

## Some Reflections on Translation Criticism and Descriptive Translation Studies

WANG Haiying<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Ph.D., Lecturer, Collaborative Innovation Center for Language Research and Service, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China.

\*Corresponding author.

**Supported by** the Joint Research Project for Young Teachers at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies “a Sociological Research of the Relations Between Theatre Translation Activities Around the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement and the Rise and Fall of the Amateur Drama Movement” (12S8).

Received 7 November 2017; accepted 5 January 2018

Published online 26 February 2018

### Abstract

There was a misconception in China about translation criticism and descriptive translation studies, the two sub-disciplines of Translation Studies. In fact, descriptive translation studies and translation criticism belong to two different scientific branches, one being the descriptive or pure branch, the latter the prescriptive or applied branch. Four reasons behind this misconception in China could be identified: a) the introduction of Descriptive Translation Studies in China is far from enough; b) both of the two sub-disciplines are believed to be the link between translation theory and practice; c) the opportunistic thought of “making foreign things serve China”; d) the translation theory itself needs further improvement.

**Key words:** Translation criticism; Descriptive translation studies; Misconception

Wang, H. Y. (2018). Some Reflections on Translation Criticism and Descriptive Translation Studies. *Canadian Social Science*, 14(2), 1-4. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/10130>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/10130>

### INTRODUCTION

A few years ago this writer came across a paper published in *Chinese Translators Journal*, the abstract of which

begins with the following sentence: “This paper introduces a descriptive approach to translation criticism based on polysystem theory” (Chen & Jiang, 2003, p.46). With a detailed case study, the whole paper tries to convince its readers that a descriptive approach to the study of the translated literature is a new method of translation criticism and a descriptive translation study is a piece of translation criticism. As *Chinese Translators Journal* is not only a peer-reviewed but also the most prestigious journal in translation studies in China, the paper represents the translation scholars’ general understanding of the relation between descriptive translation studies and translation criticism in China.

However, as far as this writer knows, even though the Polysystem Theory, which is the origin of Descriptive Translation Studies, has shed some new light on the methodology of translation criticism (i.e. a descriptive approach, in its broad sense, might be applied to translation criticism), descriptive Translation Studies definitely could not be considered merely as a theory of translation criticism. Anyone who has read through *Polysystem Studies* (Even-Zohar, 1990) and *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (Toury, 2001) would never mix up descriptive translation studies with translation criticism. This paper aims at exploring the difference between the two and the cause of such a misconception in China.

## 1. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TRANSLATION CRITICISM AND DESCRIPTIVE TRANSLATION STUDIES

To make it clear, let’s first see some statements about translation criticism provided by different scholars:

- a) Translation criticism means to give an overall evaluation to the process of translation and the quality and value of the translated versions according to a certain standard of translation (Lin, 1997, p.184).

- b) Translation criticism is the evaluation of the translations, the content of which involves: i) whether the translation is faithful to the original; ii) whether the translation is smooth; iii) whether the translation reproduces the artistic quality and style of the original (Zhou & Luo, 1999, p.146).
- c) While error analysis is focused on classifying, describing, explaining and evaluating transfer phenomena on the basis of the dichotomy “wrong / correct”, it is the task of TC (translation criticism) to make quality assessment of a translation as a whole as objectively as possible, thereby taking into account both positive and negative factors (Wilss, 2001, p.216).

Although there are many other statements about translation criticism, the above three are adequate enough to point out one common point, that is, the central task of translation criticism is to evaluate translated versions no matter what method or standard is applied to it. Translation criticism always includes topics like: Is the translation faithful or unfaithful? What is a good translation? What fails to be a good translation? In a narrow sense, translation criticism is directly connected with error analysis. No matter how good the translation is in the critic’s eyes, he will never forget to point out some small mistakes or slips of translator so as to illustrate that criticism is exhaustive.

With the flourishing development of western translation theories, the method of doing translation criticism becomes diversified. Nevertheless, no matter what method is applied or how many factors are taken into account, the nature of translation criticism—making value judgments—would never change.

Then what is a descriptive translation study about? What is the difference between descriptive translation studies and translation criticism?

Firstly, a descriptive study is opposed to a prescriptive study. In linguistic theories, which are far more systematic and comprehensive than translation theories due to their long history, we can find a clear division of the two kinds of studies. A linguistic study is descriptive if it describes and analyses facts observed; it is prescriptive if it tries to lay down rules for “correct” behavior (Hu, 1988, p.24). Descriptive studies of language consist of two main categories: synchronic studies and diachronic studies, the former being the description of a language at some point in time and the latter being the description of a language as it changes through time. As early grammars were based on “literary” written language, most linguistic studies before this century are deemed prescriptive. On the contrary, modern linguistic studies try every means to avoid being prescriptive as their interest lies in “what people actually say”, not in “what people should say”. Whatever people say in their everyday speech should be considered as social facts and thus be described and accounted for.

Although by the end of last century, translation studies had turned their steps to cultural studies, believing

that neither the linguistic approach nor the literary approach was adequate enough to explain all the existing complicated translation phenomena, the fact that this writer borrows the division of descriptive studies and prescriptive studies from linguistic theories, in her personal opinion, won’t arouse any objections. All in all, without linguistic theories, translation studies would be impossible. Therefore, we might define descriptive translation studies as the kind of study that describes, analyzes and explains all the translation phenomena observed and prescriptive translation studies as the kind of study that tries to lay down rules for “correct” translations. Based on these two definitions, it goes without saying that translation criticism belongs to the latter.

Secondly, let’s come to the definition given by Gideon Toury, an Israeli scholar and the author of *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*. He followed the idea of James S. Holmes, who was considered as the founder of the school of Translation Studies because of his paper *The Name and Nature of Translation Studies* presented in the Third International Congress of Applied Linguistics (Copenhagen, 1972). In the paper, Holmes puts forward that “Translation Studies” should be the name of the discipline, which consists of two branches: the pure branch and the applied branch, with the former further splitting into theoretical and descriptive sub-branches. According to Holmes, descriptive translation studies belongs to the pure branch, and translation criticism belongs to the applied branch. In his book, Toury (2001) uses the abbreviation DTS, introduced by Holmes, to refer to the scientific branch and the longer denomination, “descriptive translation studies”, to the activity—any research procedures addressed to translational phenomena. According to Toury (2001), DTS is a systematic branch proceeding from clear assumptions and armed with a methodology and research techniques made as explicit as possible and justified within Translation Studies itself.

In fact, many writers on translation still look down on studies into actual practices and their products, the more so if these studies are properly descriptive, i.e., if they refrain from value judgments in selecting subject matter or in presenting findings, and / or refuse to draw any conclusions in the form of recommendations for “proper” behavior. (Toury, 2001, p.2)

Toury states it very clearly that value judgments are not the focus of descriptive translation studies.

From the above analysis, descriptive translation studies and translation criticism belong to different scientific branches, no matter what those branches are, descriptive vs. prescriptive branches or pure vs. applied branches. If we go back to Chen and Jiang’s article mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the whole thing becomes obvious. Talking about the standard and method of translation criticism at the beginning and claiming to be a descriptive study at the end, the two authors are telling us an Irish bull with a pistol in each hand and a sword in the other. In fact, after reading through the article which hardly contains

any value judgment, this writer finds that it is more a descriptive translation study than a translation criticism.

## 2. THE CAUSE OF THE MISCONCEPTION

Here immediately arises the question, where does this misconception come from?

First and foremost, the introduction of Descriptive Translation Studies in China in the last century was far from enough. In the relevant academic periodicals, whose main function is to present the latest development in the field, you can hardly find any articles elaborating on the main points of it (Han, 1996; He & Wei, 1998; Shen, 1999),<sup>1</sup> to say nothing of relevant monographs. Of course, those scattered articles which have mentioned a word or two about it cannot be counted in.

It was not until the beginning of this century that Chinese scholars began to set foot in the study of the descriptive branch of Translation Studies (Zhang, 2000; Fu, 2001; Lin, 2001; Miao, 2001; Zhao, 2001a, 2001b; Pan, 2002; Sun, 2003; Chen & Jiang, 2003; Fan, 2004; Li & Deng, 2004; etc.).<sup>2</sup> In her article entitled “Objective and Organization of Translation Studies: A Review of Holmes’ Notion of Translation Studies”, Zhang (2000) stressed the importance of descriptive translation studies in the construction of the whole discipline. In November of the same year, Yilin Publishing House published *An Exploration of the Contemporary Translation Theories* (Liao, 2000) written by Prof. Liao Qiyi from Sichuan International Studies University. As indicated in the title, the book aims at introducing the major contemporary translation theories in the West. Therefore, because of the restriction on the length of each chapter, there are only a few pages dealing with the school of Translation Studies and a few paragraphs with Descriptive Translation Studies. Besides, most of them are simply the translation of the related paragraphs in Edwin Gentzler’s *Contemporary Translation Theories*, which were published in 1993. Gentzler’s introduction and evaluation of Toury was largely based on his first book—*In Search of a Theory of Translation* (Toury, 1980), a book that was published more than thirty years ago. In Toury’s own words, his later book, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*, is “not just a sequel to, but actually a replacement” of the earlier one and “the books of this kind should only be taken as interim reports of ongoing projects, which entails rapid dating” (Toury, 2001, p.4). In another book of Prof. Liao, *Contemporary Translation Theories in the UK* (Liao, 2001), although there is a whole chapter introducing the achievements made by Andrew Chesterman, a famous scholar in the school of descriptive translation studies, the

focus of it is on translation norms, another concept that might cause misconception even more easily.

In September 2001, Toury’s monograph *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*, first published in 1995, was published in China by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. And in 2002, a paper which gave a brief account of the theoretical developments in Translation Studies in the Western world in the past thirty years, especially since the 1990s, was available in *Chinese Translators Journal* (Pan, 2002). This paper, brief as it is, is the best introduction to Translation Studies that I’ve ever read. And in August 2004, there was a paper published in *Journal of Foreign Languages* which was really based on thorough understanding and in-depth analysis of the theory (Fan, 2004). Be that as it may, Prof. Liao’s two books and the papers mentioned above are far from enough to give us a clear and comprehensive idea of Descriptive Translation Studies unless you read Toury’s book yourself.

Both Holmes and Toury share the view that the results of descriptive-explanatory studies executed within DTS should be brought to bear on the theoretical branch. Thus DTS becomes the middle ground between theory and practice. This might be the second reason that causes the misconception, since Peter Newmark, whom we are much more familiar with than Toury, believes that “Translation criticism is an essential link between translation theory and its practice” (Newmark, 1988, p.184). Since Newmark has a much greater influence in China than Toury, it seems pardonable to mix up the old and the (comparatively) new concepts.

The third reason that constitutes the misconception might be the opportunistic thought of “making foreign things serve China”. The idea itself is not bad at all, but the key point lies in that we have to make clear what it is before making it serve China. A beautiful vase is used as a water container only because no flowers are found in it. Isn’t it a pity? Of course there is fertile soil for it, that is, the prevailing application-oriented attitude towards theories in both China and abroad, which is especially serious in the field of translation. “The main reason for the prevailing underdevelopment of a descriptive branch within Translation Studies has no doubt been an overriding orientation towards practical applications, which have marked—and marred—scholarly work ever since the sixties” (Toury, 2001, p.2).

The last but not the least reason lies in the theory itself. As we all know, theories of arts differ from those of science in that the latter must be accurate, rigorous, water holding, and allow of no loop holes, which is not necessarily the case with regard to the former. Though Holmes was the first to establish Descriptive Translation Studies, it was Toury who further developed it and introduced a new concept of “norms” in translation studies. Most scholars accepted the descriptive approach to translation studies, which could be best illustrated by the cultural turn in the approaches to translation

<sup>1</sup> The three articles mentioned here merely introduce the outline of the theory briefly.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the articles mentioned here are still of an introductory nature.

studies. However, quite a few western scholars, say, Peter Newmark, expressed their doubts, even disagreements, on the concept of “norms” (Schäffner, 1999). As the theory of translation norms is the core of Toury’s Descriptive Translation Studies, although it has been carried forward to a certain extent by Chesterman (1997) and Hermans (1999), it is certainly not almighty and needs improvement. Therefore, in China, a place where you can hardly find the latest monographs on translation studies written by western scholars,<sup>3</sup> a misconception between translation criticism and a descriptive translation study is no big deal at all.

### 3. THE NEED FOR CRITICAL ASSIMILATION

Books on translation studies are emerging in multitude in the last decade in China. Nevertheless, we should never be content with the new developments in the field, for western theories, as acknowledged by most Chinese scholars, are wider in scope, greater in depth, and more comprehensive in terms of observing translation phenomena. While introducing the latest achievements made by western scholars, Chinese scholars should also make their due contribution to the general development of the field themselves. The misconception about the difference between translation criticism and descriptive translation studies in China, is a reflection of, on the one hand, the long established opinion of making foreign things serve China; and on the other, the deep-rooted idea of seeking quick success. Being a young translation scholar herself, this writer feels duty bound to confront this serious problem. As the formulation of a theory always has its specific historical and cultural contexts, we should accept everything critically and integrate our own independent thinking into the development of the theory. Only through such kind of critical assimilation could we finally make the Chinese voice heard in the world.

### REFERENCES

- Chen, H. W., & Jiang, F. (2003). The translation of *Hong lou meng* into English: A Descriptive Study. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 24(5), 46-52.
- Chesterman, A. (1997). *Memes of translation: The spread of ideas in translation theory*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Even-Zohar, I. (1990). *Polysystem studies*. Tel Aviv: The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics.
- Fan, X. T. (2004). Objects and ways of description in descriptive translation studies. *Journal of Foreign Languages*, (4), 60-67.
- Fu, Y. L. (2001). Translation norm: Gideon Toury’s transcendence over traditional studies of translation. *Foreign Language Research*, (1), 68-72.

<sup>3</sup> With the effort made by Shanghai Foreign Language and Education Press in the last decade, the status quo has been changed by the publishing of a series of famous foreign classics on translation studies.

- Gentzler, E. (1993). *Contemporary translation theories*. London: Routledge.
- Han, J. M. (1996). Development of the “translation studies” school. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 17(5), 48-50.
- He, Y. J., & Wei, Z. Q. (1998). Research and application of descriptive translation studies. *Foreign Language and Translation*, (1), 1-9.
- Hermans, T. (1999). *Translation in systems: Descriptive and systemic approaches explained*. Manchester: St. Jerome.
- Hu, Z. L. (1988). *Linguistics: A course book*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Li, D. C., & Deng, J. (2004). Chesterman’s translation norms: The transcendence of traditional translation concepts. *Journal of Foreign Languages*, (4), 68-75.
- Liao, Q. Y. (2000). *An exploration of the contemporary translation theories*. Nanjing: Yilin Press.
- Liao, Q. Y. (2001). *Contemporary translation theories in the UK*. Wuhan: Hubei Education Press.
- Lin, H. T. (1997). *A dictionary of translation in China*. Wuhan, China: Hubei Education Press.
- Lin, K. N. (2001). Translation studies: From the prescriptive to the descriptive approach. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 22(6), 43-45.
- Miao, J. (2001). Translation norms: The core of Gideon Toury’s translation theory. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, (11), 29-32.
- Newmark, P. (1988). *A textbook of translation*. London: Prentice Hall.
- Pan, W. G. (2002). Contemporary translation research in the west: With an inquiry into the nature of translation studies. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 23(1).
- Schäffner, C. (Ed.) (1999). *Translation and norms*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Toury, G. (2001). *Descriptive translation studies and beyond*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Toury, G. (1980). *In search of a theory of translation*. Tel Aviv: Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics.
- Toury, G. (2001). *Descriptive translation studies and beyond*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Toury, G. (1980). *In search of a theory of translation*. Tel Aviv: Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics.
- Wilss, W. (2001). *The science of translation—Problems and methods*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Zhang, M. F. (2000). Objective and organization of translation studies: A review of Holmes’ notion of translation studies. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 21(2), 66-69.
- Zhao, N. (2001a). An introduction to Gideon Toury’s translation norms. *Foreign Languages Teaching and Research*, 33(3), 216-219.
- Zhao, N. (2001b). An initial study of the translation theories of the Tel Aviv school. *Shanghai Journal of Translators for Science and Technology*, (3), 51-54.
- Zhou, Y., & Luo, P. (1999). *Translation and criticism*. Wuhan, China: Hubei Education Press.