

## Translation of Idioms in Dubbing and Subtitling: A Case Study of *Passion to Fly* Series

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### Abstract

Audiovisual translation (AVT) is essential for bridging linguistic and cultural divides, enabling media content to engage audiences across languages. Among AVT practices, dubbing and subtitling remain the most widespread, yet both face persistent challenges when translating idiomatic expressions whose cultural and stylistic nuances often lack direct equivalents in the target language. This study examines the effectiveness of dubbing and subtitling in rendering the lexical and discourse styles of Persian idioms in the television series *Passion to Fly*. Drawing on Biber and Conrad's (2019) framework for analyzing lexical and discourse styles, the research investigates the extent to which these two translation modes preserve the stylistic features and contextual meanings of idiomatic expressions. Persian idioms were collected from all episodes of the series, categorized according to their stylistic properties, and evaluated against their English translations in both dubbing and subtitling. Statistical comparisons were then conducted to determine how effectively each mode maintains the stylistic features of the original idioms. The findings indicate that dubbing more effectively preserves idiomatic stylistic features than subtitling. This study contributes to AVT scholarship by offering insights that can inform translation practice and training, ultimately supporting more effective cross-cultural communication in media contexts.

**Keywords:** Dubbing, subtitling, idiomatic expressions, style

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## 1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, media serves as a bridge between different cultures, languages, and societies. Audiovisual Translation (AVT) plays a crucial role in ensuring accessibility to multimedia content for diverse audiences (Pérez-González, 2019). As a relatively new field, AVT has gained increasing scholarly attention in recent decades, coinciding with the rapid expansion of the audiovisual industry. Since its emergence in the early 20th century, AVT has primarily been carried out through two dominant methods: subtitling and dubbing. While subtitling involves translating dialogue into written text displayed on the screen, dubbing replaces the original speech with a recorded translation synchronized with the actors' lip movements (Pérez-González, 2019).

Different countries exhibit strong preferences for one of these AVT methods, influenced by political, economic, and cultural factors (Chaume, 2007). Countries such as Germany, Italy, and Spain, known as "Dubbing Countries", have established advanced dubbing industries, whereas nations like Denmark and the Scandinavian countries favor subtitling. Iran is recognized as a dubbing country, with a highly developed dubbing industry, although younger generations are increasingly leaning toward subtitling nowadays.

One of the major challenges in AVT is the preservation of style, which encompasses tone, register, and discourse features (Leech & Short, 1981). Style is not merely an aesthetic concern but a vital aspect of meaning-making, affecting audience perception and comprehension. According to Munday (2016), translation style significantly influences how cultural, social, and linguistic nuances are conveyed. In AVT, this complexity is heightened by the interplay of verbal and non-verbal communication elements. Failure to render the stylistic features of the source text accurately may eventually result in loss of meaning, emotional impact, and cultural authenticity, ultimately affecting the audience's engagement with the content.

Given the centrality of style in AVT, an essential question arises: which method—subtitling or dubbing—is more effective in preserving the lexical and discourse style of the source material? The present study aims to address this issue by analyzing the Persian-to-English translation of idioms in the Iranian television series *Passion to Fly*.

This research specifically seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How were the lexical and discourse styles of the idioms in the *Passion to Fly* series rendered in subtitling?
2. How were the lexical and discourse styles of the idioms in the *Passion to Fly* series rendered in dubbing?
3. Which mode of audiovisual translation was more successful in preserving the stylistic features of the idioms in the *Passion to Fly* series for the target audience?

These research questions were systematically examined, and the findings of this study provide insights into which AVT mode better preserves idiomatic and stylistic elements in translation. By answering these questions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of style preservation in AVT, particularly in the context of Persian-to-English translations. Furthermore, inadequate attention to stylistic elements in AVT not only affects comprehension but also distorts the original creative intent of the work. This research aims to provide insights into how translators can better balance linguistic accuracy with stylistic fidelity, thereby enhancing the quality of Persian-to-English audiovisual translations. The findings will contribute to the advancement of AVT practices and inform translators, educators, and industry professionals on the best strategies for preserving idiomatic style in translation.

## 2. Literature Review

As broadly explained in the *Routledge Handbook of Audiovisual Translation* (2019), the concept of the translation of films was formed with the appearance of films in the Pre-Sound Era. In this era, films did not have any sound, but the speaking was shown by the movement of the actors' mouths, then some title cards appeared on the screen to show the content of the speech. Very few researches have been done on this era because it seems that translating these films is considered to be easier than translation of films with sound. Then the sound and speech were added to the films. One of the first solutions for the problem of understanding foreign language films by the audience was to play music during the speeches and then show title cards containing the context of the speech in target language (Cornu, 2014; Freire, 2015).

As the film industry evolved and sound became an integral part of cinematic storytelling, the need for effective translation methods grew increasingly important. This transition marked the emergence of various audiovisual translation techniques, including dubbing and subtitling, each with its distinct characteristics and implications for how films are experienced by diverse audiences. The introduction of synchronized audio required translators to not only convey the spoken content but also to capture the emotional tone and cultural nuances of the dialogues. As a result, researchers began to investigate how these translation modes affect viewers' comprehension and engagement with the material, highlighting the complex interplay between language, style, and cultural representation in audiovisual media (Baker, 2018; Díaz-Cintas, 2018).

Moreover, the advent of globalization and the proliferation of digital platforms have further complicated the landscape of audiovisual translation. Audiences are now exposed to an unprecedented variety of films from different cultures, necessitating effective translation strategies to facilitate cross-cultural communication. This shift has prompted scholars to explore the effectiveness of various translation methods in preserving the original film's stylistic elements and emotional depth (Gambier, 2013; Pérez-González, 2019). Consequently, there is a growing recognition of the importance of conducting empirical research in this field to understand how different translation approaches impact viewers' perceptions and experiences, thereby contributing to the ongoing discourse on the significance of style in audiovisual translation.

Cornu (2014) stated that:

Simultaneously and in different parts of the world, processes and methods were developed which broadly fall into two categories: adding written texts in the form of titles superimposed onto the film or projected on an adjacent screen; or replacing the original dialogues with lines spoken in languages that could be understood by local audiences. Adding titles that could be read simultaneously with hearing the characters speak became known as subtitling. Changing the spoken language of the film was achieved through two main strategies: the ill-fated multilinguals and the much more enduring dubbing process. (p. 21)

And that is how the first forms of subtitling and dubbing were formed. In the transition from silent films to talking pictures, subtitles emerged as a means of translating dialogue and written information for audiences. Unlike silent film intertitles, which conveyed both narrative and dialogue, subtitles in talking films were focused solely on translating spoken words and textual elements such as shop signs or newspaper headlines. Initially, subtitles were positioned horizontally at the bottom of the screen in most languages, although in Asian languages, they could be vertically positioned on either side of the image. This shift in function and placement marked a significant departure from the intertitles of the silent era (Pérez-González, 2019).

The early years of talking films saw the development of various subtitling processes, particularly in Europe, aimed at enhancing readability. Methods such as chemical subtitling and laser subtitling were introduced to address legibility issues, such as white letters blending into bright backgrounds. These technological advancements allowed for subtitles to be burnt into the film strip, with a fine black line surrounding each letter to improve visibility. Despite these improvements, early subtitling methods faced challenges in maintaining readability across different areas of the image (Pérez-González, 2019).

The distribution of talking films, largely dominated by American productions, initially prompted subtitling to be predominantly done from English into other languages. European countries, with major film industries like Germany, Italy, and France, began developing subtitling processes to cater to their markets. However, preferences for subtitling versus dubbing varied across regions, influenced by factors such as the size of the film industry, levels of literacy, and national bilingualism. Despite the dominance of dubbing in some regions, subtitling persisted as a viable option, driven by factors like audience preferences and technical advancements (Pérez-González, 2019).

The evolution of subtitling practices during this period can also be understood through the lens of cultural adaptation. As noted by Gambier (2013), subtitles serve not only as a linguistic bridge but also as a means of cultural negotiation, allowing audiences to engage with foreign films while preserving their own cultural context. This interplay between translation and culture highlights the importance of subtitling as a tool for fostering cross-cultural understanding. For instance, subtitlers often face the challenge of conveying idiomatic expressions and culturally specific references, necessitating creative solutions that balance fidelity to the source text with the target audience's comprehension (Gambier, 2013).

Furthermore, the shift toward subtitling has been influenced by the increasing globalization of the film industry and the rise of digital streaming platforms. As the demand for content accessibility has grown, subtitling has emerged as a more efficient and cost-effective translation method compared to dubbing, particularly for independent filmmakers and smaller productions. This trend is underscored by Díaz-Cintas (2018), who emphasizes that the proliferation of subtitled content on platforms such as Netflix and YouTube have contributed to the normalization of subtitles as a primary means of audiovisual translation. Consequently, subtitling has become an essential component of the contemporary viewing experience, offering audiences the opportunity to enjoy films from diverse linguistic backgrounds while engaging with the original performances of the actors.

During the transition from silent films to talking pictures, the commercial motivation to overcome linguistic barriers prompted the development of dubbing as a viable solution. Initially, subtitling was limited in its audience reach, as multilingual viewers were less drawn to films without the original stars. Hollywood studios and German film producers, recognizing the potential of international markets, experimented with techniques to replace original voices with those of actors speaking other languages. Despite early attempts at live dubbing during filming, technical challenges led to the adoption of post-synchronization methods. These methods involved re-recording dialogue in different languages in a studio and matching it with lip movements on screen, either through actors memorizing translated lines or a mechanical system that synchronized dialogue with visual cues (Pérez-González, 2019).

The technical refinement of dubbing methods led to two major approaches: image-guided dubbing and band-guided dubbing. In the image-guided method, actors learned dialogue by heart while watching the original film without sound, striving to match lip movements as closely as possible. Conversely, the band-guided method utilized a mechanical system to synchronize translated dialogue with visual cues, projecting translated lines on a separate screen for actors to match with their performances. The translation process itself was meticulous, with translators adapting original

dialogue to fit dubbing constraints, a stage often carried out by skilled writers (Pérez-González, 2019).

Dubbing's evolution was not solely driven by commercial factors; legal and political contexts also played significant roles. In countries like Italy and Spain, dubbing was mandated by nationalist regimes to promote cultural and linguistic uniformity and censor foreign content. In France, legislative measures were introduced to ensure that dubbed versions of foreign films were produced domestically, halting the practice of French-dubbed versions being made in Hollywood. Despite variations in adoption across Europe, dubbing remains prevalent in countries with strong film industries, such as Italy, Spain, Germany, and France, where it extends beyond cinema to television programming (Pérez-González, 2019).

The significance of dubbing extends beyond its technical evolution; it also reflects broader cultural dynamics and audience preferences. According to Baños (2017), dubbing is often preferred in regions with strong film industries due to its perceived quality and the desire to provide audiences with an immersive experience. Dubbing allows viewers to engage with the film without the distraction of reading subtitles, thereby enhancing their emotional connection to the story and characters. This preference is particularly evident in countries like Spain and Italy, where dubbing has become a cultural norm, shaping audience expectations and influencing the types of films that are produced and distributed (Baños, 2017).

Furthermore, the role of dubbing in shaping cultural narratives cannot be overlooked. As noted by Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2014), the translation choices made during the dubbing process can significantly influence the way stories are perceived by audiences. Dubbing can serve as a vehicle for cultural adaptation, allowing for the inclusion of localized references and idiomatic expressions that resonate more deeply with the target audience. However, this practice also raises questions about fidelity to the source material and the potential loss of cultural nuances. Thus, the dynamics of dubbing reflect a complex interplay between commerce, culture, and audience engagement, highlighting its enduring importance in the global film industry.

Several studies have compared the linguistic and stylistic effects of subtitling and dubbing in audiovisual translation. Pettit (2005) analyzed how subtitled and dubbed versions of films convey register and tone, emphasizing that stylistic choices shape audience perception. Pettit found that both translation modes require adaptation, but dubbing tends to integrate idiomatic expressions more naturally due to its spoken format. Mogadam and Shabanipoor (2013) conducted an analysis of lexical cohesion and ellipsis in the original English dialogues of *Prison Break* and their Persian dubbed and subtitled translations. Using Halliday and Hasan's (1976) model, they examined 10 randomly selected scenes to identify differences in the use of cohesive devices between the source text, subtitles, and dubbing. Their findings revealed that repetition was the most frequent lexical cohesion device, while clausal ellipsis was the most common type of ellipsis in the original English dialogues. Additionally, while the subtitled and dubbed versions handled lexical cohesion similarly, the dubbed version contained significantly more ellipsis than the subtitled version. This suggests that dubbing allows for more omission of elements, likely due to the need for natural-sounding spoken dialogue in Persian.

Napoli (2023) examined how formal and informal language is preserved in English-Italian AVT, concluding that subtitling tends to remain more faithful to the original dialogues, whereas dubbing often amplifies formality in the target language. Bagheri Hariry and Abbasi (2023) studied implicit information retention in Persian-dubbed and subtitled films, revealing that subtitled versions retained more implicit meanings, while dubbed versions prioritized fluency and adaptation.

These studies suggest that subtitling and dubbing involve trade-offs between accuracy, style, and audience reception. While subtitling retains more linguistic detail, dubbing provides a more engaging experience by adapting dialogue to the target culture.

Idiomatic expressions, moreover, pose unique challenges in AVT, as they often lack direct equivalents in the target language. Agung (2022) examined the translation of idioms in subtitled and dubbed versions of *WandaVision*, concluding that both methods employ target-oriented strategies, meaning idioms are frequently adapted for cultural accessibility.

Shojaei (2012) explored idiom translation strategies using Baker's (1992) framework, identifying stylistic preservation as a crucial factor. The study emphasized that idioms must be translated with contextual and stylistic accuracy to ensure the original meaning is conveyed effectively. These findings are relevant to the current study, as they provide insights into how idiomatic expressions in Persian-to-English AVT are handled through subtitling and dubbing.

Style plays a critical role in AVT, as it influences how meaning, tone, and cultural nuances are conveyed. Biber and Conrad (2019) provide a framework for analyzing lexical, grammatical, and discourse style in translation:

- Lexical Style: The choice of vocabulary, including formal and informal register variations (Biber & Conrad, 2019).
- Discourse Style: This involves the organization and structure of discourse, including features such as coherence, cohesion, and rhetorical strategies. Biber and Conrad (2019) explore how discourse-level features vary across different registers and genres, reflecting differences in communicative purposes and audience expectations. The rhetorical strategies used by Biber and Conrad (2019) are allusion, irony, metaphor and simile, and rhetorical questions.

Coherence refers to the logical connections and overall sense that makes a text understandable and meaningful. It is about how well the ideas in a text flow and how easily a reader or listener can follow the writer's or speaker's train of thought. Coherence is achieved when all parts of the text contribute to the development of the central theme or argument (Conrad & Biber, 2019).

Cohesion refers to the linguistic elements that link parts of a text together, creating a smooth flow from one sentence or paragraph to the next. Cohesion is achieved through the use of cohesive devices, which help to connect ideas and ensure the text hangs together as a unified whole (Conrad and Biber, 2019).

Given the complexities of audiovisual translation, this study narrows its focus to lexical and discourse style, as these aspects are particularly relevant to the translation of idiomatic expressions. Grammatical style, while significant in other areas of translation, is less critical in AVT because spoken language often involves more flexible syntactic structures.

### 3. Methodology

This study follows a qualitative, descriptive, and comparative research design. It focuses on analyzing the stylistic features of idioms in both the dubbed and subtitled versions of *Passion to Fly*. The research is product-oriented, meaning it evaluates the final translated versions rather than the translation process.

The material analyzed in this study is *Passion to Fly*, an Iranian drama series directed by Yadollah Samadi (2012–2013). The dubbed version was obtained from the English iFilm Channel, while the subtitled version was sourced from Jam-e Jam Channel.

The study employs Biber and Conrad's (2019) framework to analyze lexical and discourse style in idiomatic translations. Idioms were identified in the Persian script and their translations in both AVT modes were compared. The collected data were categorized to assess which mode preserved stylistic features more effectively.

#### 4. Results

The findings of the study are presented under analysis of lexical style and discourse style.

##### 4.1. Analysis of Lexical Style

This section presents two tables (Table 1 and 2) that compare the numerical data on formal and informal idioms sourced from the series. The figures illustrate each translator's ability to render the lexical style of the source text.

Table 1. Frequency of Formal Idioms in the Subtitled Vs. Dubbed Versions

| Lexical Style for Formal Idioms | Subtitled Version |            | Dubbed Version |            |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|------------|----------------|------------|
|                                 | Frequency         | Percentage | Frequency      | Percentage |
| Formal Translation              | 5                 | 27.8%      | 3              | 16.7%      |
| Informal or No Translation      | 13                | 72.2%      | 15             | 83.3%      |

In Table 1, the frequency and percentage of lexical style for formal idioms rendered in the two modes of translation are calculated and presented. Based on the data shown in Table 1, the subtitled version has been more successful in rendering the lexical style of formal idioms, although both audiovisual translation modes have not been very successful overall, as the number of formal equivalents is less than half.

Table 2. Frequency of Informal Idioms in the Subtitled Vs. Dubbed Versions

| Lexical Style for Informal Idioms | Subtitled Version |            | Dubbed Version |            |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|------------|----------------|------------|
|                                   | Frequency         | Percentage | Frequency      | Percentage |
| Informal Translation              | 217               | 95.2%      | 225            | 98.7%      |
| Formal or No Translation          | 11                | 4.8%       | 3              | 1.3%       |

In Table 2, the frequency and percentage of lexical style for informal idioms rendered in the two modes of translation are calculated and presented. The quantitative results for informal idioms, which formed the majority of idioms in the series, are collected for both translation modes to analyze the rendering of lexical style. The data in this table can be considered more reliable, as the number of informal idioms was more abundant. As can be observed, the dubbed version translator has been more successful than the subtitled version translator in rendering the informal style of the source text.

##### 4.2. Analysis of Discourse Style

In this section, the numerical data collected from analyzing the elements of discourse style (including coherence, cohesive devices, allusion, metaphor and simile, and rhetorical questions) for the subtitled version and the dubbed version are compared.

Table 3 presents the number of idiom translations that have or have not undermined the coherence of the whole scene. As is evident, both translation modes have almost completely preserved the

coherence of the source text, with only a small percentage violating this endeavor. Although the percentage is small, the dubbed version has been more successful in maintaining the coherence of the source text.

Table 3. Coherence of Idiomatic Translation in the Subtitled Vs. Dubbed Versions

| Discourse Style – Coherence | Subtitled Version |            | Dubbed Version |            |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|------------|----------------|------------|
|                             | Frequency         | Percentage | Frequency      | Percentage |
| Coherent                    | 232               | 94.3%      | 244            | 99.1%      |
| Non-coherent                | 14                | 5.7%       | 2              | 0.9%       |

Table 4 shows the number and percentage of translations that were faithful to the cohesive devices of the source idioms in each mode of translation. It can be inferred from the table that both translation modes were able to maintain the cohesion of the source text idioms; however, the dubbed version was more successful in fulfilling this task.

Table 4. Cohesion of Idiomatic Translation in the Subtitled Vs. Dubbed Versions

| Discourse Style – Cohesion | Subtitled Version |            | Dubbed Version |            |
|----------------------------|-------------------|------------|----------------|------------|
|                            | Frequency         | Percentage | Frequency      | Percentage |
| Cohesive                   | 238               | 96.8%      | 243            | 98.8%      |
| Non-cohesive               | 8                 | 3.2%       | 3              | 1.2%       |

Table 5 shows the frequency and percentage of idiom translations that used metaphoric or similitic strategies. Almost all of the idioms extracted from the series included metaphor or simile. The dubbed version rendered slightly more than half of the metaphors and similes into the target text and was more successful than the subtitled translation.

Table 5. Simile and Metaphor in the Subtitled Vs. Dubbed Versions

| Discourse Style – Metaphor/Simile | Subtitled Version |            | Dubbed Version |            |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|------------|----------------|------------|
|                                   | Frequency         | Percentage | Frequency      | Percentage |
| Metaphorical or Similitic         | 72                | 30%        | 131            | 54.5%      |
| Non-metaphorical or Non-similitic | 168               | 70%        | 109            | 45.5%      |

The final rhetorical strategy analyzed in this study is rhetorical questions, with the corresponding numerical data presented in Table 6 to facilitate a comparison between the subtitled and dubbed versions. This comparison highlights the differences in how each AVT mode preserves rhetorical questions in translation, providing insights into their effectiveness in maintaining the stylistic features of the source text. As can be seen, there were few idioms containing rhetorical questions in the series. The dubbed version successfully rendered all of them into the target text, whereas the subtitled version did not.

Table 6. Rhetorical Question in the Subtitled Vs. Dubbed Versions

| Discourse Style – Rhetorical Questions | Subtitled Version |            | Dubbed Version |            |
|----------------------------------------|-------------------|------------|----------------|------------|
|                                        | Frequency         | Percentage | Frequency      | Percentage |
| Rhetorical Question in Translation     | 5                 | 71.5%      | 7              | 100%       |
| No Rhetorical Question in Translation  | 2                 | 28.5%      | 0              | 0%         |

Only one idiom in the series contained an allusion, specifically to the well-known story of the Prophet Ibrahim. Both the subtitled and dubbed versions conveyed the sense of this allusion; consequently, no separate table was created for this category.

Figure 1 aids in interpreting the average and overall quantitative data derived from the idioms in the series.

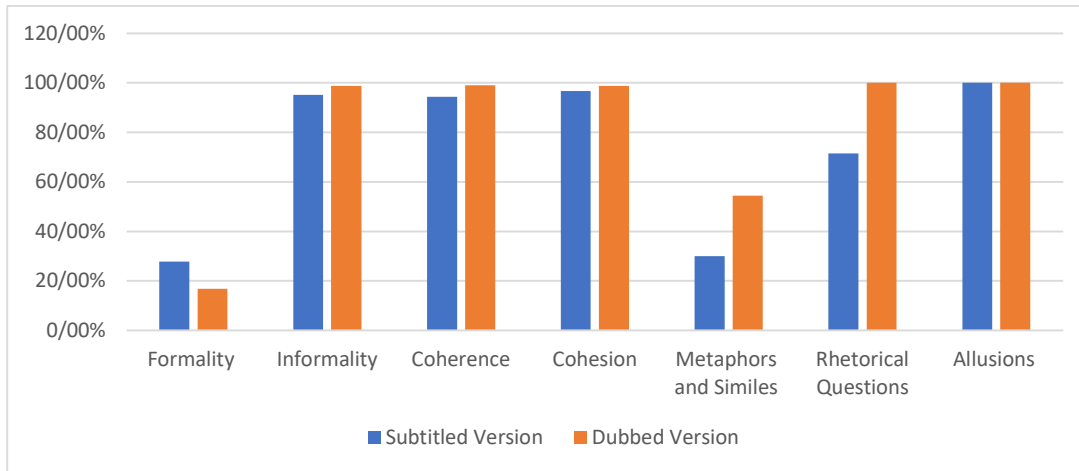


Figure 1. Accuracy of Rendering Lexical and the Discourse Styles in Subtitled vs. Dubbed Versions

As illustrated in Figure 1, the dubbed version performed slightly better than the subtitled version in rendering the source style across all categories except formal language.

## 5. Discussion

This study investigated the effectiveness of subtitling and dubbing in rendering the stylistic features of idioms in the Persian series *Passion to Fly*. The findings indicate that dubbing was more successful in preserving stylistic elements compared to subtitling. This suggests that dubbing may provide a more effective means of audiovisual translation when style retention is a priority. However, further research is needed to confirm this trend across different genres and translation contexts.

The results of this study align with existing research in the field. Safarpour (2019) analyzed translation strategies in AVT and found that subtitling and dubbing rely on different methods, leading to variations in style retention. Bagheri Hariry and Abbasi (2023), however, found that subtitling was more effective in maintaining implicit meanings in translation. Pettit (2005) suggested that both subtitling and dubbing performed similarly in preserving register, a finding that resonates with the present study's results regarding idiomatic style. Mogadam and Shabanipoor (2013) found that while subtitling and dubbing handled lexical cohesion similarly, dubbing contained significantly more ellipsis, likely to maintain natural spoken dialogue. This aligns with the present study's findings, which suggest that dubbing is more successful than subtitling in preserving stylistic features. The greater flexibility of dubbing in adapting spoken structures reinforces its advantage in rendering the fluidity and expressiveness of the original text, supporting the conclusion that dubbing is the superior AVT mode for style preservation.

Further insights into idiomatic translation strategies come from Agung (2022), who examined subtitling and dubbing in *WandaVision* and concluded that both methods tend to be target-oriented. This aligns with the present study's observation that idiomatic expressions are frequently adapted for accessibility in the target language. Similarly, Shojaei (2012), using Baker's (1992) framework, emphasized that stylistic considerations are critical for translating idioms effectively.

While this study contributes to the discussion on AVT and stylistic fidelity, it also highlights the need for further research. Since this study analyzed only one Persian series, broader research on multiple

audiovisual works is necessary to establish more definitive conclusions. Additionally, the role of voice actors and translation teams in enhancing stylistic preservation should be explored in future research.

## 6. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this research, dubbing demonstrated a greater potentiality for rendering stylistic features in idiomatic translation, at least in the case of *Passion to Fly*. However, it is important to note that a single case study cannot provide a definitive conclusion for all AVT scenarios. Further research on a wider selection of Persian-to-English AVT cases is required to generalize these findings.

Despite the observed advantages of dubbing, both subtitling and dubbing play essential roles in audiovisual translation. Subtitling offers linguistic authenticity by preserving the original script, whereas dubbing ensures greater stylistic fluidity through spoken adaptation. Future research could examine additional stylistic dimensions beyond idioms, such as humor, irony, and figurative language, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of style in AVT.

Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of stylistic fidelity in audiovisual translation and underscores the need for careful consideration when selecting AVT methods. By continuing research in this area, translation scholars and industry professionals can work toward improving the quality and effectiveness of translated audiovisual content for global audiences.

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