"I train translators": Interview with Dr. Anthony Pym

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Your academic and professional background is very interesting. You are originally from Australia, but you studied in France and the United States in communication studies, comparative literature and sociology. You are now engaged in Translation Studies as an active researcher, theoretician and surprisingly enough directing the PhD program in Translation and Intercultural Studies in Tarragona. Is translation one reason to explain this diversity?

The connection has not really been translation, at least not in the narrow sense of people doing translations. When I began university studies, it was after two years living and working in southern Africa, in what was then still Rhodesia. I had experienced one of the last hard-core colonial regimes, at that time ostensibly boycotted by the rest of the world. I wanted to study because I had many questions that could not be answered through experience alone. I first enrolled in History, logically enough, then Comparative Literature, mainly because the people there were doing what is now called Cultural Studies, with big questions rather than narrow methodologies. The same questions took me to Marxism and then cultural Sociology, and still drive my interests today. In the late 1970s, when structuralist and poststructuralist linguistics ruled the roost, translation was an interesting intellectual problem, no more. I read Derrida, gave it a materialist twist, and that was my Honours dissertation on translation. My PhD concerned postcolonial relations between literary cultures, not translation at all. And the questions that most concern me now are not particularly restricted to translation; I'm interested in risk and cooperation in cross-cultural communication. The thing that drives me is not nightmares of bad translations, but the realization that most of the major conflicts in the world are due to the way cultures perceive (and misperceive) each other. Our research group is called "Intercultural Studies", not "Translation Studies", since there is far more than translation in the world.

So what am I doing in Translation Studies? When I defended my PhD in 1985, I was so fed up with universities that I decided not to have anything to do with them. One of the things I did in

order to live was translate (alongside work for a French-Spanish cultural foundation, where I organized conferences, grants and publications). I eventually moved to Barcelona, where I became a full-time translator for several years, making lots of money and spending all of it, working for clients that included the President of Catalonia and the Barcelona Olympic Games. Then I was offered some part-time teaching at the translation school of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, which grew to a post in the Canary Islands for three years (where I started interpreting at conferences, simply to make money). I gradually became a full-time trainer of translators, and perhaps a part-time intellectual.

When I am asked what my job is, I say I train translators. It sounds useful, honest, skilled, and simple (my mum understands it). But I still live in the hope that translators, along with all mediators, can help improve relations between cultures. And I see no reason why that hope should be tied to any one academic discipline or another.

In your interview with John Milton (*Crop***, 6, 2001) you say that "the DTSers are good people to have beer with". Can you tell us more about how do you see the DTS given the fact that you, Miriam Shlesinger, Daniel Simeoni are working to edit a book called *Beyond Descriptive Translation Studies: Investigations in Homage to Gideon Toury*. What is beyond the DTS?**

Toury's concept of Descriptive Translation Studies was a very necessary corrective to the plethora of opinion-based works that preceded it. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was difficult to envisage Translation Studies as any kind of academic discipline or coordinated research program. All we had were people saying how they translated and how everyone should translate. People like Newmark or Seleskovitch would fit in with that description, but so too, in a more profound way, might classical texts like Walter Benjamin's or even George Steiner's (which brought together several centuries of such opinions). To break with that, Toury (following Holmes and others) declared the need for an empirical discipline. Within that frame, researchers could find out what translations are and what translators do in the world, without trying to defend a priori any one historical notion of what a "good translation" is.

That empirical discipline has now done much of its historical work. We have discovered an enormous variety in concepts of translation, in professional norms, and in the cultural functions of translators. For anyone who has read something of DTS (and unfortunately that does not include most of the people working in Cultural Studies or trying to reinvent Comparative Literature), there can be no going back to the age of experts' opinions about what constitutes a "good translation". And

there remain a whole lot more to discover. Descriptive studies will continue to be produced, and they will continue to be of some oppositional value.

In intellectual terms, however, I think we have now reached a point where description is no longer sufficient. We are producing a lot of empirical data that is ultimately boring, since it speaks to no strong models and is thus doing little to drive the theoretical side of the discipline. More than data, we now need ideas. (As Popper claimed in his critique of twentieth-century science, progress will come from deduction—hard thought—rather than induction—hard data.) Toury saw this in the last chapter of *Descriptive Translation Studies and beyond* (1995). The "beyond" part was, for him, the formulation of probabilistic laws, which would constitute a very powerful way of explaining the data generated by the descriptive branch of the discipline. I agree very much that what we now need are good explanations. But I tend to disagree with Toury (and other great humanists) about the way the discipline should develop in that regard.

I do not think we should be seeking out laws simply because that is what sciences are apparently supposed to do. Academic disciplines come and go, and they should ideally stay around only for as long as they respond to some very fundamental social need. If not, then not. From that perspective, I would hope that Translation Studies can develop in accordance with its social contexts, which are numerous and varied. That means that there need not be just one ideal future. It also means that I, from my particular position, cannot see or even envisage all the wonderful things that are going to happen (not to mention all the less-than-wonderful things). I can only speak in terms of desiderata. Que voici.

In the case of Translation Studies, I see at least four areas in which work is needed, and in which our efforts can respond to deep-seated social problems.

The first area concerns globalization in its relation to cross-cultural communication. For DTS, there are only two cultures (a source and a target), and a translation belongs to only one of them (the target side). That idea is seriously challenged by a world of massive movements of cultural products and massive movements of culture-bearing people. Some of the more complex geometries might be addressed by sociology of professional inetrcultures (reconfigurations of more primary cultures, constituting the places where I think translations tend to be produced). But surely much further modeling is needed, along with better sociological data, before we can say how translation relates to the dynamics of cross-cultural communication in a globalizing age. A lot can be learned, I feel, from the way various postmodern sociologies are now using the term "translation", or from the much varied usages of terms like "culture translation" or "cultural translation". The people tilling those fields seriously lack discipline, terminology and empirical methodologies. But they are talking about what is happening in the world, and I feel it is better for us to be in those discussions rather than in

some cold empirical outside. Put more negatively, I am afraid that many translation scholars, attracted like moths to the lamp of an idealized science, have stopped being intellectuals.

The second area for research is technology. There can be no doubt that electronic technologies have had a radical impact on communication, especially of the cross-cultural kind. The way translators work has been revolutionalized several times, first by computers, then by the Internet, and now by translation memories (with automatic translation waiting in the wings for various modes of integration). What is remarkable is that none of these changes owe anything to Translation Studies. We have not, to my knowledge, participated in any of the technological advances. Yet one would hope, as we discover more about the cognitive aspects of translating and the ways in which translators communicate, we will be able to help in the design of future technology. Further, since communication technology is a fundamental component of globalization, there is a lot to be discovered about how recent changes are affecting not just the way cultures communicate, but the very way in which cultures are constituted in an electronic age.

A third area would be the reception and actual use of translations. This has been a lacuna for a long time. Just as linguistics finds its traditional object in speakers, so we have focused on translators, when reception is at least half of each communication act. That said, I do not think we should study reception simply because no one has done so. There are better reasons for looking in that direction. The first reason is that the very few empirical studies that have looked at reception suggest that different translations or translation strategies tend *not* to have a significant influence on the receiver. This is not the kind of result we like to find, and for that very reason it is interesting (our whole discipline may be irrelevant). More importantly, the study of reception has moved into the domain of "usability". This concerns research on what receivers actually do with texts, how they connect communication with action, which goes well beyond what is traditionally associated with "reading". I strongly suspect that empirical research in this vein will show not only that many of our traditional arguments about translation strategies are irrelevant, but also that abstract debates about "text quality" are very wide of the mark. Experienced users can make good sense of some very cheap-and-dirty translations, and a lot of companies are thus simply refusing to pay for the luxury of translations that are fully human-produced and human-revised (quite apart from the fact that many translations are destined to remain unread anyway). This is ultimately an economic debate in which we should be able to play a part. We should be able to point out, for example, that the calculations of usability (and indeed of the whole localization industry, where usability is the criterion) are normally very short-term. They do not account for long-term effects on languages, cultures, and intercultural relations based on digital divides. We should have enough humanism left in us to be able to take up that cudgel.

The fourth area is ethics. This may sound strange, since Descriptive Translation Studies effectively swept away all the old debates about how translators should translate. The empiricists were right to break with the age of mere opinions. However, there is a lot more to ethics than just telling translators what they should do. We are in very serious need of good ideas about how cultures *should* relate, not just about how badly they actually do it. From that perspective, from the vantage point of ethics in a wide sociocultural sense, I think we can ask fresh questions about what cross-cultural communication should be like, and thus about how translators should work. This need not involve prescriptivism. At its most useful, ethics proposes ideas that help people rethink their activities. For example, the theorist Arnaud Laygues proposes that we should not think about what "the text" means; instead we should engage in a dialogue with the "you" represented by the text, with the person who us trying to communicate through the object. That is a simple idea, but it tends to resonate well whenever I steal it and use it in the middle of a conference on translation technology. Similar things might be done, I hope, with cooperation theory, with the idea that people can and should communicate for mutual benefit, and that when this does not happen, the communication is unethical. My own thought in this area has actually focused on the notion of risk. I think that we should learn to work hard on problems that are high-risk, and that risk can be defined as the possibility of non-cooperation. And from there, a whole land of theory opens up.

So much for what can happen beyond traditional text-based descriptions. I hasten to add that all of the above concerns interpreting just as much as written translation (my term "translation" covers both). I also add, with double haste, that all these areas overlap considerably, and none of them can really be tackled by just one researcher staring at a lonely computer. Beyond description, we really need projects in which we can work together, both with other translation scholars and with other disciplines.

In your book, *Method in Translation History* (1998), you emphasize on the role of translators in writing the history of translation. How do you see the position of texts (books and translations themselves) in translation history or in what you prefer to call translator history or the history of translator? Please also tell us what your advices are for a researcher who likes to write the history of literary translation in Iran, given the fact that no major work has been done before and it possibly covers a period of less than two hundred years.

First, the past is just a series of inscriptions that exist in the present. Any kind of history we write will be based on those inscriptions, which can be seen as so many texts. Even when we interview translators, what we produce are texts, which then have to be interpreted. Texts are all we can work

from, and the writing of any kind of history must pass through the interpretation of texts. In seeking a history of translators (rather than just translations), my aim has never been to circumvent the hermeneutics of texts. My interest has simply been in the type of narrative we construct on the basis of the inscriptions. If we try to reconstruct lives rather than just translation processes, several things happen. First, we reduce the illusionary importance of those interminable lists of linguistics shifts that we find whenever we compare a translation with its source. The questions quickly move from what the shifts are to why they were made, and that search for causes always brings in a wide range of non-translational material. Second, when doing translator history we quickly become aware that there is usually more than one agent at work in the production of translations (and of texts generally). Individual translators work in networks, forming relations with other translators, with clients, with readers, with authors, with political groups and ideological projects. And those relations, often involving extreme power differentials, impinge on what happens in the translating process. Third, and more importantly, those networks between people tend not to correspond to the ideal orders in which we arrange texts. One kind of history starts from the idea that all the texts in language A are over here, all the texts in language B are over there, and translation history is going to be a story about one side or the other (usually about the target side). Another kind of history, however, can follow the numerous links that connect people across the supposed boundary between those two sides. In that second kind of history, which I call intercultural, we have to talk about the different cultures at the one and the same time, and about the overlaps in which professional intermediaries tend to work. Intercultural history thus promotes a very different view of the world. And the best way to do it is by considering people, rather than ideal orders of texts.

As for the history of literary translation in Iran, I have no idea. The more I do research in this field, the more I realize how different the underlying intercultural relations can be, and indeed how different the fundamental conceptions of translation tend to be. More important perhaps, I do one kind of history in order to work out problems in the intercultural relations that affect me; you will no doubt do research to work on problems of a different order. I think you have the right to that historical and even personal involvement in research. My only real advice would be that you think about research as a way of solving problems that are of importance to you.

Just as there were people in the past, there are people in the present. And you and I are among them, creating our own histories.

In *Method in Translation History* you say that "there was never such thing as a school of translation at Toledo" (1998: 165). How do you see the translation activities that were carried out at Toledo?

I think we're talking about the translations carried out in Toledo, Hispania, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Despite many myths, the available documents do not indicate the existence of any school where translators were trained to translate. This is not my discovery: researchers like Haskins and d'Alverny have been saying this for the past 50 years or so.

I suppose this is an interesting example of why we need careful attention to documents when we do history. When you get to what is actually written (I deal with this in Negotiating the Frontier), you find that a lot else is wrong as well. For instance, there were translations being carried out not just in Toledo, but in many places in what is now northern Spain and southern France, along the broad frontier between Islam and Christendom. The histories say that Archbishop Raimundus of Toledo was responsible for setting up the translation teams, but the documents suggest he was the client for just one translation. Some historians claim there was continuity from the twelfth century (translations in Latin) to the thirteenth (translations in Castilian), but if you analyze the dates, there was a gap of about 30 years. And so on.

On the other hand, there are so many gaps in medieval history that all the evidence has to be interpreted, often through quite subtle detective work. For example, the one phrase in which something like a twelfth-century teaching activity is described says that "Galippus the Mozarab spoke in the language of Toledo and scholars wrote down in Latin". This could be a professor giving a lecture, looking at a book in Arabic and explaining it in a Romance language. Then the visiting scholars took their lecture notes in Latin. The scene could be a teaching activity. Then again, it could be a translation process, since other documents indicate that the translations were carried out from written Arabic to written Latin through the mediation of spoken Romance. So was Galippus teaching or translating? The documents do not tell us. But the question is interesting in itself. A teacher is usually in a position of power; a translator often is not. So perhaps when we interpret this particular stretch of history, we should forget about our presuppositions of what translation is, what power translators have, and why the idea of a "school of translators" might be interesting even if false.