

Descriptive Translation Studies and the Cultural Turn

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Discuss the changes undergone by Descriptive Translation Studies as a result of the influence of Cultural Studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

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1.0 Introduction

The study of translation has, for much of its history, been perceived as a subordinate art whose remit existed outside the scholarly domains of linguistics (Fozooni 2006). The narrow band of concerns that formed the conventional focus in the study of translation behaviour has typically related almost exclusively to the authenticity of a given translation – evaluations of faithfulness and of whether translations were ‘definitive’ (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990; Xie 2009; Dinçel 2012).

However, the past three decades or so have seen a broadening of scope in translation research that has extended it well outside of its traditional realm. Dubbed ‘the cultural turn’, this period heralded a marked change in emphasis driven primarily by an acknowledgement of the direct influence of culture and underlying ideologies on both the study and practice of contemporary translation. The movement by scholars and practitioners towards broader issues of context heralded a rapid diversification in translation theory.

This paper explores the phenomenon and discusses the changes undergone in the field of translation studies as a result. The paper will first offer an outline of the landscape prior to the cultural turn in order to show the theoretical frameworks that informed it. In particular, this will focus on the position of descriptive studies in translation, before discussing what facilitated the movement towards more culturally-informed developments in translation principles. Some of the most significant developments, encompassing socially, politically and historically-grounded methodologies, will be explored in greater detail. Finally, comment will be made on how, with their emphasis on context, these burgeoning theories continue to develop the role of translation as a discipline capable of intercultural understanding and exchange.

2.0 Translation before the cultural turn

Putting the events of the cultural turn in context, Trivedi (2005:2) remarks that for much of the last century translation was considered a sub-division of linguistics that focused almost exclusively on the act of substitution between source and target languages. The post-Second

World War period saw increasing volumes of language exchange being called for in a wide range of fields (Brisset 2010). In the wake of this industrialisation of translation, linguistics was called upon to circumscribe what were to be considered the principles of translatability (Yan and Huang 2014).

The somewhat mechanical approach to the process of translation meant that linguistics-dominated notions of transferral – wholly divorced from contextual issues of time and culture – became the mainstay of translation practice (Naudé 2012). Hariyanto (2002) collates a number of definitions of translation from the era which clearly cite ‘equivalence’ – the exchange of textual and semantic units in the source language for the same or very similar ones in the target language (Catford:1965:20; Snell-Hornby 2009:44) – as being paramount to an accurate translation.

2.1 Descriptive Translation Studies

Pym (2010) broadly defines the aim of Descriptive Translation Studies (henceforth DTS): ‘to describe what translations actually are, rather than simply prescribing how they should be’. Less prescriptive than its predecessors, DTS sought to establish probable expectations of translation behaviour by handling the practice as ‘an empirical discipline with a hierarchical organisation and a structured research program’ (Cheung 2013).

The concept was propounded by Gideon Toury from the 1970s onwards (Naudé 2012), and it was characteristic of the mood of that time, where ideas that challenged established conventions of translation came to prominence. There was a sense that previous theories lacked a certain sensitivity to, and awareness of, the socio-cultural conditions under which the process of translation occurs (Bassnett McGuire 1991; Bassett 2012) and that greater significance should be attached to these issues.

2.2 The descriptive approach

Toury’s was a less formal understanding of equivalence, whereby it became a functional and more relative term. In DTS this could be described as any kind of relation between

translated text and the source text (Toury 1995; Munday 2012). DTS aimed to distinguish trends in translation behaviour by first theorising on the general nature of translation. These hypotheses were based on in-depth analyses of previous texts, rather than intuitive data (Toury 1995). DTS introduced the notion of *function* – that is, the position that translation as a process occupies within the target culture. This will determine the nature of the relationships between translator, source and target texts (*product*), and will inform the chosen translation strategy (*process*) (ibid.).

A distinguishing feature of DTS is the view that translations are target orientated, as opposed to representing the source text (Bassnett 2007); how successfully it integrates into the prevailing linguistic norms of the target culture is always taken into account.

3.0 Culture and translation

Guo (2012) describes culture as patterns of customs, traditions, social habits and values – ‘the entire ways of a people’. In a similar vein, Vermeer (1992) refers to culture as ‘the totality of norms, conventions and opinions which determine the behaviour of members of society, and all results of this behaviour’. Language is included in, and affected by these results, and it is the establishment of this link between language and culture that was central to the developments undergone by DTS.

Prior to this period, there was a clear demarcation between the concerns of translation studies at the time and any sort of culturally informed studies in that field. But if it was the exchanges between cultures throughout history that necessitated translation in its most basic sense, it follows that translation (as a process and a product) should be regarded as a medium for, and product of, cultural exchange (Torrop 2002; Yan and Huang 2014).

3.1 External influences on translation

The shifts that characterised the cultural turn centred around the view that text is embedded in a network of cultural signs in both the source and target cultures. Ndlovu and Sibanda (2014:21) acknowledge the practical realities of translation when they assert that, in spite

of any claims of neutrality, some of underlying theory, however embryonic or concealed, will be inherent in the conversion.

Even as early as the 18th century, Humboldt (cited in Xie 2009) elucidated most clearly the seemingly paradoxical nature of the translation research methodology, stating that the impossibility of equivalence was ‘inherent in language’ because different languages created different worldviews. Although this stops short of mentioning culture explicitly, it provides evidence that a discussion of translation in context – one that looked to wider circle of influence – was not an entirely new one at the time of the cultural turn, over a century later. Looking again at the views of leading theorists such as Lawrence Venuti and Bassnett, it is clear that ideas such as these were influential in the advancement of translation theory after DTS.

3.2 Defining the cultural turn

Snell-Hornby (2006) cites Lefevere and Bassnett’s (1990) definition of the cultural turn as the name given to the development of a counter theory to DTS proposed by several bands of translation scholars in the late 1970s and early 80s. In a series of research papers published from the mid 1970s onwards, the translation theorist André Lefevere directly challenged the widely-accepted conventions of DTS and questioned the supposed neutrality of the autonomous processes to which translation had until that point adhered. He envisaged translation as being not primarily about language (in a purely linguistic sense) or the mechanical conversion of lexical units between languages, but as a form of transfer, with language representing an expression and repertory of the cultures involved (Pettersson 1999; Lefevere 2004).

Bassnett and Lefevere (1990:138-39) viewed a ‘scientific’ linguistic approach based on the concept of equivalence as ‘isolationist’ and ‘counter-productive’. In order to better understand the complexities of the interaction, it was necessary to reject narrowly circumscribed procedures in favour of examining the ‘processes of encoding and decoding’ that the practice involves. The cultural turn, thus, reflected a movement away from a rigidly prescriptive methodology in translation to one where the impact of culture, as well as the

wider constraints and demands on translation, are brought into focus (Derrida 1985; Fozooni 2006).

4.0 New Theories: Translation as Rewriting

The cultural turn gave rise to theories about how a text can be exploited by external forces during transition from source to target environment. Translation has never been an isolated activity, and as such there is always a context in which translation takes place, a history from which text emerges and another one into which the text is transposed (Aksoy 2001). In response to this view, Lefevere put forward the idea of translation being a form of manipulation. He described as ‘refracted’ those texts that had been adapted to a new audience of readers in the target culture for the purpose of ‘influencing the way in which the work is read and interpreted’ (Shuping 2013). Over a period of more than a decade, the idea was developed into the concept of *rewriting*; texts are translated within an imposed ideological framework in order to and ensure that it functions as desired in a given society (Hermans 1999; Ndlovu and Sibanda 2014).

The work pioneered by Lefevere bore some similarities to the theories that preceded it. There were influences from DTS as well as the functionalist Skopos theory presented by contemporaries including Vermeer and Reiss. The convergence in their thinking is clearest in the sense that they adopt a less prescriptive approach in the analysis of translation, but also because the status of the source text is secondary to its functionality in the target setting. *Rewriting* treats translations as ‘created or projected images’ of the original source texts. Lefevere (1992) himself states that they are of great value in helping translation scholars gain greater awareness of a world in which such manipulations can occur.

4.1 The Politics of Translation: Patronage and Poetics

Lefevere propounded the theory that existing within the literary system is a focus on maintaining an asymmetrical balance of power as opposed to simply conveying meaning, and that this becomes embedded in the entire translation process. The selection of texts for translation, the guidelines that govern the procedure and the place in the target society it

occupies are all said to reflect the interests of those responsible for commissioning and producing the work. Termed ‘patrons’, these bodies are concerned more with ideology of literature rather than the poetics of the literature itself (Lefevere 2004). Examples of patrons include the publishing industry, the government, the media, religious groups or a ruling social class.

In its function as a control mechanism over the literary system, patronage in rewriting went a step further than previous methods in specifying the true motivations and manifestations of translation. While the manipulation of what literature is permitted to be may help the culture of a society to advance and evolve, its view of language as being less important also has the potential to ‘repress, contain and distort’ by filtering texts through unsuitable cultural norms in an attempt to reposition and domesticate it (Dagahi and Bagheri 2012; Shuping 2013; Zhang 2014).

Hence the imposition of dominant ideologies creates a poetic inside the target system: a literary atmosphere or protocol that determines the type and properties of the translated literature that will be received (Munday 2008). It is not uncommon for texts to be rewritten to conform to changing ideological positions over decades or centuries, using a revised inventory of literary devices and characters, or new functional components that position literature so as to serve the interests of the ruling group.

Ultimately, rewriting represented a far more dynamic implementation of translation theory. The aforementioned studies note that the model gave practitioners liberty to subvert some or all of the constraints of their environment. However the proposition that translation was so discernibly controlled made it clear that the translator’s skill set now extended beyond demonstrations of linguistic competence. Rewriting actually heightened their presence by placing them at the centre of mediations pertaining to power and the order of social systems (Bassnett 1990:123).

4.2 Post-colonial studies: a definition

As an offshoot of the cultural turn, postcolonial translation theory developed in the early 1990s in tandem with progressive studies in the field of globalisation and cultural identity (Naude 2012). Here, the primary focus was on the ideological consequences of the distortions that are said to occur when translating literature from Third World countries into English (Munday 2012).

The post-colonial approach considers the effect of historical imperialism on the prevailing attitudes in the world of translation. It seeks to redress a state of affairs in which translations into major European languages (principally English) are revered much as an original might be, with its source material subjugated and positioned as inferior in order to promulgate the image of the colonised (Munday 2012; Spivak in Venuti 2012). Studies of Indian and Francophone African literature by Garane (2014) and Basu (2014) respectively attest to the ways in which the West's 'cultural others' are abstracted and presented through 'hegemonic languages of empire', often to the detriment of the message in the source text.

4.2.1 The Position of the Translator in Post-Colonial Studies

This depiction of translation as an unequal power struggle between smaller languages and English drew attention to the issue of how translation can be appropriated (and misappropriated) to subordinate the status – and hence diminish the identity – of another culture or language (Munday 2012). There is great potential for misrepresentation through various degrees and forms of 'qualitative and quantitative impoverishment' – effacement and gentrification, for instance – whereby text is rendered in such a way that it fails to effectively reflect or function according to the conventions of source and/or target setting (Hodges 2010).

Post-colonial studies asked questions of the accuracy of previously translated works, introducing the idea that the preoccupations of new and existing translations – far removed from linguistic fidelity – could have a demonstrable effect. Like Lefevere's rewriting model before it, the post-colonial perspective recognised the power of the human elements in the

translation process. This time, the translator was invited to undertake ‘interventionist’ measures to guard against the creation of colonial subjects and the exercise of colonial power through discourse (Niranjana 1992). Increasingly, it seemed necessary for practitioners to operate from a position of distrust in the translation process, as though it were a fundamentally destructive tool, and that they should be given increasing licence to intervene and rectify the apparent deformation of source material (Pettersson 1999).

5.0 The Contemporary Landscape of Translation

The cultural turn arose from the need to understand rapidly changing patterns of cultural interaction in the world (Bassnett 2007). Although this approach to translation studies is now a recognised and firmly established branch of the wider discipline, there remain numerous perspectives on what the cultural turn and the consequent shifts in perspective have come to represent.

Xie (2009) and Cronin (2010) consider the cultural turn part of a wider movement in adjacent disciplines where scholars of the time delved deeper into issues such as feminism, semiotics and literary theory. These in turn became external stimulus for the nascent explorations in translation studies. Bassnett (1998) refers to the explorations that followed the cultural turn as valuable attempts to deepen the methods of analysing ‘what happens to texts during intercultural transfer, or translation’. The adoption of sociological and ethnographic positions has led Lu and Fang (2012) to attribute the cultural turn with helping translation to become ‘an enabler, facilitator and promoter of cultural exchange’.

However, reflection among scholars on the changes undergone in DTS – and, indeed, the future of the discipline – also extends to whether there is an adequate balance between linguistic and cultural grounding. In the wake of so many theoretical models, Sakellariou (2011) sees there being little consensus on the way in which these cultural aspects are to be employed. In a similar vein, Torrop (2002) describes modern day translation as an ‘extremely loaded’ concept. Most explicitly, Trivedi (2005:3) and Bhabha (1994) are somewhat cautious of a movement that could leave the discipline bereft of most of its systematic processes – those that were the mainstay of DTS – instead ‘saddling it with the

responsibility of carrying the meaning of culture'. Tan and Lu (2007) are also mindful of a future in which a quest for equivalence returns but is now sought in the cultural identity of the source text. However, they acknowledge that as long as giving primacy to cultural issues does not 'diminish the central position of translation [in itself]', these factors can contribute to deeper levels of analysis.

6.0 Conclusion

The remarkable evolution in translation theory – the transition from linguistic-centred methodologies, through DTS and the cultural turn of the 1980s – has spawned a multitude of new paradigms and concepts. Perhaps even Bassnett and Lefevere, now considered pioneering scholars in the work, did not foresee the ways in which culture would permeate the study of translation. It is worth reflecting on the issues and questions raised by the many developments of the last few decades.

The changes undergone by DTS did much to make such culturally-informed translation theory acceptable in an academic environment which, had previously dismissed it as being more closely related to sociological studies than the academic lineage of literary humanities. In addition, the examination of the ideological, historical, political and moral positions from which texts are interpreted has reformulated the role of the translator. These questions – of ethics, of the relevance of conventional translation theory to the practical results – have gained greater prominence in the view of translation studies, and exposed a seemingly transparent and facilitative process as a manipulative one.

As the focus has moved from DTS and has brought the role of ideology to the fore, the cultural turn has cemented the notion that translated texts can no longer exist outside of the framework of cultural or power-based relations, of which the translator – now depicted as a central but nonetheless subjective character – is part. This may in fact contribute to the divisions that continue to exist between the cultural and linguistic viewpoints. As an example, it is worth noting this interweaving has manifested in a largely unidirectional flow of interdisciplinary cooperation into translation studies, rather than a reciprocal openness (Pettersen 1999; Snell-Hornby 2009). The subsequent overshadowing of more empirical

methodologies by a desire to authenticate cultural identity could in fact signal a full circle, echoing the focus on translation equivalence that preceded DTS and the cultural turn.

In any case, it is clear that the pluralism in translation theory at present means that it will continue to be studied, practised and evaluated in different ways. It is hoped that these reappraisals and the resulting conflicts can act as catalysts for explorations in new areas of study, as well as innovation that can narrow the gap between languages or cultures.

7.0 References

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