Theory

How to do things with fan subs: Media engagement as subcultural capital in anime fan subbing

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[0.1] Abstract—Anime fandom has been a fairly constant subject in fan scholarship, although only recently have conversations about fan subbing begun to circulate. As useful as those conversations are, none have directly dealt either with the mechanisms of fan subbing, particularly the use of linear notes, as a practice or with how these subs intersect with the flows of subcultural capital. Fan subbing, both as a productive and a consumptive practice, plays a small but influential part in subcultural capital. Engagement with media is a compositional element of such capital in this community.

[0.2] Keywords—Anime; Fan studies; Media studies; Subtitling


1. Introduction

[1.1] Anime fans show their love for the medium through a number of activities—writing their own comics (doujinshi) or creating games (doujin sofuto or doujin geemu) in which popular characters appear; participating in cosplay; collecting/displaying/building figures and models of characters—all of which reaffirm the claim that fans are not passive consumers of cultural media but rather are active participants who critically negotiate texts to meet specific subcultural needs (Ang 2002; Jenkins 1988; Radway 1988). While not new practices, scanlations (the scanning and translation of manga) and fan subbing (fan subtitling of anime episodes) offer other venues through which fans negotiate
meaning. As recently as the early 2000s, these practices were
the domain of a select few groups of fans who possessed the
technical and financial resources combined with geographical
location to produce such translations; these fans served as de
facto gatekeepers, in a sense controlling which shows
circulated outside of Japan, and at times nudging which shows
got licensed. The democratization of digital editing and
distribution technologies, however, has broadened the pool of
fans who can participate in this form of fandom, largely
destabilizing the role that any one group can play as anime-
licensing kingmaker, but more importantly the quality of these
programs allows fans to rival corporate and professional
entities in terms of production. Perhaps because of these two
factors, the number of anime fan subbing groups has
exploded.

[1.2] The increasing prevalence of material produced by
anime fans by itself offers no justification for its study. As
scholarly analyses of this fan practice demonstrate, though,
fan subbing impacts the larger cultural sphere by making
significant ripples in how we understand intellectual property
(Denison 2011; Hatcher 2005; Jenkins 2004; Leonard 2005a,
2005b) or media ecologies (Anderson-Terpstra 2012; Eng
2012; Lee 2011). Condry (2010) attempts to explain the
relationships between these two areas with his theorization of
dark energy, which he uses to explain the antagonism
between corporate and fan practices in the circulation of
anime. The tensions between corporations and fans are by no
means isolated to anime fandom, but it should be noted that
the community itself remains divided over fan subs. Whether
or not licensed anime (even when the mere intent to localize
is announced) should continue to be subtitled, the extent to
which translations should be adapted, and even the speed at
which groups should release their subs all represent points of
contention within the community (Ito 2012).

[1.3] Work in fan studies on anime fan subbing tends to
prioritize the ecologies in which the medium circulates;
surprisingly, actual discussion of the subtitling process itself
remains scant. This seems to have been left to pockets of
conversation in the academic and professional arenas of
subtitling, the literature of which is aware of the role that
formal properties of media play in the construction and display
of subtitles (Nornes 1999). While not a new conversation,
subtitling literature helps to supplement the conversations in
fan studies by offering examples of specific ways in which fans
negotiate the potentiality and limitations of visual media.

[1.4] These two literatures, while clearly related, appear to
operate in parallel rather than reinforcing fashions. On the
one hand, we know that the circulation of media is important in fan communities, and on the other, we glean some insight into specific practices of interaction with visual media. Missing from these conversations is a clear path as to how subtitling choices, informed by the strictures of the medium, inform fan ecologies and vice versa. The theory of subcultural capital provides one path to bridging these two fields by framing subtitling choices as an articulation of specific types of knowledge that serve as currency within fan communities. Since anime fans place a high premium on knowledge of and about Japan and its language (Napier 2005, 2007), how fan sub groups leverage the properties of container media—or do not—to meet these needs provides insight into the role that the media play in the circulation and performance of knowledge.

[1.5] Using anime fan subbing practice as an example, I argue that engagement with media should be viewed as contributory to subcultural capital in digital communities because the performance of knowledge essential to its conferral can only be staged through the fan text itself. To successfully stage their knowledge, fan producers must negotiate both the needs of the community in which the text circulates and the limitations of the formal properties of the medium. In anime fan subbing, these conditions unfold in the act of subtitling, with the layout strategies and translation choices of fan groups functioning to display their knowledge regarding Japan and, in so doing, meet the needs of the community.

2. Subcultural subtitling

[2.1] Prior to developing these arguments, however, some time parsing the relevant points of both subcultural capital and subtitling will be useful in framing their overlaps. Subcultural capital, a concept proposed by Thornton (2005) to explain British club culture, derives from Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital. Cultural capital as Bourdieu theorizes it is status conferred through education and upbringing; typically a marker of class, it manifests in the bourgeois concept of taste where being able to discriminate between high and low cultures establishes a hierarchy predicated upon knowledge. Fiske (1992), using the term "official capital" (31), applies this concept to fandom and argues that these communities also have hierarchies, often based upon knowledge about the object of fandom itself and its surrounding context. Anime fandom prioritizes knowledge as well, but the context or scope of the surrounding context includes knowledge of and about Japan. There is a small but
growing literature, mostly in education, that links fan consumption of Japanese cultural media to interest in the country's language, culture, and history (Armour 2011; Fukunaga 2006; Northwood and Kinoshita Thomson 2012; Shamoon 2010). Within the context of anime fan studies, Napier's (2005, 2007) work provides the most explicit link to this body of research, with her respondents frequently confessing that they use anime as a vehicle through which they learn about Japan's culture, history, and language; being familiar in these areas not only deepens their enjoyment of anime but also confers upon them status within the community.

[2.2] In her discussion of club culture, Thornton (2005) makes a distinction between two categories of knowledge relevant to this discussion: embodied and objectified. Embodied knowledge is, as Fiske (1992) describes, being able to tap into reservoirs of knowledge about an object of fandom and its surrounding context. Displaying such knowledge, for example through dress or material goods, reflects the exercise of objectified knowledge. By Thornton's own admission, the concepts of embodied and objectified knowledge do not greatly diverge from Bourdieu's (1984) own cultural capital. Rather, subcultural capital differs from its unprefixed counterpart in two ways: how it is conferred and how it is circulated.

[2.3] Subcultural capital "confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder" (Thornton 2005, 186). Unlike cultural capital in official culture, which is hierarchical and frequently flows from institutions in a top-down manner, subcultural capital locates the authority to bestow credibility within individual fans, facilitating a model of evaluation that is both largely decentralized and in flux. This is not to suggest that hierarchies in fandom, such as gatekeepers, play no role in its conferral; rather, the nature of subcultural capital means that the position of these fans is also tenuous and subject to scrutiny.

[2.4] This flux may be due in part to the importance that media play in the circulation of subcultural capital. "Within the economy of subcultural capital the media is not simply another symbolic good or marker of distinction...but a network crucial to the definition and distribution of cultural knowledge" (Thornton 2005, 187). The role that media play in the circulation of anime and related contexts appears especially compositional to anime fandom, as the Internet functions as the primary means of connecting fans and sharing information in a global context (Eng 2012). These networks are additionally crucial to the workflow of fan subbing, as
broadband technologies allow fan producers to quickly and efficiently share resources during the production phase of the process (Doki Fansubs, n.d.; Ito 2012); these technologies further facilitate the rapid distribution of fan subs across multiple channels and open exposure to global audiences, ensuring that fan subs are not, in Fiske's (1992) terms, narrowcast.

[2.5] Yet in the context of fan subs, media take on another dimension related to knowledge: the means to concretely demonstrate those types of knowledge prized in the anime fan community. This requires a bit more than linguistic proficiency or cultural-historical familiarity: it necessitates the technical aptitude to effectively insert this knowledge for display in the video stream during playback. Good translation with bad timing is equally as poor as good timing with bad translation. The reality is that few people possess proficiency with all aspects of the process, making it more efficient to mimic the group workflow of industry.

[2.6] Discussions of the technical aspects of subtitling have appeared for some time in literature on the practice (Nornes 1999; Pedersen 2005; Zojer 2011), with work directly dealing with anime fan subbing slowly emerging (Denison 2010; Pérez González 2006). While directly addressing anime fan subbing only at the end of his piece, Nornes's article is particularly relevant because of his discussion of how fan practices force the viewer's awareness of cultural differences. Arguing that the way in which subtitles operate—where and when they appear as well as which characters get subtitled—can challenge ideological norms, he remarks that their use prevents "converting everything into easily consumable meaning" and "always directs spectators back to the original text" (32). Facilitating this awareness through leveraging of the display of subtitles becomes a practice he calls "abusive subtitling" (32).

[2.7] Of course, abusive practices can only be such when positioned against other ones. For Nornes, this would be the subtitling practices of official culture, most prominently seen through corporate translations, which frequently efface cultural differences in favor of mass market appeal. The theoretical and historical backdrop for translations in official culture is addressed by Venuti (1998, 2008), whose exploration of ideologies in translation practice has become widely recognized in the field. Tracing the historical development of translation in the West, he notes that the Romantic notion of the creative genius coupled with Realism's theorization of the internal stability of the text seek to downplay the role of translation by presenting the text as imminent and complete.
Basically, these positions combine to present a narrative of good translation as one that gives little hint of its foreign origins and that appears to have been written in the target language. These practices appear in the official cultural practice of localization, which is designed to appeal to as broad a market as possible in order to increase sales.

Abusive subtitling draws attention to the seams from which a good text in official culture is stitched. It may include keeping foreign words or concepts in the translation or drawing explicit attention to the translator through notes to supplement dialogue. While such practices, according to Nornes (1999), deepen viewer appreciation of the original, we need to consider how different ways of subtitling and translating meet the needs of the communities in which they circulate. Examining how anime fans produce and consume fan translations offers one path to linking how media engagement impacts fan practice, and the concept of subcultural capital is a crucial part in this link due to the centrality that knowledge plays in these communities. I begin by analyzing the role of linear notes in fan subbing, arguing that their function as an overt bridge connecting the translation to larger cultural expanses serves as an important way by which fan producers demonstrate their knowledge. The operations of and problems with the conferral of subcultural capital by fans forms the second part of my argument: while their position as learners raises questions about the ability of some fans to distinguish between good and bad translations, they make distinctions anyway, and I advocate that media engagement plays a role in this process.

3. Linear notes and self-fulfilling justification

Speaking about subtitling from the standpoint of official cultural practice, Zojer (2011) claims that the technical limitations of subtitling present problems when dealing with cultural material (e.g., untranslatable words). Anime fan subbers answer this challenge, however, through the use of font positioning, color, and linear notes—translator comments typically integrated into the upper portion of the video stream to identify cultural referents and clarify translation choices. The integration of these abusive elements meets the expectations of fan consumers, who use anime to learn about Japan, and also provide a platform from which fan producers can stage their knowledge for subcultural evaluation.

While it can be argued that the antagonism that fans have for mainstream market practices explains the inclusion of linear notes, conceptualizing this practice in terms of
resistance does not seem to be the most fruitful of paths because it relegates the fan community to a reactive rather than active system. Instead, conceiving of subtitles as a way by which fan subbers can create "a palpable sense of the foreign" (Nornes 1999, 29) that their consumers find valuable maintains participatory fandom as a generative, active practice. The prestige placed on knowledge and its demonstration in anime fandom, coupled with the fact that many fans are in the process of learning about Japan and its culture and hence are potentially unaware of the full scope of foreign elements, suggests a subtitling practice that overtly justifies a group's translation to fans. The symbiotic relationship between knowledge and its demonstration is particularly important when the translation itself appears to contain errors (figure 1).

Figure 1. Gintama, episode 83. Group: Rumbel-sMi. [View larger image.]

[3.3] Because of the linear note, the perceived misspelling in the translation is reframed as a demonstration of Rumbel's linguistic aptitude. The explanation of Toujo's irregular pronunciation provides an example of the group's phonetic prowess in differentiating between morphemes; the example assists fans who use anime to learn Japanese in training their own ears. In addition to pointing out translation choices originating in the linguistic realm, linear notes also serve to justify broader choices motivated by cultural affairs wherein referential knowledge plays a key role in fully appreciating the context (figures 2 and 3).
The visibility of the linear note is essential to this relationship, as without it the group can neither show its skill with language nor assert that its translation is faithful. A sympathetic relationship between the linear note and translation thus emerges, creating an internally consistent narrative that further justifies the choices made by the group and, ultimately, their skill. Linear notes and their accompanying translations, then, operate much like a binary star: their combined meaning creates the referential center of mass around which they revolve. Lose one half of the binary and the system collapses.

This relationship takes center stage when considering that many fan consumers approach anime as an educational tool. The visible chain of signification afforded by the linear notes enables these fans to trace linkages in a way that facilitates their understanding of Japanese cultural and linguistic nuance. Meeting these needs goes a long way to gaining credibility in the community, since their inclusion adds a depth to the translation that many fans are grateful for, and simultaneously positions the group as knowledgeable sources:

I just wanted to give HUGE props to the rumbel-sub team for constantly going the extra
mile and providing so many of the cultural references as part of the subbing process.

I'm sure it must be a lot of extra work. I wanted to let you guys know how much it is appreciated.

It adds so much to the episode to get that additional insight. I can't imagine watching Gintama without it.

(Stainless 2008)

[3.7] These comments, taken from Rumbel's forums, highlight the importance that linear notes play in furthering fan appreciation of anime. Their inclusion allows fans to understand not only what is being said but also why, intrinsically linking the study of language to the study of culture. Linear notes meet the subcultural needs of fans, then, by providing necessary context and background not only to the translation itself but also to the larger linguistic and cultural currents in which anime resides.

[3.8] Within the anime community, however, linear notes themselves are not necessarily abusive in Nornes's (1999) sense. Abuse arises from subtitling practices that destabilize the fluid consumption of a text; in anime fan subbing, the sympathetic and mutually reinforcing dynamic between linear notes and the translation ensures the necessity of both when attempting to provide an overall smooth product. Without linear notes, translations can appear unnatural or stiff, creating the same instability that their inclusion warrants in commercial texts in official culture. These moments of disruption can be seen as "immersive dissonance," a concept I have discussed in video game translations (Schules 2012, 90). Essentially, immersive dissonance occurs when unintentional ruptures in the game text destabilize our experience by calling attention to its status as a construct, whether through grammatical problems, referential breakdown, visual disruption, or some other issue. This concept is derived from the Dadaist theorization of the function of art. According to Tzara (2003), art should challenge our conceptions of the world by revealing how ideologies function and should offer alternatives to them. Immersive dissonance follows this trend, but whereas the Dadaists conceived of artistic disruption as a conscious effort of the artist, games in their commercial capacity can only achieve this unintentionally. When this occurs in translation, however, especially of the fan variety, we do not necessarily see this liberatory potential; rather, we see ineptitude. The reasons for this perception emerge from a weaving of the expectations that fans have for anime engagement with those brought about by advances in new media technologies with respect to production and distribution
qualities.

[3.9] Linear notes function as a way to mitigate such disruption by justifying translation choices, the byproduct of which simultaneously provides a convenient way to display proficiency in the Japanese linguistic and cultural domains. The importance of linear notes in co-constructing the meaning of the text can be seen through the comparison of a short exchange from episode 86 of *Gintama* (videos 1 and 2).

**Video 1.** *Gintama*, episode 86. Group: YuS-SHS.

[3.10] While the differences in translation between the two groups are superficial, the way in which the linear note (or lack thereof) realizes the translation speaks to how the two reinforce and justify each other. Rumbel-sMi's inclusion of the note provides some context to Hijikata's statement and Kondo's reaction, offering an explanation for the translation choice by explicitly charting the cultural chain of signification. Without the linear note, YuS-SHS's rendition of the lines appears out of place, a non sequitur within the overall exchange that potentially disrupts the flow of the translation for those unfamiliar with the referent itself. While it could be argued that the difference in linear note strategies between the groups reflects their choice in audience, the fact that subcultural capital is a perceptual commodity necessitates that groups overtly display their prowess as a means of convincing viewers of their ability to function as cultural and linguistic ambassadors. More than their function to justify translation choices, linear notes operate as rhetorical arguments of credibility. The absence of linear notes implies—rightly or wrongly—YuS-SHS's lack of proficiency, motivated by the immersive dissonance emergent from the referential cracks in the exchange.

[3.11] While it is tempting to examine these differences in translation and their consequences as specific to anime fan subs, the functional space occupied by linear notes within this sphere has grown as a consequence of the democratization of
editing technologies and distribution networks. These two developments, in part, exacerbate the blurring of boundaries between the expectations placed on the quality of fan products and that of corporate ones. While Fiske's (1992) theorization of fandom as an echo of official culture remains useful, his assertion that fan textual production frequently costs fans money and is of lesser quality owing to an economic imbalance that restricts access to professional quality production resources does not accurately describe contemporary anime fan subbing practice. The democratization of editing and subtitling tools, many of which are open source and designed by anime fan subbers, makes creating professional quality texts easier than before, so much so that quality can no longer distinguish fan productions from commercial ones. I take Fiske to mean production quality in the sense of high-end materials used to professionally package creative media. In anime, this would translate to HD or better video resolution and audio bitrates, along with dynamic subtitling; digital ecologies have largely rendered these concerns irrelevant as a means of distinguishing professional from fan texts as the nature of digital reproduction ensures that the copy is of the same production quality as the original (Davis 1995). Digitization also allows fans to easily lay out translations and linear notes, with programs like Aegisub (figure 4) offering advanced effects such as vectoring and layering in addition to more mundane features such as spell checking. Rather than producing a hardsubbed file, where the subtitles would be burned into the video stream and be impossible to edit, programs like Aegisub produce a modified text file that streams with but is not integrated into the video stream: a softsub. With the video and subtitle streams separate, it is relatively easier to fix errors in production and distribute these corrected files quickly.

Figure 4. Aegisub interface. [View larger image.]

[3.12] The editing environment of Aegisub allows translations and explanatory material to be added and edited
quickly, blurring the distinctions between fan and commercial texts from production and postproduction standpoints. The consequences of this are not without some irony, as the relative ease by which Aegisub enables fan subbing groups to proof, edit, and make alterations to their translations becomes part of the performance necessary to subcultural capital. Avoiding grammatical errors certainly falls into this category, but fans using anime to negotiate Japanese language and culture additionally expect that explanatory materials appear in order to bridge referential gaps that would otherwise fracture the unity of the text. YuS-SHS's translation is less successful than the Rumbel-sMi one not because of the lack of a linear note justifying the translation and, hence, the enmeshed position about their own proficiency but because the lack of the linear note offers a disruption in the text that could have been easily spotted and corrected. In this manner, the importance of media to subcultural capital in anime fan subs extends beyond the mere circulation that Thornton (2005) notes is essential to it; groups must be proficient not only in the linguistic and cultural domains but also be able to articulate these proficiencies through skillful interactions with container media.

[3.13] The importance of being able to properly negotiate the strictures of media can be applied more broadly to fan communities that communicate primarily through online channels and to the production of fan texts reliant on digital technologies for their creation. Manga scanlations certainly qualify (Anderson-Terpstra 2012), but the "Let's Play" videos in gaming circles apply as well, as fan producers of these walkthroughs must be proficient in video editing technologies as well as possess a sense of what gameplay to cut, when, and how. The larger point here is that the conferral of subcultural capital in the digital fan context is not just about what one knows or how one shows it; it is equally about articulating these credibly through media engagement. Linear notes in anime fan subs fit these criteria by meeting the needs that many fans have when consuming anime—learning about Japan—while simultaneously leveraging the properties of container media to demonstrate the fan subbing group's knowledge.

4. A problem of distinction

[4.1] The synergy between translations and their accompanying linear notes presents problems for the conferral of subcultural capital. This is because many fans are in the process of learning the Japanese linguistic, cultural, and historical maps, which places them in a restricted position to
either affirm the accuracy of the nuggets of wisdom dispensed in linear notes or evaluate the accuracy of the translations provided by fan subbing groups. The following excerpt from episode 8 of *Gintama* demonstrates these stakes. Shinsen-Subs, independent of YuS, created the subtitles in this example; a transcript of the scene follows, and I have provided a rough literal translation of my own for the purposes of comparison (table 1).

**Video 3.** *Gintama*, episode 8. Group: SHS.

**Table 1.** Literal transcription and translation of scene in video 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Literal</th>
<th>Original Japanese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kondo</td>
<td>Why do I have such a hairy ass?</td>
<td>dōse ore nante ketsuge dashisa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I don't know how I'll get a woman.</td>
<td>onna ni moteru wakenaindayo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I'm useless...</td>
<td>dame dana ore wa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Isn't it wonderfully manly?

What if your boyfriend...

What would you do if he had hair all over his butt?

I'd love him, even with his butt hair.

A buddha...she's a buddha who draws in all the impurities around her!

Butt...butt...butt...please marry me!

It's not like that.

Then I'll ask you,

What if your boyfriend...

What would you do if he had hair all over his butt?

I'd love him, even with his butt hair.

A buddha...she's a buddha who draws in all the impurities around her!

Butt...butt...butt...please marry me!

sonna koto nai desuyo

otoko rashikute suteki jarimasenka

jaa kikukedosa

moshi otaesan no kares saa

ketsu ga kedaruma datt dou suru yo

ketsuge goto aishimasu

bosatsu...subete no fujo tsutsumikomu marude bosatsuda

ketsu...ketsu...ketsu...keshte kudasai

[4.2] In this case the translation is at best inaccurate. The justification provided by the linear note is only half-correct; the joke does revolve around a play on words—ketsu (butt) and kekkon (marriage)—yet the connotations of impotence simply are not present in the original Japanese. The internal consistency provided by the linear note reinforces SHS's translation strategy, however, smoothing over the apparent leap in logic between Kondo's lines by implying that any disruption is due to idiosyncrasies in translating the joke from Japanese into English, not with poor translation. What is particularly interesting is that Shinsen-Subs was a fairly respected group prior to its demise, generally credited with accurate, compelling subtitles enjoyed by the fan sub viewing community (note 1). That the translation provided in this
episode of *Gintama* diverges so radically from a literal rendering of the text raises questions over the conferral of subcultural capital and the ability of fans to serve as critics capable of distinguishing between texts. How inaccuracies like this can circulate within the anime community and register little major complaint represents an epistemological Gordian knot with respect to subcultural capital, one whose answers lie in part with how fans approach language and its role in ideological constructions of translation. Although Napier (2007) notes that many fans critically consume the images provided in anime, she does not address how fans understand the role of these anime within Japanese culture, nor does she discuss how fans address differences in translations. It is one thing to point out that fans place critical distance between themselves and stereotypical tropes that circulate within anime genres, but it is a different matter to ask how they interpret anime within social structures such as Japanese and American media. Azuma (2001) theorizes some of these issues but from the perspective of Japanese fans and, of course, without a discussion of fan subbing. Weaving these issues together and tracing their consequences is an important step to understanding how subcultural capital operates in anime fandom.

[4.3] One potential reason why fans lack critical capacity with respect to language lies in assumptions over language and its translation circulating in official culture: congruence. While Venuti (1998, 2008) argues that translations should be seen as responses to specific situations, he reminds us that concepts of authorship and disciplinary approaches to language study (such as Grice's maxims of communication) construct a system in which the meanings of texts remain essentially unchanged as they undergo adaption to another culture (or time). We assume that the translation we read is a faithful rendition of what occurs in the original. This position is echoed more broadly in the concept of communicative action, which states that shared assumptions with respect to truth and rightness between people underlie interaction (Habermas 1979). We assume that the people we are talking to are sincere and honest in their requests; when arranging a meeting, for example, we trust that no one agrees to meet at a time they cannot. Idealized and contested as it is, the framework explains the deeper ideological relationships that we have with translation: we assume that the original and translated texts, negotiated by the translator, are sincere and honest representations of each other—they are congruent. This is different than fidelity, which speaks to meaning and can boast variations. Fidelity necessitates congruence but not the other way around. This is particularly important for
theorizing subcultural capital in fan translations and broader anime fandom in general, as no matter how fans prefer their subs—from sub to dubbed, literal to localized—they all operate on the assumption that the translations themselves accurately reflect what was expressed in the original Japanese. For those who consume fan translations, this assumption bears particular weight, as approaching anime as a tool to study Japan and its language necessitates congruence between the original Japanese and the translated fan sub as an unshakable, foundational, assumption: one can't study Japanese (effectively) if the referential and semantic links fail to function. As such, one reason why fans do not consume anime critically from a linguistic standpoint is that to entertain alternative approaches destabilizes the assumption (and not a small one, considering the Japanese government’s long-running Cool Japan campaign and its recent turn toward language support) that the medium can serve as a means of cultural and linguistic instruction. The confluence of translation ideologies and fan-critical consumption of images suggests that they approach anime as representational vehicles through which the studied fan can discern Japanese cultural flows.

[4.4] In accepting the congruency of translations, fans not only establish them as a platform upon which they can practice and develop their skills, but they also scaffold a broader subcultural economy in which the demonstration of these linguistic and cultural skills becomes a means of distinction and stratification. Engagement with container media becomes one such means of potential distinction, as the incorporation of linear notes into translations becomes essential to the performative onus critical to subcultural capital.

[4.5] With these concerns in mind, we can now theorize a rationale for the translation provided by Shinsen-Subs. As a localization strategy for Western audiences, the translation fares better, but the inclusion of the linear note to explain the punch line of the exchange suggests that this is not an attempt at fidelity: it functions as discussed earlier, by bridging the gap between the dialogue and cultural referents in such a way as to avoid any form of immersive dissonance interfering with either the fluid readability of the text or consuming it as a study aid. The linear note, quite simply, reinforces an incorrect translation. In so doing, it grates against the subcultural logic of linear notes within the anime community as their purpose is to serve as the harbor from which fans depart the firm ground of the translation for the deeper, more treacherous waters of linguistic and cultural representation. A localized text is essentially landlocked, and
linear notes in them are about as useful as an international seaport in Iowa.

[4.6] The reasons why fan groups include linear notes—and extrapolating from that media engagement strategies in general—reflect the needs of the community in which the text will circulate. The segment of the anime community that views fan subs consumes them rather than localized corporate offerings to deepen their understanding of Japan, and thus they expect certain production practices to facilitate this goal. Linear notes are one such practice, conveying the appearance of proficiency on the part of the fan subbing group. Whether or not these groups are truly competent is immaterial. Framed from this vantage, the conferral of subcultural capital emerges less from fidelity to the Japanese linguistic and cultural streams than from their seamless integration of explanatory materials that function as bridges of semantic stability.

[4.7] This is not to suggest that all fan subs or even the majority of them are inaccurate, but the fact that a group such as Shinsen-Subs, an established and reputable group prior to its disbanding, adheres to the conventions of linear notes while offering incorrect translations raises broader questions about the conferral of subcultural capital by fan consumers in their capacity as arbiters of distinction. At its most basic, the position adopted by fans when consuming anime for linguistic purposes places them in a subordinate role with respect to their fan subbing teachers. Sakai (1997) notes that such subordination makes it difficult for language learners to engage in criticism emergent from language and its related arenas. As such, fans who consume fan subbed anime for the purpose of learning encounter hierarchical flows of power that potentially undermine their ability to serve as critics and distinguish good translations from bad ones. This subordinate position additionally explains the emphasis on the critical consumption of images over words as noted by Napier (2007), as many may feel implicitly silenced because of their status.

[4.8] While this framing makes some logical sense, fans do make critical distinctions despite their supposed subordination to their fan sub-creating brethren. A LiveJournal discussion over Rumbel-sMi and YuS-SHS's translation strategies for Gintama offers insight into how fans make distinctions despite their perceived subordination. Speaking of how translation strategies between the two groups inform consumption patterns, one fan writes:

[4.9] I haven't watched Yuurisan's Gintama releases, but I've seen their DGM ones, so this may
not really count.

I don't like how Yuurisan, more often than not, omits some words from the dialogue. It kind of off the translation quality.

Rumbel however, sticks to the actual dialogue and their translation is very accurate. Also, I've always liked how they include notes, even uberly long ones, because...I don't know, I just like it. I'm not really familiar with the Japanese custom, so I need side-info. (silhouette_68 2008).

[4.10] The first significant point is that this fan's consumption patterns are influenced by how the fan subbing groups engage with material from both linguistic and technical perspectives. YuS's omission of words in other work leaves silhouette_68 (2008) skeptical as to their ability to accurately engage with Gintama, a gap that is filled by Rumbel's use of linear notes to explain cultural material he is not familiar with. Focusing on Rumbel's inclusion of notes, rather than their accuracy, is a common theme in this forum:

[4.11] I gotta go with Rumble. They actualy take the time to reasearch all of that stuff, which means they win muchly in my book. XD (spartydragon 2008)

Rumbel, definitely. It never fails to amaze me how they manage to track down EVERY SINGLE REFERENCE/PARODY/QUOTE. *____* (raineyz 2008)

[4.12] The generally favora ble reception that Rumbel receives for including linear notes with their subs suggests that media engagement, in addition to the translation itself, forms a core criterion though which fan subs are judged by the community. In recognizing that they prefer Rumbel because of the notes that the group supplies, these fans tacitly acknowledge that they use them to learn about Japanese customs and, therefore, should be in no position to stake claims about their accuracy. At most, fans should only be able to judge Rumbel on their use of linear notes and the appearance of credibility they offer. This only works, however, if we assume that the flows of distinction in fandom parallel their official counterparts.

[4.13] One rationale for how fans can judge the quality of fan subs without being proficient in the language or culture lies in the fact that we are dealing with a subcultural community in which normal, official flows of power may be
impotent. In this case, status conferred by paths recognized in official culture—postsecondary study, testing, work experience, and so forth—is not easily translatable to the online environment in which anime fan communities operate because of, in part, problems of verification. Instead of conferral by organizations, displays of knowledge provide the mechanism through which subcultural capital travels. For subcultural capital in anime this is not a major problem, as fan subbers possessing the relevant accreditation in official culture should be able to easily wear it on their sleeves in their interactions with the anime community, and the only way to do this effectively is through their interactions with the container media in which they house and distribute their translations. In this way, Thornton (2005) is correct in postulating that media are essential to subcultural capital, but whereas she limits this to circulation, we see that in anime fan translations they are equally essential to its construction. Subcultural capital emerges from how technologies are leveraged to demonstrate cultural and linguistic prowess.

While this rationale explains one way in which subcultural capital functions in anime fan subs, it still does not address the larger epistemological paradox of how those who have varying degrees of linguistic aptitude serve as critics when they are still mastering the systems they are critiquing. This would not be a problem in other contexts where the official and subcultural spheres are separate, but the nature of how fans approach anime suggests that the boundaries between official culture and the anime subculture are perhaps more permeable than those erected by other subcultures. While subcultural capital rarely leads to economic capital in official culture, it is possible, but usually only in a limited arena related in some way to the subcultural context in which it originated. In the case of anime fan subbing, the linguistic and technical skills displayed potentially have wider applicability, and fans who consume these texts see them as an entrance into a world larger than that of the anime community. Anime is, essentially, a gateway drug. With this in mind, Japanese is not learned for the sake of Japanese but, rather, as a potential skill transferrable to some aspect of official culture or subcultural community. Fan subbing as well functions as a portfolio of sorts in which individuals or groups can appeal to institutions of official culture. Dattebayo, for example, used the knowledge honed via fan subbing to enter the professional world by starting a subtitling company.

5. Conclusion

While Thornton (2005) is correct in identifying the
circulation of media as a necessary part in the flows of subcultural capital, the relationship that anime fan subbing has with media, from production to consumption, penetrates deeper: media engagement forms an essential part in its construction. The demonstration of knowledge through which subcultural capital is conferred is aided by the democratization of editing technologies that enable fans to easily enact alternative interpretations of the dominant ideologies of translation to fit their pedagogical needs. Skill with manipulating container media, especially in terms of the translation's presentation, becomes a means through which the cultural and linguistic proficiencies important to anime fandom as a practice can be measured: linear notes serve as the link here, functioning as a bridge through which the translation meets the subcultural needs of language acquisition and cultural cosmopolitanism.

[5.2] Unfortunately, this very point offers a look at the challenges of analyzing anime fan subbing as a form of subcultural capital: those tasked with identifying good and bad translations are, because of their status as learners, in the least likely position to criticize. The lack of formally recognized schema to confer credibility as in official culture is not the problem; rather, the problem really lies in the way in which subcultural capital as a system operates in conjunction with the subcultural needs of the fans who frequently seek to operate in circles outside that of anime fandom. While I am not sure this problem needs resolution, it is an interesting consequence that I leave for others to expand upon and theorize.

[5.3] These theoretical musings aside, how fan subbing functions with respect to subcultural capital suggests that we should look at how engagement with media contributes to the ecologies of fandom. I do not mean just what media are used but, more specifically, turning our attention to the ways in which the formal features of media are leveraged by actors in both the official and subcultural stages. This implies more than identification of specific media as platforms for discussion, as these speak to their capacity as tools of circulation that have already been theorized; rather, what the case of anime fandom suggests is that specific forms of engagement with those media distinguish between successful and unsuccessful appeals. As fan subbing expands from Japanese anime to Korean drama, for example, we should be cognizant of and analyze how the divergent needs of the communities consuming them motivate different strategies of engagement with container media. Content, of course, is still king, but if we understand content in terms of Marshall McLuhan's adage that the content of all media are other
media, then we begin to witness the practical and theoretical horizons of what it means for media to be a compositional element of subcultural capital.

[5.4] Under this rubric, we are given alternative methods by which to approach and understand divergent fan practices, particularly when the form of engagement remains the same. In this case, I am speaking of the differences in how American and Japanese fans approach cosplay. As a medium through which fans engage anime and manga, understanding the way in which fans approach media, in this case the costumes, in this subcultural space suggests an alternative (and at this point purely speculative) rationale for these geographic and cultural differences. Naturally, we should be mindful that how a group engages with media reflects, in part, discourses of media and their use circulating in the larger cultural sphere; the potential nuances emergent from these divergent discourses of media offer fertile ground from which to examine a cross-cultural comparison of the flows of subcultural capital.

6. Note

1. While this claim stems from my own experience in both viewing their anime and discussions with fans about their work, the closest one can come to quantifying this claim comes from the Web site MyAnimeList (http://myanimelist.net), where Shinsen-Subs has an 82 percent approval factor (on the basis of 5,949 votes) overall, and a 58 percent approval (from 136 votes) for their work on Gintama.

7. Works cited


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