

Okay, so how are translation norms negotiated?

A question for Gideon Toury and Theo Hermans

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Norm, you see, was a typical Australian slob who watched football on television as he drank beer. Norm was the norm, or at least the behavior pattern that the enlightened Australian government of the day was seeking to change. “Life, be in it...”, read the slogan that followed the image of Norm, telling us all to get up and do things. So the advertising campaign was aimed at changing a norm (changing, not necessarily breaking) and would seem to have been successful, to judge by the figures one now sees jogging along Australian beaches, not to mention the guilt I feel as I sit and watch football on television. One set of norms was transformed into another. And yet the change was by no means between equal objects; it required investment, effort, and exchange between people.

Now, norms are all very well. They exist, they change, and they can be changed from above or below, by reason, technology, or creativity. Norms are certainly part of anything we do, including translation. Their empirical study usefully insists that most of what we do, including translation, varies from place to place, time to time, and is subject to social conditioning. This relativist reminder is sometimes much needed. Yet the general concept of norms does not really get me moist in the nether regions, neither with excitement nor disgust. Why? Probably because norms, such as we find them in the papers by Gideon Toury and Theo Hermans, are not really opposed to much except norms. You can have Norm 1 or Norm 2, or Norm 1.5 if necessary, as the scientific stance holds its object at arm’s length to make the appropriate measurements. But what I do not find, or do not find enough of in the oppositions of norm and norm, is a radically opposed category that might broach what the Australian advertising campaign was all about: Is life, in any mildly participative sense, really just another set of norms? It could be more like the activity, the interactions, from which norms ensue and which they in turn constrain. No, I do not want to give a theory of life here. Heaven forbid! What I want to do is simply to edge the descriptivists a little further out of their armchairs; I would like them to participate in the active construction of their object, or, better, to recognize more consistently that this is what we are all doing.

My brief comments will thus focus on a question that remains largely unanswered in the papers by Toury and Hermans (nor really in the other material at hand: Douglas Robinson’s response, Daniel Simeoni’s *Target* article, Andrew Chesterman’s book on memes, and Theo Hermans’ manuscript *Translation and Systems*). I want to ask about how norms might be related to some kind of participative social life. But I will be more technical and ask how they are apparently “negotiated” (since Toury uses the term). I would like to know how this is done, where it is done, and by whom.

Signs of Life?

The papers by Toury and Hermans both show signs of an aging structuralist empiricism (which they would not name that way) adjusting to critical theory with a sociological bent (which they might indeed name that way).

In Toury, the signs of the adjustment are the relative absence of terms like “system” or “polysystem”, and the robust presence of items like “power relations”, “creativity”, and “social groups”, as well as vague human things like “hunches” and “feelings”. I suspect all these newish elements could be aligned around the active verb “to negotiate” (“norms are negotiated”, etc.), since the term presupposes active human agents who are scarce, to say the least, in previous texts by Toury. Compare his paper in this volume with, for example, the second chapter of *Descriptive Translation Studies and beyond* (1995), where norms are simply dropped in as an object to be studied on the basis of observed regularities of behavior. There were no people doing anything in that chapter. Now, at least we have people “negotiating”, and thus, perhaps, we have some kind of social logic behind the emergence of norms.

Yet the adjustment is not quite as smooth as one might have hoped. Here we still find insistence on norms as behavioral “regularities”, as something that might be accessible to sociological statistics and fingers that can count (not that, to my knowledge, Toury has ever indulged in actual numbers—sociology is much easier to cite than to do). Here (in both Toury and Hermans) we still find that norms are meaningful in terms of the non-selection of available alternatives, which is about all that non-statistical structuralism ever had to say. And here (now specifically in Toury) we still find very positive values attached to the concepts of “order” and “predictability”, apparently by a mind that very much wants our societies to make sense, to establish regularities, and to produce norms of one kind or another.

In Toury, the adjustment is helped by the recruitment of Davis and his explicit association of “sociability” or “social creativity” with “order and predictability”. Other authorities could have supported similar associations (digging deeper, one might eventually reach the vitalist thought of Guyau’s sociology, where “sociability” was also the prime value). When people conform and work together, they are socially creative, and this is a good thing. Of course, Toury does not actually say “this is a good thing”, but I believe the implicatures are there. And the underlying thought is noble enough not to be taken as an insult. My only problem is that I, like many others of my generation, started theorizing these things in the context of recycled *Tel Quel* revolutions, where absolute creativity (“productivité sans produit”, said Kristeva at the time) required that all norms (usually in the guise of “codes”) be seen as ideological impositions, power-based constraints. They unacceptably restricted activities that were somehow opposed to norms: fractured subjectivities, subversive polysemy, the dynamics of difference, and associated battle-cries that you might remember if you were there at the time. From that perspective, you see, social life is not simply a matter of one norm against another, or of meaning ensuing from the selection of A rather than B, or of people politely socializing in order to agree on acceptable behavior, or of analysts passively observing regular patterns. Much else was happening; even more was supposed to happen: and critical theory, by no means neutral, was supposed to help make it happen. Of course, we are no longer there (“violence” was a positive word then; now our politically correct radicals use it

negatively). But some of us might quietly regret that, opposed to norms, we had, at the time, the seething dynamics of what I would now like to call, in memory of Guyau and the Australian government, “life”. And that is precisely what I miss in Toury’s somewhat forced compatibility of sociability and regularity. Without adequate attention to all those vital process, the verb “to negotiate”, along with its refreshing companions, seems to be dangling on a loose end.

Theo Hermans would appear to have made the same adjustment in a rather more abrupt way. The careful, level-headed and cautious empiricist of the seminal *Manipulation* volume (1985) has somehow been seduced into full-blown critical theory of an even more postmodern ilk. I mean, we cruise along quite nicely with the story of the Flemish translator of Boëthius; we are doing some kind of history or using concepts to investigate facts; and then, splash, we dive into the deep end of a strange theoretical certitude: “Translations compound and intensify the refractory increase in voices, perspectives and meanings, they simultaneously displace and transform texts, and produce...”, and I spare you the rest. What is this? Certainly not a series of hypotheses awaiting falsification. I suspect that the sentence, and the five or so pages that follow it, is a report on theories read rather than translations studied. And since it has little to do with norms—they are not mentioned—let me summarily dispense with the matter: Sorry, but the vast majority of translations I deal with, even the ones I do, are linguistically and ideologically conservative because they reinforce imaginary boundaries between languages. Sorry, but the theoretical sleight of hand here is to attribute active verbs to translations as things (can objects really “compound and intensify”, “displace and transform”?) rather than to translators as people (since I suppose that only subjects, be they producing or receiving, can properly “negotiate”). Sorry, but I preferred the doubting Theo who once wanted to check such things.

Next question.

Where do norms operate?

The signs of life are good. They are a generally positive development. Yet they tend to overshadow the specific question of norms in such a way that I am no longer sure exactly where the norms are supposed to do their stuff. Consider Toury: “whenever regularities are observed, they themselves are not norms [...], observed regularities testify to recurrent underlying motives”. So norms are somewhere behind or “under” the regularities observed. Okay. Norms are also, apparently, the “translation of general values or ideas shared by a community”(Toury 1995: 55). So, if we can overlook the ineptitude of using the term “translation” in a definition of translational phenomena, we have some kind of order or genealogy linking observed regularities, norms, and “shared values”, with the latter at the bottom of the heap. This is confusing because “underlying motives” are not necessarily the same things as “shared values”. It is also difficult to grasp because norms occasionally re-appear well beyond this eminently social embedding, as when Toury describes them as “explanatory hypotheses”, as something that the researcher ultimately invents in order to link observed regularities to some assumed “underlying motives” or “shared values”. Norms are thus at once somehow in the object and in the explanatory narrative. The trick, I suppose, is to ensure they are in both places at once, so that the ones we describe have as close a relation as possible to the ones we presume are there.

But I am not sure that Toury or Hermans really tell me how to do that. Because I am not really sure where the “there” is.

Let us take something that looks like a norm. John Milton (1994, 1996) has found that in a corpus of Brazilian translations of popular novels in the period 1943-1976, non-standard English is *never* rendered as non-standard Portuguese. Milton observes a regularity; he can construe at least one alternative to this regularity (i.e. translate into Brazilian dialects); he would thus appear to have bagged a norm. What is the norm? Apparently, to produce a “more homogenized register than the sources”, which Milton (1994: 28) actually calls a “primary norm”, with reference to Toury. But what is the difference between this “norm” and the “observed regularity”? Not much. The regularity supports the description, and the terms of the description are what looked for the regularity. This is because we have done nothing more than quantify one isolated variable. That does not get us vary far until we start to tie that variable to a few other variables. I mean, the norm is fine, and might as well be identified with the observed regularity, but it has nothing much to say until correlated with something else. In an early paper, Milton does indeed find that the norm is associated with the presence of censorship, the officialist ideologies of the publishing houses concerned, the Brazilian military regime at the time, and the false image of a homogeneous and non-contestational society that must ensue from novels where everyone uses the same register. String all those variables together and we get something more than a banal regularity. We have started to *explain* how and why the norm might have come about; we have delved into the life behind the numbers; and we are using some kind of model to do so (in this case a dash of Althusser and Ideological State Apparatuses). Yet none of that can be definitive: in later papers Milton explains the same norm in terms of translators’ rates of pay (they had no time to delve into dialect). In still more recent reflections (well, John and I were talking about it in the car this morning), Milton makes more of the fact that many of these novels were translated for children and adolescents, a sector in which the norm, for both translational and non-translational writing, was to use standard language only. So perhaps the translation norm was merely conforming to target-culture norms, in which case it would not really be a translation norm, would it?

I imagine Toury correcting me politely: No, he says, the norm is to conform, and I (and John Milton) have made the mistake of identifying the norm with the thing conformed to (the observed regularity). All right. It suits me quite well to locate properly translational norms in the space where one decides to accept or change target-culture norms, since that space is quite likely to be intercultural. But none of that terminological shuffling really solves the basic methodological problem. If the one dependent variable (refusal of non-standard language) can be explained in terms of variables involving political ideologies, translators’ pay and norms for educational literature, to name but three possible paths, how are we to choose between these independent variables? How are we to interrelate them to form some kind of model?

Can Toury and Hermans help us with this problem? Can they tell us how variables might be strung together? And where, exactly, was the negotiating in this case? (Where, for that matter, was the “refractory increase in voices”?)

If we really want to know where norms operate, I think we need to know more about what to do with terms like “motives” and “shared values” in contexts like this. The

mere observation and description of norms does not explain a great deal. It just tells us that there are norms. We have to know about the other variables.

Who negotiates norms?

If there is to be negotiation, we need people able to negotiate. Who are these people? Where are they? Are they professionals, working on behalf of interested parties? Are they the principles themselves? Are they in the centers of cultures? Or perhaps in small groups along the edges?

In *Descriptive Translation Studies and beyond*, Toury starts from a basic spatial binarism, assuming that translation “involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions, i.e., at least two sets of norm-systems on each level” (1995: 56). This seems to mean that norms are either on one side or the other, a division that does indeed underlie the “initial norms” that involve adequacy or acceptability as a strategic aim. This sort of vision made life difficult for people, like myself, who think they find norms in the intersections or overlaps of cultures, in the intercultural spaces where I suspect a lot of translators work. It also complicated things for people, like me, who suspect that norms found only on one side or the other are mostly not properly translation norms, since they tend to concern non-translational text practices as well as translation (e.g. standard language in educational books). Happily, when Toury addresses these questions now, he basically says all previous bets are off. Anything is possible. In each case you have to look around and see who and what the pertinent groups are. This is a huge advance on the previous binary thinking. Now we simply do not know.

How should we find out? Let me risk a practical suggestion. When deciding who the pertinent groups are, or indeed what independent variables are likely to be of interest, we should try to make sure the signs are there, somewhere in the documental object, and somehow related to a debate. This means reading the prefaces, the critical reactions, readers’ responses, anything that can help locate arguments for or against the observed norm. This is more or less what Hermans does in his reading of de Buck. Catholic Flanders is not opposed to Protestant Holland simply because Hermans thinks this is the major division of the world (although Hermans does come from one side rather than the other); it is the division named in de Buck’s preface. In Milton’s study of popular novels, prefaces are used for similar orientation, although there, in a context of censorship, it is as important to read what was actively unsaid. If those signs were not there, researchers could more or less pick on any social group or banal regularity they liked, accumulating arbitrary variables in accordance with their latest readings in critical sociology. If the signs are there, and if they allow us to hypothesize that someone is arguing with someone else, it is usually not too difficult to dig around a little to locate those figures with quite specific social groups, which may or may not be within the one culture. Examples: In my work on Hispanic translation history, some of the debates are between the church and foreign translators (12th century), the church and the crown (transition to the 13th), the crown and Jewish translators (13th), militant religious orders and Jewish translators (early 15th), a Spanish reformer and an Italian humanist (mid 15th), exiles and non-exiles (18th to 20th), reformists and aesthetes (20th), and so on. The groups are uneven in size, power, and cultural location. To that extent, Toury is quite right to leave the question as open as possible; he is correct to accept a far more fragmented social model than the systems to

which he previously subscribed. But the center of our interest, you see, has now shifted from the nature of the norms themselves to the social confrontations in which they are, indeed, negotiated.

Now, let me further suggest that, if such signs of debate can be located, there is no need to pay undue attention to many statistical regularities. When trying to locate a norm of some kind, it is often enough to pick up traces of dissent or debate, or some degree of challenge to the norm. It is often of remarkably little consequence exactly what quantitative regularity is attached to the practices concerned; factors like authority or association with a dominant social group tend to be of rather more weight.

Several interesting things happen when we approach translation history in this way. Instead of compiling chronicles of stability (since that is what we first find when we start looking for norms), we approach the history of change (which is, after all, what history is all about). Instead of risking an arbitrary selection of regularities or social groups, we can at least point to evidence that might help tie our descriptions to things actually at work within the historical objects. And instead of mapping norms onto just one social group or dominant ideology, we start to see them as the results of disagreements bridged by adaptation and compromise.

If you like, John Milton would not really have to choose between variables concerning translators, political ideologies or literary genres. He might, for example, look for signs that an intercultural group of translators wanted to render all features of their source texts, that a group of nationalist educationalists sought to exclude translations altogether from the available children's literature, and that some kind of negotiation between the two resulted in translations being accepted without non-standard language. That is only a suggestion, a possible model. But it makes as much sense as norms that simply hang in the space of regularities, or norms that by definition belong on one side or the other.

Why I prefer negotiation

I do not pretend to have solved all the problems. And I am not really here to sell by own replacements for norms. But I would like to stress, in semi-conclusion, some of the advantages that ensue from taking the term “negotiation” seriously. I am aware that the term is often used as a conveniently vague metaphor, and that is how I suspect it is operating in Toury. And it must indeed be a metaphor in most of our studies. Translators, patrons and social groups very rarely actually come together to work out the norms that might enable them to work together despite their differences; we mostly have to see our field *as if* people were doing this, as if they were in a negotiation process. But the theories of that process can still help us in several ways.

First, norms are already present in neo-classical negotiation theory (along with technical definitions of principles, rules, procedures, strategies and so on, offering us some quite precise analytical tools). Second, negotiation theorists are very much aware that norms are both part of what is to be agreed and part of the process of agreement (the most important norms are the ones that concern how the norms are to be negotiated). This imbrication might help us to think about the relations between the intercultural *how* of translation (properly translational norms, for me) and the *what* of the outcomes of translation (often the non-translational norms of target-culture genres). Third, negotiation

theory generally sees the aim of these processes as being to facilitate cooperation despite difference, as opposed to the blunt differences that are now the gold sought by many of our relativist approaches. And fourth, neo-functional theories are starting to see how international institutions can become something more than the intergovernmental negotiations on which they are based, and how the agents can thus form epistemic communities that then oppose and overrule the principles that were originally represented (the European Court, for example, can oppose its member states). It could pay to ask if translators and their institutions might be able to function in such a way, at a level beyond the constitution of source and target cultures.

But to ask those questions, we have to think well beyond the level of culture-specific norms. Our attention should perhaps be focused on the human negotiators, the people involved in the development of translational norms, rather than on the mere apparition of the norms themselves. The papers by Toury and Hermans, in pointing to modes of life in and around norms, do much to initiate this process. But there is still a long way to go.

Life?

The Australian advertising campaign did much to change Norm's quotidian slobbery. How was this achieved? Basically, by producing a schematized representation of the norm to be changed. That is, by describing a particular set of norms. From this we might usefully learn that our descriptions of norms—be they those of Descriptive Translation Studies or of some kind of more critical theory—are far from neutral. When we describe, we immediately participate. This means that, as various social groups negotiate the norms of translation, we are not merely observers on the sidelines. It is good and pleasing to see Toury and Hermans loosening their lab coats a little and admitting, between the lines, to degrees of involvement. Whether we like it or not, some kind of life is at work in the negotiation of norms. And we are all in it.

References

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