



Evans, J. (2019) Fan translation. In: Baker, M. and Saldanha, G. (eds.) Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies. Routledge: Abindgon, pp. 177-181. ISBN 9781138933330.

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Deposited on: 27 August 2020

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Fan translation

Jonathan Evans

Fan translations differ from other non-professional practices such as volunteer translation in the choice of what is translated: whereas much volunteer translation focuses on *pro-bono* work for non-governmental organizations such as charities, fan translation focuses on translations of texts that are important for a particular group of fans. These texts tend to come from popular culture, rather than the political, medical and other specialized domains that are of interest to charities, and their translations are often, though not always, collaborative (O'Brien 2011; O'Hagan 2009:101). The expansion of the internet since the 1990s has made fan translation much more visible, as fan-translated texts are now more easily available: they can now be searched online rather than having to be identified through non-commercial distribution networks. Fans translate a wide range of materials, including cartoons, TV shows, films, video games, comics, fiction, board games and song lyrics. Apart from the translation of cartoons, TV shows and films (see FANSUBBING and FANDUBBING), translations of comics (also known as scanlation) and video games (also called romhacking) have received most academic attention, followed by fan translation of (popular) fiction and song lyrics.

Fandom and fan culture

Fan translation is undertaken by fans. Fandom, as early fan scholars such as Jenkins (1992:9-49) and Jenson (1992) have noted, has often been viewed negatively in the media, with fans seen as “excessive, bordering on deranged” (Jenson 1992:9). Yet fandom is a common feature of popular culture (Fiske 1992:30), and many people will be fans of a particular text, musician or sports team at some point in their lives. The question of what defines a fan is actively debated in fan studies scholarship (Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005) as it is not fully clear at which point one becomes a fan or how fandom can be measured. It is also difficult to compare fandom across different types of object: football and sports fans, for instance, will interact as fans in different ways from music fans or anime fans.

Sandvoss (2005:8) defines fandom as “the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text”. Sandvoss’s definition is somewhat minimal and aims to include fans of various different objects, from sports teams to popular music and media products. Other scholars have argued that fandom includes the production and consumption of derivative works (Jenkins 1992; Azuma 2009:25-26), such as t-shirts, fan fiction, fan art, fan songs, figurines, and so on. While Jenkins and Azuma both focus on productions by fans, derivative works are clearly also created by media companies for the consumption of fans, from videos and DVDs of TV series, to t-shirts, video games and more niche items like figurines (Hills 2002:28-30). Fans are often collectors of such material, which deepens their engagement with the objects of their fandom (Gray 2010:175-205; Geraghty 2014).

Fan practices extend beyond the production and consumption of texts and objects and include visiting places that are meaningful for fans, from sites of production to represented locations (Hills 2002:144-157; Geraghty 2014:93-119). Cosplay, dressing up as a character from a beloved TV show, film or comic book, is also a common expression of fandom (Lamerichs 2011). All these fan practices demonstrate an investment of time, energy and often money that goes beyond the casual consumption of an object of fandom. Fandom can also be seen as a form of community (Jenkins 1992) as fans communicate regularly with each other, for

instance by participating in discussion fora or conventions that allow them to meet, trade and discuss their objects of fandom. Not all fans will participate in all fan activities or even in the fan community, but self-identifying fans will often be involved in more than just passive viewing or passive consumption of their objects of fandom: as scholars of fan studies argue, fans are active consumers, making their own meaning from popular media texts (Fiske 1992:30).

Fan translation

Fan translation clearly fits into the pattern of fan activities discussed in the literature on fandom. It involves the production of a derivative work: the translated text. Like collecting, cosplay and visiting locations, the production of a translation extends the interaction with a text from passive consumption to a more active engagement with it. Fan translation is a form of service to the fan community: it allows texts to be consumed in languages other than the ones they were created in before an official translation is produced and distributed, or as an alternative to it. This pattern varies with each object of fan translation: it is uncommon for a translated comic, for instance, to function as an alternative to an official translation, but this is more common in the translation of video games.

In some cases, fan translations are the only vehicle through which a text may be made available to a different linguistic community, for instance if the text is deemed commercially unviable and hence unworthy of an official translation. While fan translation may be undertaken in all domains in which a subculture of fandom exists (which could include the entirety of popular culture), as well as in many language combinations, most discussions of fan translation in the literature have so far focused on translations of Japanese cultural products into English.

Scanlation, or the fan translation of comics, is a highly visible area of fan translation and, as Evans (2016:324) notes, has influenced mainstream and official translations of Japanese comics (known as 'manga'). *Scanlation* is a contraction of the English words *scan* and *translation* (Ferrer Simó 2005:29; O'Hagan 2009:100): the process involves scanning the original comic, removing the written text and then adding in the translated dialogue (Trykowska 2009:10-11). This is a development from earlier fan translations of manga, where fans produced translated scripts for the comics which readers could then compare with the Japanese printed comic (Trykowska 2009:7). Scanlations are more user-friendly as they do not require readers to switch their attention from one text to another. It is not clear when fan translation of manga began, though Deppey (2005) argues that it was in the early 1990s, following the expansion of the internet and the possibility of sending high quality image files by email. The availability of affordable, reliable scanners for home use also played an important part in the spread of scanlation (Trykowska 2009:7). Scanlation, then, is a by product of expanding home computer use and shifts in consumer technology.

One of the reasons fans undertake scanlation is the unavailability of certain manga in English. As with other cultural products, not all manga are selected for translation by official publishers (Lee 2009:1014), and scanlation thus offers a way in which additional manga titles can be made available. As Lee (2009:1016) notes, many scanlators focus on these unlicensed comics and so do not see their activity as competing with official translations. This is an important aspect of the ethical dimension of scanlation practice: for fans, the translation is not undertaken for profit, but rather to make texts available and to encourage better recognition for manga and thus share fans' own enthusiasms for these cultural products (Deppey 2005;

Lee 2009:1015-1017). The effect on the manga industry is viewed as positive by some, leading to publishers turning a blind eye to the activities of scanlators where the translated manga has not been licensed (Trykowska 2009:8). However, scanlation aggregation sites that collect pdf files and link to other sites have been threatened by the industry (Reid 2010).

The literature on scanlation identifies wordplay and onomatopoeia as particularly challenging phenomena (Trykowska 2009:14), and the use of extratextual glosses in the form of footnotes and endnotes as typical strategies used to address them (ibid.). Scholarship on scanlation has also examined issues of layout and typography. In contrast to early translations of manga into European languages (Kaindl 1999), scanlations do not flip pages to read from left to right but leave them in the Japanese reading direction of right to left, thus requiring readers to invest in learning how to read in this direction. These source-oriented practices have become more accepted in official manga translations: official translations face the same difficulties as scanlations (Evans 2016:324) and are increasingly influenced by fan practices. Further technical difficulties relate to redrawing and typesetting in scanlation (Trykowska 2009:14), as the speech bubbles used for Japanese text do not always accommodate the roman script used by European languages easily. The difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that English is often used as a pivot language for scanlation into other languages (Trykowska 2009:20).

Fan translation of video games constitutes another key area of research. The majority of video games are created in Japan or the USA, but not all are officially localized into other languages (Muñoz Sánchez 2009:169). Fan video game translation is also known as ‘romhacking’ as early video games (such as those for the Nintendo Entertainment System [NES] or the Sega Master System) were stored on Read Only Memory (ROM) chips in cartridges. Translating the textual element of a game involved extracting it from the ROM, before it could be translated and reinserted back into the game (Muñoz Sánchez 2007; O’Hagan 2009:107-108). This required a high degree of technical knowledge, which led to collaboration between ‘hackers’ (who are able to extract the text and do the necessary coding) and translators (O’Hagan 2009:108; Consalvo 2013:61). In addition to providing translations of otherwise unavailable games, fan translations are also produced in order to correct what are seen as ‘poor’ official translations of games (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013:309).

Romhacking began in the mid-1990s, as Anglophone interest in text intensive Japanese role-playing games grew (Consalvo 2013:61), and was aided by the appearance of console emulators that allowed people to play console games on a PC, and hence also to play the romhacked games (O’Hagan 2009:108; Muñoz Sánchez 2009:169). As with scanlation, the internet made distribution of the fan translated games much easier and increased the visibility of the practice. Older games continue to be translated alongside newer games, as older systems such as NES and Game Boy still interest gamers and can be played on emulators (Consalvo 2013:61).

Some of the available literature has focused on challenges faced by both romhackers and official game translators, such as the difficulty of fitting text within the available space for dialogues (Muñoz Sánchez 2007) and translating variables of gender, number and colour across different linguistic systems (Bernal Merino 2007). While official translations are often adaptive (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2006:15), fan translations tend to privilege authenticity (O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013:302) and are more source-oriented. Fan translators have the advantage of deep knowledge of the text they are translating (Muñoz Sánchez 2009:178) and enjoy full access to the game itself, which is not always the case for official game translators (Bernal Merino 2007). Fan translators also have more freedom than official translators as

they are not constrained by the censorship rules that PEGI (Pan European Game Information) age ratings impose (Muñoz Sánchez 2009:178); this freedom allows them to use more taboo language and/or sexual content, for instance.

In addition to these more established fields, emergent areas of research include fan translation of popular fiction and the translation of popular music. A great deal of research has been done on fan fiction (Jenkins 1992; Hellekson and Busse 2006), that is, fiction written by fans based on the world of the text that they are fans of (for example, *X Files* and *Firefly*), but much less work has been done on fan translation of popular fiction. J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* is the most widely discussed source text in this context, given the proliferation of fan translations in German, French, Turkish and Chinese. These and other fan translations of popular fiction are often undertaken very quickly in order to appear before the official translation is published (Chan 2010:137-138). As with the translation of video games and comics, fan translations of popular fiction are often motivated by a lack of availability of translated texts. Multiple Chinese translations of *The Deathly Hallows* (the final book in the *Harry Potter* saga) were produced by groups of Harry Potter fans, with varying degrees of quality given the speed of production and their "patchwork" nature (Chan 2010:139-140). The situation was further complicated by the production of what Chan (2013:139) refers to as "fake translations" of the novel around the same time: a combination of fan fiction and fan translation, these 'fake translations' were often sold as translations of the new novel (ibid.). While there are fan translations of other texts such as *wuxia* (martial arts) novels, one of the difficulties involved in researching such sub-genres concerns the tendency for official translations to follow shortly after fan translations, leading to the removal of the latter from websites.

Like other forms of fan translation, music translation began its life offline, in fanzines (fan created magazines), and moved to the internet in the 1990s (Kaross and Spinola 2012). The literature distinguishes between fan translations undertaken for the purpose of understanding the meaning of the lyrics and those undertaken with the purpose of producing a version that can be sung (Kaross and Spinola 2012; Low 2003; Susam-Saraeva 2015:141). Unlike the other forms of fan translation discussed here, fan translated songs do not seek to offer a replacement for the source text, but rather to provide a supplemental text that facilitates appreciation of the original song. The social function of translating songs has been investigated by Susam-Saraeva (2015:143-156), whose analysis focuses on the translations of songs between Greek and Turkish to argue that such fan created material contributes to a rapprochement between the two cultures (ibid.:155). Susam-Saraeva's work thus demonstrates how fan translation can become part of wider activist practices, a theme rarely addressed in the literature.

Fan translations are technically illegal (Lee 2009:1011; Trykowska 2009:8) as they involve the production of derivative works and hence require authorization from the copyright owner in many countries (Berne Convention, Article 8 [Paris Text]). However, they appear to be tolerated in many cases as long as they do not compete with an official translation. In the case of the Chinese Harry Potter fan translations, no actions were taken against fan translators as Rowling's lawyers permitted non-commercial fan fiction and fan translation (Chan 2010:138). At the same time, many fan translators take the stance that their work should be non-profit and tend to stop translating once the product is licenced (Lee 2009:1016-1017). This is coherent with their positioning as fans of a particular group of texts, with an interest in the promotion and continued circulation of those texts. On the other hand, it is worth noting that the texts in question are often owned by large media corporations and that these

corporations stand to benefit from fan labour, which can serve as free promotion of the copyrighted texts and thus lead to further sales of texts and merchandise. As with other fan practices, fan translation here displays the tensions between emancipatory actions, relating to the interpretation of a text and the development of a community around the object of fandom, and a consumerist structure based on purchasing official copies (Hills 2002:27-45). The translation of video games is legally more complex still, as more recent laws such as the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (1998) and End User Licensing Agreements also prohibit the activity (Muñoz Sánchez 2009:180; O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013:297). While there is some evidence that software companies do send Cease and Desist letters to romhacking groups (Muñoz Sánchez 2009:181), something of a 'gentleman's agreement' seems to exist between comics publishers and scanlating groups (Trykowska 2009:8).

Future directions

Much research remains to be done on fan translation, as existing studies cover only a small range of domains in which fan translations are being undertaken, and a limited range of issues involved in this activity. There are fields, such as musical theatre, board games and sports, where fans translate materials that have not yet been examined by scholars of translation. The history of fan translation is another neglected area of research and may require searching the archives of fanzines and less known magazine collections in order to establish what was translated in the past. The connections between fan translation and other forms of fan activity are worth examining more closely: both involve rewriting and intervening in texts, but it is unclear whether similar motivations and goals are at play when fan translators undertake other fan activities. Farley (2013) suggests there are theoretical similarities between writing fan fiction and translating texts due to the forms of interpretation and rewriting involved. [HShe](#) further points out that fan fiction and fan translation may be undertaken by the same people; and yet, the relationship between fan translation and other activities such as cosplay has received no attention in the literature so far. The field would also benefit from more engagement with the sociological dimension of fan translation: little or no research has addressed the issue of who is doing fan translations (possibly due to the illegal nature of the activity), where they come from, their age profile, or even what motivates them.

Fan translation may ultimately help us develop an understanding of the role of translation in many people's lives and open up translation studies to a broader discussion of translation as a concrete, every day practice rather than a remote object of scholarly analysis. Such 'vernacular theories' (McLaughlin 1996) of translation would have the advantage of challenging and moving beyond existing paradigms.

Further reading

Hills, Matt (2002) *Fan Cultures*, London: Routledge.

An important conceptualization of how fan cultures function and the contradictions within them.

Lee, Hye.-Kyung. (2009) 'Between Fan Culture and Copyright Infringement: Manga scanlation', *Media, Culture & Society* 31(6): 1011-1022.

A useful article on scanlation from a media studies perspective that offers a good overview of the issues.

O'Hagan, Minako (2008) 'Fan Translation Networks: An accidental training environment?', in John Kearns (ed.) *Translator and Interpreter Training: Issues, Methods and Debates*, London: Continuum, 158-183.

An investigation of how fan translation can serve as a training environment for translators.