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# DESCRIPTIVE TRANSLATION STUDIES AND BEYOND

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Volume 4

Gideon Toury

*Descriptive Translation Studies - and beyond*

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## INTRODUCTION

### A Case for Descriptive Translation Studies

In contradistinction to non-empirical sciences, empirical disciplines are devised to account, in a systematic and controlled way, for particular segments of the 'real world'. Consequently, no empirical science can make a claim for completeness and (relative) autonomy unless it has a proper *descriptive branch*. Describing, explaining and predicting phenomena pertaining to its object level is thus the main goal of such a discipline. In addition, carefully performed studies into well-defined corpuses, or sets of problems, constitute the best means of testing, refuting, and especially modifying and amending the very *theory*, in whose terms research is carried out. Being reciprocal in nature, the relations between the theoretical and descriptive branches of a discipline also make it possible to produce more refined and hence more significant studies, thus facilitating an ever better understanding of that section of reality to which that science refers. They also make possible the elaboration of *applications* of the discipline, should one be interested in elaborating them, in a way which is closer to what is inherent to the object itself.

Whether one chooses to focus one's efforts on translated texts and/or their constituents, on intertextual relationships, on models and norms of translational behaviour or on strategies resorted to in and for the solution of particular problems, what constitutes the subject matter of a proper discipline of Translation Studies is (observable or reconstructable) facts of real life rather than merely speculative entities resulting from preconceived hypotheses and theoretical models. It is therefore empirical by its very nature and should be worked out accordingly. However, despite incessant attempts in recent decades to elevate it to a truly scientific status, as the empirical science it deserves to become Translation Studies is still in the making. This is clearly reflected in that, among

other things, it is only recently that deliberate efforts have begun to establish a descriptive branch as an integral part of its overall program, i.e., as a vital link between successive phases of its own evolution as well as between the discipline itself and its extensions into our world of experience. Consequently, translation scholars still find themselves in a tight spot whenever they are required to put their hypotheses to the test, insofar as the hypotheses themselves are formed within the discipline to begin with, and not imported wholesale from other frameworks, be they even those regarded as "Voraussetzungswissenschaften für die Übersetzungswissenschaft" (Kühlwein et al. 1981: 15).

The main reason for the prevailing underdevelopment of a descriptive branch within Translation Studies has no doubt been an overriding orientation towards practical applications, which has marked – and marred – scholarly work ever since the sixties. Thus, whereas for most empirical sciences, including even Linguistics, such applications – important as they may be – are presented merely as extensions into the world, the immediate needs of particular applications of Translation Studies have often been taken as a major constraint on the formation of the theory itself, if not its very *raison d'être*. Small wonder that a scholarly framework geared almost exclusively towards applicability in practice should show preference for prescriptivism at the expense of description, explanation and prediction.

What the application-oriented variety of Translation Studies normally amounts to is an admixture of speculation, if not sheer wishful thinking, and research work pertaining to some *other* discipline which, for one reason or another, is considered more prestigious, sometimes just more fashionable, for a limited period of time. By contrast, it tends to shun research within its own terms of reference. In fact, many writers on translation still look down on studies into actual practices and their products, the more so if these studies are properly descriptive, i.e., if they refrain from value judgments in selecting subject matter or in presenting findings, and/or refuse to draw any conclusions in the form of recommendations for 'proper' behaviour. Somewhat paradoxically, it is precisely writers of this denomination who are also the first to lament the yawning gap between 'theory' and 'practice'. Even though gaps of this kind are best bridged by taking heed of the full range of real-life behaviour (practice!), along with the factors underlying, and conditioning them (theory!), the lack of a truly descriptive-explanatory branch within Translation Studies has never really bothered these writers. Often quite the contrary. After all, this attitude spared them the need to justify their own preferences in the face of the fact that in real-life

situations, priority has often been given to quite different options. Not without reason, to be sure.

The practice of ignoring regularities of behaviour also made it easy to back one's claims with mere 'examples'. Recourse to randomly selected translation solutions has thus come to be associated with appliedly oriented writing, often unjustifiedly presented as 'theoretical', whereas writings of other denominations were given to severe criticism on account of a scarcity of examples; as if a handful of quotes torn out of their original co-texts and contexts can attest to anything at all. And, in fact, the main consideration underlying the selection, often even invention of an example was normally its *persuasiveness*, i.e., its alleged capacity to assist in driving a point home, rather than its *representativeness*. Consequently, standard behaviour was not merely overlooked either. At least by implication, it was also marked as downright unsuitable, thus requiring change.

All this is not to say that no attempts have been made to account for actual translational behaviour and its results. Quite the contrary. However, most descriptive studies have been performed within disciplines other than Translation Studies; e.g., Contrastive Linguistics, Contrastive Textology, Comparative Literature, *stylistique comparée*, or – in more recent days – Text-Linguistics, Pragmatics, or Psycholinguistics. Thus, while their subject matter could well have been deemed translational, the theoretical and methodological frameworks within which it was handled could not, if only because their interests lacked the wish to fully account for all that translation may, and does involve.

What is missing, in other words, is not isolated attempts reflecting excellent intuitions and supplying fine insights (which many of the existing studies certainly do), but a systematic branch proceeding from clear assumptions and armed with a methodology and research techniques made as explicit as possible and justified within Translation Studies itself. Only a branch of this kind can ensure that the findings of individual studies will be intersubjectively testable and comparable, and the studies themselves replicable, at least in principle, thus facilitating an ordered accumulation of knowledge. This is what the present book is about: Its main aim is precisely to tackle some of the main issues involved in establishing such a branch and embedding it at the very heart of the discipline as it grows empirical.

In many ways, the book is not just a sequel to, but actually a replacement of my programmatic *In Search of a Theory of Translation*, published some fourteen years ago and out of print for almost as long. In fact, I have long resisted all temptation to have that 1980 book published in a second edition, a temptation which has recently turned into growing pressure, from colleagues

and publishers alike. The reason for my reluctance has been a firm belief that books of this kind should only be taken as interim reports of ongoing projects, which entails rapid dating. Be that as it may, no particular acquaintance with that book is presupposed. Precautions have even been taken to keep the number of references to it to a bare minimum, so as not to burden the reader unnecessarily. Instead, theoretical issues which bear directly on the present discussion have been taken up again and presented in some detail. In one case a whole chapter was reproduced, albeit in a highly revised form. This is the programmatic essay on the role of norms in translation, a notion which started my own thinking, back in the seventies, and which is still central to my entire position. Three of the chapters are offered as excursions: Though digressing from the main line of argumentation, the extra light they cast on essential issues was deemed reason enough to include them in the book. The semi-independence they have been given should make them easy to either skip or focus on, as the reader sees fit. A change of type-face marks shorter digressions within the chapters themselves.

Work on the book has taken quite a while. Over the years, some of the ideas comprising it were presented in separate articles, albeit always in a provisional manner. Tackling a topic, often selected in accordance with the requirements and limitations of a particular conference or volume, inevitably resulted in shedding new light on old ideas and often gave rise to new points, to be dealt with more thoroughly later on. At the same time, the book raises a whole garnut of new issues, many of them for the first time. When the argument of an existing article was used, the need to come up with a unified book imposed another measure of changes, often resulting in complete rewriting. Finally, rethinking and rewriting were also prompted by some of the more serious criticisms leveled against my work, for which I am grateful to dozens of colleagues throughout the world. None of them should be held responsible for any of my arguments, but they were all instrumental in their shaping. Special thanks are due to Mrs. Miriam Shlesinger, a fellow translation scholar and a fine editor, who has applied her final touches to my manuscript. I will no doubt soon regret all those instances where I decided not to adopt her editorial suggestions!

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Part One of the book is expository: It deals at some length with the pivotal position of descriptive studies — and of a descriptive-explanatory branch — within Translation Studies. By implication, it also supplies justification to the author's initial decision to devote a book neither to a purely theoretical presen-

tation nor to a full-fledged study of a particular corpus, or problem, but rather to the issue of approaching translation empirically as such.

Part Two comprises a series of methodological discussions, constituting a Rationale for descriptive studies in translation. As such, it serves as a necessary framework and background for Part Three, where an assortment of case studies is presented, referring to issues of various scope and level, from a whole historical move through the translation of single texts to the translational treatment of lower-level entities. Each chapter is greatly self-contained, and can therefore be read in and for itself. However, the framework in which all studies were carried out lends them a high degree of methodological unity, which ties back to the Rationale. The guiding principle here was to tackle each issue within higher-level contexts: texts and modes of behaviour — in the appropriate cultural array; textual components — in texts, and through these texts, in cultural constellations again. The overriding need to contextualize is also stressed in the critical presentation of the use of experimental methods in the study of translation, as well as in the programmatic exposé of the gradual emergence of a translator — a highly neglected research domain of Translation Studies.

Finally, in Part Four, the crucial question is addressed which will already have come up in the expository part: what is knowledge accumulated through descriptive studies performed within one and the same framework likely to yield. Formulating laws and drawing implications for applied activities undoubtedly lie *beyond* the scope of these studies as such, and it is they which have contributed the ultimate part of the book's title. I intend to pursue them towards another book; hopefully, in less than fourteen years.

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One problem with books is that they seem so final. If an author may venture a request, I would ask my readers to regard what they are about to read as just another interim report; at best, a stepping stone for further developments of the discipline in one particular direction. Far from wishing to attain general agreement, my intention is to stir a debate. The former I don't believe in anyway; the latter seems vital, if any real progress is to be achieved.

Tel Aviv, February 1994