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Subtitling in the Iranian Mediascape: Towards a Culture-Specific Typology

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Abstract

Given the increasing pace of dissemination of cultural content across global borders, subtitling as a cost-effective solution for rendering audiovisual programs is gaining more popularity, even in societies, which have been traditionally using dubbing as the dominant modality for foreign films and television series. Likewise, various types of subtitling practices have developed and are used in Iran both at official and non-official outlets. While official dubbing has failed in some aspect in addressing the growing interest of Iranian viewers of foreign content, a variety of non-professional subtitling has been filling the gap, and subtitling appears to be dominating the audiovisual media market. Despite such developments, the necessities of professional practice of subtitling, including standardized guidelines, codes of ethics and practice, and training, have never been realized in Iran. In the absence of a professional subtitling tradition, this article presents the status quo of non-professional subtitling into Persian and introduces the specific typology of this practice in the Iranian mediascape.

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1. Introduction

Besides the seven-decade-old prevalence of dubbing in Iran as the exclusive audiovisual translation (AVT) solution for watching foreign feature films and television series, a variety of Persian-language subtitling practices has emerged and rose to fame among Iranian audiences, especially the young generation, due to the expectations that the official dubbing has failed to fulfill in recent years. Although dubbing has been practiced in Iran since the mid-1940s, it was not until the late 1990s, that Persian subtitling was born in the Iranian society. Over the past decade, the use of subtitling has substantially risen in Iran. The increase is due to the development of broadband technologies and high-speed Internet access for the public, which in turn has paved the way for cheap and fast access to original films and TV shows by the Internet downloading. Enjoying this readily available ocean of foreign cinematic programs—mostly pirated versions—requires a translation solution for which official dubbing could not be an option as the audiences look for a fast mode, which contains the least amount of cultural intervention in the original content.

However, the absence of professional subtitling has led to the emergence of various types of subtitling practice in Persian. The practice has been investigated from multiple angles, such as its use in language learning (Ameri & Ghodrati, 2019), its application in the rendition of graphic codes (Mehdizadkhani & Khoshsaligheh, 2019), its status quo for deaf viewers (Shokoohmand & Khoshsaligheh, 2019), eye-tracking its readability (Zahedi & Khoshsaligheh, 2019), its pedagogy (Rastegar Moghaddam & Khoshsaligheh, 2020), and its reception through using multimodal transcription (Abdi & Khoshsaligheh, 2018). Unexpectedly, the history of subtitling in Iran has been scarcely researched, and therefore its birth and development are reasonably uncertain. According to a few sporadic magazine articles (Jalili, 2001; Shajarikohan, 2011), the birth of Persian subtitling dates back to the final years of the last century. Original contents were made widely available on the illegal Iranian markets and even legal ones under the ambitious and bold title “Language Learning Material”. Indeed, films were unofficially subtitled and distributed in the

market with the advertised function. This market provided foreign language enthusiasts with authentic foreign multimedia, mostly English content, and helped them improve their foreign language competency. That was a convenient excuse, helping to conceal the illegal nature of this unauthorized distribution of selling pirated foreign films (Jalili, 2001). However, it was legally problematic on two grounds. Firstly, it was violating copyright laws, and secondly, severe consequences such as ethical issues followed from the unauthorized distribution of foreign cultural products. Another early attempt in broadcasting foreign films along with Persian subtitles is MBC Persia, a satellite television channel, starting in 2008. According to Naficy (2012), the subtitles were of such poor quality mostly in terms of consistency, coherence, and synchronization, and the deficiencies were even notable to the lay public audiences who were not competent in the source language.

In the absence of a professional tradition of subtitling in Persian, this article aims to serve as an introduction to the different types of subtitling practices in the Iranian context. The clarification of the subtitling practice would help consistency and accuracy in the use of the related terminology in the growing research publication on subtitling in Persian. In several local studies, the distinction of professional, non-professional, and amateur subtitling is not carefully observed, and the terms are interchangeably used. Initially, in the following section, the international literature on non-professional subtitling is briefly surveyed. Later, the main types of Persian subtitling are introduced and discussed, and real-life examples are also presented. In the concluding section, contextual considerations in understanding these types, as well as the potentials for prospective types of subtitling, are discussed.

2. Theoretical Framework

Non-professional subtitling can be considered an umbrella term under which a range of subtitling practices by fans, amateurs, activities, and students are produced. In this sense, the number of publications on non-professional subtitling has been on a steady rise over the last decade including journal articles, edited books, and encyclopedic entries (e.g., Dwyer, 2019; Orrego-Carmona & Lee, 2017b;

Pérez-González, 2020). To achieve a more comprehensive understanding of non-professional subtitling, some factors, as translation scholars argue (Antonini, Cirillo, Rossato, & Torresi, 2017; Martínez- Gómez, 2020; Orrego-Carmona & Lee, 2017a), are to be taken into account: training, remuneration, recruitment, ethics, and standards of practice. Non-professional subtitlers, according to Orrego-Carmona and Lee (2017a, p. 4), “do not receive and do not require monetary remuneration for the activities they perform and the translations they provide”. For Evans (2020), fan translation differs from non-professional translation, as in the former, the strong focus is on foreign content that is important for a community of fans. Non-professional translation is mainly concerned with “pro-bono work for non-governmental organizations” like TED (p. 177). Lee (2018) contends that non-professional subtitling has developed as a social outcome of fansubbing.

Failure or defiance to comply with commercial subtitling standards is the prime feature associated with this phenomenon. Nevertheless, recent studies (Jiménez-Crespo, 2017; Orrego-Carmona, 2019) claim otherwise, stating that non-professional subtitlers do not tend to neglect or refuse mainstream subtitling conventions. This very contrast between the scholars in this regard is the ultimate purpose of writing this article to emphasize that first, the concept of non-professional subtitling is culture-specific and context-dependent and does not necessarily refer to the same practice in every society. More importantly, a relatively diverse set of practices in the same context are liberally and collectively referred to as professional subtitling, which has their own differences. At the same time, they share certain similarities and consequently deserve their own name and definition for the sake of clarity.

The abusive approach of non-professional subtitling, in a general sense, at times includes experimenting with the original content through “compositional parameters such as number, layout, and positioning of subtitles”, together with “uses of colors, typefaces, typography” (Pérez-González, 2020, p. 175), not to mention “novel uses of notes and glosses superimposed on visuals to provide explanatory comments” to assist the viewers’ understating of the unfamiliar content (Guillot, 2019, p. 37).

As far as translation is concerned, non-professional subtitling strives to bring to the light the foreignness of the original content through foreignization approaches, such as retention and glossing (Dwyer, 2019; Massidda, 2015; Massidda & Casarini, 2017; Nornes, 1999). Therefore, non-professional translations are “closer to the original, wordier, [and] more word-for-word” (Gambier, 2013, p. 54). The reason appears to be clear; such a strategy will increase “the visibility of the mediator and the process of mediation” and can “increase awareness of the foreign culture and encourage the viewer to engage with it on its own terms” (Dwyer, 2019, p. 459). Nonetheless, Chinese fansubbing apparatus on the contrary to those of the Western and Iranian fansubbing seems to be target-orientated and promotes and applies domestication strategies (Chang, 2017; He, 2017) probably to serve as “a means to best entertain Chinese audiences” (Lee, 2018, p. 573).

Fansubbers as a category of non-professional subtitlers work on various motivations (Cemerin & Toth, 2017; Duraner, Tunali, & Koçak, 2017; Luczaj & Holy-Luczaj, 2017): altruistic or non-altruistic. They may simply wish to help others access their favorite foreign program in a language they understand, or they just do it as a recreational activity, or to improve their command of the foreign language. Others are involved to be recognized as an essential agent in their own social circles. On occasions, these subtitlers are pushed into this activity due to activist reasons. These subtitles—known as Guerrilla subtitles—“are produced by individuals or collectives highly engaged in political causes” to skirt censorship or circulate a unique narrative which can “counter-argue the truth reported by the powerful mass media” (Díaz Cintas, 2018, p. 134).

Non-professional subtitling, especially fansubbing has raised many ethical and legal issues as it has violated and challenged the screen media copyright laws by translating and subtitling unauthorized contents (Dwyer, 2017; Massidda, 2015; Pérez-González, 2014). Despite this, Pérez-González (2020) maintains that the works of fansubbers “are now more widely tolerated and, in some cases, actively promoted by distributors and broadcasters” (p. 176). In terms of Iran, Iranian legal and illegal commercial video-sharing websites heavily

rely on non-professional subtitlers due to the lack of any professional subtitling, which has resulted from the lack of any solid training and tradition in this area, followed from a historically dubbing prevalence.

3. Subtitling in Iran

3.1. Regular Subtitling

3.1.1. Quasi-Professional Subtitling

Before introducing this category, a brief mention of the concept of professionalism is of importance. On the one hand, if we take the term profession as any occupation by which an individual can make a living, a pragmatic yet simplistic definition of a professional translator would be anyone who earns their living by providing translation services (Jääskeläinen, 2010). According to Weiss-Gal and Welbourne (2008), a real profession involves a particular set of code of ethics, focused education controlled by members of the profession, professional autonomy, possessing a strong knowledge base, control over certain kinds of work, public respect for the profession, an influential professional association, and respect and payment which reflect professional prestige. In this sense, it is barely possible to assume to have professional subtitling in Iran or many other countries, as is discussed below.

The existing AVT literature tends to assess the quality of translations rather than its process (Bogucki, 2009; Pedersen, 2019). It appears that professional subtitlers are capable of delivering a translation with high quality and are remarkably faster, perhaps because they are well aware of the standards of practice (e.g., Orrego-Carmona, Dutka, & Szarkowska, 2018). In terms of subtitling, several studies such as Ivarsson and Carroll (1998) and Karamitroglou (1998) as well as international associations like the European Association of Studies in Screen Translation (ESIST) have worked towards the standardization of subtitling practices. As a result, ESIST has advocated a set of guidelines and codes for the subtitling profession. Although subtitling companies, which provide services for language pairs other than English may have their own subtitling tradition, the guidelines could be used “to set some minimum standards in the profession and to safeguard subtitlers’ rights” (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007, p. 80).

Considering the Iranian context, while entry to other professions, such as engineering, medicine, and law, is strictly regulated, the translation industry is barely controlled (Kafi, Khoshsaligheh, & Hashemi, 2018). Concerning the AVT markets, particularly dubbing, traditionally, translators have not been trained in AVT for the absence of formal training. Therefore, most dubbing translators have been selected among those who have had translating experience in written translation, especially literary translation. Translating for Persian dubbing is less technical and complicated than subtitling as the translators are not required to observe a synchronized version of their translation, as there is always another agent responsible for the adaptation (Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2016). On the contrary, subtitling demands more technical know-how, and the translators are, at times, required to deliver a subtitling file, say .srt, created by a subtitling program. Additionally, dubbing translators follow the regulations demanded by professional translation, so that they can be promoted to the official translator status, and to be hired for the national television channels, they need to pass some exams. When it comes to subtitling, the situation is complicated compared to dubbing because subtitling tradition, as alluded to earlier, began to form as a result of the emergence of unauthorized, uncontrolled, and underground activities in the late 1990s.

There are still questions that call for careful considerations: Who is professional, and who is official? Are there any professional and official subtitlers in Iran? In consideration of the criteria enumerated by Weiss-Gal and Welbourne (2008), the most realistic and honest answer could be that there are currently no professional subtitlers in Iran. One reason is that no code of ethics is available, and there is no recognition of the profession, let alone public respect. Even subtitles on national television are not without mistakes or problems with technical constraints. Another reason is the evident absence of focused education, controlled and guided by members of the profession. Besides, there is no professional association, which represents the professional prestige of the practitioners by ensuring the due respect and reasonable payment. In this sense, it is barely possible to assume to be somewhere near-professional subtitling in Iran. The most

reasonable answer to the above questions can be that any official subtitler who could meet at least the three professional translation criteria can be entitled quasi-professional translator. These criteria, discussed above, are service fees, the professional codes of practice, and the issue of quality. The final criterion could be fulfilled through rigorous training or intensive courses provided by universities and academic institutions in neighboring fields such as translation studies—in the absence of audiovisual translation pedagogy. Considering the service fees, there is no set rate for subtitling, and the fee commonly differs on a case-by-case basis and from company to company. Regarding the professional codes, AVT providers have their own conventions and regulations for the process of subtitling because there is no Iranian subtitling association at this time. However, these conventions cannot be tentatively accessed; further research should examine these rules and compare them with those of others followed internationally. It is also certain that the professional codes, if available, would be at best secondary to cultural regulations of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. In several studies in Iran, it was found that the subtitles made by the online subtitlers are of relatively poor quality as the translators simply ignore commercial subtitling conventions, such as rules relevant to temporal and spatial constraints (Ameri & Khoshsaligheh, 2019; Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2017b; Khoshsaligheh & Fazeli Haghpanah, 2016). Another research also evidences that online subtitlers refuse to apply censorship and the

guidelines of the said ministry (Khoshsaligheh, Ameri, & Mehdizadkhani, 2018). Nevertheless, the authors' observations suggest that subtitles made by the video-on-demand (VOD) service providers follow the state-advised appropriation/censorship considerations.

Taking advantage of interlingual subtitling on Iranian national television (e.g., Sports Channel and Documentary Channel) is a great initiative (see Figures 1 & 2). However, it has been limited to non-fiction content so far. For instance, the subtitling service offered by a national documentary TV channel, otherwise known as IRIB Mostanad, provides inter/intralingual subtitles to make the languages of ethnic groups and different dialects understandable to the audience. From the perspective of quality, these subtitles have some shortcomings in terms of reading speed, timing and duration, line length, and incorrect use of hyphens in speaker identification. However, some norms of commercial subtitling are adequately observed, for example, segmentation synchronization, punctuation, accuracy, and the use of block boxes for the sake of legibility. It is worth noting that even professional translators can make errors or mistakes. Translation is a human activity, and no human activity can be entirely free of errors. Nevertheless, mistakes and errors should not lead to norms, trends, and regularities for other subtitlers. Consequently, the severity and frequency of errors should be taken into consideration when distinguishing professional translators from quasi-professional or amateur ones.



Figure 1

Persian Subtitles of David Beckham's Talks on Sports Channel



Figure 2

Persian Subtitles of Foreign Documentaries on Documentary Channel

The Iranian VOD services, emerging in the mid-2010s, have been offering both subtitled and dubbed foreign films and TV series, as well as Iranian fiction and non-fiction programs. As for quality, VOD services barely follow commercial subtitling guidelines, like amateur subtitling (discussed below). The main difference between VOD subtitling services and amateur subtitling is the state-required “cultural gatekeeping”; VOD services are legitimate, commercial companies and work under a license issued by the Iranian government. Therefore, their provided content has to be censored to conform to the regulations of the distribution of foreign cultural products (Mollanazar & Nasrollahi, 2017). A telling example is the subtitled version of *The Irishman* (2019) produced by one of the Iranian VOD services. Its subtitled file was shared on *Subscene*, where Iranian users voiced their complaints and criticisms for the strict censorship practiced on the translated film.

Given the basic requirements of a real profession, the subtitles produced under official licenses for the national television channels, streaming services, and authorized companies are at best quasi-professional. This should be emphasized that subtitling in dubbing countries appears to be quasi-professional, mainly due to a strong dubbing tradition. Research, for example, has it subtitles made in dubbing countries are wordier and denser than those of subtitling countries (Georgakopoulou, 2009; Sokoli, 2009). Thus, countries may follow their own subtitling rules and conventions, quite contrary to those of another country. Given that the practice varies in different countries, it is reasonable to understand the subtitling practice from the particular context it has originated.

It is, however, envisioned that the rapid development of academic research, professional training, and increasing investment in the foreign multimedia content rendition would contribute to the professional development of the practice and establishment of the due social prestige of subtitling, which consequently would conclude national professional associations and formation of regulations and codes of ethics and conduct soon.

3.1.2. Non-Professional Subtitling

3.1.2.1. Amateur Subtitling

Amateur subtitling is the most widespread category of subtitling in Iran. Amateur subtitlers typically work for video sharing websites distributing pirated films and TV shows and are paid for the work they produce. Indeed, amateur subtitling in Iran is the middle ground between, on the one hand, fansubtitling, which barely confines its work within the do’s and don’ts of mainstream subtitling standards, and on the other hand, quasi-professional subtitling whose producers are financially compensated for their services.

Amateur subtitlers are typically language students or fledgling subtitlers trained in other relevant disciplines, especially computer sciences who seek a paid career (Ameri & Khoshsaligheh, 2019). Nevertheless, due to their limited yet growing knowledge in translation norms and standards and the absence of professional, nationally-devised conventions for Persian subtitling in terms of the technical aspects of the practice, their work does not enjoy high-quality standards for frequent translation-related and technical problems (Ameri & Khoshsaligheh, 2019).

In the past, before the emergence of VOD services, these subtitlers were hired by pirated film sharing websites. The payments were unreasonably low, but amateur subtitlers had no choice but to accept to build up resumes and learn the practical aspects of the craft and develop their language skills, not to mention to make a living out of it. When most video-piracy websites were taken down by the Iranian government in 2018 and 2019 for providing uncensored foreign content, the amateur subtitlers have been recruited by the thriving VOD services. As observed by Ameri and Khoshsaligheh (2019), these subtitlers do not follow commercial subtitling norms. They are solitary workers whose collaboration is in the translation phase only, especially in the case of Netflix original TV shows where the whole episodes are released all at once. Although these subtitlers may be motivated by financial rewards received from the websites, a web of other motivations, including language learning is at work.

Reception studies also show that Iranian viewers appear to be satisfied with amateur subtitles. Khoshsaligheh et al. (2019)'s study is the first attempt to explore the reception of

amateur subtitling by Iranian viewers. The results reveal that amateur subtitling, despite having fairly low quality, is usually preferred over dubbing because it tends to be more authentic and is faster to be produced. The same hypothesis was also supported in two experiments (Ameri, 2020; Ameri & Khoshsaligheh, 2021) where amateur subtitling did not negatively affect the viewers' reception, immersion, and understating of the program when compared with professional subtitling.

3.1.2.2. Fansubtitling

Fansubtitles are mission- and community-oriented. That is, the main motivation behind producing them is promoting a genre from a certain culture like the Korean or the Japanese. Anime or video games are a perfect example here. These subtitles are produced on a voluntarily basis, and no monetary rewards are sought by the fansubtitlers (Fazeli Haghpanah & Khoshsaligheh, 2018; Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2017b). Good examples worth mentioning are subtitles produced by the Iranian group of "The Simpsons" which aims to familiarize the Iranian audiences with this classic American animated series (Figure 3).



Figure 3

Website of Fansubtitling Group Dedicated to the Simpsons Animated Series

The subtitles produced for foreign stand-up comedies by users of social networking services such as Instagram and Telegram are other examples for fansubtitling in Iran. For instance, Standupfa, as its name implies, exclusively produces Persian subtitles for stand-up comedies, and shares them on their Instagram page and Telegram channel (Figure

4). These subtitles conform to some technical standards of subtitling, but they are far from professional standards in terms of translation quality, presentation rate, line length, and segmentation. The source cultures involved in Persian fansubtitling include Anglophone, Japanese, South Korean, and Turkish in order of frequency.



Figure 4

Subtitle for Stand-Up Comedy: Chris Rock: “Nowadays We Pay for Things Which Used to Be Free”

3.1.2.3. Funsubtitling

Like fundubbing (Chaume, 2012; Nord, Khoshsaligheh, & Ameri, 2015), funsubtitling involves fake verbal content in the subtitles of the original program, which is not difficult to distinguish from reality. Funsubtitling, created by amateurs or a group of fans, is distributed through computer-mediated technologies and aims to “offer false information with the ultimate objective of entertaining the viewer” (Díaz Cintas, 2018, p. 135). The humorous and witty nature may not necessarily aim for entreating the audience as the use of parody in

subtitles may also be used for criticism and to openly express opinions against the existing policies, as Chaume (2020, p. 329) nicely mentions, “fansubbers ridicule politicians and leaders by creating fake subtitles”. In the following example (Figure 5) uploaded to Aparat.com (the Iranian version of YouTube), a Korean music video by Bangtan Sonyeondan was funsubtitled into Persian, and the subtitles had nothing to do with the original lyrics. Rather than rendering the original content, the funsubtitles in Persian reads “I am fed up with the jealous teachers who do not allow us to nap in the class”.

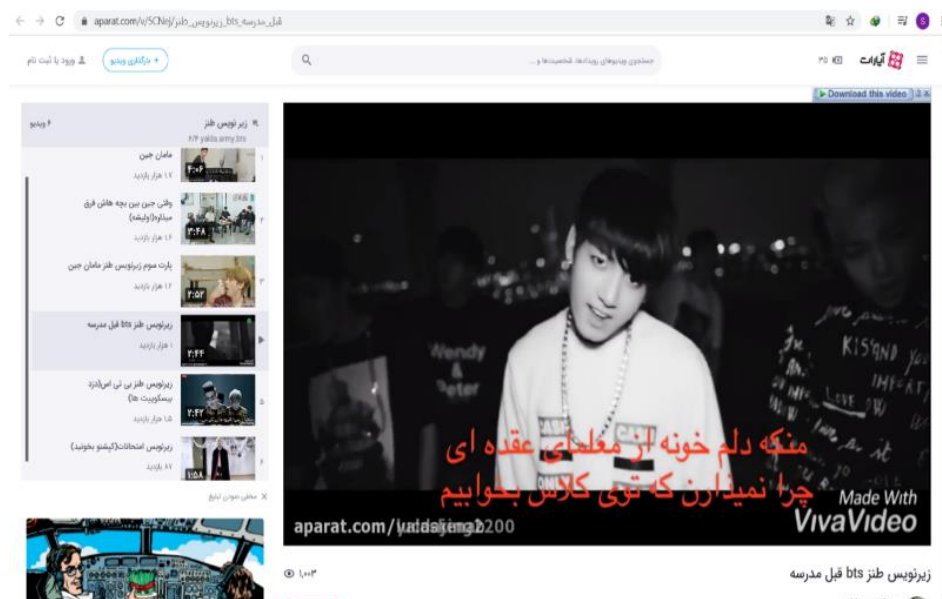


Figure 5

Funsubtitling in Persian on a Korean Music Video by Bangtan Sonyeondan

Besides these, one political instance of fake or fun subtitles is worth mentioning here. During the coronavirus pandemic, many Persian Telegram channels distributed and shared (un)reliable information about this issue as an effort to support people facing problems. Much information was spread through translation, especially original educational video clips subtitled into Persian. Nevertheless, unreliable and false information through fake subtitling was easily distrusted. A telling example is the Persian subtitles of Vladimir Putin's speech. The Russian clip was subtitled into Persian

through English; yet, the English version was fake and had nothing to do with the original speech. The viewers can see how Vladimir Putin is complaining about a conspiracy by sinister and powerful American and European countries, which created coronavirus to put innocent people's life in jeopardy. Despite that, the original version, which is in Russian and entirely unfamiliar to Iranians, is unrelated to the conspiracy of American and European countries as the speech was made by Putin in 2016 to honor *Victory Day* (Table 1).

Table 1

Fakesubes of Vladimir Putin's Speech on Victory Day in 2016

Persian Translation (Back-translated into English)	Original Speech (Back-translated into English)
Today, I'm tired, I'm very tired of everything.	Dear citizens of Russia, dear veterans, dear soldiers and sailors, dear sergeants and majors, warrant officers.
You've been trying to reduce global population growth. They've been doing this at the expense of innocent lives.	Comrades, officers, and admirals. With a triumph in which the joy of memory and sorrow on May 9 merged.
Death or my homeland. Cheers	Happy holiday great victory.

3.1.2.4. Activist Subtitling

Persian Activist subtitling is employed as a tool to achieve socio-political goals. Thanks to the prevalence of digital media and the widespread influence of social networks such as YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, and by far Telegram in Iran, individuals or groups with social or political agendas increasingly tend to resort to subtitling to further their activities. Subtitling is the most commonly used AVT mode for disseminating activist multimedia content on a nation-wide as well as global scale (Baker, 2019). Subtitling in this context serves not only to raise objections to the existing social state and power relations but also to trigger social and political changes and call for other people to attend political events (Díaz-Cintas, 2019). As Chaume (2019) explains, subtitling activism includes "engagement, civic empowerment, and dissent shown in audiovisual translated content" and these amateur subtitles are "produced by ordinary citizens on digital media platforms on the web" (p. 330). Elsewhere he indicates that "fansubbers

ridicule politicians and leaders by creating fake subtitles that either expose their hidden agenda or simply make them sound ludicrous through absurd utterances" (Chaume, 2020, p. 329). Activist subtitling has also been present in the Iranian context, especially in recent years by many anti-government protesters and pro-government groups. Despite being blocked in Iran, Twitter has been the extensively used platform for sharing videos on political and social issues. To voice their protest across the world, the activists need to translate their content into international languages, most often English (Figure 6). The activist subtitlers, besides their hands-on activity in the translation of the audiovisual content of their choice, tend to recruit collaborations through open-calls mostly for help in further dissemination of the contents as well as translation of the same content into other languages besides English. Additionally, to make sure the content reaches out to all walks of life, the posts are reposted on Telegram, the most popular social network in Iran.



Figure 6

Two Examples of Activist Subtitling on Twitter

Similarly, pro-government activists also take advantage of subtitling. They, for example, translate video segments into Persian, which confirm the state theories about specific activities in Iran. Alternatively, they subtitle video segments into English to disseminate the religious or ideological doctrine on Shi'ism or the foundations of the 1979 Islamic revolution. No academic research to date has examined the textual and technical strategies used in activist subtitling in Persian. However, the authors' observations point to unconventional placement, colors, sizes, and fonts of the texts.

3.1.2.5. Commission-Oriented Subtitling

Another form of subtitling in Persian is commission-oriented subtitling, which is mainly produced for non-fiction content. Also called "crowds subtitles", these subtitles are "commissioned by platforms like TED" (Díaz Cintas, 2018, p. 132). According to O'Hagan (2020), TED translations are non-professional practices, which are carried out by a large number of volunteers. These activities "are supported by the use of cloud-based translation platforms to provide lay translators with a user-friendly translation environment" and translators are aided by "resources such as glossaries" and they have "access to machine translation in some cases" (O'Hagan, 2020, p.

566). The subtitles for TED are created through AMARA which is a user-based subtitling platform (Jiménez-Crespo, 2017). AMARA has the advantage of alarming the deviations from the subtitling standards (for example, the recommended reading speed is 21 cps), helping the translator have better control over its work (Figure 7). Nevertheless, it depends on the translator and the reviewer to follow or ignore these norms. As far as the content of these works is concerned, they are non-fiction, as TED videos are influential talks by experts and successful people. Interestingly, this non-professional subtitling tool has also been integrated into the translator training programs of some Iranian universities, such as Allameh Tabataba'i University and Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, since the environment of non-professional translation may encourage students to be involved more in translation tasks. As to the quality of these subtitles, a survey of the TED website suggests a variety of quality in Persian subtitles. These subtitles appear to stick much to the original content, as required by TED's style guidelines. Therefore, a word-for-word rendering is likely to happen even though another agent reviews them. Because of a very faithful translation, subtitling reading speeds are usually high, and viewers may need to pause the program or play back

some sequences to grasp the content thoroughly. In TED subtitling guidelines, the subtitlers are required to keep as much meaning as possible, and as mentioned above, the maximum reading speed, as recommend by

TED, is 21 characters per second. More importantly, the TED translators are simply volunteer translators and are not paid for their work, but they are credited with their name.

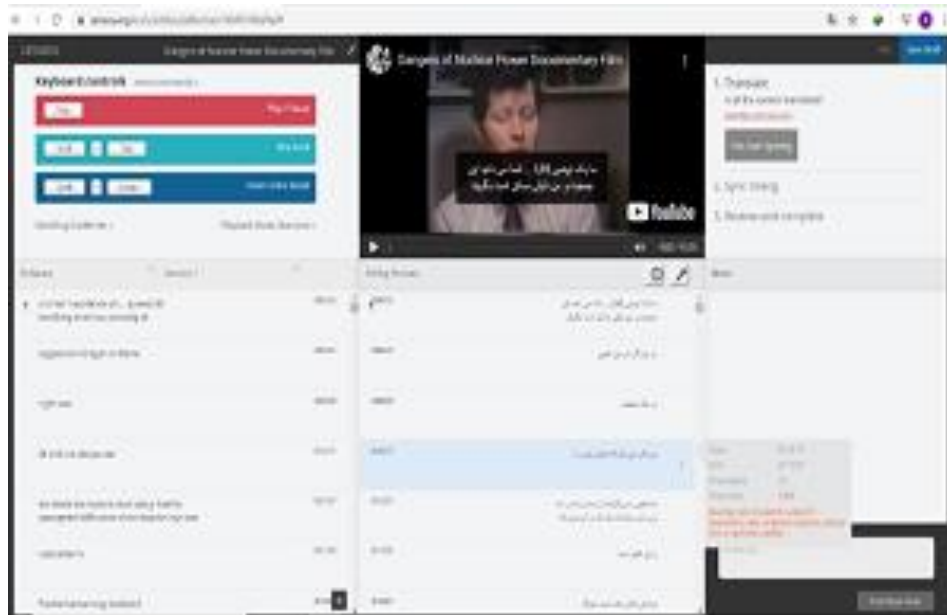


Figure 7

Example of Commission-Oriented Subtitling in Persian for TED

3.2. Subtitling for the d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing (SDH)

3.2.1. Quasi-Professional SDH

Subtitling for people with hearing loss is a professional act when the final product is received effectively by the intended users (Neves, 2008). As Neves (2008) states, this process, in order to come to the desired result, requires someone who has in-depth knowledge of the needs of the intended users, a clear understanding of the composition, textual conventions of the audiovisual content (redundancy, relevance, adequacy, cohesion, and coherence), and “the ability to capture both sense and sensitivity when making difficult choices” (p. 172). Given the requirements mentioned above and the findings of the local research (e.g., Shokoohmand & Khoshsaligheh, 2019; 2020) on the status of SDH in Iran, the current practitioners of SDH are not mostly specialists in SDH. The current trend –where subtitling is exclusively aimed for deaf viewers– is the recruitment of producers of regular subtitles whose products are hardly considered professional as far as subtitling

quality is concerned. The reasons for this trend are probably commissioners’ unawareness of the professional requirements, financial pressure, or lack of SDH experts.

In Iran, subtitles produced for the d/Deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) have a short and somewhat limited history because at the time of completing this article (April 2020), there is still no strict law enforced by the government that would make SDH obligatory in practice (Shokoohmand & Khoshsaligheh, 2019). Furthermore, since Iran belongs to a dubbing tradition where professional subtitling has never been used on national television, SDH has never been part of the audiovisual media landscape. However, in recent years, due to the growing awareness about media accessibility rights, audiovisual products, particularly film and TV shows, have been slightly more accessible to DHH viewers. Although the total number of audiovisual programs with SDH hardly represents 1% of the market in Iran, this percentage is increasing steadily with promising prospects. This percentage barely includes TV programs. A national channel, IRIB TV2, has

provided an accessibility service for DHH, which is a pre-recorded news program. The service includes short texts appear on the right side of the screen (Figure 8). Slow reading speed and lexically and structurally simplified sentences are the distinguishing features of these captions.

IRIB Salamat (Health Channel) has been providing subtitles for an American science



Figure 8

Scrolling Texts Appearing on the Right Corner of the Screen

As far as SDH in the film industry is concerned, such accessibility-improving subtitles can be found in just a few theaters in a few big cities in Iran and are only available as closed-captions on DVDs and during special open-captioned screenings (Shokoohmand & Khoshsaligheh, 2019). The open-captioned screenings are usually provided at the request of film producers and non-governmental associations of the Deaf.

The limited SDH provided for feature films has distinguishing features proving the subtitler's awareness of the unique needs of the intended audience. A good example is the SDH produced for an Iranian film, *The Bodyguard* (2016), whose textual features show the consideration that DHH mostly have to process subtitles in a language that they do not 'speak' and as a result, they need subtitles whose reading difficulties have been resolved (Shokoohmand & Khoshsaligheh, 2020). Even though in intralingual subtitles, noticing deviations from original dialogues causes distraction and may negatively affect viewers' comprehension

television series, *Brain Games*, since last year. This program has been dubbed in Persian, and the subtitles are the word- or-word transcription of the Persian dubbing. Despite having lingual complexities that may hinder immediate understanding of the content, the subtitles have the merit of conformity to the SDH conventions such as speaker identification, sound description, and emotion indication (see Figure 9).



Figure 9

SDH Provided By Quasi-Professional Subtitlers for a Persian Dubbed Version of an American Science Series

(Szarkowska, Krejtz, Pilipczuk, Dutka, & Kruger, 2016), the edited forms of the dialogues reveal the subtitler's knowledge of users' possible cognitive deficits. Apart from the simplified dialogue list, the SDH includes sound effects and song lyrics, but not paralinguistic and speaker identifying information (Shokoohmand & Khoshsaligheh, 2019).

For the growing demand for SDH in Iran, an Iranian SDH scholar began to practice SDH in 2020. This action is exclusively taken to control SDH practices on VOD and DVD markets. This accessibility service, being hired by one of the Iranian VOD services, has been the only one in the country that applies a certain stylistic guideline, and uses the findings of local SDH studies. Since a national subtitling guideline has been unavailable, the Netflix Timed Text Style Guide (2019) has been used (Figure 10) and domesticated in some cases to apply the findings of the survey study conducted by Shokoohmand (2019). Subtitling background music, for instance, was not mentioned in the

guideline; however, it has been included in these subtitles (see Figure 11 [Music becomes soft and sweet]) since the majority of the

participants requested the description of the background music.



Figure 10

Speaker Identification by Hyphens and Verbalized Sound Effects



Figure 11

Description of Background Music

As can be seen, the SDH provided so far does not entirely have the necessities of the professional practice of SDH. Even the SDH that has followed professional standards cannot be considered professional since they are not based on national codes of good practice for SDH.

3.2.2. Non-Professional SDH

3.2.2.1. Amateur SDH

Due to the Iranian commissioners' lack of knowledge in SDH and possibly economic constraints imposed by them, SDH producers mostly have firsthand experience of subtitling for DHH viewers. As a result of this, the subtitles do not always embody the very essence of SDH, which is making visible all relevant auditory information (Neves, 2008). For instance, the SDH produced for the open-captioned screening of an Iranian feature film, *Che* (2014), apart from falling short of general subtitling standards, does not contain SDH specific features. Moreover, users of amateur SDH are often faced with diverse formats of subtitles that do not always manage to transfer the audiovisual content successfully. This inconsistency of formats is evident not only among different products, but also throughout the same product (Shokoozmand & Khoshsaligheh, 2019), and among the subtitles produced at the request of the same company. To illustrate the latter, the intralingual subtitles

produced at the request of Owj Arts and Media Organization for feature films *The Bodyguard* and *Damascus Time* are by no means similar in terms of observing SDH conventions. Although there are some open-captioned screenings and DVDs carrying the option of SDH, SDH is by no means a common practice in Iran. Therefore, the existent amateur SDH shows some excellent potential for new progress.

3.2.2.2. Fan-SDH

There has also been a gradual movement towards audience engagement in the provision of audiovisual access services for the viewers with special needs. The SDH produced by the fansubbers is idiosyncratic and creative, aiming at the free distribution of audiovisual products over the Internet (Figure 12). The SDH provided on popular social networks, in particular, Instagram, is a telling example for this newly emerged trend in Iran, which seems to surpass official efforts in this regard soon. This service is provided for a wide range of audiovisual programs such as TV series, talk shows, current affairs programs, and feature films. and is offered by some private initiatives led by DHH, referred to as "participatory accessibility" by Di Giovanni (2018). The Persian Telegram channel *Free from Silence*, administrated by DHH users, has produced inter/intralingual subtitles for feature films, documentaries, entertainment, and educational

videos since 2017. The subtitles available on the channel have very different formats and, in some cases, failed to adhere to the basic standards of subtitling (e.g., subtitle placement, color, and line length) (Figure 13). The mentioned initiative is also supported by hearing fans of SDH. These groups have been



Figure 12

Use of Asterisks (Instead of Musical Notes) in a Fan-SDH to Show Background Music is Playing



Figure 13

Fan-SDH Provided for a Feature Film

These subtitles are transcriptions of the dialogue list and by no means conform to SDH standards. Another example for fan-SDH is the free service offered by the Iranian fansubbing group, Avaneqaran, which is available on the group's website, Instagram page, and Telegram channel. The sole purpose of this group, as mentioned on its homepage, is to contribute to

the prevalence of SDH provision for feature films and TV programs. The subtitles have high presentation rates. However, they adhere to a handful number of the SDH conventions, such as sound description, tone/mood description, and speaker identification; among others (see Figure 14).



Figure 14

SDH Provided by Non-Professional Subtitlers For Segments of a Series (on the Left) and a Talk Show (on the Right)

Besides, some Iranian singers have distributed their music videos with captioned lyrics, and even have persuaded some Instagram users to post their own witty and entertaining video clips with intralingual subtitles on Instagram

(see Figure 15). The one big drawback with these subtitles is the high presentation rates that do not allow the viewers to follow them comfortably.



Figure 15

SDH Provided for a Music Video (on the Left) and a Short Comic Video Clip (on the Right)

It may be concluded that the SDH produced by amateur subtitlers, despite having many varied formats and many technical drawbacks, has had the benefit of covering a variety of popular genres that may far outweigh the poor quality from DHH's viewpoints. The merit of covering a wide range of genres, including entertainment programs, has been supported by a survey conducted by Shokoozmand (2019) in which entertainment and lifestyle programs were DHH's favorite programs.

4. Discussion

This study was an attempt to go over the status quo of Persian subtitling in Iran and clarify the distinctive differences of quasi-professional, amateur, and fansubtitling in Persian. Figure 16 shows an illustrative summary of the existing variety of subtitling in Iran.

Persian subtitlers' job visibility has changed a lot over the past few years and there exist relevant requirements for high-quality and professional subtitlers to meet viewers' needs and expectations (Díaz Cintas, 2018), especially where the dubbing industry is

incapable of fulfilling the growing demands for AVT services.

Besides professionals, subtitling can be and nowadays is being produced by non-expert individuals and groups who have not been trained or are involved with the practice unprofessionally. In an attempt to explore and categorize the existing subtitling practice in the Iranian mediascape, the four criteria of the service fee, quality, relevant training, and availability of ethical codes were considered. In the light of these defining conditions, barely any audiovisual translator in Iran can be considered a professional subtitler; that is, a subtitler who is hired—consequently paid reasonably—and has been trained to deliver audiovisual translation services in line with the commercial subtitling standards. Given the Iranian context, it barely happens because AVT training is far from perfect, as it is taught very unsystematically (Khoshsaligheh & Ameri, 2017a). The Iranian undergraduate translation training programs have mainly focused on written text translation, and marginally involve a few modules on the translation of multimedia content.

More importantly, Iran has never been a subtitling country. Accordingly, there is no solid subtitling tradition there and no attempts have been made to devise Iran/Persian-specific

guidelines. Consequently, the subtitlers do not necessarily conform to a certain guideline and only render the original content according to their personal decisions.

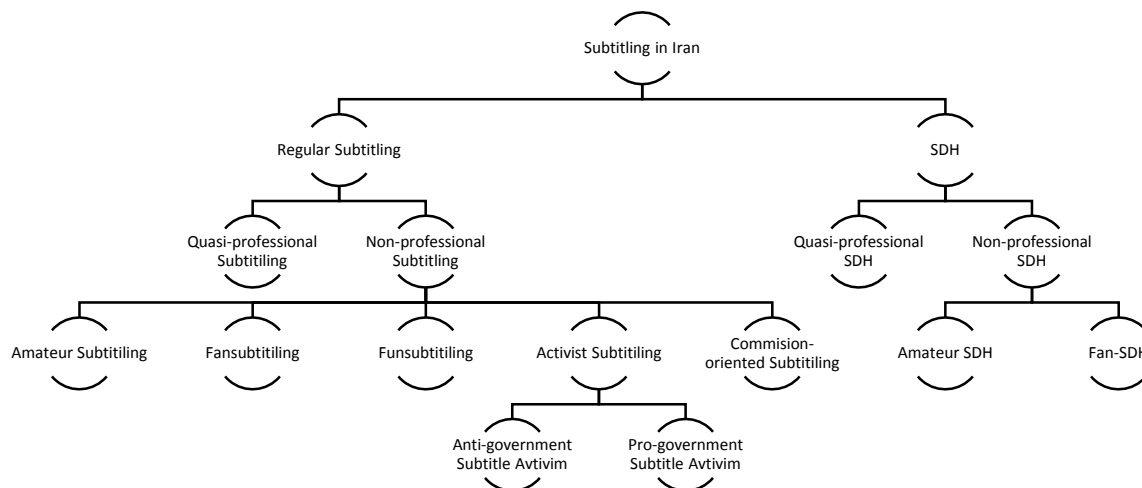


Figure 16

Subtitling Typology in the Iranian Mediascape

In general, since none of the Iranian subtitling services meet all the four aforementioned criteria, especially the lack of a national set of professional subtitling codes and guidelines, professional subtitling is virtually non-existent. However, not all subtitles could be called amateur accordingly. Iranian VOD service providers, as well as national Television channels, which produce relatively good quality subtitles and observe a set of ideological principles regulated by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, retain quasi-professional subtitling services. Nevertheless, unauthorized video-sharing websites and individuals who produce subtitles without maintaining the ideological regulations, fall into the category of amateur subtitling, which typically endures questionable quality in terms of translation and technical issues. One of the cautions emerging from this categorization is that Iranian researchers, especially graduate students who do research on non-professional subtitling, should attend to the difference between the two varieties of subtitling. Moreover, comparing students' subtitles with the existent non-professional subtitles could enhance the quality of the students' translations and raise their pragmatic awareness (Lakarnchua, 2017;

Valdeón, 2015). Using non-professional translation platforms in the classroom may suggest that the distinctions between non-professional and professional subtitling would be being blurred in the future (Orrego-Carmona, 2013).

This research holds far-reaching implications for the accessibility service of SDH as a whole. What was discussed here revealed that whether due to negligence, lack of knowledge or financial constraints, most of the existing SDH does not meet the principle of 'relevance' for DHH users with their special needs, and only a minimal number of subtitles conform to international SDH conventions. Given this service is fledgling in the context of Iran, it is crucial to establish standardized context-specific guidelines to ensure the adequacy of the service in Persian. To achieve this, SDH scholars, target users, service providers, SDH practitioners, deaf associations could collaborate in formulating such guidelines. Local empirical studies are also needed to study subjective and objective data on SDH users' experiences while using quasi-professional and non-professional subtitles, informing the national guideline on SDH. Moreover, descriptive studies analyzing

implemented strategies in actual subtitled programs are useful in providing SDH practitioners with educational resources, which would help develop their critical thinking in the professional context.

The other implication arises from fansubbers' actions and refers to the fact that in order to satisfy the DHH audience, the decision on audiovisual content needs to be made based on their viewing preferences. To this end, as advocated by Neves (2008), SDH trainees should have direct interaction with DHH people to get insight into the expectations and needs. National surveys are also crucial to generate data on the audience profile and preferences. Since the reaction of DHH viewers is unknown to the various types of SDH strategies, reception studies could be used to this end. The accessibility service of SDH is in its infancy in Iran; however, there is an auspicious outlook for the future development despite numerous looming challenges ahead. Since to date, no live subtitling has been provided for live programs on Iranian national television or live events like conferences and operas, the significance and applications of respeaking and live subtitling (Romero Fresco, 2011) are likely to play essential roles in the development and research of this practice over the next years in Iran.

Given the map of subtitling typology in the Iranian context, devising specific and consistently agreed-upon guidelines and manuals for Persian subtitling is of paramount importance, which can serve to promote the production of objective and consistent subtitles across the different platforms. As emphasized by Khoshsaligheh and Ameri (2017a), teaching and training future translators for the AVT industry needs to be regularized and organized more rigorously. This is understandable that not all universities across Iran may be able to provide AVT training and pedagogy; however, seminars and workshops could be organized by leading universities to fill the gap. Moreover, intensive train-the-trainer programs should be developed to enhance the teaching competencies of trainers.

Finally, given the sheer necessity of professional subtitling for the future of Iranian mediascape, more research and practice are needed to help establish professional associations and national guidelines, to control and regulate the performance of new

practitioners, and to set service fees. Overseer training is also crucial to pave the way for the emergence of the sustainable profession of subtitling into Persian (see also Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007, pp. 39-41). Facilitating the communication among the amateur and quasi-professional subtitlers could also be a contributing factor since it helps create a nation-wide virtual community, the same as what the subtitlers benefit from in Finland (Tuominen, 2015).

By way of conclusion, it is worth commenting that although the present work tries to be exhaustive and comprehensive, it is evident that new forms of subtitling will emerge in the future, and consequently, more research is of necessity to explore the subtitling landscape in Iran.

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