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The nature of translation theory: from prescription to the description of the translation phenomenon

Evanthia Saridaki

Academic Staff at University of Thessaly, Department of Language and Intercultural Studies, Greece, PHD in Translation Studies.

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***Corresponding author:** Evanthia Saridaki

Academic Staff at University of Thessaly, Department of Language and Intercultural Studies, Greece, PHD in Translation Studies.

Abstract

One of the most influential distinctions in the field of Translation Studies is that between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to translation theory, a crucial distinction that has possibly affected attitudes and opinions regarding the role of translation theory to translator training and translation competence development. This article seeks to illuminate the nature and features of descriptive approaches to translation theory as well as their contribution to translation didactics and translator competence enhancement. Furthermore, the discussion delves into the critique that has been set against descriptive approaches to translation as lacking objectivity or underestimating main parameters of the translation phenomenon such as the political and ideological aspects of translation. The research methodology employed is theoretical exploration focusing on the concept and core elements of translation theory, the objectives of descriptive approaches to translation and main points of criticism against descriptive translation approaches. The fundamental conclusion drawn is that we need a translation theory that will act as a guide for the act of translating, allowing students to produce quality translation products and to handle translation problems both as trainees and, mostly, as future professionals.

Keywords: *Description versus prescription, Descriptive approaches to translation, Translation Theory, Translation as cultural act.*

Introduction

Since the early 20th century, Translation Studies gradually left its complementary character as a subbranch within other related disciplines and established itself as an autonomous science. The two primary branches of the discipline are referred to as Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) and Prescriptive Translation Studies (PTS). Descriptive Translation Studies entails an intercultural activity that describes the various aspects of the translation phenomenon in real-world settings. This model encourages researchers to concentrate on descriptive work rather than on abstract theoretical principles. Descriptive Translation Studies does not aim at providing rules regarding the methodology of translation but to observe and describe analytically the stages of the translation process. Among others, DTS focuses on the purpose of translations, the techniques employed and the role of the translator within the target culture.

Prescriptive Translation Studies is normative by providing rules and regulations for translation and by adopting the theoretical approach of a 'good' or 'bad' translation. This approach aims at setting standards and best practices that translators should follow. Prescriptive Studies may dictate that a translation should be as literal as possible or as natural as the original text in the process of transference to the target language.

1. Methodology

1.1. The notion and core elements of Translation Theory

Descriptive Translation Studies and Translation Theory are two interrelated domains. The findings of descriptive research which describes various aspects of the translation phenomenon will produce theoretical principles regarding the act of translating. On the basis of this empirical foundation, theory will then be able to interpret the translation process and make predictions.

In our attempt to investigate the role of descriptive approaches to translation, it is necessary to briefly explore the concept of translation theory and its core elements. Regarding the notion of theory, Popper (1972) stresses that any theory provides both answers to theoretical questions and solutions to practical problems while Gile (2013: 152) suggests we explore the basic components of the term which he analyses as follows:

- Theories are mental structures and not descriptions of given facts
- Theories make generalizations for scientific phenomena and they provide food for thought and reflection

An interesting distinction of translation theory is that of Boase-Beier (2010: XII) who refers to two types of theory:

- Pure Theories from the field of Translation Studies such as functional theories
- Theories borrowed from other disciplines such as linguistic or cultural theories that interact with existing translation principles and they finally act as autonomous translation theories.

Vermeer (2000: 537) also argues that there are two types of theories:

- General theories that refer to the scientific field of translation, functioning irrespective of text-types, languages and other extralinguistic factors and

- Partial theories that explore specific aspects of translation such as the translation process itself and the way it works in a specific culture.

As far as the practical nature of any theory is concerned, according to Iser (2006: 5), theories do not aim at making predictions, but rather at describing a phenomenon in order to be fully understood. Chesterman (Chesterman & Wagner, 2002: 10), suggests that theories are not directly applicable since their basic task is to describe and not to prescribe. Researchers also discuss the explanatory nature of theories. As Boase-Beier (2010: 27) mentions, because of their explanatory function, theories affect the way we approach in practice situations in the particular domain that has been explained.

Regarding the aims of translation theory, translation theory intends to establish some general principles that could both define and interpret the translation phenomenon (Grammenidis, 2010: 60). Gile (2013: 13) stresses the explanatory nature of theory that contributes toward the interpretation of the translation phenomenon through its observation and toward making predictions about the translator's actions under certain contexts. Consequently, translation theory helps the translator in practice by suggesting solutions to practical problems and specific translation techniques for different text-types.

Translation theory aims at examining the relationship between the production of knowledge in a given culture and its transference in a target culture. According to Cheung (2006: 78-79), the syllabus of a translation theory course should aim at making students be aware of the cultural differences of societies and provide them with information concerning the cultural gaps, as well as appropriate techniques for bridging them.

Translation theory offers a solid framework for understanding the complex activity of translating texts. More particularly, it explores several different dimensions such as:

- Linguistic dimension that centers on the translation of simple linguistic units between the source and the target language.
- Cultural dimension which considers the cultural context and the translator's role in transmitting the cultural words of texts.
- Philosophical Stage which examines the philosophical nuance of translation and its effect on the act communication.
- Sociological dimension that investigates the translator's role on social acts and cultural communication.

The development of translation theory can be described through four main stages:

- Pre-linguistic Stage that entails the early theoretical approaches which were not informed by linguistic theory and they were based entirely on intuition and experience.
- Linguistic Stage that entails theories which come from linguistics such as the notions of literal translation and equivalence.
- Cultural Stage that involves theories which come from Cultural Studies and recognize the significance of cultural differences between the source and the target culture.

- Interdisciplinary Stage that draws on various disciplines which have affected Translation Studies aiming to provide a more holistic approach toward translation.

1.2. Historical background of Descriptive Translation Approaches

The researcher James S Holmes gave the name Translation Studies, observing 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). As a field of pure research, Translation Studies is then defined as an empirical discipline aiming first to describe “the phenomena of translating and translation(s) as they manifest themselves in the world of our experience” and then to establish principles that would allow to explain and predict the complicated translational phenomena (Holmes 1988/2000: 176). The map of the discipline includes a main distinction between the branches of Pure and Applied Translation Studies. Pure Translation Studies are divided into two subbranches: Descriptive Translation Studies (aiming to describe the phenomena of translation and translating) and Translation Theory (aiming to both explain and predict translational phenomena).

The branch of DTS is subdivided into three subbranches of research, as proposed by Holmes. Product-oriented DTS describes individual translations and the comparative descriptions of different translations of the same source text. Function-oriented DTS centers around contexts rather than translated texts, investigating notions such as the function and intention of translation in the target context, the analysis of the effects of translation upon the context leading to the development of the branch of translation sociology. Process-oriented DTS aims at describing the mechanisms at the translator’s mind while translating and the translator’s psychology by studying more conscious decision-making processes such as the selection of translation strategies and methodologies or the organization of translation services. It should be stressed that Holmes sees the necessity of maintaining Pure Translation Studies independent of any applied goal of the discipline (1988/2000: 176).

In a historical approach of the branch of Translation Theory, much of the discourse about translation regards the prescription of specific modes of translation, such as the earliest statements of St Jerome and Cicero and the discussion centered around the dichotomy between literal versus free translation. Dryden, (1680), made the distinction between three types of translation: metaphrase, that is word-by-word translation, paraphrase, that is sense-for-sense translation and imitation that involves free translation. Prescriptive approaches to translation remained influential throughout the twentieth century and as Newmark (1981) states, the main goal of Translation Theory is to determine the best possible methods for a widest variety of texts or text categories.

1.3. The contribution of Descriptive Approaches to the act of translating

The development of Descriptive Translation Studies in the 1970’s aiming to establish translation research as an empirical and independent scholarly discipline could be seen, according to Brownlie (1998) as “a reaction to centuries-long speculative and prescriptive writing on translation”. Holmes (1972) conceived of translation as a discipline that were to be distinguished into pure and applied branches and the pure branch to be further divided into theoretical and descriptive branches. The core task of the discipline

would be descriptive in order to describe, interpret and predict the translation phenomenon while any prescriptive orientation would be relegated to the applied branch of the discipline. Within this framework, the relationship between the source texts and their translations is described in order to provide explanations drawn of the findings.

Robinson (1991) observes that most translation theories before the 50’s were clearly and indisputably characterized as prescriptive: “they told us how to translate and not how we translate while most of these theories nowadays continue to be prescriptive although they are characterized as non-prescriptive”. This is a prescriptive approach to translation according to which translators must apply certain rules in order to be able to translate.

Krings (1986) who has studied translation as a psycholinguistic phenomenon criticizes the effort to dictate or impose solutions to problems in translation didactics and he stresses that prescriptive approaches cannot predict translation activities from a psycholinguistic aspect and they are actually deceptive. Furthermore, Gile (2013: 253) suggests that researchers should verify through various testing the theoretical models so that they can provide advice, otherwise, this advice will no longer be more reliable than those of experienced translators who express opinions based on their experience.

Early approaches of a systematic approach of translation theory such as Dryden’s categories, Dolet’s principles and Tytler’s “laws” make up according to Munday (2008: 24-27), prescriptive approaches to translation dictating to translators what they have to do in order for a translation to be successful.

The immersion of Descriptive Studies as an autonomous academic field, could be considered to be, according to Brownlie (1998: 77), as a “reaction” to the dominant for centuries prescriptive approach to translation. The descriptive approach is based on precise theoretical descriptions of multiple translation procedures and just because the descriptive approach describes and also interprets, Toury (1995: 15), refers to it by the use “descriptive-hermeneutical”. Toury, another pioneer of the descriptive approach to translation, developed Holme’s model by arguing that the translation phenomenon could be best explained by its systemic position in the target culture. He also introduces the concept of “norms”, that influence the practice of translation in the target culture at a certain place and time. Another key-term of Toury’s approach is the term “laws of translation” which derive from a series of different studies on genres of translation in various eras and cultures aiming to propose a number of laws that regard translational behaviour.

The descriptive approaches laid the foundations for further development of Translation Studies by incorporating cultural approaches to the discipline as part of the well-known “cultural turn” that investigates the role of translation as a cultural event. As Tymoczko observes Descriptive Translation Studies establish translation as a political, ideological, economic and cultural act. (1999: 25).

Above all, Descriptive Translation Studies attempt to explain the various aspects of the translation phenomenon and provide answers and solutions to complex problems and translation difficulties. Due to their interpretative function, descriptive approaches have an effect on comprehending the world in a practical manner without dictating specific rules of behaviour. They describe translation reality in a way that it can resolve important from pedagogical

approach matters and in order to achieve this they have to be characterized by psychological validity (Shreve, 1995: XII). More specifically, they have to provide a description of the translation process as a real and not as a “speculative or supposed activity”, since some descriptive approaches possess a structural reliability without reflecting cognitive reality.

This approach appeared in the early 1970s, developed in the 1990s and still inspires academics aiming 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 it is often related to the study of literary translation, especially at the initial stages, Descriptive Translation Studies expanded in several types of special translation such as legal translation, technical translation or audiovisual translation.

2. Critique of Descriptive Translation Approaches

The critique that has been exercised against descriptive approaches to translation theory is that it presupposes that theoreticians are capable of having an objective attitude toward the translation phenomenon, while in reality some subjective attitudes are inevitably related to the descriptive approach since, they reflect the interests and points of view of those that they express them. Hermans (1999: 22), for example, asks researchers to admit that even descriptive theories “filter” translation data through personal beliefs and those of the society in which they belong.

Another point of critique is that a descriptive approach to translation sets apart the translator’s individuality and distinct translation cases that could make up a useful hermeneutical source for the translation phenomena, since the complex translation phenomenon requires many different translation sources in order to be described and interpreted appropriately.

It has also been judged for underestimating the complex nature of the translation phenomenon that calls for multiple sources of explanation (Pym, 2009) such as Toury’s oversimplified target orientation that neglects complicated translation settings and does not concentrate enough on the relevance of power relations and ideology in empirical studies of translational phenomena (Niranjana, 1992). Indeed, early descriptivism has been criticized for neglecting the political and ideological aspects of translation. Lefevere (1990), stresses the ideological dimension of translations by reflecting target cultures ideologies and by promoting dominating ideologies in certain cases or non-conformative ideologies in other cases.

Conclusions

The aim of a descriptive approach is to bring together a great number of studies of different types of translation from different eras and civilizations and based on the findings of research to propose certain principles of translation behaviour that could be applied in certain translation situations. Thus, it is made clear that in the framework of translator training a theoretical approach is needed that would not suggest rules and strict translation models, but it would aim at student acquisition of critical competences, that would allow them to evaluate the translation product and resolve translation problems and difficulties. The specific goal could not be achieved through isolated descriptive or prescriptive approaches to translation texts that would lead to individualized experiences for students. Therefore, it is essential the creation of a comprehensive theoretical approach that would contain not only descriptive approaches but mainly guidelines for improving their

translation competences and mostly appropriately interpreted methodological approaches to the translation phenomenon.

The application of prescriptive approaches to translation didactics according to which translators should apply certain rules during the translating process, possibly contributes toward forming negative attitudes regarding the role of translation theory to translator training since it does not allow them to select by themselves those theories they are going to apply in translation practice.

However, translation teachers should not overview students’ need for advice and guiding about translation methods and strategies in order to be able to handle common translation problems during their training. The question that is often raised is whether translation teachers adopt a prescriptive attitude by guiding students on how to translate. According to Shreve (1995: XIII), if translation theory on which teaching is based is descriptive and psychologically valid, as teachers we can exercise a power role toward our students without becoming authoritative, since the translator’s role is, first, to describe and, then, to propose strategies that will allow students to produce a quality translation product. In brief, descriptive translation theories should function as guidelines and as a point of reference for an effective translation practice and not as strict rules that will either approve or reject a certain translation practice.

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