FINDING THE PROPER PLACES FOR PRESCRIPTIVENESS AND DESCRIPTIVENESS IN TRANSLATION

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1.   *The Nature of Translating*

This paper works from an understanding that translation is not a natural process. There is a will behind each production and an understanding as to what translations are and what translating involves. Translating is subject to personal opinions, to fashions, to social attitudes, to authorities on the subject and other influential forces. No text contains an inherent translation of itself. For this reason, to my mind there can be no *objective* translation *rules*. Normative translation rules are similar to the rules of a board game; somebody decides what they are to be, and if you find yourself playing that game you will have to obey those rules. The analogy for translation might be a *stylebook*. Other translation rules derive directly from rules of logic, common sense, composition, grammar, and any other factor which is related to the translating process, but which is also separately identifiable. This explains how somebody can translate without knowing theoretical *translation rules*. The fact that *stylebook* rules are frequently ill-defined or not defined at all helps towards explaining the need for a certain amount of intuition.

I feel the following considerations are important for Translation Theory:

a)   The *interdisciplinary* nature of translation studies demands interactivity with scientists and experts from various areas of knowledge, firstly, to identify and explain factors operative in the process, and, secondly, to account for translation as a product. This is not to say that translation studies are not viable for their own sake.

b)   While the description of translation production may be *objective*, translation strategies are *subjective* and often respond to arbitrary restrictions imposed on the process from a wider context than the translator and his/her text. Nevertheless, such strategies should always be *justified* by reference to clear criteria (regardless of the nature of the criteria).

c)   A general descriptive translation theory, or model, should provide the same framework for: the translator, the translator instructor, the translation critic.

Although it is contended that translation studies should be objective and empirical, the theory still needs to accept and explain the subjective nature of translation itself and the arbitrary criteria that so often impinge on it. Scientific approaches to translation (i.e. empirical observation of all the intervening Factors), while

necessary in developing models, help to reveal even more clearly the subjective, context-dependent, social, and communicative nature of its practice.

It is generally agreed that Translation Studies are of a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary nature. However, some aspects of these studies are unique to translating, and on these a theory or a model of translation needs to concentrate. Moreover, as an indirect consequence, the application of other scientific premises to translation studies and practice may create some resonance in the perception of the sciences involved. If a given science or discipline offers some interesting insight into the translating process this will be regarded as an intervening Factor in the process. But should such a Factor radically change our perception of the nature of translation then we will conclude that our approach to translation is either inaccurate or incomplete.

We maintain, therefore, that translation theory should be descriptive. It should account for variation and also locate (not set) the limits of adequacy and acceptability for different renderings. Any descriptive theory will co-exist alongside specific normative requirements imposed by context on a translator.

Translation theory will prove most useful in enhancing the translator's awareness of the factors involved in the translating process and of potentially useful translation strategies and techniques. This is based on the fundamental premise that all translations are improvable, and may be improved with the more refined application of better translation theories, but this cannot be effected through systematization or the *correct* application of translation techniques. The only way to improve target-text production is through refinement of perception and not through standardization and rationalization of techniques.

2.   The Implications of Translation Theory Becoming Purely Descriptive

Any translation theory should be able to explain why and how a translator can produce good translations without any prior theoretical knowledge, which is frequently the case. Taken a step further, that this is so says something about the nature of translating as well as providing further grounds for supporting a descriptive approach in translation theory. Unlike other theories from which related practices are derived and conditioned directly, translation theory is much closer to linguistic or literary theory in that the theory describes an already existing practice. From this we will maintain that translation theory should always be descriptive of a related practice, namely translation, which is influenced by exterior pressures of a prescriptive nature. In the final analysis, translation is what translators do, just as language is what the speakers do with their mother tongue (even more than what they perceive it to be) and not what some grammarians say it should be. So, the translation theorist, like the linguist, can only honestly aim to understand and describe what goes on when somebody is said to be translating. And the translation theorist and critic, like the literary theorist and critic, can also form an opinion as to what makes a translation good or bad or better than another, and justify that opinion.

Any new translation theory or model of the process will redefine translation, approach it from a different angle, introduce new concepts and parameters by which to analyse the subject. A new translation theory may aspire to be widely accepted,

frequently applied, and introduced as a valid model to be taught in Translators' Training Schools or as a guideline in translation criticism. With all this a translation theory or model can only act as a more powerful lens for improved, more objective observation of phenomena, a more precise tool for evaluation. A translation model is needed in order to write a computer program for Machine Translation, but this does not mean that any model will take on the appearance of a closed set of *translation rules* to be applied universally by all translators regardless of context and function. If this were the case we would not be able to explain how anyone who does not know such a *Magna Carta* for translators can possibly translate even the simplest of texts.

The descriptive approach is correct, as long as one realizes that a translator can follow many different patterns of behaviour for different types of translation and even for the same translation. All we can hope to do is indicate *what kinds of decisions need to be made* at different stages of the process and compare them with decisions that are actually made or not made. What a theory can never do is spell out exactly and universally *which* decisions need to be made, or even more fancifully, devise a theory that will make the decisions for the translator without knowing what the assignment is.

Regularities and patterns will produce typologies and classifications, but we must, at all times, be aware of the limitations of their scope and application. In other words, classifications and typologies are no more than tools which are used to model and explain our experiences.

3.   *The Difference between Prescription and Description*

One unfortunate misunderstanding in the evolution of translation theories has been an inability to see that prescription and description are both necessary to the translator but in entirely different ways. Prescriptive conditions will be accounted for in the theoretical domain as important Factors, but the theory itself will not be normative.

There is a need to draw a line between the postulates of translation theory, and practical guidelines, handbooks, standard procedures, stylebooks, methodologies, tradition, etc. The need to properly distinguish the two stems from the following: (a) they are too frequently mistaken in the literature, and (b) they influence the practice of translation from different angles.

Translation strategies and techniques should be identified, described and exemplified in the theory. In practical guidelines and handbooks for translators there will be an outline of the ideal conditions in which certain translation techniques or strategies will be either mandatory or inappropriate.

Our first claim is that all of the potential translation Factors included in any descriptive theory or model give rise to two very essential complementary categories when it comes to specific translating assignments: the translator's two related sets of Priorities and Restrictions which are both, in principle, unique for each process. The second claim is that any new theories or new applications that come along will simply be the result of discoveries of new Factors, Priorities, or Restrictions or they will shed more light on existing categories. If we are to say that

previous [theoretical] solutions were *not wrong or incomplete* we will have to say, then, that they were simply too restrictive in their scope of applicability.

4.   *The Nature of Translation Rules*

So-called translation rules are *arbitrary*. This is a logical result of the subjective nature of translation itself. However, this does not mean that there is no room for prescription in the everyday work of the translator. On the contrary, the translator has to adhere to certain norms and follow certain guidelines. Although there is prescription in many translation processes, it will not come directly from any theory, but from the conditions in which the translation is to be produced. Thus, theoretical models will not be the source of prescription, but they will explain and account for prescriptive conditions as variables, as Restrictive guidelines that are imposed on the translator.

Theorists find it frustrating that so many translators can get on without them, and translators feel frustrated in not finding the kind of answers they are looking for whenever they decide to read the theory. The goal of the theory is not to produce a series of rules that the translator has to follow blindly, but simply *create an awareness* of what translation is all about. There is still some resistance or reluctance to accept that it is not the theorist's job to establish the rules of translation. However, I have not found in the literature any recent publications proposing a prescriptive model. The need to insist on this point might be because most translations are produced in normative situations.

Below is a diagrammatic representation of the sources of prescription, which, when operative (i.e. the translator chooses to take them into account or is forced to), act as very powerful constraining forces. Each curve line or semicircle is meant to be interpreted as a complete circle; thus, the diagram represents eight circles, each one containing all of the inner circles and contained by the outer circles. The circles are numbered 1 - 8 from smallest (innermost) to largest, with the translator at the center of the process (alternatively, we could have placed *the translation* at the center, in a circle 0). The straight lines represent the lines of influence, and the arrows at the end show the direction of the pressure; so the thick line on the left represents the pressure from the outside on the inside, and the thin dashed line the influence of the inner circles on the outer ones. The difference in thickness and solidity is meant to show that the pressure from the outside is nearly always much greater and more difficult to disregard than from the inside. The short, thick line crossing the dashed line, between circles 2 and 3, means that the TO (translation order) cannot affect the TI (translation initiator) precisely because the TO is given by the TI; otherwise inner circles can influence or try to influence any of the outer circles, especially the neighboring ones. For example, a translator may try to influence Translation Orders that have turned out to be contradictory or ambiguous. Only truly outstanding, authoritative translators (or any individual for that matter, if we adapt the diagram to describe other activities) will manage to produce any effect or change beyond circle 5.

But the greater thickness of some of the circles (1, 3, 5 and 6) means that they are sometimes (e.g. through design or ignorance) less permeable to influence from the other circles. Circles which are contiguous are most likely to influence each other.

However, a circle may receive direct prescriptive constraints from any of the outer circles regardless of how close the two are, especially in those cases where there is no prescriptive force originating from the contiguous circle. For example, when the translator is his/her own initiator, circle 1 may be more directly influenced by circle 4; or a translator may not be familiar with (or may choose to disregard) the prescriptive translation rules of his/her time, but will be respectful with rules and conventions from circle 6.
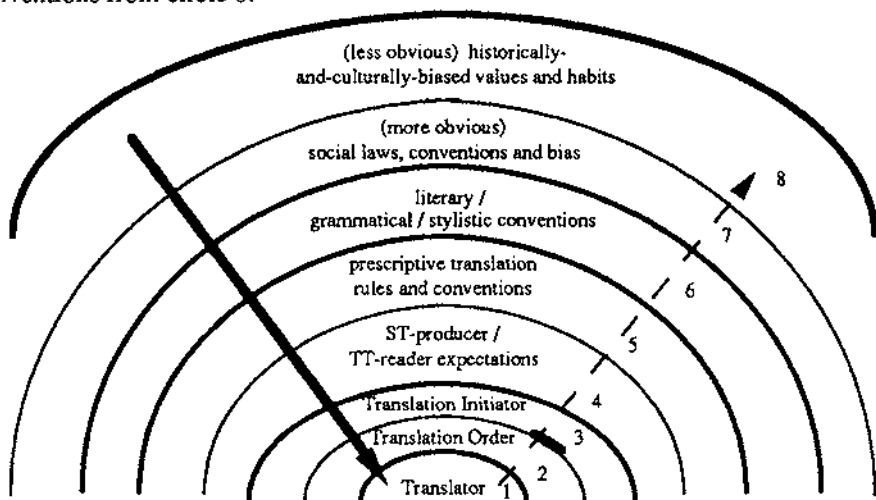

fig. 1. *the sources of prescription*

Because each circle is influenced in varying degrees, depending on a number of variables, by all or most of the outer circles, only a translator with a strong personality and a considerable degree of originality, who is translating for a small number of receptors, and who is probably his/her own TI (circle 3) with some out-of-the-way translation purpose, will find the prescriptive force of these circles most considerably weakened. An obvious candidate for the other end of the scale (i.e. where prescriptive force is strongest) would be *staff translators*, whose individuality and creativity are greatly reduced. At this end of the scale, however, the most extreme case could well be what most people expect of machine translation, where all of the rules have to be perfectly well defined. On the other hand, the influence from the individual outwards is much more difficult and usually very weak unless it is echoed by other individuals. Here is a brief account of the nature of the prescriptions numbered according to the circles above.

1)   The *Translator*:   this involves; (*a*) self-imposed Restrictions and Priorities. Ideally these should be carefully planned and be the result of a full awareness of all of the intervening Factors that have a role to play for the task being undertaken. We include in *self-imposed* Restrictions and Priorities those which are initially originated in any of the outer circles and are then recognised and incorporated by the translator as his/her own.

(*b*) The translator's own understanding of TT (target text) production (i.e. when we translate we always implement a certain theory and/or method of

translation). In this case the translator should be as free as possible from his/her own prejudiced ideas which may be an obstacle in responding adequately to expectations from the outer circles based on different prejudices.

2)   The *TO*: this should include specifically stated *targets* (e.g. skopos, rhetorical purpose, intention) for the TT, as well as *methodology* (i.e. translation method, strategies and procedures allowed) and *stylistic norms*. Unfortunately, professional translators find that translation orders are not always stated in unambiguous terms together with a complete set of guidelines and realistic goals.

3)   The *TI*: in the absence of a clear TO, the translator will have to find out about the TI's *intention, expectations, tastes* and *prejudices*, in the last resort the translator will have to guess what they are, or, alternatively, choose to ignore the TI as a Factor and move up to higher, less specific, levels of prescription (circles 4 - 8).   .

4)   *TT-reader expectations*: the translator or the TI will have to be aware of the TT-receptor's needs, expectations and assumed knowledge and set of values, as well as what the TT-receptor can reasonably be expected to *react against, misinterpret,* or *simply not understand*, i.e. the translator needs to anticipate potential breakdowns in the communication act he/she is producing.

ST-producer expectations may become prescriptive if the ST (source text) producer has sufficient authority, because: *(a)* it is pronounced so by normative criteria (from circle 5 or elsewhere); *(b)* the ST-producer acts as translation initiator or broker, (e.g. Bible into certain Indigenous languages); *(c)* the ST-producer or the language and culture of the ST or both are seen as superior in some relevant way.

5)   *Prescriptive translation rules,* such as Savory's 12 pairwise contradictions (e.g. *a translation should read as a contemporary of the original* vs *a translation should read as a contemporary of the translation*). Here we include theoretical norms for appropriate use of translation approaches, methods, and procedures or techniques. Our thesis in this paper is that although some translators have not been able to or have not wished to disregard this source of prescriptiveness, the goal of translation theory should not be to set up such rules. Moreover, translation theory should not be the source of any sort of prescription. We cannot deny that circle 5 has at times played an important role in constraining the translator's inventiveness. We hope that prescription from this area will disappear as soon as possible.

6)   *Literary / grammatical / stylistic conventions*: this circle includes norms for *good* writing and correct interpretation of words, figures of speech and all other aspects of language and texts. It also covers literary fashions and mannerisms; prescriptive grammar; rules of politeness and formality; and stylistic conventions and house-styles.

7)   *Social laws and prejudice,* e.g. patronage, censorship, socially acceptable/unacceptable topics, types of criticism, the potential influence of the ideology contained in theories from exact and natural sciences (like the ones outlined in fig. 2).

8)   *The weight of historical tradition / culture*: e.g. the myths and taboos of a community, its perception of the world, its prejudices, and arbitrary concepts that are given natural or absolute status.

5. *The effects of disregarding or being unaware of each level of prescriptiveness*

1)-   (The numbers of this list, as for the above one, correspond to the circles). Inconsistent, disjointed, ambiguously oriented translations are produced, lacking in discernable goals and methods. The translator may show a lack of awareness of the nature of translation production or be unfaithful to his own criteria, which is worse than any other type of infidelity or *betrayal* in translation practice.

2)-   Translations may not fulfil the function they were supposed to have been produced for in the first place. Here it is the intention and the function of the translation that is *betrayed*. In the worst case it becomes a useless translation as far as its original purpose is concerned, even if it can appreciated for other merits.

3)-   Here, translations run the risk of *betraying* the individual TI, the institution or the purpose for which they were produced. This may happen by blindly applying some translation method regardless of context and purpose, or by mistakenly reinterpreting the TI. It may also happen when the translator is not given enough information about the TI.

4)-   A translation will be produced that *the TT receptor* will possibly find either difficult or impossible to *understand* or *appreciate*. On the other hand, a disregard for ST-producer authority (if he/she is not the TI) may go in favour or against the TT receptor (i.e. the advantages and disadvantages of *reader-centred translation*).

5)-   Going *against the prescriptions of normative academic translation rules* is often the most sensible thing to do. This is what is frequently referred to as the *intuitive, feeling-for-language* component of translator competence. The only danger here is that the translation may be accused of being *unacademic, too free* or a *non-translation* by the critics or one's teacher.

6)-   Some translations as texts aspiring to *read as originals* will be regarded as ungrammatical, unnatural, stylistically poor (but also, occasionally, *original*). In this area a vocational literary translator has a much freer hand than a staff translator who will have to conform to stylebook and formatting requirements at all times. Translations that *lean towards* the ST and its formal features will find it difficult to conform to prescriptions of target language grammar and stylistics.

7)-   TT producers who choose to ignore social laws and conventions will sometimes find their translations banned, censored or at least considered disrespectful, rude or provocative. At the level of ST analysis the translator will usually fail to see all of its implicatures and full pragmatic force.

8)-   A translation that does not take into account historical, national and nationalistic, and other deeply rooted, though ill-defined, Factors that are involved in text analysis or production will fail to produce a translation that reflects the full semiotic and discursive value of the ST and/or produce a TT that is apparently pointless, or offensive (by not respecting or being aware of certain myths or taboos), or one that is only available to an expert or sympathetic readership.

Circles 1 - 5 are the only strictly translation-related prescriptions, which usually, but not necessarily, take into account prescriptions from 6 - 8. A translator may be unaware of or disregard more than one of these sources of prescriptiveness at the same time.

Now we will move on to present the sources of the descriptive tools for analysing and explaining translation-related phenomena in fig. 2. Among other things, the circles below help to illustrate the interdisciplinary nature, not only of translation but of all of the human sciences. Each circle represents a field of study that will objectively account for one of the sources of prescription and prejudice as depicted in fig. 1. In fig. 2 there are no thick and thin lines because information exchange should *ideally* be quite fluid and influence should be mutual. Each one of these sciences and sources of information cannot afford to contradict one another, whereas the various sources of prescription do sometimes run the risk of incompatibility. Therefore the two straight lines that represent the two different directions of influence are equally thick. They are dashed because there is, ideally, no prescriptive pressure from one circle to any of the others.
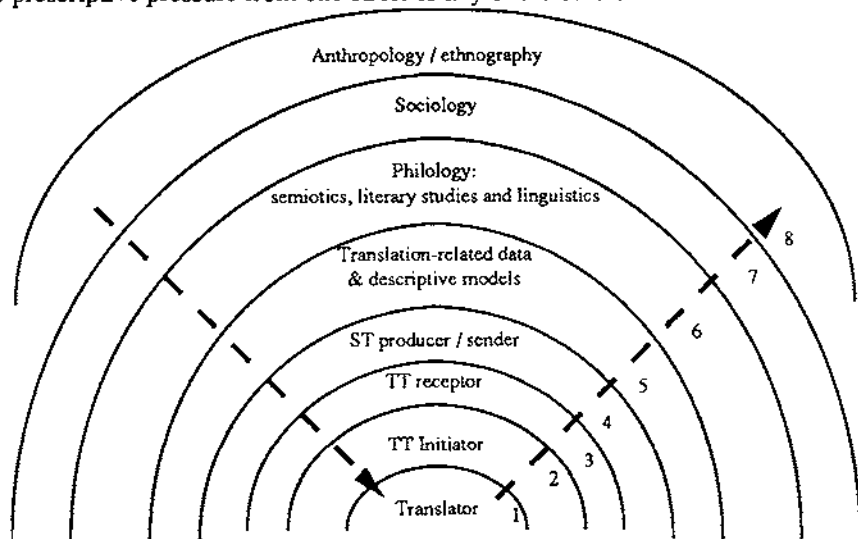

fig. 2. *the sources of descriptive tools of analysis*

In this case, circles 1 - 4 act as informants for circles 5 - 8. Ideally, descriptive sciences should be 100% objective, but this is actually impossible in many cases since the scientist is, firstly, an individual who can only make observations from a limited point of view, and secondly, a product of his/her own social and cultural environment, not always without a previous personal ideology, and not infrequently a creator of new ideologies, even if they are *scientific*, or have been *scientifically justified*. In circle 6, linguistics is meant in its broadest sense including all of its subdisciplines and approaches.

Beyond this diagram of circles other studies acting as sources that may throw more light on the nature of translation are logic, philosophy and more recently computer science.

6.   *The Advantages and Disadvantages of Prescription in the Translating Process*

The following account of the advantages and disadvantages of prescriptiveness is not offered as a complete list, the reader is invited to think of more examples to add to it.

6.1.   *Advantages*

a)   The translator knows exactly what is expected of him/her regarding final product and the function of the TT.

b)   The translator will be sure of what translation techniques and strategies are allowed and/or disallowed. It is essential that the translator know the exact boundaries of acceptability.

c)   The translator's responsibility is reduced and should be shared by the authority of the prescriptive source.

d)   A clear, coherent order or prescription is an advantage when the TI has a good understanding of the nature of translation and what he/she wants.

e)   The more thorough and unambiguous the order and the stylebook, the less the translator will have to resort to *intuition* or his/her own translating competence.

6.2.   *Disadvantages*

a)   Some prescriptions may result in unrealistic expectations either of a translation task in particular or translations in general.

b)   A prescriptive order that is not context-sensitive may be contrary to or fall short of the TT receptor's real needs or expectations. It does not seem desirable that prescription should ever be so arbitrary as to go against common sense and the prescriber's own interest.

c)   Certain techniques or strategies that may provide effective solutions are disallowed or frowned upon.

d)   Alternative solutions are not explored.

e)   The translator's work may be evaluated by a critic regardless of the nature of the order and other prescriptive constraints, the result being an unfair criticism or review.

f)   A translation order or prescription may be completely or partially ambiguous, incomplete or contradictory.

g)   Prescription will often be unable to foresee and adequately account for new varieties of text production, text functions or other potential translation problems; hence the danger of either treating new situations as exceptions, marginal cases or forcing them to be seen as analogous to traditionally accepted categories.

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RESUM

Sobre la correcta ubicació de la prescripció i de la descripció a la traducció

La traducció necessita una teoria descriptiva, però el traductor treballa en unes condicions que impliquen una sèrie de normes restrictives. Aquest article prova de demostrar que aquests dos fets no suposen cap paradoxa. Hi figuren dues representacions gràfiques de les fonts normatives, per una banda, i les eines per estudiar la traducció de manera més objectiva per una altra.

SUMMARY

Prescriptiveness and descriptiveness both have a role to play in translation but in very different ways and it is important to keep each one in its proper place. Prescriptiveness is something that affects the translator in his/her everyday work. Hence, the importance of the notion of acceptability. However, translation models and theories should not be a source of prescriptiveness. This paper includes diagrams representing the sources of prescription and the sources of the tools for descriptive, objective analysis of the nature of translation and related phenomena.