TRANSLATIONAL NORMS: A PRESCRIPTION? REVISITING THE CONCEPT

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1. Introduction

In his book *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*, Toury states that "Translation activities should (…) be regarded as having cultural significance" (1995: 53). In Toury's view, and following the tendency of the descriptive perspective towards translation, this cultural significance applies only and exclusively to the target culture. According to him, the acquisition of the intersubjective factors present in the target culture, which he labels as *norms*, and the proper use of them are seen as a *sine qua non* for the practice of translation (ibid.).

The notion of norms in Toury's model is a key concept which underlies his descriptive analyses of translated texts. In this article, I intend to expand on this concept, trying to verify how important a role it plays within Toury's descriptive model, as well as call into question the validity of the mere identification of the translation norms present in a target culture as sufficient criteria for a proper understanding of the translation practices in that culture. The main argument presented here is that to the identification of norms must follow an investigation of the forces behind them, an assessment of the consequences resulting from them and a committed questioning on whether the identified norms are to be strictly adhered to or not.

In opposition to Toury's statement that "properly descriptive [studies] (…) refrain from value judgements" (Toury, 1995: 2), I subscribe to Venuti (1998) and his more realistic view that "judgements can't be avoided in (…) any (…) cultural theory" (28). Thus, a critical, and careful, look at the current norms of a given target culture is here advocated in order to properly analyse the impact of such norms in any translational practice within that culture. As far as I can see it, the identification of the guiding principles behind the translational norms in a certain culture may lead to the identification of intended manipulation[1] of cultural and/or stylistic features[2], among other factors. Therefore, a purely descriptive and non-evaluative attitude towards norms would not be satisfactory at all.

2. Definition of norms

2.1. Toury's Descriptive View on Norms

Norms are presented by Toury as the third member of his tripartite model - system-norm-performance - claimed by him as indispensable for the establishment of a TT's position in the relevant target literary and/or linguistic systems in terms of its acceptability in them (Toury, 1980: 49). In this model, norms would work as the intermediating factor acting between the "system of potential equivalence" and the "actual performance" (ibid.: 50), this latter being identified by descriptive analyses of translated texts, being, therefore, empirical in nature. The concept of norms here entails all the regular patterns of behaviour within actual translations. Since they are only identified in the target texts, their study is bound to be target-oriented. According to Toury, norms occupy the middle-ground between more absolute rules present in a given culture or system and the idiosyncrasies which also take place during every translational activity (ibid.: 51). Although they are presented as the "focal concept in any study of literary translation", norms are

charged with two features which make them rather hard to be analysed, i.e., their *socio-cultural specificity* and their *instability* (Toury, 1995: 61-62). By the former, it is taken into account the fact that the significance of a norm is dependent on the system in which it is embedded, whereas the latter accounts for its inherent time-bound nature (ibid.): every value in a socio-cultural context tends to go through changes imposed by various elements along its evolution in time. Naturally, the identification of the agents behind such changes would definitely shed a bright light on the evolution of translational practices; however, Toury, although aware of this fact, limits himself to stating that "much more research is needed to clarify" the "relative role" of these agents (ibid.: 62). His aim is markedly turned to the sheer description of the norms currently regulating translational practices within a given system, refusing to adopt any prescriptive attitude towards such practices. In Toury's view, the identification and analysis of norms are bound to account for the actual patterns occurring in a certain target culture, without however endeavouring in a deeper investigation of to which agenda such norms may be serving. Thus, no normative principle is to be generated from the identification of the current norms in a given target system.

Toury lists three major groups of norms to be considered in descriptive translation studies: *initial, preliminary* and *operational* norms (ibid.: 56-61). Generally speaking, the initial norms would refer to the translator's decision about adhering to the norms of the source system or adhering to the norms of the target system. Within descriptive studies' usual terminology, the former is labelled as a choice for *adequacy* to the source pole, whereas the latter refers to the search for *acceptability* in the target pole. The translator also deals with the preliminary norms which account for the nature of a translation policy to figure at the basis of his or her work, as well as for the directness of translation. It can be seen that the preliminary norms are established by factors external to the translational process itself. On the other hand, the operational norms

refer to the translator's decisions during the process of translating
and will tend to reflect his or her choice for following whatever
pole chosen when selecting the initial norm. However, as far as the
relation between preliminary and operational norms is concerned,
and as Toury himself states, there may be "mutual influences"
between them, or even "two-way conditioning" (ibid.: 59).

In the next section I will attempt to account for the socio-cultural
character of norms in order to support my argument that, despite
the fact that they indeed reflect a behavioural pattern in a given
system, the description of norms alone is not sufficient for a proper
account of translational practices in the target pole.

2.2. The Socio-Cultural Charge of Norms

Despite Toury's allegedly neutral attitude towards the current
norms operating in a given system, his own description and
explanation of the term accounts for the cultural charge of norms in
a literary system. His reference to the contemporaneous occurrence
of *mainstream* norms, *remnants* of previous ones and *rudiments* of
new ones (ibid.: 62-63) reveals his awareness that norms are
constantly subject to changes, just as every cultural phenomenon.
As I have previously pointed out, one of the features that make
norms rather hard to be analysed is their socio-cultural specificity.
Strange as it may sound, it is Toury himself who acknowledges the
urge to look at norms within the cultural context in which they
manifest: "the only viable way out seems to be to contextualise
every phenomenon, every item, every text, every act, on the way
to allotting the different norms themselves their appropriate position
and valence" (ibid.: 63). What Toury's descriptive approach seems
to fail to recognise, however, is that once one sets out to regarding
norms as culture-bound phenomena, one just cannot leave out the
principles that generate these same norms. And I believe that there
is no feasible way to perform such attempt without recurring into
an evaluative attitude. This fact is brilliantly emphasised by Venuti
(1998: 28) when he quotes Toury's comments (1995: 55) on the

independence between norms and their verbal formulation in language: "However, they [verbal formulations] also imply other interests, particularly a desire to *control* behaviour (…)" (Toury's emphasis). When making such quotation, Venuti called attention to the fact that every formulation is actually an interpretation. Therefore, the very act of formulating a norm, whether by prescribing one (attitude condemned by the descriptive branch of translation studies) or describing one that is to be regarded as recurrent in a given culture, implies an evaluative conduct. I would like to illustrate the implications of this fact by referring to the professional translators who are at the beginning of their careers. If we take into account the fact that when these professionals start their activities they are already embedded in a cultural context, we are immediately led to recognise that they are bound to somehow react to the norms operating in this context. Whether they conform to them or stand up to question them, their behaviour will unavoidably be dictated by the existence of norms. What I intend to emphasise here is that this fact, although prescriptive in nature, does not necessarily figure as an evil to be defeated. Actually, the attempt to deny the existence of a prescriptive and evaluative nature in translational behaviour seems to me pointless. When describing norms, a translation critic will end up verbally formulating them and, whether they are to be followed or questioned, they will generate reactions within the cultural context in which they take place. Besides, the mere description of norms would not justify their study; once they are identified, a critical attitude will necessarily lead to the questioning of their nature and the consequences they may bring about. In some specific cases, like translations from a source text produced in a "minor" language into a hegemonic culture, this questioning may well be said to figure as the *raison d'être* of any translation study. If translation scholars limit themselves to the identification and description of norms in actual translations, major cultural aspects inherent to this undeniably culture-bound activity may be missed out.

3. Translational norms: a prescription?

3.1   Criteria for Corpus *Selection.*

The narrow scope of this paper does not allow for an exhaustive account on the selection of corpora for a descriptive study of translational norms. Therefore, I will limit myself to an overall consideration on the possible reasons prior to such selection, as well as on the possible implications of this choice.

In one of his case studies regarding norms in literary translation, Toury took three defining factors for the selection of his *corpus: genre, period* and *source languages and their literatures* (1980: 122). The justification of such criteria, according to Toury (ibid.), only came about during the investigation process. In this specific case, the chosen period was classified as a transitional period, one in which norms would tend to go under change, either in the literary system itself or in translational practice. To which extent this selection was properly justified as an ideal *corpus* for the study of norms is not under question here; I think it is worth, though, to point out that although Toury claims scientific neutrality and descriptivism devoid of prescriptive concerns, the very fact of selecting a specific *corpus* (to the detriment of any other) for a scholarly investigation is itself necessarily loaded: selection inevitably entails a process of inclusion and exclusion, which might be said to be "prescriptive" in nature.

Following the criteria adopted by Toury in his work mentioned above, it can be seen that by defining the genre of the *corpus* to be analysed, the translation critic will naturally list and analyse norms which are supposed to figure within texts belonging to that genre. By the same token, the norms of a given period will be said to refer to that period only, and, finally, they will be analysed within the boundaries of the source languages and literatures selected. In this context, the following question can be raised: what other purpose would such study serve if not the one of investigating what principles

have generated the norms identified in the *corpus* and which agenda they would be serving? To ignore this point seems to void any justification for the identification of norms. Why should we get down to the study of norms in a selected *corpus*, whatever criteria one uses for this selection, if there was no intention whatsoever of bringing about the causes and consequences of their emergence? The claim that such descriptions work as a proof that actual translations do not follow prescribed rules seem to me rather naive: if norms do occur they do not probably occur at random. They may well, and I do believe they do, reflect some principles operating within the translational practice of works belonging to that genre, in that period of time and coming from those selected sources. Still it seems important to say that these principles may generate distinct features in different translations, since every translator is an individual social being, and therefore, reacts differently (even if we take into account the regular behavioural patterns that do occur) to every social input. But their prescriptive starting point, disguised as it may be, can not be denied. I am very much drawn to believe that the very selection of the *corpus* may attempt to prove that the norms do not correspond to certain expectations of some so-called 'prescriptive' branches of translation studies. But such aim is just as normative in nature, since the verbal formulation of norms will, at least to a certain extent, instigate their continuation, if not following any pre-established optimum of translation, at least following a certain patterned behaviour and its principles. By stating so, I am not condemning the prescriptive nature of any translational attitude, but I do question the tendency stimulated by descriptive studies to avoid evaluation of what establishes norms and what they may come to generate. In fact, since the primary stage of selecting the *corpus* to be evaluated, the translation critic is already adopting a prescriptive nature, i.e., he or she is about to point out which patterns are to be followed or denied in translation practices. Therefore, it seems to me that more than limiting translation studies to a description of patterned behaviour in translation practices, there is

a cultural need for the evaluation of these patterns regarding their causes and the possible implications of them. Within this context, the attempt to prove that there should be no evaluative nature operating in translational practice seems to have minor importance. Since cultural practices will always be instigated by some force or another, we had better analyse to what agenda such forces respond than insist on denying them.

Perhaps the more dangerous consequence of limiting translation studies to the description of norms has to do with those norms which illustrate an attitude commonly known as *domestication*. This term here is taken with its negative connotation, as Venuti sees it (Venuti, 1995 apud. Shuttleworth and Cowie, 1997: 59): a practice that leads the readers to recognise their own culture in a text which has been produced in another culture. The translator's invisibility generated in this practice allows for the denial of the other in order to keep a "natural-sounding TL style".

Thus, if we submit a given *corpus* in which domestication practices are the norm to a purely descriptive analysis, we will in all probability end up providing a pointless listing of the recurrent factors within a given number of works. On the other hand, if after such identification we get down to analysing and evaluating the reasons behind those norms, adopting a critical view on such occurrence, then we will indeed justify such study.

4. Conclusion

The concept of norms has become of core importance within Translation Studies, particularly in DTS. Toury's attempt to be objective, descriptive and precise when analysing them has encouraged a new approach towards translation practice, tackling features which had been overlooked until then, such as the very existence of norms operating in the production of translated texts. Undoubtedly, his position towards translational behaviour has proved

to have invaluable resonance on translation critics in the last decade. In fact, being acquainted with the current norms in a given literary system seems now to be a crucial initial step when taking into consideration the translation practices within a given culture.

Nevertheless, Toury's approach is bound to suffer from limitations if one is to perform a cultural analysis of any translational activity. Two points are suggested here as potentially providing Toury's project with a more feasible attitude towards actual translations, as far as norms are concerned. Firstly, a closer look at the SL text. Whichever norms prevail in the target context, a look at the source context is to provide feasible answers regarding the cultural implications of the encounter between the two poles. Many times, current norms in the translated text will disguise an attitude towards the source culture which is to be indeed questioned. Such attitude may well have political or socio-cultural motivations lying underneath the translational practices in the target pole. The analysis of the ST is not bound to work as purely prescriptive as regards achieving a pre-established degree of equivalence, but is to enable the critics to weigh which features of the text production inherent to the source culture are at stake in the process of translation and which consequences may emerge from their manipulation. Secondly, as a direct consequence of the considerations made above, the acceptance of the impossibility of value-free descriptions as far as translation criticism is concerned. The view of translation norms as cultural bound factors cannot be disregarded in order to allow for a "scientific" evaluation. Not only do translation norms reflect cultural features, but somehow they also have a role in perpetuating or altering them.

Notes

1. The term *manipulation* here is taken with its ideological charge. According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1995), to manipulate implies "to make someone think and behave exactly as you want them"; "to work skilfully with information, systems, etc. to achieve the result that you want" (871-872). In the context of this paper, manipulation will refer to intended alterations in elements of texts produced in a given source culture in order to conform with principles present in a given target culture.

2. All considerations made in this paper refer to the translation of artistic texts, i.e., literary fiction, films, poetry, etc.

References

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