

THE INESCAPABLE INFIDELITY

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Man and his environment are in continual and intimate reciprocity each controls the other and we would spend our time much more productively if we were to focus on the nature of their inter-dependence rather than defending claims of priority.

Michael Mahoney

Introduction

Over the past three decades, chiefly, Translation Studies has been continuously and insistently struggling with a crisis of identity caused by its lack of planned directions and systematisation. If one asked where the discipline was going, probably there would be no answer (or maybe several different ones as it has, in fact, been pulled and pushed in many directions along all these years). The necessity to be recognised and respected as an independent research area has led it to take several different paths, each focusing on different features, emphasising and de-emphasising different nuances which could somehow help accomplish the daring endeavour of constructing an ethos of its own, with space and object acknowledged by other fields of investigation.

The *scientific boom*, which gradually evolved since the end of the II World War, reached its peak in the 1970s and pervaded, to different extents, most research practices of non-hard sciences,

such as Sociology, Psychology, Linguistics and many others. Commenting on such a pervasiveness, Altman (1987: 1059) points out that

[e]ven in fields where experimental work was not possible, emphasis was placed on rigorous quantification and measurement, for example psychometrics. Although case studies, field observation, and other methodologies were acceptable in certain instances, the prevailing norms idealised quantitative, experimental, laboratory-oriented research methodologies.

Thus, in order to conform to the requirements of a *scientific model*, writers and researchers from social sciences and the humanities started to give special attention to measurement and, specifically, being aware of the metrics in which their results were expressed. Recognising the substantial importance of accuracy as well as its inevitability to have their results empirically validated, they embarked upon looking for

operational definitions, analysis, search for antecedent-consequent relationships as a basis for inferences about causation, discovery of universal and generalisable laws of behaviour, and the sharp separation between organism and its environment, measuring results, determining effectiveness, applying proper scientific methodology and standards of evidence

as Altman (*ibid.*: 1059) points out. They realised that unless they did that, the values produced would not be considered meaningful to the scientific community. This methodologically empirical trend seems to have *contaminated* Translation Studies too and apparently represented a source of relief to its crisis: it would not be

misconstrued or ignored any more. Finally, an acknowledgeable approach!

It is unquestionable that the scientific perspective, first suggested by Holmes and later on adopted by Toury in order to *re-view* Translation Studies has affected the discipline, mainly as far as a paradigmatic shift is concerned. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine Toury's contribution to the development of research in translation, pointing out the historical importance of his model as well as some of its limitations. Furthermore, and perhaps even more important for my purpose in this work is to briefly comment on some salient aspects of such a paradigmatic shift.

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We have witnessed, over the past couple of decades, different theories in Translation Studies revolving around the translational phenomena embodied in what Gentzler (1998: 127) refers to as the polarity "ideal author - original text / translated text-reader models". Such models involve a diversity of issues varying from literal translation (with its strict equivalence feature) to free translation (with its *anarchic* visibility). In this context, the so-called *scientific orientation* which, up to Toury's intervention, had never been a point of concern to Translation Studies, was introduced to frame and direct the discipline.

Toury's Descriptive Translation Studies model seems to be resultant of the intense development of Translation Studies in the 1960s and 1970s, with contributions from several researchers, bringing new perspectives to it and placing Translation Studies in the threshold of a crucial paradigmatic change where this *scientific* aspect plays a leading role. Venuti (1998: 27) refers to such an empirical preoccupation when he comments on Toury's model:

Gideon Toury's orientation is avowedly scientific, avoiding prescriptive accounts of translation to examine actual translation practices. He sets out from the assertion that

“translations are facts of target cultures” (Toury, 1995: 29), the domestic situations where foreign texts are chosen for translation and discursive strategies are devised to translate them.

The new paradigm

The title of this paper (expression used by Gentzler, *ibid.*:134) is an allusion to the new paradigm proposed to Translation Studies by authors like Even-Zohar and Gideon Toury, in that it gives clues about the way core concepts such as that of equivalence, for example, is to be treated in the new model.

The concept of paradigm, introduced by Thomas Kuhn (1962, 1970) in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, emphasises, as Hoogeveen (1997: 153) states, “the aspect of widespread underlying convictions that often take the form of a firm belief, rather than just a set of testable hypotheses”.

Stricker (1997: 443) goes further and presents a more comprehensive understanding of the concept. According to his interpretation, a paradigm can be viewed

in terms of shared examples or exemplars. This involves not only a shared theory and rules of inquiry but also a recognition as to how these rules apply to a variety of disciplinary problems. Thus, it is not only knowledge but also a mode of knowing that is shared in the paradigm. Thus, a paradigm is more than simply a theory. It encompasses the whole disciplinary matrix that surrounds a theory, including an epistemological framework, a corpus of knowledge, a means of generating and understanding that information, a set of values, and possibly even a worldview.

This broad interpretation of paradigm seems to conform exactly to what Toury was searching in order to justify and explain the new

routes proposed by his Descriptive Translation Studies. Such routes should lead, as Toury argues, to a systematic approach with

clear assumptions and provided with methodology and research procedures which are as explicit as possible, and which will render the findings of any single field study carried out in its framework both intersubjective and significant from the point of view of translation studies, and make the studies themselves repeatable, either for the same or for another corpus. Different aims are therefore bound to yield not only different questions and answers, but also different organisations of different “facts”, different methods and procedures, and the like (1980: 81).

Toury’s pursue was to demonstrate the possibility of Translation Studies to be empirically grounded and viewed as a behavioural way of knowing. This methodological *upgrade* attempt caused a stir in the field of Translation Theory as the discipline, up to that time, used to base their sources of information on theoretical (intuitively-based) approaches which were, ultimately, resultant of authority. Thus, in order to make his model operational, features of the old paradigm, such as *isolated attempts*, *excellent intuitions*, and *fine insights* had to be left out.

Considered a methodological advance over the earlier approaches, Toury’s model also provoked a radical paradigmatic shift in the questions that were addressed by translation theoreticians. Largely due to the Manipulation group and more specifically to Toury’s remarkable contributions, the question became not whether a translation is correct or incorrect, good or bad, but what regularities guide the translation product. Consequently, various target problems are dealt with. Thus, acceptability (relative), target text identity (floating), equivalence (an empirical matter), and text manipulation (*procrustianly* conforming to target cultural system) are just some of them.

However, by insisting on moving the discipline to a direction opposing to intuition and mere speculation Toury may have

overreacted to the pressure to justify empirically its processes when he ruled out an aspect that is of utmost importance, i.e. value judgement.

Gergen (1994: 414) draws attention to “the traditional view of science where the scientist is limited to speaking on matters of fact alone; issues of value, morality, and the cultural good are considered irrelevant to science qua science”. Can one effectively view Translation Studies in such a detached position from cultural involvement? It is important to notice that if there was the *scientific boom* in the 1970s, there was also the *social boom* of the 1980s and mainly of the 1990s. As the world goes more and more social, an increasing difficulty arises to understand translational phenomena _ and any discipline _ as apart from social and ethical foundations. Venuti (ibid.: 28) very perceptively, acknowledges the fact that “judgements can’t be avoided in this or any other cultural theory. Even at the level of devising and executing a research project, a scholarly interpretation will be laden with the values of its cultural situation”. He also adds that such an empirical endeavour assigned to translation studies “would perpetuate the marginality of translation studies by discouraging an engagement with the trends and debates that have fueled the most consequential thinking about culture”.

This stance finds support in other fields too, as one can see, for example, in Brown’s comment on her own field of studies. Psychology. According to her,

[m]any such psychologists, no matter where they formally situate themselves in the discipline, are struggling to find meaning and connection in a social context that attempts to disconnect them from the underlying sacred and revolutionary goals of their work (1997: 452).

In this post-modern context we live, there seems to be a growing consensus and movement for regression (progression?) to more holistic approaches, where the *human factor* (authors, translators

and readers) is more important than the “*facts*”. Thus, from this post-modern vantage point, I would daringly say that Toury’s model sounds *demodé*, mainly if one thinks of “the false dichotomy created between being values-driven or being objective” (Brown, *ibid.*: 450).

Some important issues

Norms

The immediate result of this observable, tangible attempt to subvert paradigms was the introduction of the concept of “translation norms”, a term grounded on historical-cultural “*facts*” and established by the comparisons made between two or more translations from the same original, in different (or the same) times in history. One of the purposes of the norms is to find out what elements are taken into account along the translation process, what common features can be found, what elements do not share commonalities. The recurrent common features are called in Toury’s terms, “regularities” and would account for the “typicality rating” among the rendered texts. It is important to mention that as the analysis for the identification of regularities or typicality is a post-hoc one, the norms can be said to be *perceptive* and not prescriptive.

The notion of regularities implicit in the norms is based on Wittgenstein’s (1963) concept of *family resemblance* structures. Howard (1987: 60) refers to them as “instances of some complex natural concepts [that] may only be held together by a set of similarities a set of family resemblances”.

The destabilising of text identity, another feature of Toury’s model, is also inspired in Wittgenstein and finds a safe harbour in Gergen’s (also following Wittgenstein) use of the expression *relational view of language*. He draws attention to the fact that

language acquires its meaning not through a referential base but through its use in social practices. To use a word accurately

is to use it within the rules of culturally specific language games, which games are embedded within broader cultural conventions or forms of life. It is not the world that necessitates our callings but the relationships in which we participate (1994: 413).

Equivalence / Adequacy / Acceptability

Central to any discussion about Toury's model, equivalence, meaning total and strict faithfulness to the source text ("*the assumption that translation is nothing but an attempt to reconstruct the original appears not only as naive, but also misleading and infertile for translation studies to start from*") (Toury, 1980: 17) "is not a postulated requirement" and a nonissue in the new paradigm.

In his book *Contemporary translation theories* (ibid.: 134), Gentzler comments on equivalence. He considers it (or its replacement by the concept of acceptability) to be one of the main tenets of the *polysystems theory*, Toury's model's foundation. He states:

translators do not work in ideal and abstract situations nor desire to be innocent, but have vested literary and cultural interests of their own, and *want* their work to be accepted within another culture. Thus they manipulate the source text to inform as well as conform with the existing cultural constraints.

On these grounds, the new model leaves the notion of 'adequacy' (source-oriented equivalence) and goes towards the notion of *acceptability* (target-oriented equivalence). Thus, Toury would claim that the search for the truth and for the good in an ideal world (the source text) loses strength to the search for a certain acceptable use of words embedded within larger cultural contexts. He argues that "every actual translation thus occupies a certain position with respect to both adequacy and acceptability, and exhibits some

mixture of these two extremes” (1980: 29). As a consequence of this typicality effect (or “regularities”, in Toury’s terms), is that texts are not viewed as having one and just one fixed (and *correct*) translation as traditional previous models would require. On the contrary, the borders of what would be considered appropriate/acceptable are fuzzy and dependent on other issues. In my opinion, this concession to flexibility is a positive though contradictory stance in Toury’s model.

One consequence of this relational view embedded in the model is that the constant manipulation of the original to inform / conform with the existing [target] cultural constraints, as mentioned before, leads it to realms far from the basic tenets on which Toury has been insistently urging Translation Studies to be based. *Canonical* science, as it is well known, requires precise concept definitions; it is verifiable, objective, quantitative, just to mention some of its characteristics. To what extent can one say that Descriptive Translation Studies accounts for these characteristics? This *scientism* that became so pervasive in DTS, the erroneous notion that the *scientific umbrella* only encompasses what has been obtained through testing and refutation, what is observable or reconstructable, is a weakness of the model. Obviously, this does not mean that the discipline should not be aware of its bias; no doubt, as Myrdal (In: Messick, 1975: 964) acknowledges, there is no other device for excluding bias than to face the valuations. In fact, by constantly monitoring its own weaknesses the search for effective results will be more tangible.

Perhaps one of Toury’s major contributions were, first, his attempt to rescue Translation Studies from the speculative detours of previous models, accused of being subjective, unscientific, qualitative, uncontrolled, unverifiable, intuitive, vague and hazy; second, to provide the discipline with more (as much as possible!) rigorous foundational assumptions (whether truly experimental or not); and third, to pursue a more flexible alternative to the concept of equivalence.

Some limitations

As I can see it, the major limitation of Toury's model is, probably, a lack of commitment with social change. Descriptive Translation Studies was devised to *only* describe translation products; there is no space for questioning, proposing a debate and changing the *status quo*. By avoiding value judgements the model also does not provide for a discussion of the reciprocal effects of target culture/translations rendered (dominant *vs.* colonised roles, for example); it also sets aside reflection on more universal aspects of human experience and behaviour, and does not perceive that, as the post-modernist literature claims, "scientific constructions, fallible as they are and always subject to disconfirmation and revision, are simply optional myths on all fours with religious or political dogmas and ideologies. (Smith, 1994: 408).

What the model privileges, therefore, is a centripetal movement and not a centrifugal one, just to use Altman's (*ibid.*: 1063) terms. Thus, Descriptive Translation Studies moves towards itself while the post-modern perspective favours the opposite movement, with the exploration of insightful and new directions. This out of touch with contemporary thinking, which assigns an engaged role to all kinds of knowledge (scientific knowledge being included) and cannot accept any kind of neutrality is, in my opinion, one of the model's major limitations.

Other criticisms to Toury's model come from Venuti (*ibid.*: 132-133). According to him, Toury is concerned with conformity, not with the exceptions. In other words, Toury is more concerned with standards rather than with violations which usually are, as Palmer (1977: 174) argues, more appealing and insightful.

Another strong criticism refers to the *tertium comparationis*. Is Toury pursuing competence or performance? Ideal or real facts? And if he denies value judgements, how has he found this third *adequate* translation? These are just some of the questions posited in Venuti's considerations:

Ironically, Toury's comparison technique does not involve actual texts. In order to carry out a series of comparisons and to measure the shifts revealing the norms which determine them, Toury "uses" an ideal invariant third text which is the "adequate translation," not based on a comparison to the original and various historically bound texts, but on abstract linguistic and literary theory (Venuti, *ibid.*: 131).

Thus, in spite of insisting that DTS privileges performance, it is in Chomsky's concept of competence that Toury finds justification to the premise that

every literary system is *different* from every other in terms of its structure and norms of usage; on the other hand, he suggests that the *same* structural universal form underlies two different language systems (Venuti, *ibid.*: 132).

To sum up, I really do not know whether Descriptive Translation Studies can really be science-driven or not. What I may say is that Toury's model provided a new approach to translation studies, brought concern with rigour to research in the area by establishing clear assumptions and method and thus facilitating the pursue for its ethos. In similar fashion, it is not for me to say whether the model favours gains or losses; nonetheless, as I do not believe in total neutrality and having to take a stance, I would admit that Toury's model did contribute for Translation Studies to achieve agency and reflection on its own activity; it did tackle important issues, it did provoke important parallel debates which consequences will certainly be the subsequent step to remedy its incompleteness and incongruity.

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