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The Name and Nature of Translator Studies

Abstract

A number of recent research tendencies in Translation Studies focus explicitly on the translator in some way, rather than on translations as texts. These trends might be grouped under the term "Transla*tor* Studies". The article argues that this new focus is inadequately represented in Holmes' classic map. Evidence of the recent trends is found especially in translation sociology, but also in translation history and in research into the translator's decision-making processes. A broad outline of Translator Studies would cover sociology, culture and cognition, all looking at the translator's agency, in different ways.

Translator Studies?

James Holmes started his now classic article (1988, original version 1972) with the observation that when science discovers a new area of ignorance, one of two things tend to happen. The new set of research questions may be incorporated into an existing domain, in which case it becomes a legitimate branch of that domain. Or the new questions may lead to the establishment of a new research field, a new interdiscipline. Holmes argued that, at the time he was writing, the new field of what we now call Translation Studies illustrated the second case, and he gave some space to a discussion of the possible names for this new field. A generation or so later, it now seems that we have an example of his first case: within the field of Translation Studies we may be witnessing the development of a new subfield, a new branch. I suggest we could call this *TranslaTOR Studies*.

As a simple preliminary definition, let us say Translator Studies is the study of translators (and of course interpreters). Of course, all re-

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search on (human) translations must surely at least imply that there are indeed translators behind the translations, people behind the texts. But not all translation research takes these people as the primary and explicit focus, the starting point, the central concept of the research question. Examples of the kinds of research that illustrate this focus are given below.

Opinions will vary on whether or not the research trends I am referring to actually constitute a distinct subfield rather than merely a kind of broad perspective on aspects of Translation Studies in general. Perhaps my sketch shows no more than an ongoing shift of emphasis within translation research as a whole. But such shifts may also merit our metatheoretical attention. – Following is an overview of what I see as this emerging subfield, in the form of a brief response to Holmes' original article and the map he discusses there.

Back to the map...

The famous map has circulated in many publications, such as Toury 1995: 10. However, the published version of Holmes' original article (1988) does not actually contain it in diagram form. Curiously, some versions of the figure (such as Toury's) omit the branch on translation policy, which is nevertheless explicitly listed in the article itself. Below is a version of the map including this branch.

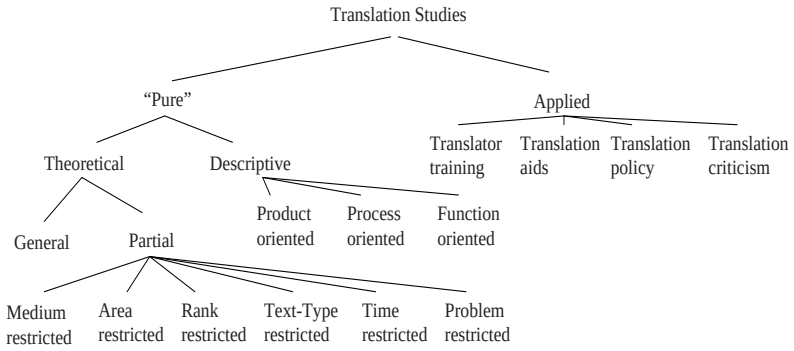

Figure 1. Holmes' map (based on Holmes 1988)

The map has of course been widely commented on before. Toury (1995: 9f) problematizes the apparent autonomy of Holmes' major division of descriptive research into orientations of product, process and function, and also the relation between "descriptive" and "theoretical" studies. Pym (1998) points to the absence of historical research on the map (although Holmes does mention historical studies of translation, albeit not explicitly translators, in the text). Lambert (1991) argued that the map should have given more weight to contextual and pragmatic factors. Snell-Hornby (1991) argued that the categories of "partial", restricted studies are outdated, and proposed a different kind of map altogether, showing the relations between the interdiscipline of Translation Studies and its neighbouring disciplines. Gile (2005: 341) points out several problems, particularly concerning the "descriptive" category: applied research can also be descriptive, for instance. Chesterman (2004) also queries some of Holmes' apparent assumptions about the relation between theory-building and description. My purpose here, however, is to see to what extent the scope of our putative Translator Studies is represented in the map.

Holmes' general distinctions between pure and applied studies, and between theoretical and descriptive ones, are not relevant to us here. I will start with his types of partial studies (as opposed to general). Holmes says that these deal with specific aspects of translation rather than translation as a whole. The first of these types is medium-restricted studies. Holmes uses the notion of a medium in two different ways. In terms of human vs. machine translation, our proposed subfield of Translator Studies is certainly implied. In terms of written vs. oral media, we can take Translator Studies to be implicitly relevant to both. The other kinds of partial studies (restricted by area or language, textlinguistic rank, text-type, time, translation problem) do not indicate any explicit relevance for Translator Studies, because the main focus of such work is textual. Under time-restricted studies, however, we can obviously place work on the history of translators and interpreters, many of whom were cultural pioneers.

Under descriptive studies Holmes lists those oriented towards product, process or function. Since the products of translation are texts (including the oral variety), this branch on the map does not primarily relate to our new subfield. In Translator Studies, texts are secondary, the translators themselves are primary; this priority leads to quite different

kinds of research questions. (This is not to deny that product-oriented research can reveal interesting things about the people behind the texts.)

Translation sociology

The process orientation, however, is certainly relevant. Holmes relates this to cognitive studies of the translation act – an area of translation research that has expanded considerably since his time. But he makes no mention at all here of the sociological process of the translation event. True, this is partly implied by what he says on the topic of function-oriented research, which has to do with the reception of translations in the target socio-culture. Holmes even suggests the possibility of what he calls "translation sociology" as a future area of research. This is indeed a prophetic statement, in the light of the recent "sociological turn" in Translation Studies. I have suggested elsewhere (Chesterman 2006) that such a translation sociology comprises three strands:

- the sociology of *translations*, as products in an international market;
- the sociology of *translators*; and
- the sociology of *translating*, i.e. the translating process.

Holmes seems to have foreseen only the first of these strands. The second and third strands are obviously central areas of Translation Studies nowadays. (For examples dealing with both translators and interpreters, see e.g. Heilbron 2000; Bachleiter/Wolf 2004; Diriker 2004; Inghilleri 2005; Wolf/Fukari 2007; Koskinen 2008; Dam/Zethsen 2008; the special issue (2002) of the sociological journal *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 144; and the new journal *Translation Studies.*)

The *sociology of translators* covers such issues as the status of (different kinds of) translators in different cultures, rates of pay, working conditions, role models and the translator's habitus, professional organizations, accreditation systems, translators' networks, copyright, and so on. Questions of a different kind under this heading are those relating to gender and sexual orientation, and to power relations, and how these factors affect a translator's work and attitudes. The sociology of translators also covers the public discourse of translation, i.e. evidence of the public image of the translator's profession, as seen e.g. in the press, or

in literary works in which one of the central characters is a translator or interpreter (see e.g. Maier 2006, Kurz/Kaindl 2005). Under the same heading I would place research on translators' attitudes to their work, as revealed in essays, interviews, translators' prefaces and notes, etc. Here too I would place the wide field of translators' ideologies and translation ethics: curiously, this is entirely absent from Holmes' map. An extension of this strand would include the study of voluntary, activist translators (see e.g. Baker 2006, especially chapter 7; Munday 2007).

In this connection, I would like to draw attention to an idea which is given a preliminary airing in Chesterman/Baker (forthcoming). We have become accustomed to use the term "skopos" to denote the intended effect of a translation. We might also make use of the companion term "telos" to denote the personal movation of translators. This would include the reasons why they work in this field in general, and also the reasons why they translate a given text. Voluntary translators in particular, such as activist translators, may have teloi that are specially interesting. Sociological work on the teloi of translators (and of course interpreters) might make worthwhile contributions to a better understanding of their attitudes and personal goals and ethics, and how these are realized in what and how they translate.

A recent incident in Finland illustrates other dimensions of sociological research on translators. An employment advertisement appeared in a newspaper, asking for applications for the following post: "a Russian-speaking translator / interpreter / cleaner" [sic!]. The Finnish translation community reacted immediately, with horror, and protests followed. But the incident reveals worrying aspects of the public perception of the translator's / interpreter's status, attitudes to Russian speakers (the advert was probably targeted at immigrants), and commercial exploitation. It also raised issues concerning employer's ethics. I wonder how typical such advertisements might be?

The *sociology of the translating process*, on the other hand, has to do with the study of the phases of the translation event: translation practices and working procedures, quality control procedures and the revision process, co-operation in team translation, multiple drafting, relations with other agents including the client, and the like. A central concept is that of translation norms, which have been much in evidence in transla-

tion research especially since Toury (1995). (For further discussion and references, see e.g. Mossop 2001 and Chesterman 2006.)

Moving now to the applied branch of Holmes' map, we find three sub-types that are relevant to Translator Studies. One is translator training, which is so obvious that no further comment is needed here. The second is translation policy, which is certainly an area of Translator Studies. On this, Holmes writes:

> The task of the translation scholar in this area is to render informed advice to others in defining the place and role of translators, translating, and translations in society at large: such questions, for instance, as determining what works need to be translated in a given socio-cultural situation, what the social and economic position of the translator is and should be, or [...] what part translating should play in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. (1988/2000: 182)

With hindsight, we may feel that the tone here is somewhat prescriptive. After all, we can also seek to describe and explain translation policies of particular institutions (such as the EU, for example, or a given company or municipality) without necessarily giving them advice. These policies might bear on questions such as whether a commissioned translation should be done by a native speaker of the target language or not, or by a professional translator or not; whether a given type of task should be done in-house or by a freelance translator; what kinds of arbitration procedures are available in cases of dispute; or what kinds of consultation services are available to the translator. This research topic thus extends into Holmes' descriptive branch. Holmes also seems to include here some of the topics I have listed under the sociology of translators, above. Here too, the notion of norms is central, especially Toury's preliminary norms, which deal explicitly with translation policy.

Holmes' third applied sub-type is the study of translation aids. From the point of view of how translators themselves use various aids and resources, this research is clearly part of Translator Studies, being part of the study of the translator's working procedures. The development of the aids themselves, such as the improvement of translation memory systems, lies outside our subfield. Holmes' last sub-type, translation criticism, does not seem to lie within Translator Studies.

Towards an agent model

What can we conclude from this brief survey? First of all, Holmes' vision of Translation Studies was highly weighted towards texts rather than the people that produce them. This is not surprising, in view of his own special interest in literary translation and research on it. We have found explicit or implicit acknowledgement of Translator Studies at various points on the map, but not in any consistent manner. Our points of contact have been at different levels in Holmes' hierarchy. We have also found some gaps in the map, especially regarding the scope of research on translation sociology, history and ethics. To be fair, such research topics had scarcely yet appeared in 1972. Using Holmes' map, it is difficult to provide a coherent picture of the new subfield, so here is an alternative (from Chesterman 2006 and elsewhere).

Assume that Translation Studies consists of four big branches: textual, cultural, cognitive and sociological. The textual branch deals with all matters textual, and thus by definition lies outside Translator Studies. But the three other branches are all relevant to us here, and indeed offer one way of conceptualizing this subfield of Translation Studies. The cultural branch deals with values, ethics, ideologies, traditions, history, examining the roles and influences of translators and interpreters through history, as agents of cultural evolution. The cognitive branch deals with mental processes, decision-making, the impact of emotions, attitudes to norms, personality, etc. The sociological branch deals with translators'/interpreters' observable behaviour as individuals or groups or institutions, their social networks, status and working processes, their relations with other groups and with relevant technology, and so on. All three branches comprise both theoretical and descriptive studies, and also pure and applied studies.

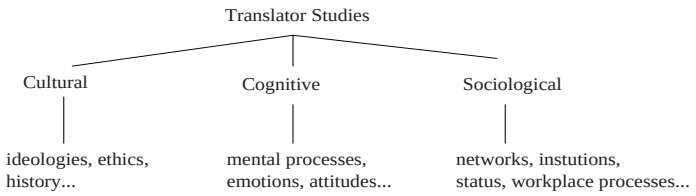

Figure 2. Sketch of Translator Studies

In terms of Popper's three ontological worlds (e.g. Popper 1972), the objects of study of the cultural branch lie mainly in World 3, the world of objective contents of thought which are in the public domain. The objects of study of the cognitive branch lie in World 2, the sphere of mental states. The objects of study of the sociological branch lie partly in World 1, the world of observable physical phenomena (e.g. actions, behaviours) but partly also in World 2 (subjective ideologies and attitudes) and partly in World 3 (status, public image). The sociological branch is thus ontologically the most complex. It may thus be the most prone to further fragmentation.

A sociological perspective also forces us to adjust our traditional models of the object of our research. I have elsewhere (e.g. Chesterman 2000) suggested that TS has typically made use of three general models of translation. The first is a comparative model, based on comparing two bodies of text, such as source text and target text or translations and non-translations. The second is a process model, looking at phases of the translation process over time, either at the cognitive level of decision-making or at the observable level of translator behaviour and workplace procedures. The third is a causal model, with many variants. However, the kind of work cited above suggests that some scholars are now using an additional general model focusing not on translations as texts, nor even on the translation process, but on the translators themselves and the other agents involved. Perhaps we could call this the *agent model*.

In the light of the foregoing sketch, we can now return to our preliminary definition of Translator Studies and offer an expanded version: Translator Studies covers research which focuses primarily and explicitly on the agents involved in translation, for instance on their activities or attitudes, their interaction with their social and technical environment, or their history and influence.

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