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Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS)

Also known as the Polysystem Approach, the Manipulation School, the Tel-Aviv Leuven Axis, the Descriptive, Empirical or Systemic School, or the Low Countries Group, DTS corresponds to a descriptive, empirical, interdisciplinary, target-oriented approach to the study of translation, focusing especially on its role in cultural history. This approach was first developed in the early 1970s, gained momentum in the 1980s, boomed in the 1990s, and still inspires several researchers seeking to “delve into translation as cultural and historical phenomena, to explore its context and its conditioning factors, to search for grounds that can explain why there is what there is” (Hermans 1999: 5). Although frequently equated with the study of literary translation*, especially in its early stages, DTS has branched out in several directions including technical translation*, audiovisual translation* or interpreting*, among others.

1. The Name and Nature of Descriptive Translation Studies

Responsible for the name of the discipline in English as well as for its most influential map, the Amsterdam-based American researcher James S Holmes chose the name Translation Studies, stressing that it “would not be wise to continue referring to the discipline by its subject matter”, which would mean failing to distinguish the territory from the map (Holmes 1988/2000: 173-174). Significantly starting with the word “science” and a reflection on the hard and soft sciences and their relation to the emerging discipline, the seminal 1972 paper entitled “The Name and Nature of Translation Studies” also explains the choice of “studies” as a means of explicitly affiliating the discipline to the arts or the humanities. As a field of pure research, Translation Studies is then defined as an empirical discipline with the dual purpose of describing “the phenomena of translating and translation(s) as they manifest themselves in the world of our experience” and, based on such descriptions, of formulating general principles that allow one to both explain and predict translational phenomena (Holmes 1988/2000: 176). The map of the discipline encompasses a first binary division between the branches of Pure and Applied Translation Studies* (which includes translation teaching*, translation criticism, producing translation aids and devising translation policies). Pure Translation Studies are further subdivided into two branches: Descriptive Translation Studies (with the aim of describing the phenomena of translation and translating) and Translation Theory (with the purpose of explaining and predicting translational phenomena, and thereby producing general or partial theories.

The branch of DTS encompasses three main kinds of research, as suggested by Holmes. Product-oriented DTS focuses on the description of individual translations, the comparative descriptions of several translations of the same source text (either in the same language or in different languages) and the description of larger corpuses of translation, which led to the analysis of corpora in translation studies* in the beginning of the 1990s. Function-oriented DTS researches contexts rather than translated texts, considering the study of the function, influence and value of translation in the target context, the mapping of translations and the analysis of the effects of translation upon the context, which has developed into a focus on translation sociology*, also under the influence of Pierre Bourdieu and other sociological models. Process-oriented DTS aims at a systematic description of what goes on in the translator's mind while translating, which results in translation psychology*, but may also comprehend the study of more conscious decision-making processes, the selection of global strategies or the organization of translation services. In a statement that would prove relevant for the forthcoming evolution and discussion of DTS, Holmes highlights the importance of maintaining pure translation studies independent of any applied goal (1988/2000: 176).

2. The Manipulation School

In the 1970s, a group of scholars including Raymond van den Broeck (Antwerp), Theo Hermans (Warwick and London), James S Holmes (Amsterdam), José Lambert (Leuven), André Lefevere (Antwerp and Austin) and Gideon Toury (Tel Aviv) carried out descriptive research on translation, with a special focus on translated literature, under the influence of the Israeli scholar Itamar Even-Zohar's Polysystem Theory*, as published in *Papers in Historical Poetics* (1979).

Three seminal conferences taking place in Leuven (1976), Tel Aviv (1978) and Antwerp (1980) also brought together other participants whose names are associated with this group, such as Susan Bassnett (Warwick), Katrin van Bragt (Leuven), Lieven D'hulst (Leuven), Zohar Shavit (Tel Aviv), Maria Tymoczko (Massachusetts) or Shelly Yahalom (Warwick and London). Later recruits include Dirk Delabastita (Leuven and Namur), Saliha Parker (Istanbul) or Theresa Hyun, among others (Hermans 1999: 12). As a new descriptive and systemic paradigm of Translation Studies, DTS is said to have emerged in the 1980s due to the contribution of these scholars.

The 1985 volume of essays entitled *The Manipulation of Literature* and edited by Theo Hermans heralded the new paradigm for the study of literary translation and inspired the designation The Manipulation Group or School for a target-oriented approach, according to which "all translation implies a

degree of manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose” (Hermans 1985: 11), as a result either of intentional choices made by the translator or of target system constraints. According to this group of scholars, the descriptive study of translated literature has to break the presuppositions of the evaluative source-oriented “conventional approach to literary translation”, based on the supremacy of the (naively romantic idea of the) “original” and the assumption of translation as a second-hand and generally second-rate, error-prone and inadequate reproduction thereof.

Other important landmarks in this opposition to prescriptive, source-text oriented, formalistic and atomistic approaches to the study of translation also include the innovative ideas previously published by Gideon Toury in the volume *In Search of a Theory of Translation* (1980), James S Holmes’ posthumous collection *Translated!* (1988) or José Lambert’s works, later published in *Functional Approaches to Culture and Translation* (Delabastita *et al.* 2006). Theo Hermans’ 1999 work *Translation in Systems* offers a(n already explicitly) critical comprehensive review of the main tenets and developments of this approach.

Two important channels of communication were created in 1989: the scholarly journal *Target* and CE(T)RA. *Target: International Journal of Translation Studies*, created by José Lambert and Gideon Toury, provided a channel for the publication of articles predominantly featuring this approach to the study of translation. Initially named CERA, and later CETRA, the special research programme set up at the University of Leuven by José

Lambert, offering annual international intensive summer courses for doctoral students since 1989 (from 1997 to 2006 these took place at Misano Adriatico, Italy), also provided an additional channel for the dissemination of DTS especially among younger scholars.

3. A Methodology for Describing Translations

To take “the translated text as it is” and consider the features underlying its nature (Hermans 1985: 12-13) required devising a specific methodology for the comparative analysis of source and target texts as well as of their respective literary systems, as set out in José Lambert and Hendrik van Gorp’s “On Describing Translations” (Lambert and van Gorp 1985). Based on Polysystem Theory and adopting a communicative approach to translation, the authors point out the basic parameters of translational phenomena and offer a complex network of relations between literary systems worth considering in a descriptive study of literary translation. This requires collecting information on author, text and reader in each source and target system, so as to build a scheme consisting of four categories: preliminary data (on title and title pages, metatexts and general translation strategies, leading to hypotheses on the macro- and micro-structural levels); macro-level data (comprising information on text division, titles and presentation of sections, acts, internal narrative structure, dramatic intrigue

or poetic structure, as well as authorial comment, leading to hypotheses on the micro-structure); micro-level data (including the selection of words, dominant grammatical patterns and formal literary structures, forms of speech reproduction, narrative point of view, modality, and language levels, leading to a reconsideration of macro-structural data); and systemic context data (including oppositions between macro- and micro-levels, as well as intertextual and intersystemic relations). Although hypothetical and partial, this systematic scheme, as the authors point out, should aid the consideration of the systemic nature of translational phenomena, and, by moving from individual texts by individual translators to larger corpuses and series of problems, should allow for the study of both individual and collective translational norms*, models and behaviour.

4. DTS and Beyond

Gideon Toury's contribution towards DTS, featured in his *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (1995), which in turn builds on some of his previous works, is a central one, due to his emphasis on the need to promote descriptive studies: "no empirical science can make a claim for completeness and (relative) autonomy unless it has a proper *descriptive branch*" (Toury 1995: 1). With the objectives of an empirical science in mind, Toury calls for "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” (Toury 1995: 3). Intersubjectivity, comparability and replicability are also aimed for when delineating a specific methodology for DTS. Equating Translation Studies with what Holmes had called Pure Translation Studies but adopting Holmes’ subdivision of Translation Studies into Descriptive and Theoretical Translation Studies, it is on DTS that Toury focuses his attention. He defines it as the study of what translation “DOES involve, under various sets of circumstances, along with the REASONS for that involvement” (Toury 1995: 15), and stresses that the consideration of the interdependency of the three types of descriptive study proposed by Holmes (“function, process and product-oriented”) is mandatory for the purpose of explaining translational phenomena (Toury 1995: 11). Toury also refers to the reciprocal nature of relations between DTS and Translation Theory, since “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” (Toury 1995: 1). However, it is DTS that needs developing with the purpose of describing, understanding and explaining the regularities that are representative of translational phenomena.

Toury’s most important proposals for DTS are the definition of this approach as descriptive-explanatory and interdisciplinary; the definition of its subject-matter, assumed translations as a result of a target-oriented

approach; the proposal of a three-stage methodology for descriptive studies; the contextually motivated redefinition of equivalence as a descriptive concept; the formulation of translational norms (a notion that is central to Toury's position) as the epitome for a target oriented approach; and the formulation of theoretical (possibly universal) laws* of translation behaviour as a goal beyond descriptive studies (Toury 1995: 5).

4.1. Describing and Explaining

In a reaction against speculative prescriptive studies, DTS is defined by Toury (1995) as having the goal of producing systematic exhaustive descriptions of “what it [translation] proves to be *in reality*” (Toury 1995: 32). By considering the interdependency of translation as product, process and function, and by relating regularities uncovered by such a description with features of the sociocultural context constraining them, DTS also aspires to both understand and explain the described regularities. The identification of relations of sequence, correlation or cause between profile and context variables is also carried out with the purpose of producing more refined formulations of probabilistic theoretical laws, capable of predicting what translation may be under a given set of circumstances.

4.2. A multidisciplinary approach

Although the need to develop a specific methodology for DTS is always stressed, such a methodology can only be multidisciplinary, given the systemic definition of the object, because “translation borders on too many provinces” (McFarlane 1953: 93). Holmes had already suggested textual features should be analysed against linguistic contextuality, literary intertextuality and sociocultural situationality (1988/2000). Toury suggests DTS should focus on what translation is and does, and on the contextual reasons for what it is and does. Although including micro-textual studies, this approach clearly stresses the need to focus on the wider picture in order to encompass how translation (as product, process and function) is related to the sociocultural context in which it occurs. Only a multidisciplinary approach can aspire to accommodate the wide range of different phenomena that are brought to bear on translation.

4.3. A Target-Oriented Approach

Such a descriptive study “should start from the empirical fact, i.e. from the translated text itself” (Hermans 1985: 13). In what is one of his best-known formulations, Toury states: “Translations are facts of target cultures” (Toury 1995: 29). Statements such as this have operated a Copernican Revolution by reorienting studies on translation, which until then had concentrated

predominantly on the source text as the yardstick for an evaluative analysis of the target text as a mere reproduction thereof. Toury therefore posits that the context framing a translation is that of the target culture, and, as such, the target text must always be interpreted as a result of the constraints and influences of such a target context, or as a cause for the introduction of changes into the target system. Such proposals for DTS amount to a shift of paradigm from the a-historical prescription of what translation should be to a description of what translation is in a particular historical context. As a consequence, attention is shifted from the comparison of source and target text to the study of the relations between target texts and between target texts and their context, the target culture.

4.4. Assumed Translations

But Toury goes even further in this target-oriented approach. The definition of translation as the proper object of study is central for DTS and Toury relativizes or “undefines” (Hermans 1999: 46) this concept by making its definition a result of the sociocultural target context. Toury advocates an “overall culture-internal notion of assumed translation”, pragmatically or tautologically defined, some argue, as “all utterances which are presented or regarded as such within the target culture, on no matter what grounds”, thereby making pseudo-translations appropriate objects of study too (Toury 1995: 32-33).

This notion of assumed translation posits three postulates: the existence of a source text; the existence of a previous transfer of some source text features to the target text; and, as a result of this process, the existence of a set of relations associating the translated text with its source text.

Such an approach does not exclude consideration of the source text, but it does shift the emphasis to the target text as product, to its function in the target culture and to the process leading to its production. As such, it also shifts the emphasis to the way the translator as a target culture agent negotiates contextual constraints pertaining to the target culture, in its historical, geographical, social and ideological coordinates.

Any descriptive study will consequently reveal the target culture since a culture's own self-definition within intercultural relations is betrayed by the way in which translation decisions are made. Translation therefore "is of interest because it offers first-hand evidence of the prejudice of perception. Cultures, communities, groups construe their sense of self in relation to others and by regulating the channels of contact with the outside world" (Hermans 1999: 95). The position occupied by translation in the prestigious canonized centre or in the margins of the target system will determine how translations are produced and reveal power relations between source and target cultures.

4.5. *Equivalence as a descriptive concept*

DTS discards the traditional, a-historical, invariant, ideal and prescriptive concept of equivalence, and replaces it with a functional-relational, historical, variable, empirical and descriptive concept of the translational relationship. This major shift is operated upon the concept of equivalence, traditionally defined *a priori*, when, instead of making the definition of translation dependent on equivalence, Toury inverts the roles and states that “a translation will be any target language text which is presented or regarded as such within the target system itself, on whatever grounds” (Toury 1995: 27). If text A is regarded as a translation of text B, then, according to Toury, equivalence is the relationship between them, which will exhibit the variable profile determined and accepted by the target context. The relationship of equivalence is therefore presupposed, and any descriptive study will aim at profiling the variable features adopted by functional equivalence. Inverting the traditional relationship between equivalence and translation also operates a redefinition of translation studies, for, instead of starting with an *a priori* definition of equivalence, its profiling becomes the epitome of the descriptive process, once it is acknowledged that “features are retained and reconstructed in target language material, not because they are important in any *inherent sense*, but because they are *assigned* importance, from the recipient vantage point” (Toury 1995: 12).

4.6. *A Three-stage Methodology*

For the purpose of studying translations as cultural facts, Toury presents a three-stage methodology: firstly, to identify and describe texts that the target culture considers to be translations; secondly, to conduct a comparative analysis of source and target texts, by mapping target text segments onto source text segments (although the intervening criterion underpinning such a mapping remains a point of contention); and, thirdly, to identify regularities evinced by translation shifts, and to formulate generalizations about norms of translational equivalence, defined as the translational models in force in the target culture, and identifying implications for future translation work (Toury 1995: 36-39, 102). The translator is identified as a social-historical agent, whose negotiation of contextual constraints or motivations as well as of the prospective target text function is predominantly revealed by the shifts adopted in translation, which, for this reason, become one of the most important sources for the study of translational norms.

Toury thus establishes as a first-order object translated texts and corpuses of translated texts, which should be studied so as to uncover the interdependencies of product, process and function in the target culture; additionally, texts on translation are also acceptable objects for descriptive studies, with the *caveat* of their probable prescriptive nature. By stating that it is the norms of translation equivalence in force in the target culture that determine, in type and degree, the equivalence adopted by real translations,

Toury identifies another fundamental step for the kind of descriptive studies he proposes. The study of norms as a second-order non-observable object is instrumental for ascertaining how the functional-relational postulate of equivalence is realized.

4.7. Translational Norms

According to Toury (1995: 53-64), becoming a translator implies learning to play a social role according to a set of intersubjective translational norms in force within a given cultural environment and applicable to all kinds of translation. These norms are defined “as the translation of general values or ideas shared by a community – as to what is right and wrong, adequate and inadequate – into performance instructions appropriate for and applicable to particular situations” (Toury 1995: 54-55). As intersubjective elements, norms occupy the middle ground of socioculturally specific constraints that vary in terms of normative force or potency (between the poles occupied by rules and idiosyncratic behaviour), and also in time, in terms of both force and validity.

Toury suggests the consideration of three types of translational norms: initial norms, of semiotic not chronological priority (favouring a choice either for adequacy – determining adherence to source norms – or for acceptability – determining a preference for the norms of the target culture); preliminary norms (governing translation policy on the choice of texts or

text types to be translated, or regarding the degree of tolerance to indirect translation which resorts to intermediate texts); and operational norms (including both matricial norms regarding the degree of fullness of translation, textual segmentation and distribution, and textual-linguistic norms governing the choice of target textual-linguistic material to replace the one found in the source text).

4.8. Beyond DTS – From Norms to Laws

In Toury's words: "as soon as the applicability of science to the complex problems clustered around translation has been accepted as such, there is no reason why the formulation of laws should not mark the horizon here too" (1995: 259). Adopting the aims of science, DTS purports to describe translational phenomena in order to understand and explain them, and, by identifying regularities, to generalize and formulate probabilistic laws of translational behaviour relating all variables found relevant (Toury 1995: 16).

Toury tentatively formulates two such laws. According to the Law of Growing Standardization "in translation, source-text textemes tend to be converted into target-language repertoires" (Toury 1995: 268), or, in other words, signs that, by virtue of their occurring within a text, carry *ad hoc* significance within it tend to be translated as mere signs belonging to the target-culture's repertoire, defined as the set of codified items awarded

semiotic value by a community. Or, in yet another formulation: the network of textual relations present in the source text tends to be transformed or ignored in translation, being substituted by habitual target repertoire options, or “the more peripheral this status [of translation], the more translation will accommodate itself to established models and repertoires” (Toury 1995: 271). In a peripheral, less prestigious position within the system, translation will tend to replicate existing models; in a central, prestigious position, translation will be allowed to bring innovation into the system. According to the second Law of Interference, “in translation, phenomena pertaining to the make-up of the source text tend to be transferred into the target text” (Toury 1995: 275). Alternatively, in a reformulation of this law, taking into account intercultural and interlingual relations of prestige and power, it is stated that “tolerance of interference (...) tends to increase when a translation is carried out from a ‘major’ or highly prestigious language/culture, especially if the target language/culture is ‘minor’, or ‘weak’ in any other sense” (Toury 1995: 278).

Approaches designated as the cultural, ideological, sociological, empirical, technological and globalization turns of translation studies*, are sometimes said to have substituted DTS, especially from the 1990s onwards (Hermans 1999). However, research on translation oriented by key concepts such as laws (and universals), and especially by the influential concept of translational norms, still bears the mark of this descriptive approach – although the appropriate name to be adopted for some of these regularities

of translational behaviour, especially the term universals*, remains a matter of contention.

5. Criticizing Descriptivism

Several researchers have adopted this descriptive target-oriented stance towards the study of translation, refraining from “value judgments in selecting subject matter or in presenting findings, and/or refus[ing] to draw any conclusions in the form of recommendations for ‘proper’ behaviour” (Toury 1995: 2), and valuing the diagnosis of the role played by translation in cultural history and the importance of considering inter- and intra-cultural power relations and ideology as part of the analysis of contextually motivated translational phenomena. However, DTS has been subject to criticism because of its positivistically importing the goals of (exact) sciences and putting forth models based on them; because of its not concentrating enough on the relevance of power relations and ideology for the consideration of intercultural and interlingual relations in empirical studies of translational phenomena (Niranjana 1992); for not focusing enough on the translator as an agent operating in a specific set of circumstances, or for not considering further explanations for translational behaviour due to its being too strictly target-oriented (Pym 1998); or for insufficient self-criticism and self-reflexivity (Arrojo 1998; Hermans 1999).

These criticisms are often associated with an affiliation in cultural studies, postcolonial studies, cultural materialism, women's studies, queer studies, or a more general political motivation to draw attention to the ethical implications of a merely diagnostic approach to translation instead of a politically motivated stance geared towards prescriptive intervention, regarding, for instance, translator invisibility (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999; Simon 1996; Venuti 1995). The distinctions at stake seem to go beyond the early binary opposition between descriptive and prescriptive approaches and are currently described as taking place between early descriptive approaches, current critical descriptive approaches (recognizing the "pervasiveness of interpretation and values") and committed approaches* ("prescribing what translators should do") (Brownlie 2003).

It is a fact that Holmes wrote a defence of pure research "pursued for its own sake, quite apart from any direct practical application" (1988/2000: 176); that Toury claimed "it is no concern of a scientific discipline (...) to effect changes in the world of our experience" (1995: 17); and that Hermans stressed "[t]he primary task of the study of translation is not to seek to interfere directly with the practice of translation by laying down norms or rules" (Hermans 1999: 65). Besides interpreting such statements in terms of a clear move away from traditional or current prescriptivism, other more contextualized readings might also be argued for. On the one hand, such statements were made at a time when the discipline was still struggling for independence, not only from predominantly prescriptive approaches, but

also from a focus on its applied extensions (Toury 1995: 2), and was also under pressure for academic recognition, thereby making the need to stress its status as an empirical (soft/human) science understandable. On the other hand, the target-orientedness of DTS and especially what has been identified as perhaps Toury's main legacy – the concept of norms, as a particularly operative theoretical interface between translation and context— has opened up the possibility for the consideration of translation as a social activity, constrained by prestige and the power relations in force both within specific target culture situations and within a network of intercultural relations. This has also made it possible to consider the cultural role played by individual translators and their social, ideological and political intervention. As such, the emphasis on contextualization and norms may be interpreted as having paved the way for more critically, socially, ideologically and politically intervening stances on translation practice and on translation studies.

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