

***Reception and Consumption of Korean TV drama by Asian audiences:  
The Fansubbing Phenomenon***

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Changes in the new media environment are radically shifting the ways audiences consume media products like foreign language TV dramas. The rapid expansion of broadband internet and the development of mobile technology in Asia are changing how Asian fans of these media products interact with each other. The purpose of this study is to examine the reception and distribution process of Korean TV dramas to Asian audiences. For instance, fans of the "Korean Wave" in Asia interact with other fans by participating in discussions about TV drama plots and characters on online communities, exchange amateur-translated subtitles and also comment on the translations. This study will particularly focus on the practice of exchanging fansubs (amateur translations by fans) on fan-based internet forums centered on TV dramas with the purpose of examining the translation process of fansubbers and the operating procedure of fansubbing.

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The cultural productions of South Korea, once peripheral, has emerged and increased its exports and market share in the international audiovisual market in recent years (Cunningham and Jacka, 1996; Keane, 2006). "Hallyu," which literally means "Korean Wave," represents the growing popularity of Korean cultural products all over the world. The popularity of Korean media culture, including TV dramas, has now fully blossomed in China and many other Asian countries (Jin, 2007; Mee, 2005).

Since the late 1990's, high speed broadband Internet access has made it easy for internet users around the world to quickly download and share large audiovisual files. These changes in the communications environment is giving rise to radical shifts in the ways audiences consume media products. Korea is also one of the highly wired countries in the world, where more than 90 percent of urban households are connected to high-speed broadband services. In this kind of environment, it is inevitable that viewership trends would be affected. With the advent of Internet technology that breaks down physical geographical barriers, people with shared interests gather in cyberspace and form communities. Logan (2010) refers to the term New Media as "those digital media that are interactive, incorporate two-way communication, and involve some form of computing as opposed to "old media" such as the telephone, radio, and TV" (p.4). In this new media environment, the viewers are able to engage in active participation and share critical observations about these media products which ultimately make them less susceptible to cultural domination and be more critically aware.

As mentioned above, the rapid distribution of high-speed Internet contributed to the research paradigm of the fan culture phenomena, shifting from 'passive audience' to 'active audience'. Jenkins (1992) classified the members of online fan communities as a special category of media audiences that are more active than other common media audiences. He stated that fans are like consumers who also produce readers who also write, spectators who also participate. It is widely accepted that without the limitation of time and space, Internet enhances the fandom.

An increasing trend among TV viewership among the youth all around the world is the engaging in social media while viewing and need to discuss the dramas with other people. A growing number of people are watching television programs on computers and mobile devices. Since the late 1990's, high speed broadband Internet access has made it easy for Internet users to quickly download and share large audiovisual files. These changes in the communications environment is giving rise to radical shifts in the ways audiences consume media products. This provides viewers with multiple opportunities to engage with a particular piece of content and it also makes it possible for content to be shared in a diverse manner. Hundreds of Internet fan-sites have sprung up on-line which allows fans to participate in on-line discussions about plotlines and favorite characters. Korean TV dramas are fast becoming one of the most popular and shared contents on these Internet boards. Accordingly, there has been a big demand for subtitles for these programs and amateur translators on these discussion boards are the ones who provide the content for these viewers. The viewers exchange fansubs in order to understand the contents and have interactions about the contents of the subtitles.

With the development of high-speed broadband technology and the increasing popularity of the fansubbing practice, online forums based on sharing subtitles are gaining popularity. And with the viewing practices of the young generation are rapidly shifting, moving away from their TV screens or movie theaters and consuming audiovisual cultural products on their computers and smart phones.

Although these amateur subtitlers are happy to distribute their work freely, they have to remain low-profile about their practice, unwilling to reveal too much about their identity to the general public. The online sites and communities are important platforms for ordinary fans to interact with fansubbers. These fansubbers announce the completion of their subtitle works and post the download links. And the viewers, who eagerly wait for the latest installment of their favorite American drama or sitcom, download the release of newly subbed work.

With the popularization of high-speed broadband Internet, the sharing of the latest media products have been made easy with uploading and downloading services that are prevalent on the Internet. Despite some shady legal implications, numerous video sharing websites have become as easily accessible by just the click of the mouse. And with the demand for high-quality American popular media products have increased the demand for subtitles foreign films, especially American TV shows.

### **Literature Review on Audiovisual Translation and Fansubbing**

Fansubbing is a very distinct art of translation both with the limitations of audiovisual translation, but at the same time somewhat free of the restrictions of the practice. It is not an overstatement to say that, fansubbers have employed some translation skills that are distinctive from traditional subtitling practices. This study will describe some of the practices shown in the fan-made subtitles of an American sitcom program by comparing it with a more traditional set of subtitle broadcast of the same program on a cable channel. I will attempt to show that there is much more diversity and individualism in fansubs and there may be implications on these practices encouraging more innovative practices in audiovisual translation in the future.

In audiovisual translation, the translated text is produced in a specific context with specific recipients, communicative functions, and so on. Translators are always faced with the problem of how to treat the cultural aspects implicit in the source text and of finding the most appropriate technique of successfully conveying these aspects in the target language. Culture is a multifaceted concept that encompasses a wide range of explicit and implicit factors and characteristics. The translator must be equipped with the competence to analyze the specific context of the source text and be aware of the cultural and linguistic constraints that are involved in producing a specific type of target text. We will examine how the amateur subs that are uploaded on this site compare with the standards set by professional translators in the field.

Translators in the audiovisual field have to engage with elaborate multisemiotic texts. We have to keep in mind that language and culture interrelate and take on a special significance. Audiences of foreign films encounter sociocultural systems which might be similar in some cases, but differ substantially from their own experience in others. audiovisual translators must decipher and filter meaning on different levels (aural, visual, verbal, nonverbal) before deciding on an appropriate rendering that will

hopefully make sense to their target audience. TV and film are comprehensive texts containing not only verbal information, but also image, sound, music and signs. Gottlieb (2005) states that there are four channels that to be considered during subbing foreign television programs or films. They are:

- The verbal auditory channel, including dialogue, background voices, and sometimes lyrics.
- The non-verbal auditory channel, including music, natural sound and sound effects.
- The verbal visual channel, including superimposed titles and written signs on the screen.
- The non-verbal visual channel: picture composition and flow.

It goes without saying that these channels should be considered when translating audiovisual texts. Pak (2012) has noted that as “paralinguistic features including intonation and stress patterns, gestures and facial expressions affect meaning, both verbal and nonverbal utterances are supposed to be conveyed into subtitles” (p.19).

O’Hagan (2007) focuses on the creativity shown by amateur translators and comments that the trend of fan-based subtitles and translation had developed with success of the Harry Potter series of books where underground translations were made available by fans that provided amateur translations before the official versions were published. In a study that focuses on academic acknowledgement of fansubbing, Diaz-Cintas (2004) comments on the development on the latest technologies such as DVD and the Internet and outline the fansubbing phenomenon. Diaz-Cintaz (2005) also stresses that fan-created subtitles shared among internet forum users are much less dogmatic and more creative than institutional subtitles on regular TV programs. In a study on the fansubbing process of Japanese animation, Diaz-Cintas and Sanchez (2006) examines the unique features of fansubs and also ponders on the legality and ethics involved in the phenomenon.

In another study on Japanese anime, Ortabasi (2006) focuses on fansubbed translators notes and points out that some fansubbers employ the technique of ‘thick translation’ and explains that the distinct features of digital technology will enable the fansubber to add on supplementary textual material which will provide the viewer with further information. As Pérez-González (2006) has predicted, scholarly interest in fansubbing has expanded exponentially. These researchers have focused on the emerging trend of fansubbing and have offered their valuable insights and the process of fansubbing will continue to challenge will challenge basic western assumptions about the nature of translation.

### **Unique Features of Fansubbing**

For the purpose of this study, an online site called Gita Migug Drama Gallery (Other American Drama Gallery, [http://gall.dcinside.com/list.php?id=f\\_drama](http://gall.dcinside.com/list.php?id=f_drama)) was examined to find out how viewers congregate and discuss their viewership. The viewers on this online site gather not only to talk about the programs but share in the distribution of subtitles of American programs translated by non-professionals who upload their work without any expectations of monetary rewards. Fansubs are posted on the online discussion sites and users can download freely and easily. The

translators comment about the difficulty of translating certain cultural terms, and explain the meanings behind them. Discussions on translation errors are posted by other users. It is a truly interactive process.

The study will also compare and analyze examples from both institutionalized subtitles (authorized translations on cable TV stations by professional translators) and fansubbed versions (fan-produced amateur translations). Upon examination, we can see that this new form of Internet subtitling by amateur translators employs more creative and individualistic strategies of translation than conventional translations done by professionals. The following are some of the idiosyncratic features of fansubs that were found on the above online site.

### **Annotations**

American TV programs, especially sitcom genre which is the focus of this study, contain numerous allusions, puns and cultural references, which are very difficult to translate. A popular strategy, widely adopted in fansubbing practice, is annotations. Annotations, which are essentially the amateur fansubber's explanations, are usually not allowed in conventional subtitling for movies or broadcast TV programs.

The fansubbers provide annotations on cultural references, allusions, background information on proper nouns that appear on screen and particularly explanations of jokes or puns that may go over the head of the foreign viewers who are viewing the program.

The annotations are placed in parenthesis or appear on the top of the screen. Diaz-Cintas (2005) has analyzed this feature in fansubbed Japanese animes, and this is also a prominent feature in the examples of the fansubs I present in this study. It is a logical strategy on the part of the translator to communicate with the viewers, eliminate cultural barriers and enhance comprehension of the contents of the text.

### **Direct Comments**

The fansubbers occasionally interact directly with the viewers by adding comments in the subtitles, expressing their opinions, feelings, and judgments on what is happening on screen. Comparing to annotations, comments are much less formal and more idiosyncratic.

### **Interaction**

The fansubbers often email addresses or post translation reviews on the forums citing the cultural references that appear in the particular program and the users offer feedback or point out the mistranslation in the subtitles.

As outlined in the above, a significant reason people join online communities is the desire to receive and share information. The sharing of the knowledge on cultural references and background information through annotations, comments and interaction fulfill members' need for knowledge and information about American culture. Meanwhile, passing on the knowledge to members in the community reassures fansubbers' identity as culture disseminators, which brings them the

psychological payoff for being higher in the hierarchy of knowledge and the actual respect from other members.

The study confirms that another primary reason for foreign TV drama fans to become members of fansubbing community is to express their interest in the shows and to share the fascination with others who also have the same interest. Fansubbers' adding comments, prefaces and postscripts increases the interactivity of the fansubtitles and creates a sense communication with the audiences in front of the screens, which satisfies fans' desire to discuss their interest with others. Seo (2010) has outlined how foreign feature films can also enhance people's intercultural awareness. The intercultural contents contained in the subtitles produce a special kind of humor that can be appreciated by people with both bilingual cultural competence. These insider jokes also serve as a power to bind members together, generating a sense of sharing understanding. Sometimes this information takes a guidance role in creating a sense of shared views, opinions and historical loyalty to the show that in some level consolidates the whole community.

The Fansubbers' self-empowered and self-commissioned practice and their diverse translation skills prove that translation is a process in which established standards and conventions can be challenged. Individualism and intervention is crucial; and the role of the translator is very visible indeed. Efforts should also be made to approach fansubbing from cultural and political perspectives. The practices of fansubbing within the academic field of Audiovisual Translation Studies should be further explored and discussed in the future.

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