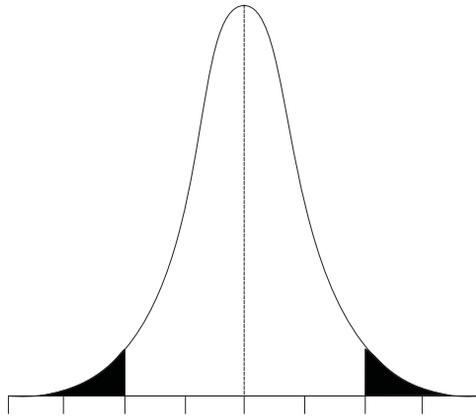


***Why Common Ground Is Not Automatically
Space for Cooperation***
On Chesterman versus Arrojo

Anthony Pym
Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona

Andrew Chesterman will not particularly like my reading of the text he wrote conjointly with Rosemary Arrojo, no matter how much I should praise both writers for the dialogue. Yes, such things can only be positive for Translation Studies. Then again, no, will say Chesterman, the dialogue is not linguistic empiricism ‘versus’ deconstruction; it is a matter of finding common ground, a basis for cooperation, a set of consensual items that might bring us together around a discipline, a group effort, a loose social structure able to provide jobs, publications, students, knowledge, whatever. And yet, I’m afraid, the competitive ‘versus’ is there, and not just because of my own penchant for debate. Let me explain why.

Consider, if you will, a Normal Distribution curve (actually a z-curve):



The curve might recall the one Toury uses to explain norms (1995: 68). It is also the kind of curve that our empirical statistics such as t-tests are actually measuring; they say, more or less, how well our data fit in with the curve. Here we see many similar things in the middle, two symmetrical tails at both ends.

Further, if the things most in the middle are the stuff of norms, of patterns, of low p-values, of at least quantitative social significance, the crazies in the black tails are where change might begin or the most intriguing qualities might be found.

I suggest that what Chesterman most seeks is somewhere in that peaking middle, and that what Arrojo most values would be far closer to either tail (no innuendoes intended). This might enable me to claim that the common ground constituting that middle is of interest to Chesterman but not to Arrojo. More, the Chestermanian-Arrojado act of cooperation is not to build up that quantitative middle space but to define each other in terms of it: the empiricist needs the tails (if there were no lost sheep there would be no shepherd) just as the deconstructionist needs the middle (where the masses build illusory structures for smart intellectuals to deconstruct).

Several minor points:

1. In this mutual but asymmetric dependence, Arrojo seems a little thrown by Chesterman's reasoned empiricism. She seeks to do a bit of screaming against fidelity, prescriptivism, authoritarian rationalism, millennial tradition, apparently without appreciating the extent to which a Popperian like Chesterman can make much the same critique.
2. Arrojo scores her final points with all the enthusiasm of a political debater, unafraid to enlist syllogisms in her critique of western rationalism, unashamed to unleash deontic modals in her liberation from authority. Like several hundred deconstructionist school marms ever keen to point out how language requires the plural interpretation of all thought except Derrida's, she positively requires the enemy she invents, even if that enemy is not quite Chesterman.
3. Empowerment is then somehow assumed to come from reading such critiques. But that must concern the very narrow power of postmodern intellectuals, impeccably existential (since I don't know, you decide; I thus empower you?). Professional translators might gain more social and economic power from an array of strategic action, from technical competence in languages, from actual experience with texts and clients, more generally from much that experiment and empiricism have brought over the centuries. Power, in the social and commercial worlds, now belongs more to science and its technologies than to facile critiques of an absent scholasticism. Postmodern intellectuals are by no means the ones leading change.

4. Arrojo's refusal to talk about degrees of semantic stability is simply disappointing. Did she think some trap lay down that path? But Derrida's discourse on iteration should have allowed a satisfactory compromise. Strangely timid purism.

5. As for all those wonderful propositions about what Translation Studies is and what it can do, well, as long as no one is saying what Translation Studies is not or cannot do, who cares? A discipline might as well include any activity of potential interest, or whatever one can get away with.

6. Actually I do care a little: I believe that a narrow focus on translation and nothing but translation is ideologically pernicious, since it invites us not to compare the costs and advantages of translation against the range of alternative modes of cross-cultural communication. I suspect that the restriction to translation blinds us to the conceptual geometries of interculturalities. But I'll save those arguments for another day.

7. And if you do want to focus on translation and nothing but translation, perhaps the 'TS is...' and 'TS can do...' mode of formulation is just a tad pedestrian. Far more stimulating, I suggest, to set about formulating problems to be solved, perhaps as in the classical problems of mathematics (I'm told this is one of Daniel Gile's themes). What kind of problems? Well, ways to make the European Union work with 20 or more languages; text typologies for field-specific translation tools; ways readers successfully negotiate low-effort translations; ethical principles for non-equivalence tasks; ways to train translators and interpreters so they can work as people rather than machines; for example.

8. On this last point, the issue of training, let me simply stress how little is actually known about most educational aspects (level at which training should begin, adaptation to changing market demands, sequencing of competencies, evaluation). And yet the massive growth in translator training institutions remains the motor behind the expansion of so much of Translation Studies. More important, it seems to me that we can only learn about training processes by using an active interdisciplinarity, reading and applying research on language acquisition, on learning strategies, on the sociology of education.

I mention this because the dialogue between Chesterman and Arrojo was initially structured in terms of a meeting on the training of translators. But do the experts in theories of translation also know everything about pedagogy? (Having discussed this dialogue with my research-methodology class, I asked

which of the two authors would make the better translation teacher. Neither, came the general reply, what does this have to do with learning how to translate?)

Yes, we must talk to each other, producing common ground where possible. Let the Normal Distribution curves bulge with consensual contentment. But we must also be prepared to talk to those who tend neighbouring plots.

Author's address:

Anthony Pym · Filologia Anglogermànica · Universitat Rovira i Virgili · Plaça Imperial Tàrraco, 1 · E-43005 TARRAGONA, Spain · e-mail: ap@fll.urv.es; apym@tinet.fut.es

When in Doubt, Contextualize... ■

Daniel Simeoni
York University (Toronto) ■

I will not address the initial formulation of the issue — objective, meaning-stable essentialism *versus* radical non-essentialism of the indeterminacy-of-meaning school of thinking. To state the obvious: A good many approaches to cultural diffusion and translation are *at the same time* empirical, descriptive, and very much aware of the dynamics of culture and language. Meaning is certainly not taken by all descriptivists to be stable, neither substantially nor even formally. Nor does every researcher who considers him/herself a post-modern culturalist reject empirical work. Rather, I wish to sketch out a context for the issue, enlarging the focus to the human sciences where similar questions have arisen in the past few years. What may be happening here is that established translation studies, both of the postmodern persuasion and of the traditional descriptive-empirical type, are faced with a questioning (some would call it a crisis) that has affected not only literary criticism and comparative literature but anthropology, history, legal studies, to a lesser extent linguistics, pragmatics and the language sciences, as well as the very notion of what makes good, “proper” science. The commotion in those areas of knowledge has been circumstantial but no less far-reaching. It probably accounts, at