

A Map for the Research in the Present Life and After Life of Descriptive Translation Studies: A Review of *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*

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Abstract

Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond (2004), a book written by Gideon Toury, one of the most important members of Manipulative School of translation studies, have systematically elaborated on the main theoretical ideas of descriptive translation studies. The present paper is to analyze the theory and to make some discussions with respect to both its merits and defects — especially regarding its starting point and its methodological approach, through which the present paper intends to point out that Toury's research is on the whole significant in that it inaugurates the turn of translatology from prescriptive studies to descriptive studies, and provides a framework for the research in the present life and after life of descriptive translation studies.

Key words: Descriptive translation studies; Basic theoretical ideas; Theoretical merits and defects

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INTRODUCTION

In the Third International Congress of Applied Linguistics (Copenhagen, 1972), James S Holmes envisioned a full-

scale scientific discipline which he purported to call Translation Studies. Holmes then outlined the structure of this discipline in his paper bearing the name "The name and nature of translation studies" (Holmes, 1988, pp.67-80). According to Holmes' "map" of the discipline, Translation Studies is divided into Pure vs. Applied branches; Pure translation studies is further split into Theoretical (General and Partial) vs. Descriptive sub-branches, with Descriptive Translation Studies (referred to as DTS in the following) broken down again, in terms of three different foci of research, namely, Function-, Process-, and Product-oriented. Regarding descriptive studies as occupying a key position in Holmes' map of the discipline, and dissatisfied with previous literatures on translation which are primarily prescriptive in nature, Toury in this book thus sets out to make an attempt to establish DTS as a distinct sub-discipline within Translation Studies.

1. BASIC IDEAS OF THIS BOOK

The book falls into four parts. Part One expounds on the pivotal position of descriptive studies within Translation Studies. Part Two is concerned with a series of methodological discussions, which serve as a framework and background for Part Three, where various case studies are carried out, including mediated translations, lexicographical treatment of translation-specific lexical items and experimentation in translation studies. Seeing formulating laws and drawing implications for the applied activities as beyond the scope of descriptive studies he is performing in this book, Toury in Part Four just makes an initial attempt to explore what the knowledge accumulated through descriptive studies is likely to yield. Since Part One and Part Two constitute the two most important sections of this book, in the following, the present author will mainly focus on these two parts.

2. PART ONE

In Part One, to enhance the accuracy of the map (Toury, 2004, p.10), so as to help those who wish to locate him-/herself in the middleground of Translation Studies in general and DTS in particular, relations among the three aspects of DTS are discussed here, along with relation between the two sub-branches of “Pure” branch in Holmes’ map, i.e. between DTS and Translation Theory, as well as relations between Translation Studies and its applied extensions (e.g. translator training, translation aids and translation criticism).

According to Toury, the internal organization of DTS, i.e., the three aspects of DTS — function, process and products, are not only related, but also interdependent on each other. Specifically, since any individual studies are on one hand local activities, pertinent to a certain corpus, problem, historical period or the like, and on the other hand part of an overall endeavour within one unified discipline, if one is to obtain true insights into the intricacies of translational phenomena, the interdependencies of all three aspects should be laid bare for the simple reason that after all the three aspects are no doubt always performed simultaneously. Translating is a *teleological* activity by its very nature (Ibid., p.14, original emphasis), translations always come into being within a certain cultural environment and are designed to meet certain needs of, and/or occupy certain “slots” in it (Ibid., p.12), the prospective *function* of a translation within a recipient culture therefore should be regarded as having at least logical priority over their surface realizations, i.e., end *product* (carriers or functors, as are sometimes called). In a word, two features characterize the relations among function, process and products: One is the principle of independence; the other is the priority of function over their carriers.

The relation between DTS and Translation Theory is bi-directional. Although formulating a series of coherent laws which would state the inherent relations between all the variables is out of the research scope of descriptive studies, the cumulative findings derived from DTS do supply exhaustive descriptions of and explanations for certain translational phenomena, and this is inevitably forming the basis for establishing generalizations or laws about translational phenomena. With descriptions and explanations derived from individual studies within DTS constantly accumulated, some predictions about certain translational phenomena may be formulated on the condition that the parameters of function, process and product of DTS are maximally controlled. The predictions are thus formulated in fact constitute some partial theories of translation studies, and they will make possible the performance of yet more elaborate studies, and this will, in turn, bear back on the theory, making it even more intricate. Therefore the relation between DTS and Translation Theory entails a gradual evolutionary process

of translation theory from partial theories to a general theory of translation. It is in this sense that the author claims DTS occupies a pivotal position within the unified discipline of Translation Studies.

Relations between Translation Studies and its applied extensions are not the main concerns of Part One. What is worth mentioning here is that, by drawing an analogy between appropriate way of language use and linguistics, the author ascertains the deadlock where translation theorists have always been put into by practitioners, practicing translators or even common public in general. Practitioners here refer to those who indulge in the applied activities such as translator training, translation aid and translation criticism. In reality, it is not uncommon to hear the complaints made by translation practitioners as well as practicing translators against translation theorists that the theories generalized by theorists are of no practical use. However, as Toury crystallizes, the *object-level* of Translation Studies in all its branches is *translation*, rather than an ‘application’ of any of them, just as speaking in one language or another is not an application of Linguistics of L₁ or L₂ (Ibid., p.18).

One thing that practitioners and practicing translators alike seem to have failed to recognize is that none of the sub-branches of applied extensions can draw on Translation Studies alone. For example, a series of rules for translator training would not only come from translation theory, but also from a theory of teaching and learning. Similarly, rules for translation aids would not only benefit from translation theory, but also from the theory of computer. Seen as such, Toury claims that it is not the translation theory that is to blame for the blunders in their “practice”; it is practitioners themselves who should take full responsibility, since it is up to *practitioners*, not the *scholars* (Ibid., p.17, my emphasis) to draw conclusions, be its orientation retrospective (such as translation criticism), or prospective (such as translator training or translation planning).

From my humble point of view, on one hand, it seems plausible for Toury to ascertain that the value of translation “theory” does not necessarily reside in its “application”; but on the other hand, it seems it is at least not very responsible for Toury to shift the responsibility entirely from the scholars to practitioners. The fact that translation studies is multidisciplinary and hence does not have all the bearings on its sub-branches of the applied extensions can not be taken as the legitimate excuse for freeing the scholars from formulating generalizations for the applied extensions of Translation Studies, although this is really a challenging task due to its multidisciplinary. Now that Toury’s own DST aspires to offer a framework for individual studies of *all* kinds, at *all* levels (Ibid., p.11, original emphasis), various translations involved in the sub-branches of applied extensions such as the translation materials for “Translator Training”,

should also be taken as objects of study within DTS. Such input from the Applied to DTS, then will eventually become an input to the “Theoretical” branch too, making it more comprehensive and intricate. To put it differently, the relations between the “Pure” and the Applied is not unilateral, i.e. not only from the Pure to the Applied, as indicated by Toury with unilateral arrows in Figure 5 (Toury, 2004, p.18) on the book (Ibid., p.18). Rather, their relations should be bi-directional, i.e., the Pure and the Applied should be mutually supplying input to each other. In this sense, there is a great defect in as the Figure drawn by Toury which only shows a unilateral relation between the Pure and the Applied. Maybe it is such a unidirectional view that leads to Toury’s total neglect of ‘translations’ involved in the Applied extensions of Translation studies and eventually leads to his claim of shifting the task of formulating generalizations from the scholars to the practitioners.

3. PART TWO

Part Two as has been mentioned, is mainly composed of a series of methodological discussions; it constitutes a rationale for descriptive studies in translation. The main issues dealt with here include the object of study, as well as the research method of DTS.

By expanding the definition of translation of DTS to *assume translations*, namely, to all utterances which are presented or regarded as translations, on no matter what grounds (Ibid., p. 32), the author intends to encompass in the domain of research of DTS not what translation is *in general*, but what it proves to be *in reality*. As we can see, there are at least two main merits in Toury’s definition of translation as such: one is that it extends considerably the range of objects of study, making it in full agreement with real-life situations that a researcher sets out to account for; the other is that it is functionally operative even in cases where the basic principle of translation in general might have seemed inapplicable. Pseudotranslation, compilative translation as well as indirect translation are just some cases in point, where no source text, more than one source text or a single source text which is different from the one that was initially assumed to be, is respectively involved. Whereas all such cases may be excluded from the traditional translation studies *in general*, especially those prescriptive in nature, DTS can offer a general framework for describing and explaining these cases. In this sense, Toury’s DTS considerably broadens the horizon of translation studies by bringing more objects of study into the domain of investigation.

The research method of DTS mainly involves two main procedures, i.e. discovery vs. justification procedures. Each of them shares the same three basic steps with certain sub-steps, but would proceed in a reversed direction from each other. Take the discovery procedures for one pair of texts for example, the first step

is to approach an assumed translation according to its acceptability in the target culture; the second step involves establishing a corresponding source text and mapping target text on source text; the third step is concerned with the formulation of first-level generalizations. The steps of justification procedure as has been mentioned are just the same steps in its reversed order (i.e. from the third to the first). The research method expounded here in Part Two is useful for carrying out descriptive studies within the unified discipline of Translation Studies, as has been demonstrated by an assortment of case studies.

CONCLUSION

From what we have discussed above, we can see that, apart from the defect stemming from Toury’s interpretation of Holmes’ map regarding the relations between the two main splits, i.e., the Pure and the Applied branch, another obvious flaw with Toury’s descriptive approach lies in the very innate feature of target-culture-orientation, namely, the generalizations derived from descriptive studies would tend to be too culture-specific, thus leading to “the abolition of the intercultural study of translation” (Gutt, 2004, p.7).

In fact, Toury’s approach has not only attracted broad attention from scholars at home and abroad, but also has drawn interest of these scholars. Since 1970s, more and more scholars have adopted and developed Toury’s approach, among which the contributions made by Susan Bassnett, Theo Hermans and André Lefevere and etc are especially prominent. Gradually, Toury’s approach is termed as descriptive school/approach in translation circle. Seeing its growing influence, many scholars have made different interpretations of or comments on this school/approach from different perspectives — Vermeer (1996), (Venuti (2008)), Snell – Hornby (2001) and etc., to name just a few. Chinese scholars have also made their voices on it. For instance, Lin Kenan has pointed out two merits of descriptive school: One is that it has provided right position for various translations, and hence can avoid conceptional confusion resulting from prescriptive translation criterion as well as meaningless and endless arguments (描写学派的功劳在于给予各种各样的翻译以正确的定位. 避免了由于规范性的翻译标准而造成的概念上的困惑以及无谓而又无止无休的争论; Lin, 2001, p.44); the other is that the descriptive school can provide solid theoretic weapon for boosting translation practice and enriching translation means (描写学派还可以为繁荣翻译实践, 丰富翻译手段提供强有力的理论武器; Lin, 2001, p.45). Having made introduction to the development of the descriptive school, another two Chinese scholars Han Ziman and Liu Fang have also pointed out its achievements: Firstly, the definition of translation is unprecedentedly broadened, those translation phenomena which has been put in a marginal

position before thence enter the horizon of translation researchers (首先, 翻译的定义空前扩大, 以前处于边缘位置的翻译现象进入了翻译研究者的视野; Han & Liu, 2005, p.98). Secondly, descriptive approach can make us understand some translation phenomena better. Unlike prescriptive translation studies, descriptive translation studies won't limit itself to those static and closed text systems, but rather, look to broader domain — the target social-cultural environment, and explore the interaction between translation and its cultural environment ... Therefore, descriptive translation studies can interpret translation phenomena from historic angle and make us better understand its cause of formation (其次, 描述翻译研究的方法有利于我们更清楚地认识翻译现象. 描述性的翻译研究不再像以前规范性的翻译研究那样将视野局限于静态, 封闭的文本体系, 而是将目光投向更为广阔的领域 —— 目的语的社会文化环境, 探索翻译与其所在的文化环境之间的互动关系 由此可见, 描述翻译研究可对翻译现象做出历史的解释, 从而使我们更加清楚地认识其成因; Han & Liu, 2005, p.98). Thirdly, descriptive translation studies have promoted the status of translation studies as a discipline (再次, 描述翻译研究提高了翻译研究的地位, 促成了翻译研究的学科化; Han & Liu, 2005, p.98). However, descriptive translation studies has its own demerits, as scholars like Han and Liu have illuminated: for one thing, it overemphasizes the neutral stand of researcher, and tries to avoid value judgment, however, both are just impossible; for another, by ignoring those specific translation problems which traditional translation studies focus on, the approach tends to deviate from translation practice itself, hence, to advocate it too much is not beneficial to the healthy development of translation studies; lastly, being a kind of peripheral studies, this approach does not pay enough attention to translation subject, it especially tends to ignore translator's creativity (Han & Liu, 2005, pp.99-100).

In summary, by bringing any assumed translations — “any utterance which are presented or regarded as such within the target culture, on no matter ground” (Toury, 2004, p.33) into the domain of translation studies, Toury's Descriptive Translation Studies widens the scope of investigation. Under this approach, more objects of study

are embraced here. For example, those once marginalized translations like pseudo translations, compilative translations, and those once deemed as “unfaithful” translations like “phonetic translations” (translations that only mimic the sound of the original while almost totally disregarding its meaning/content) and “morpheme translations” (translations using coinages which are invented according to morphemes) have all become legitimate within the paradigm of translation studies. However, as we have elaborated before, due to its demerit in the starting point as well as the innate defect of its methodological approach, this theory also has its own limitations. Notwithstanding those disadvantages, Toury's research is significant in that it inaugurates the turn of translology from prescriptive studies to descriptive studies, and by carrying on Holmes' map of Translation Studies, Toury also provides a further “map” for the research in the present life and after life of descriptive translation studies.

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