3

Descriptive translation studies and polysystem theory

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Introduction

This chapter offers a selective view of main theoretical and methodological coordinates and issues associated with descriptive translation studies (DTS) and polysystem theory (PT). It addresses their main tenets, presents a brief overview of their key authors and texts, and zooms in on central concepts, such as assumed translation, equivalence, untranslatability, translation norms and laws; (poly)systems, centre and periphery, repertoire, and canonization. This conceptual network provides the necessary framework for a selective presentation of ontological and epistemological considerations and methodological choices as well as of critical topics and issues regarding DTS and PT.

Literature overview: Polysystem theory and descriptive translation studies

In the 1980s and 1990s DTS joined efforts with PT, and these two decades are ‘the central years of translation studies in which its most important ideas were elaborated and tested: the period in which translation studies was wedded, for better or worse, to polysystem theory’ (Gentzler 2001: 105). DTS was posited as a branch of pure translation studies (together with translation theory) by James S. Holmes (1924–1986) in ‘The Name and Nature of Translation Studies’ (2000), and it was developed mainly by Gideon Toury (1942–2016) in his Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond (2012/1995). This happened in very close cooperation with Itamar Even-Zohar (1939–), who had developed PT since the early 1970s, in several texts later published in revised version as Poetics Today: Polysystem Studies (Even-Zohar 1990). Let us focus on these authors and works.

Itamar Even-Zohar’s polysystem studies

(Poly)systems

The notion of (poly)systems was introduced by Even-Zohar in a research project aimed at tackling the spatial and chronological versatility and heterogeneity of the history of
translation of literature into Hebrew (Ben-Ari 2013: 144). Initially formulated to study language, literature, and translation, and later transformed into a theory of culture, PT adopts a broad definition of these phenomena which always encompasses their sociocultural context. Dynamic functionalism, borrowed from the Russian formalists, leads the gaze of the researcher of literature beyond a mere consideration of text and authors towards ‘larger complexes’ (Even-Zohar 1990: 2), whose study requires an interdisciplinary approach.

Even-Zohar rejects atomistic considerations of literature or translation as disparate autonomous phenomena and instead intends to address their complex correlation with other sociocultural factors (economics, ideology, politics, etc.) within a (poly)system, defined as dynamic, open, complex and heterogeneous. It is dynamic because it is in constant change; open because it allows new elements to enter as well as to leave the system, either from other polysystems or by means of a change of position within the same polysystem; complex because of the multiplicity of systems it encompasses and also of its complex network of interdependent and competing phenomena; and heterogeneous because it integrates canonized and non-canonical literature and literary and non-literary systems of different natures. As a polysystem, or a system of interdependent systems, its encompassing nature allows for the ‘historicization’ of specific phenomena such as literary or translated texts (Gentzler 2001: 108).

Previously, the role of translation within a literary system had been mostly ignored by literary studies because translation, along with other phenomena, was considered extra-systemic. PT redefined the study of a literary system as encompassing phenomena previously considered to be extra-systemic and included as objects of research both canonized and non-canonical literature such as popular fiction and children literature, as well as the sociocultural, historical, and economic context. It suggested that the diverse systems are interconnected and mutually influence one another. Semiotic phenomena, such as language, culture, society, and literature, should therefore be studied and understood as complex systems. The functional analysis of such networks goes beyond the production of a mere taxonomy as it aims to understand and describe the complex relations between phenomena and systems, and to formulate hypotheses about the way a polysystem works.

For the study of literature, understood as much more than authors and texts, a multiplicity of contextual features therefore becomes relevant. Such features include, for instance, where a book launch occurs, for example, whether on the premises of a more or less prestigious bookshop, or at a literary association, a high school, or the rectory building of a top ranking university, the status of the presenter within a community, the status of the publisher, the profile of the series or collection (if any), the target readership, the type of book binding, paper, and typesetting, the number of volumes printed, the price for each volume, where the volumes are sold (bookshops, newsstands, supermarkets), the media coverage devoted to the book launch, the national and international context, the critical echoes expressed in published reviews, and the place the volume occupies in national and international book fairs, to name but a few. A study cannot consider only authors, texts, and repertoires. The phenomena listed above were previously considered extra-systemic. From the point of view of PT, however, they become potentially relevant for the study of literature, which of course requires an interdisciplinary approach.

The dynamics of literature, translation, language, and culture can only be understood if considered at the level of the polysystem. This, in turn, points towards a subsequent evolution of Even-Zohar’s work from the study of literature to the more encompassing study
of culture (in its complexity and heterogeneity) and from the study of translation to the
study of cultural interference and intercultural relations (Ben-Ari 2013: 147). Interference
is a central concept defined as a relation between cultures involving direct or indirect
loans from another (Even-Zohar 1990: 54). Translation is a source of indirect, because
mediated, interference from other cultures.

**Centres and peripheries**
Systems are not equal. The polysystem integrates systems organized into different com-
peting strata, and it is characterized by several centrifugal and centripetal movements
among prestigious centres and marginalized peripheries. It is the integration into the
polysystem of heterogeneous phenomena that allows for the consideration of the tensions
between strata, the interrelation between centre and periphery, the relative value of phe-
nomena, and the change originated by the victory of one stratum over others (Even-Zohar
1990: 14). PT zooms in on the study of interrelations and tensions between heterogenous
strata and systems, as well as on the motivations for inter- and intra-systemic transfer
and how they come about. It is the dynamic tension between competing canonized and
non-canonized strata that ensures the balance of the system, enables change, and avoids
stagnation.

**System, repertoire, text**
In this theoretical framework, a *system* is defined as ‘the network of relations that can be
hypothesized for a certain set of assumed observables (“occurrences”/ “phenomena”)’
(Even-Zohar 1990: 27); it is also on the basis of the nature of the (hypothetical) sys-
temic relations between phenomena that a system is classified, for example, as literary.
A system can be either central or peripheral. Both *repertoire* and *text* are defined as
follows: ‘Repertoire is conceived here as the aggregate of laws and elements (either single,
bound or total models) that govern the production of texts’ (Even-Zohar 1990: 17). Repertoires and texts can be either canonized or non-canonized.

**Canonized texts and models**
As stated by Even-Zohar,

> by ‘canonized’ one means those literary norms and works (i.e., both models and
texts) which are accepted by the dominant circles within a culture and whose con-
spicuous products are preserved by the community to become part of its historical
heritage.

*Even-Zohar 1990: 15*

This status is attributed by a socioculturally dominant group with power and prestige
to intervene within a community. To bring this to the spotlight of descriptive research,
Even-Zohar uses the terms ‘canonized’ and ‘non-canonized’ instead of ‘canonical’ and
‘non-canonical’ to avoid any association of this status to an intrinsic feature of the model
or work, or to any sort of inherent artistic value.

**Primary vs. secondary system and repertoire**
A system and repertoire integrating new elements and thereby generating innovation and
discontinuity with respect to previous models are classified as primary. On the contrary,
a secondary repertoire or system is conservative, and generates predictable texts. The
canonization of a primary or secondary repertoire depends on the preference of the dominant group for innovation or the perpetuation of existing models, respectively.

**System, polysystem, mega-polysystem**

Intra- and inter-systemic relations are the focus for the researcher and Even-Zohar defines them as follows:

any semiotic (poly)system (such as language or literature) is just a component of a larger (poly)system – that of ‘culture,’ to which it is subjugated and with which it is isomorphic – and therefore correlated with this greater whole and its other components.

*Even-Zohar 1990: 22*

Correlating systems (literature, language, society, economy, politics, ideology, and so on) requires the formulation of sophisticated hypotheses to account for the complex network of direct and indirect relations of interference. The same type of hypothesis applies to the inter-systemic relation, that is, to the relations between systems controlled by different communities, which may integrate a ‘mega-polysystem’.

**A ‘scientific’ approach**

Even-Zohar stresses the need for descriptive and explanatory research on literature or translation, as opposed to criticism or applied research aimed at solving problems and marked by an intention to change reality. On the contrary, the aim of PT is to describe and explain literature or translation, to identify regularities and patterns, and to understand potential motivations, so as to extract and formulate, as hypothetical laws, the principles underlying the way literature or translation functions. This is how the ‘scientific’ approach of dynamic functionalism becomes attractive, in terms of main goals, intentions, and methodological programme. This is also how this approach enabled PT and translation studies to secure a position in academia at a time when non-prescriptive approaches were called for.

The ontological status of the laws Even-Zohar wishes to study and formulate needs stressing: ‘they cannot be taken as eternal truths […] but rather as temporary hypotheses, to be discarded or modified whenever it becomes necessary to do so’ (Even-Zohar 1990: 4). PT is the interactive network of such hypothetical laws. The main hypotheses to describe and explain translated literature are: (i) translated literature is a system of the target culture; (ii) translated literature tends to occupy a peripheral position within the target culture; and (iii) the central or peripheral position of translated literature within the target culture influences its functioning: when central it tends to be innovative and source-oriented (primary and adequate); when peripheral it tends to be conservative and target-oriented (secondary and non-adequate).

The predominant invisibility of translation in literary history works suggests a secondary and peripheral status of translated literature, using secondary models and tending to be target-oriented by replicating pre-existing models. Still, Even-Zohar suggests it can also function otherwise: ‘[w]hether translated literature becomes central or peripheral, and whether this position is connected with innovatory (“primary”) or conservatory (“secondary”) repertoires, depends on the specific constellation of the polysystem under study’ (Even-Zohar 1990: 46). In a young literary system, or in a peripheral or weak system, or in systems undergoing a crisis or a turning point, translated literature may occupy the centre of the system, generating innovation by means of source-oriented translations.
Gideon Toury’s Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond

The main objectives and goals of DTS are presented by Gideon Toury mainly in the volume *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*, first published in 1995 and thoroughly revised in 2012, starting with the dramatic redefinition of the concept of translation as a fact of the target culture.

**Assumed translation**

Defining translation is difficult as it is

a kind of object that is characterized by its inherent variability:

- difference across cultures,
- variation within a culture, and
- changes over time.

_Toury 2012/1995: 26_

As a consequence, *translation as product* can only be (in)defined:

[Every product] is an actual translation only inasmuch as it meets the requirements set to texts of the ‘translation’ type in and by the recipient system […]. From the viewpoint of the target system […] the term translation applies to any target text that is regarded as a translation from the intrinsic considerations of that system.

_Toury 1986: 1119_

This redefinition of translation as assumed translation dramatically discards both the source text and any a priori notion of equivalence as definitive yardsticks for identifying a translation. Instead, it focuses on the target context to define translation as any text recognized by the target system as having that status and function. This is a Copernican revolution for the concept of translation. The object for translation research is also thereby widened to encompass pseudotranslations, that is texts thought to be translations but that are actually originals.

**Translating**

As a process, translation is also redefined more broadly as a transfer of units (signs, messages, rules, norms, models) endowed with communicative, social, and cultural value, across several semiotic borders. Far from operating in a cultural vacuum, translation occurs in specific situational and cultural contexts, wherein the units used for communication have a function, understood as their communicative value in social and cultural terms (Toury 2012/1995: 6). Instead of a mere interlingual transfer of meaning, translating is redefined in a much more encompassing way as intercultural communication anchored in a historical context.

As a process, translating involves generating invariance but also variance. Its stages are tentatively postulated to encompass the analysis of the source text (or entity) into features, a selection of relevant features to be retained, the transfer of the selected features across semiotic borders, and a recomposing of the target text (or entity), which involves assigning the same or a different level of relevance to each transferred feature (Toury 1986: 1114). Consequently, translation involves the recreation of sameness (or invariance),
but it also involves (and perhaps even mostly involves) difference and transformation (e.g., obligatory and optional shifts and modulations, omissions, and additions).

The choice for a certain type of relation between the source and target text is, furthermore, variable and unstable, for it not only depends on the target system but also on the prospective position and function a translation is expected to hold within that target system. Semiotically, this position influences the identification of relevant features to be transferred and of less relevant or irrelevant features to be transformed or omitted in the process. Such a profound redefinition of translation and translating requires a revisiting of the concepts of equivalence and untranslatability.

**Equivalence and untranslatability**

As soon as translation is acknowledged to involve sameness but also difference and transformation, untranslatability ceases to exist and the notion of ‘fidelity’ to the source text loses its meaning. If translational equivalence is no longer defined as identity, if the source text is no longer the one and only absolute reference for translation, then it no longer makes sense to aprioristically demand that translation should be equal to the source text, and it makes even less sense to impose a moral judgement of ‘(in)fidelity’ on the difference generated by translation.

Equivalence is redefined as ‘any relation which is found to have characterized translation under a specified set of circumstances’ (Toury 2012/1995: 85). The specific type of equivalence becomes empirically verifiable by means of a comparative analysis of source and target texts. It is only by describing what translation is, as a fact of the target culture, that it becomes possible to identify the type of equivalence adopted. It can be dynamic or pragmatic, that is, aiming to create an effect for the target text which is similar to its source; denotative or referential, that is, attempting to maintain the referent; connotative, that is, aiming for a similar association or connotation; formal (on several linguistic levels); textual; lexical; text-normative, that is, resorting to uses appropriate to similar contexts; or functional, that is, based on a hierarchy of transfer priorities established by a given communicative and cultural context. In either case, the preference for a given type of equivalence is constrained by the target context (Kenny 2008). Instead of being defined a priori as a condition for the identification of translated texts, equivalence results from the descriptive study of assumed translations.

**Translation norms**

As a fact of the target culture, translation is influenced by it. The contextual influence of the target context upon translation is understood, described, and explained by means of the concept of translation norms, defined as ‘the “translation” of the general “idea,” or “value” of translation (which also always involves a certain rate of both adequacy and acceptability), shared by the community in question, into specific performance instructions appropriate for and specific to specific situations’ (Toury 1986: 1123). Norms of translational equivalence (as they were also referred to) correspond to a model of good practice in translation which is tacitly and intersubjectively accepted by a community. They influence the socially motivated practice of translators and the expectations of the community regarding translation. As models of socially appropriate behaviour, norms are prescriptive and prescriptive, in that they prescribe certain behaviour as acceptable and even desirable and prohibit other behaviour as unacceptable and better avoided. They are also variable and unstable, because they vary from community to community and they also change over time.
Regularities motivated by norms are directly observable; norms, as a second order object, are not. Their study must resort to textual and extratextual sources, including translated texts, inventories of translations, and semi-theoretical or critical statements by translators, editors, publishers, among others. It is possible to hypothetically formulate translation norms in force in a given context by means of the descriptive study of translation. The prescriptive and proscriptive nature of norms must not be confused with research about norms. Within this paradigm, research on norms is empirical, descriptive, and explanatory, focused on what translation actually is and does, and on explaining why.

Toury describes three types of norms: initial, preliminary, and operational norms. The initial norms of adequacy or acceptability involve a basic choice between orienting a translation towards the source text, language, and culture to produce an adequate or source-oriented translation; and orienting a translation towards the norms of the target culture to produce an acceptable or target-oriented translation (Toury 2012/1995: 79–80). Preliminary norms are related to translation policies, motivating the choice of source languages, authors, literary modes and genres, or even specific texts for translation, and they are also related to varying degrees of tolerance towards indirect translation (defined as a translation of a translation). Operational norms regard decisions made during the translation process and include matricial norms (motivating the choice between full-text or abridged translation, the textual segmentation and distribution of textual segments within a translated text) and textual-linguistic norms (influencing the formulation of the translated text).

Norms apply whenever the translator is faced with a non-random decision between alternatives. Translation norms motivate translation decisions and influence translation regularities that are specific to a sociocultural context. Translation norms are in force within a specific culture and in a specific moment in time. Beyond the study of such culture-specific norms lies the formulation of translation laws regulating translation in general.

Translation laws
Based on the identification of general patterns shared by different languages, cultures, communities, groups, timeframes, and text types, it becomes possible to formulate probabilistic translation laws defined as ‘a series of coherent laws which would state the inherent relations between all the variables that will have been found relevant for translation’ (Toury 2012/1995: 10). Universal translation laws, even if formulated based on the identification of conditions and translational behaviour, are transversal to several cultures, geographies, and historical moments.

Toury suggests two hypothetical and probabilistic laws of translational behaviour. The first is the law of growing standardization stating that translated texts tend to be more conventional than source texts. The second is the law of interference stating that ‘in translation, phenomena pertaining to the make-up of the source text tend to force themselves on the translators and be transferred to the target text’ (Toury 2012/1995: 310), either by altering the frequency of elements already existing in the target language or by importing elements or patterns which do not exist in the target language (positive or negative transfer).

Researching translation regularities, norms, and laws
It becomes particularly interesting to produce descriptive studies that aim to research to what extent textual or behavioural regularities may be (i) dependent from factors which are not specific to a given culture (i.e., resulting from translation laws), or (ii) dependent from a given sociocultural context (i.e., resulting from translation norms). In order to achieve this, it becomes particularly important to identify possibilities of paving the
Designing a research project within DTS and PT

Ontological considerations

Defining the object of study, that is, translation, mainly as a contextually motivated social activity is not theoretically neutral. Defining as a goal for research to describe, understand, explain, and predict translation as a social activity is not ontologically or epistemologically neutral either. Irrespective of the specific type of object envisaged by each study, methodological options should conform to ontological and epistemological positions that should be considered from the moment a research project is designed:

The researcher needs to understand that information and research do not exist in a vacuum but are part of a bigger whole that includes how we think about ourselves and our social world, our ideas and theories as well as more immediately practical issues like designing a questionnaire or analysing statistics.

Matthews and Ross 2010: 1

At least three main issues require ponderation: (i) the researcher is part of the social world they wish to describe, understand, explain, and predict; (ii) language plays a central role in the social world; and (iii) the researcher can only obtain and convey knowledge about the social world through language.

For the purpose of addressing these issues, Matthews and Ross (2010: 24–6) offer a very clear definition of three ontological positions or ways of seeing the social world, which they identify as objectivism, constructivism, and realism. According to objectivism, the social world is made of social phenomena that are autonomous from the researchers who observe their object objectively. Constructivism, in turn, purports that social phenomena are ideas constructed by social agents (one of which is the researcher) who attribute meaning to social phenomena. Realism takes an intermediate road in that it accepts both ‘that the social world has a reality that is separate from the social actors involved in it and that this can be known through the senses’ but also that a dimension of reality cannot be directly observed by the senses. This dimension corresponds to our knowledge about the social world as participants in it. It includes mechanisms that affect the observable social reality, and these mechanisms, though not observable, have an impact upon observable social behaviour (Matthews and Ross 2010: 26).

Epistemological considerations

These three ontological positions are related to the epistemological positions of positivism, interpretivism, and realism, defined as ways of positing how knowledge about the social world can be obtained. According to positivism, social phenomena can be
objectively studied, data on the social world can be collected and measured, and the researcher remains independent. It is often connected to quantitative analysis. According to interpretivism, the meaning of social phenomena is subjectively constructed and interpreted in a contextually motivated way by the researcher, and the social world is addressed from the point of view of the actors and their subjective interpretation. It is often related to qualitative analysis. Realism offers a middle ground:

As an epistemological approach it claims that certain social phenomena exist outside the human mind and can be objectively investigated using approaches similar to those in the natural sciences. In this respect, realism agrees with positivism. However, it also recognizes the existence of invisible but powerful structures and mechanisms that cannot be directly observable but whose effects are apparent, and these effects can provide evidence of the underlying structures and mechanisms. [...] Realist approaches to research might typically adopt both quantitative and qualitative tools and methods.

Saldanha and O’Brien aptly debunk any easy relation between positivism and empiricism, stating that

[p]ositivism is often linked with quantitative approaches to research and to empiricism, that is, the collection of observable evidence. However, in postpositivistic research, empiricism and objectivism are treated as distinct positions; just because research is ‘empirical’ in nature does not mean that it is ‘objective’.

A reflection on the main ontological and epistemological positions adopted by many researchers anchoring their research within DTS and PT would probably place them among postpositivists or realists. They resort to both quantitative and qualitative research methods (for data collection and analysis) and they produce empirical knowledge based on research evidence. They define their object, translation, as a social activity, so they collect and analyse data to study the agents, the social, cultural, historical, economic, and political context, and translation as a (cognitive and sociological) process and as a product with sociocultural function and value. Their empirical research aims to describe, understand, explain, and predict. They relate dependent and independent variables in data analysis so as to identify relations between them and to formulate hypothetical general principles regarding the structures and mechanisms underlying translation as a contextually motivated social activity. They accordingly identify second order objects (which are not directly observable), such as translation norms and laws, whose formulation is the epitome of their evidence-based research. For that purpose, they identify relevant and pertinent data sources, as well as methods for quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis to answer research questions, test hypotheses, and develop knowledge-based theories (Matthews and Ross 2010: 22). These ontological and epistemological positions strongly influence the design of a research project.

Methodological choices

Based on Lambert and van Gorp (1985), Chesterman (2000 and 2001), Williams and Chesterman (2002), Matthews and Ross (2010), and Saldanha and O’Brien (2013), the
main methodological coordinates and choices for designing research projects within DTS and PT include deciding on the definition of an object; potentially relevant source- and target-system factors and relations between them; and research questions; as well as considering a series of relevant alternatives (such as fundamental vs. applied; empirical vs. conceptual; inductive, deductive, and abductive research), along with specific goals, variables, relations between variables, categories, and classifications as features of empirical research.

**Objects**
Methodological choices depend on the specific focus on different objects of study: (i) the product of translation: the translated text; (ii) the cognitive process of translation; (iii) the participants or translation agents, such as translators, revisors, project managers, clients, and so on; and (iv) the context of translation, including both the function of translation in context and the sociological process of translation. Each one of these objects of study requires several methodological options, involving methods to collect quantitative and qualitative data and methods for the analysis of such data, as well as specific tools for their collection and analysis.

**Factors**
Lambert and van Gorp (1985) offer a still operative and productive functional and semiotic approach for the study of translation that goes well beyond a mere comparative analysis of one source and target text. They innovatively suggest, for example, comparing several target texts for a single source text (the analysis of which can even prove unnecessary), or several target texts with homologous non-translated texts. To perform the extensive analysis suggested by Lambert and van Gorp (1985), a list of potentially relevant factors regarding the source and target systems is presented. Factors on the source system include the source text (a literary text or any other text type), its author, and its readership, as well as information on other texts, other authors, and other readerships; factors on the target system include information on the target text, its author (i.e., the translator), and its readership, as well as further information on other translated and non-translated texts, their authors/translators and readerships. The relation between the source and target texts is expected to result from the priorities of the translator under the influence of translation norms in force in the target context.

**Relations**
According to Lambert and van Gorp (1985), the potentially most promising relations for the study of translation are: (i) between source and target texts; (ii) between source text author and target text author/translator; (iii) between the readership of both source and target text; (iv) between possible authorial intentions in the source and target systems; (v) between pragmatic and reception issues in both systems; (vi) between the status of the source text author and that of other source text authors in the source system; (vii) between the status of both source and target texts regarding other texts in both systems; (viii) between the status of the source and target text readings within both systems; (ix) between the target system and the literary system (i.e., the translations that are part of a given literature); and (x) between source and target (literary) systems. It is up to the researcher to identify which relations may be more pertinent for the study to carry out. Priorities must be established as it is not possible to offer a thorough analysis of each one of the above relations.
Research questions
Within DTS and PT, several types of research questions are addressed. Research questions may be explorative (aimed at identifying existing knowledge on a phenomenon), descriptive (collecting data so as to describe a phenomenon), explanatory (seeking to identify motivations and consequences, thereby identifying connections between variables), and also evaluative (seeking to understand the value and function of translation within a given context). As stated above, DTS and PT focus on these four types of research questions.

DTS as an empirical human science
Chesterman (2000) identifies three main visions of translation studies, and each one corresponds to a different idea of disciplinary progress. These three alternatives are very relevant to reflect upon the nature of any specific study. The first is a vision of translation studies as an applied science aimed at solving practical problems and having a specific impact upon society. The second envisages translation studies as a hermeneutic discipline (similar to literary theory), aimed at solving internal problems that are relevant for the discipline but also aimed at understanding the relation between translation and culture, and interpreting translations as forms of power manipulation by translators, clients, or patrons. The third vision sees translation studies as an empirical human science (similar to sociology or psychology), aimed at researching human behaviour, with the goal of describing, explaining, and predicting. This third vision corresponds mostly to the approach of DTS and PT and as such involves methodological choices specific to empirical research.

Fundamental vs. applied research
DTS and PT focus mainly on fundamental research, as both aim to acquire new knowledge instead of being focused on solving practical problems, as in applied research. A research project can be either retrospective, considering pre-existing phenomena, or it can be experimental, that is, based on methods that generate the data to be analysed (experiments within controlled environments, questionnaires, interviews). Studies can be either hypothesis-oriented, aimed at testing hypotheses, or exploratory, aimed at identifying main issues and resulting in the extraction of hypothetical statements, such as norms and laws.

Empirical vs. conceptual research
As empirical descriptive research focusing on ‘what it [translation] DOES involve, under a particular set of circumstances, along with the reasons for that involvement’ (Toury 2012/1995: 9), both DTS and PT, nevertheless, establish a very close connection with conceptual research. On one hand, empirical research is not theoretically neutral; it is based on a conceptual framework used to describe, understand, explain, and predict the object of study. On the other hand, the actual profile of the data analysed may ultimately also feed into conceptual research, by means of adapting and refining the conceptual framework. Toury suggests a recursive pattern relating introspective conceptual research and empirical descriptive-explanatory research in translation studies, whereby a theory is refined by studies of actual behaviour and will, in turn, inform more sophisticated studies of translation behaviour (Toury 2012/1995: 10).

Inductive, deductive, abductive research
As for the type of research, researchers working within the framework of DTS and PT develop hypothetical formulations (underlying translation norms, laws) based on the data...
collected, that is, they carry out *inductive research*. They also test pre-existing theories and hypotheses by collecting and analysing data on translation as process, product, and function, thereby performing *deductive research*. *Abductive research* is also performed as some studies identify the most convincing hypotheses in order to carry out further research on them.

**Goals of empirical research**

To describe, generalize, understand, explain, and predict the phenomenon of translation, that is, to perform empirical research on translation, Chesterman (2001) presents a set of main coordinates. The *main goals of empirical research* involve identifying new data (on a new corpus or resulting from a new case study), testing and reformulating pre-existing hypotheses, formulating and justifying new hypotheses, or suggesting new relations between hypotheses (i.e., proposing a new theory).

**Variables and relations between variables**

An empirical study of translation aims to relate translation with other factors and phenomena, that is, to analyse *relations between variables*, such as the linguistic profile of translations and features of the translation context. Variables may be related by chance, sequence, correlation, or cause. It is important to distinguish between dependent variables, which are expected to be affected by other variables, and independent variables, which are taken as a starting point for the study and influence dependent variables. A study may, for instance, take the translated text as independent variable, which means the researcher aims to study the effects of the translation upon its context (the dependent variable). A study may aim to identify, describe, and explain how the translation of a specific foreign literary author or text may have resulted in changes to the textual competence and preferences of readers or in the production of non-translated texts following the poetics and model imported via translation. Or, a study may take contextual factors as independent variables to study their effects upon the textual-linguistic profile of the translated text (dependent variable). For instance, a study may aim to identify how a change in the historical, ideological, and political context may influence the translation of forms of address and power relations between characters in fiction and film translated within a given time frame.

As a possible illustration of the above, let us consider Lambert and van Gorp’s (1985) *practical model for text analysis* that structures data into four main groups: (i) preliminary data include paratextual information, allowing for the formulation of hypotheses about textual techniques, as well as the macro- and micro-textual profile of the translated text; (ii) macro-textual data encompass the division of the text into titles, chapters, acts, and scenes and information on narrative and poetic structure, which allow for the formulation of hypotheses regarding the micro-textual level; (iii) micro-textual data include patterns of lexical selection, syntactical and literary structures, forms of discourse representation, point of view, modality, and so on; and, finally, the authors consider the category of (iv) contextual data. This model is particularly relevant for the replicability of descriptive-explanatory studies, for organizing findings into a historical study of translation and for contributing to translation theory.

**Categories and classifications**

Empirical research on translation means identifying differences and similarities. These two procedures must rely on the formulation of *relevant categories*, related and organized into a *classification system*, either binary or continuum, where categories may partly coincide,
or even involving several continua in a multidimensional classification. Such categories result from the nature of the object as well as from the theoretical framework selected for the study, and they must be justified and tested as interpretive hypotheses. For instance, to perform a quantitative study to identify the most frequent translation solutions for a given text type within a specific time frame, a classification of translation solutions is needed – identifying, defining, and organizing categories of translation solutions such as maintenance (1=1), addition (0=>1), omission (1=>0), and shift (1~1). To perform a descriptive study of translational solutions for a given problem and their motivations, an additional set of potentially relevant contextual parameters motivating translation decisions is also needed.

Critical issues and topics

The theoretical and methodological proposals generated by this alliance between PT and DTS, however, are far from consensual. On the contrary, they have been the object of criticism, both from within translation studies and from other disciplines. In some cases, however, this appears to be rooted in a misinterpretation arising from a less precise understanding of the main tenets of PT underlying DTS. This section addresses a selection of issues regarding theoretical and methodological criticism.

On ontological and epistemological positions

For the descriptive approach of both DTS and PT, no phenomenon can be excluded from the object of study as a result of a priori attitudes and evaluative judgements. Far from ignoring such a priori evaluative judgements and attitudes resulting from a complex network of power relations within a community, for PT and DTS they become a relevant part of the object of study. This is perhaps one of the most promising but also controversial proposals. Promising because it integrates into the object of study power relations underlying attitudes and evaluative judgements determining both the prestigious and canonized centre and the marginalized periphery drawn by the dominant group of a community. Controversial because, in doing so, PT and DTS implicitly appear to place both the researcher and the theory above and beyond such value judgements and attitudes, instead of explicitly defining the researcher as part of a community’s network of power relations and value judgements, with relevant epistemological consequences.

On the study of systems as deterministic

The notion of law applied to translation behaviour and regularities has been criticized for being deterministic. However, it needs stressing that both for PT and DTS laws are probabilistic because they integrate the notion of exception. The system DTS aims to describe is stochastic, not deterministic: it is neither entirely predictable nor entirely unpredictable, but it shows regularities that are influenced by constraints (Lefevere 1985: 225–6).

On the focus on collective schemes

Similarly, DTS has been criticized for stressing the nature of translation as a social practice rather than focusing on the creative action of the translator as agent. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the notion of translation norms does not exclude the possibility
of non-normative, innovative, and creative behaviour. In this context, the choice of ‘influences’ or ‘constraints’ to understand, describe, and explain translation behaviour or regularities is far from unintentional. Influenced by the constraints imposed by translation norms, it is up to the translator as agent to make the final decisions regarding the interpretation of the source text and the formulation of the target text, guided by their interpretation of its prospective function in the target system. The notion of habitus has been used in this regard to focus more on the role of translators as agents (Simeoni 1998) and on ‘translatorship’ as ‘an individuation of collective schemes’ (Meylaerts 2008: 100).

**On the status of norms and laws**

Within a community, norms function prescriptively as models for correct and appropriate behaviour; they regulate behaviour and expectations. However, from the point of view of the researcher, norms and laws are a descriptive category for the study of translation; they are in no way prescribed by the researcher. Additionally, borrowing from PT, DTS adopts the presupposition of laws as temporary hypotheses and purports to study both translation norms and laws as such. This ontological status of laws and norms is sometimes misunderstood because they are not considered temporary and hypothetical formulations, extracted based on the description of large translational corpora or on the analysis of extratextual sources and to be subject to further testing, but rather as definitive factual formulations.

**On research ethics**

Pondering and ensuring research ethics is mandatory for research on translation as social activity, involving various research foci, such as the social agents of translation, the social network where they work, power relations among participants (also considering the researcher), and their language use. Relevant motivations and results should be specifically addressed. Upstream, personal motivations for research should be addressed, identified, pondered, and presented, because the selection of a research topic, of the aims and goals for a specific research project, and even of the theoretical and methodological frameworks is influenced by the researcher’s values and ideological, ontological, and epistemological positions, as just stated. Downstream, the impact of research projects’ findings and results may also have ethical consequences that require reflection. Simple publication issues such as the choice for open access publication may have a considerable impact upon the availability of research findings for other researchers, for translation practice, and for translator training. Anonymizing informants and making it impossible to trace data back to informants is mandatory practice as failing to do so may have serious practical consequences. For instance, it may involve toxic working environments due to the publication of non-anonymized criticism, difficulty in getting translation jobs, or even loss of jobs due to the publication of non-anonymized evidence of flawed translation practices and products.

Criticisms sometimes addressed at research within DTS or PT are whether it is ethical to produce fundamental research with public funding instead of applied research aimed at solving specific problems; whether it is ethical to diagnose a status quo without taking an explicit critical and committed stand about it; and whether not taking a stand is, in the end, sanctioning the described status quo, for example, as regards describing censored or politically correct translation.
On research quality

For quantitative research on translation, issues of research quality involve reliability, generalizability, and validity (and validation). Reliability (also reproducibility or replicability) is defined as ‘the extent to which other researchers (or the researcher herself) could generate the same results, or come to the same conclusion, if investigating the same question, using the same data and methods at a different time’ (Saldanha and O’Brien 2013: 35). In social sciences, however, such demands need adapting and results are expected to be similar, though not the same, for research to be reliable. For research to be replicable, methods should be presented transparently for discussion and replication, and they should be dependable and convincingly demonstrated to be so, so that the findings and results may be considered credible. A study is generalizable if the results of a limited study can be extrapolated to apply to a larger population, which is usually based on solid sampling methods and an adequate size of the sample collected and analysed.

Validity of research may be said to depend on ‘the extent to which results match as closely as possible the real state of the world’. However, Saldanha and O’Brien question this formulation on the grounds that it assumes a positivistic research perspective (Saldanha and O’Brien 2013: 28) – as if ‘the real state of the world’ could be studied, even if the expression ‘as closely as possible’ may also be interpreted as distancing this from any positivistic research perspective. According to Saldanha and O’Brien, however, absolute validity cannot be claimed as one can only make ‘justifiable inferences’ based on the data collected and analysed. The authors suggest research should consider instead the validity measures of credibility and warrantability, as developed for qualitative research: ‘warrantability […] in terms of scientific criteria requires demonstrating that the analyses are sound, principled and well-grounded on evidence, and thus credible and convincing’ (Saldanha and O’Brien 2013: 29).

To conclude, according to DTS and PT, a phenomenon is never entirely autonomous but, on the contrary, depends on a complex network of interrelating heterogenous elements belonging to different (central and peripheral; primary and secondary) systems. As a consequence, to study translation means to encompass its cultural context, a context where translation has a relational value, status, and function. That context functions simultaneously upstream as source of influences for translation and downstream as target of influences introduced by translation. With both DTS and PT, the study of translation opens up to a sociological study of factors and contextual features both influencing and resulting from intercultural communication and moves away from prescriptive and evaluative approaches that tend to underestimate translation and its sociocultural role.

As stated by Edwin Gentzler, ‘the merging of the polysystem theory with translation studies [happened] to the point where, at least during the 1980s, the two were almost indistinguishable’ (Gentzler 2001: 107). Even-Zohar and Toury were the two main protagonists of this descriptive-explanatory and contextually informed approach to the study of translation, which marked mainly the 1980s and 1990s. It is hoped this selective and brief presentation of the main proposals by Even-Zohar and Toury may contribute to a more thorough understanding of this groundbreaking approach.
Further reading


Even-Zohar, Itamar (ed.) (1990) *Polysystem Studies*. Special Issue of *Poetics Today* 11(1). This issue publishes a revised version of the main tenets of polysystem theory. It presents an overview of the main theoretical framework, covering concepts such as polysystems, literary systems, interference, translation, and transfer, and also includes several case studies.

Hermans, Theo (1999) *Translation in Systems: Descriptive and System-Oriented Approaches Explained*. Manchester, St Jerome. This volume offers a very accessible, well-grounded, and convincing critical view on the origins, main ideas, and development of PT and DTS.

Toury, Gideon (2012) *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*, Revised Edition. Amsterdam, John Benjamins. This thoroughly revised version presents the main rationale, theoretical and methodological coordinates for DTS. It addresses the concepts of translation, translation problems, pseudotranslation, and translation norms and laws. Several case studies are presented as examples for researchers.

Williams, Jenny and Andrew Chesterman (2002) *The Map: A Beginner’s Guide to Doing Research in Translation Studies*. Manchester, St Jerome. This volume offers translation studies students a step-by-step overview of how to organize and present research in translation studies and more specifically within DTS. It considers main areas and kinds of research on translation and offers guidance on how to organize a research plan – considering the research question, main aims relevance, and overall rationale, as well as theoretical and methodological choices – as well as on writing a research report, presenting research orally, and assessing research.

References


