

Empiricism and Hermeneutics in Descriptive Translation Studies

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Abstract. With empiricism at its core, Descriptive Translation Studies aims at deducing and validating the translation norms for specific translation activities under the specific cultural contexts. Besides, understanding and interpretation are essential to humanities and Translation Studies. Therefore, while in pursuit of the precision, replicability and validity of research outcome, translation researchers should impose a humanistic interpretation on their research, thus integrating the humanity of Translation Studies with the rigor of empirical science.

Keywords: Descriptive Translation Studies; empiricism, hermeneutics, science and art.

1. The Prescriptive and Descriptive Paradigms for Translation Studies

For a long run, two research paradigms have been prevailing in Translation Studies: the prescriptive and the descriptive. Focusing on how to tackle those specific translation problems, prescriptive studies are more often than not idiosyncratic standards proposed by senior translators based on their professional experience. For example, they would elaborate on how a text should be rendered or if a certain translation is good or poor. In addition, with a foothold on text itself, the prescriptive research deems “faithfulness”, the accuracy of translation, as the primary standard. In other words, the translator should be maximally faithful to the source text. By contrast, the descriptive paradigm holds that translation activities are concerned not only with the linguistic transfer on the textual level but also take into account the context where a translation comes into being. Essentially, prescriptive studies believe in the absolutism of equivalence between the target text and the source text while the descriptive school argues that equivalence is relative and posteriori: the translation norms for a specific translation activity under a certain context cannot be summarized until after the activity is done. With the emergence of cultural turn in Translation Studies, descriptivism has been gaining popularity from culturalists, descriptivists and deconstructionists, whose principal doubt cast to the prescriptive paradigm is why the same source text can have more than one yet correct translated text if equivalence were absolute and if the source text were supreme.

2. The Empiricist Descriptive Translation Studies

Toury, founder of the descriptive translation studies paradigm, argues that the paradigm has been created “to mitigate the subjectivity in translation research” [1], with which certain scholars could freely comment on an ad-hoc translation and the same translation might invite different appraisals from different researchers. He assailed this haphazardness for impairing the discreetness of Translation Studies as an emerging discipline. Therefore, he emphasizes introducing empiricism to translation studies from natural sciences. In his opinion, a descriptive and explanatory study of a certain amount of translated texts could generate translation norms which could be further testified with more similar cases, thereby respecting the process of natural sciences: observation, experiment, proposing hypotheses, testifying them and summarizing theories.

Undoubtedly, it is admirable to generate and verify translation norms through detailed analysis of cases in the specific context in line with the spirit of empiricism. Since its inception in the 1990s, descriptive translation paradigm has constantly been favored by translation scholars both in China and the rest of the world. Through a massive description of translation cases, researchers can truly speak with facts, restoring the genuine contexts under which translation activities take place. Additionally, they can explore why certain strategies are used by the translator under a specific

context. Compared with the idiosyncrasy and subjectivity of the prescriptive approach, descriptive case studies have instilled Translation Studies with the truth-seeking spirit of science.

Particularly during the recent decade, scholars both home and abroad have done much significant research following the positivism of the descriptive paradigm. It is found that translation concerns existing institutions, history, politics, power and ideology besides the assumed simplicity of textual conversion. Just as the right and wrong of a historic figure should be judged under his or her specific historic context, translation criticism is also supposed to be given under a specific target cultural context, which is of paramount importance in studies on ideology and translation.

Lefevere, a prestigious scholar on ideology in comparative literature and translation, once surveyed descriptively the foreign literary works translated and published in Germany not long after the end of the World War II, including *Annie's Diary*, whose author a Jewish girl Annie hid in a secret room with her family for two years to avoid Nazi persecution. In her diary, the girl recorded her daily life and innermost world in great detail, cursing Nazi atrocities against the Jewish people. The diary eventually came to daylight though Annie failed to survive her ill fate. However, Germany in the 1950s tried desperately to get rid of the Nazi shadow, rebuilding its international image. Instigated by this ideology, the then translation of the book enormously dimmed or even deleted Annie's assault against Nazi, re-writing the original diary fundamentally. From Lefevere's case study, it is clear that the linguistic meaning of a text is not ultimate and that ideology and the other social constraints are having a tremendous impact on translation activities.

3. Hermeneutics: The Philosophical Turn in Translation Studies

In 1813, German language philosopher Schleiermacher proposed one of the most seminal theories in Translation Studies: "translation is never easy and a translator has only two options: either pushing the reader to the writer or pushing the writer to the reader" [2]. Until now, this theory remains difficult to be verified but it tells us that given the cultural gaps existing during the intercultural and interlingual communication, the translator can either cater to the cultural forms of the source text, enabling the reader to appreciate them, or cater to the reader's ease of understanding, replacing the source cultural forms with the equivalents in the target culture.

Taking a well-known quote of Mencius, a great sage in ancient China, as an example, let's see how "it is the same river that carries and capsizes the boat" (the literal meaning) can be properly translated. According to Schleiermacher's theory, a translator has two options. Option one is to convey the source cultural forms to the target reader, namely pushing the reader to the writer. In this case, the quote can be translated in the same fashion as its literal meaning. Likewise, we can push the writer to the reader, taking into account the reader's feeling and ease of understanding. In this case, the target cultural forms that sound familiar to the reader, such as "It is the same knife that cuts bread and finger." can be used to replace the source cultural forms.

Such descriptions of the rules of things using images, metaphors and other abstract thinking are in nature hermeneutics, commonly found across all fields of humanities. Originating from Germany, hermeneutics is essentially a science about understanding. It is of vital importance to translation studies since translation is per se an activity of understanding and interpreting. And in the English language, interpreting can both mean oral translation and understanding, evidencing their strong connections.

There have been so far several "turns" in Translation Studies: linguistic turn, cultural turn, functionalist turn, system theory turn, sociological turn, ecological turn, philosophical turn and so on, amid which, the angle of language philosophy and humanistic hermeneutics has been tremendously popular with Chinese and Western scholars, because "our daily communication is in effect a kind of translation" [3], as posited by Steiner. For example, you are trying to understand and interpret the meaning of this paper as a reader and understanding per se is a translation. Consequently, the value of a translated text is extended through hermeneutics, just as the melody of a nostalgic song can be blended into feelings, igniting fantasies. With a humanistic nature, Translation Studies entails hermeneutics.

However, looking through humanities, from the hermeneutic interpretation of Othello's multiple personalities to the aesthetic image of Van Gogh's Sunflower, from the melancholy connotation of Chopin's lyrics to feminism in the Bible, and from the historical progress of the British Enclosure Movement to the life philosophy embodied in Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching, we can find almost all of the fields entail the interpretation of the researchers based on specific theoretical frameworks and their experience. The findings of such studies can be "enriched and improved through constant practice and academic exchanges with colleagues" [4]. Therefore, humanities researchers do not intentionally pursue clear, precise, repeatable and transferable findings regarding research objects closely related to meaning, culture, context and the deep thinking of human beings. On the contrary, they use theories to analyze their research objects, put forward the general law and development trend reflected by the specific objects within a specific research scope, and attract more researchers and practitioners to enrich and improve the existing results through their own experience, so as to deepen people's understanding of a research object in the constant circle of from interpretation to understanding and further to interpretation.

4. Integrating Empiricism with Hermeneutics in Descriptive Translation Studies

It is argued in this paper that the understanding and interpretation of meaning be the essence of humanities and that of Translation Studies despite Toury's insistence on taking empiricism as the core of the descriptive translation research paradigm. Therefore, descriptive translation studies should integrate hermeneutics with positivism. From the process of naming the discipline of Translation Studies, we can also find the necessity of combination.

Translation Studies as an academic discipline was established with Holmes' seminal paper Name and Nature of Translation Studies in 1972 as a symbol. However, long before that, scholars in the realm had been giving different names such as Science of Translation and Translatology, from which it is clear that translation used to be deemed as a science or technology. In that case, any involvement of researchers' subjective values is prohibited while a cause-and-effect interpretation in the ideal fashion is pursued, with a focus on if the findings are accurate and repeatable. But the hard fact is that "not only humanities but also sciences, be they natural or social, cannot exclude subjectivity from their research as long as they have involved human thoughts and willingness" [5], as argued by Tymoczko. As aforementioned, it would be difficult to explain why a same source text can have many "right" translations if the equivalence of translation were so accurate and if norms of translation were changeless.

The reason is simple: translation, integrating science with art, is a cross-cultural activity that cannot be simply imitated. It cannot be copied because the choice of translation strategies will be affected by translators' subjectivity. Besides, with numerous linguistic choices, we may express the same message with different ways. Translation is scientific, for we can explore the specific norms for a certain translation activity through discreet descriptive case studies. Conversely, translation is also artistic, for the entire process is permeated with the translator's experience, style and inspiration, just as that for painting, composing poems and music.

The integrity of science and art embodied by translation activities determines that translation studies entail both positivism and hermeneutics. Despite different forms in different descriptive case studies, hermeneutics in translation studies generally includes collecting, sorting out, defining and analyzing data. For example, in order to explore the translation of Chinese cultural terms in *The Dream of Red Mansions*, we should firstly determine which kind of data to choose, Yang Xianyi's or Hawkes's (both are translators for the novel with their respective translations), or both? The next step is to define the cultural terms in the case study before sorting them out and coding them in the corpus. The last step is to plan how to carry out qualitative and quantitative analysis. Obviously, personal interpretation is indispensable to such research. However, positivism is necessary to prevent such interpretation from becoming excessively subjective. The research methods are scientific if the translation norms generated from the case study can be verified.

In conclusion, it is principally argued in this paper that hermeneutics be integrated with empiricism in Translation Studies, thereby reflecting the scientific and artistic nature of the discipline. Hermeneutics differs from empiricism in that it prioritizes reasoning and theories while the latter focuses on data and facts. Translation Studies attaches equal importance to theoretical and applied research, with most of its seminal theories generated and continually optimized through professional translation activities. All in all, it is crucial to respect both scientific rules and humanistic hermeneutics when exploring translation activities, integrating hermeneutics with positivism.

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