubbers’ subversive, norm-breaking ‘mediation of commercial media content is driven by a desire to undermine and tamper with the industrial context of production’ that fosters ‘culturally odourless’ translations (Pérez-González, 2012, p. 336; see also Pérez-González, 2014, for a discussion on aesthetic and political subtitling activism). To put it differently, by presenting a foreignized translation, fansubbers offer ‘a more accurate and “authentic” experience’ of the original content (Dwyer, 2012, pp. 228–230).

Finally, more research on the many aspects of fansubbing is required to clearly manifest the various forms of subversion and resistance that fansubbers pursue. Further research is recommended to benefit larger corpora for more generalizability of the results as well as investigation of this non-professional practice across various genres, and languages, among other relevant variables. Additionally, supplementary research is suggested to interview a sample of the Persian fansubbers to explore their attitudes in depth. Other research methods with a focus on the fansubbers’ habitus, world views, and ideological biases will prove useful in a full portrayal of their cultural identity. On a more critical note, the effects of such subversive yet non-professional translation on Persian society and culture are also inconclusive and therefore open to investigation.

All in all, the authors hope that the present study, although preliminary, could partly contribute to the fields of AVT, translation studies, cultural studies, and fandom studies by exploring a multidisciplinary yet untapped area in the Iranian locale.

Note


Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Masood Khoshsaligheh is associate professor at the Department of English Language and Literature at Ferdowsi University of Mashad where he is program coordinator for MA and PhD in
transformation studies. He is on the editorial board of several international journals including *International Journal of Society, Culture and Language* and *SKASE Journal of Translation and Interpretation*. His research interests include translator education and audiovisual translation.

**Saeed Ameri** is a PhD student in translation studies at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad where he works as a research and teaching assistant. He holds a BA in translation and interpreting from Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman and an MA in translation studies from Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. Saeed is a member of the National Elites Foundation in Iran. He was chosen as top student at the Department of English Language and Literature in 2016. His main research interests are audiovisual translation and non-professional translation.

**Milad Mehdizadkhani** earned his BA in translation and interpreting from the University of Zanjan in 2012. During his Master’s studies, he was an exchange student at the University of Warsaw. In 2016, he received his MA in translation studies from Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. He is recently admitted to start his PhD at the Department of English Applied Linguistics at the University of Szeged, Hungary.

**ORCID**

Masood Khoshsaligheh [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6508-1986](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6508-1986)
Saeed Ameri [http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7706-0552](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7706-0552)
Milad Mehdizadkhani [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3453-4065](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3453-4065)

**References**


Azimi, M. (2010). *The collection of laws and regulations by the ministry of culture and Islamic guidance*. Tehran, Iran: Khane Ketab.


M. KHOSHSALIGHEH ET AL.


Ghazizadeh, K., & Mardani, V. (2011). بررسی راهبردهای متراکمان در ترجمه ناپایداری کردن دوبله فیلم های. [Investigating the strategies employed by the translators in dealing with western taboos in English dubbed movies into Persian]. Language and Translation Studies, 45(1), 85–100.


**Filmography**


