

A spirited critique of a certain anti-empiricism in Translation Studies (and in anything else concerning the study of cultures)

Anthony Pym

Version 5. March 8, 2018

Much revised draft of a paper published in *Translation Spaces* 5:2 (2016): 289–313.

Abstract: The scientific method known as empiricism has been attacked in two influential books in Translation Studies. Mona Baker's *Translation and Conflict* sees all knowledge as being produced through narrative, thereby excluding the processes of repeated testing and dialogue that can be associated with an empirical approach. Further, Baker's failure to attend to textual linearity, voice, and narrator position lends her project an ideological essentialism that actively shuns such empirical testing. Lawrence Venuti's *Translation Changes Everything*, on the other hand, escapes essentialism by insisting on the active interpretation of all data. However, Venuti thereby falsely opposes hermeneutics to empirical method, in a way that willfully ignores key twentieth-century epistemologies of science. The resulting anti-empiricism leads him to some very questionable psychoanalytical conclusions and an excessive reliance on the authorities of dictionaries and distanced theorists. Neither Baker nor Venuti can say, as must any empiricist engaging on research, 'I don't know.'

The one thing an activist cannot say, and which any empiricist must say, prior to all else, is this: 'I don't know.'

One of the things that first attracted me to translation was the way this particular object of knowledge invited repeated testing. You can say anything you like about cultures, utopias, infamies, and the rest – and my literature professors were more or less saying anything they liked, inculcating closed orthodoxies – but at the end of the day, with translations, there is at least something there, available to all, that thing can sometimes say you are wrong. The translation, as an artifact, as something actually resulting from decisions about intercultural relations, is firstly that: one of the things that can turn our private hallucinations into something more than fantasies. Of course, there is no reason why the same testability should not be available across the board, in any kind of cultural research. But in Translation Studies, at least when I began, that desire for testability was particularly pronounced.

It seems that many of our current studies on translation are no longer there. Much of the current foam will disappear into the flotsam of opinion and failed disciplines. So I tell myself to look the other way, to extend respect where it is due, to let the rest silently disappear. Yet some of them are not floating away, or at least not as fast as they deserve to. Mona Baker's *Translation and Conflict* (2006) should have nothing to do with scholarly research on translation, yet it is there, with its appeal to narrative being cited by students from Indonesia to Africa, somehow as a legitimate way to do research. And Lawrence Venuti's *Translation Changes Everything* (2013) was vigorously promoted by Routledge as the way forward in Translation Studies, with Venuti advertised as 'linguist of the month', a pin-up for earnest young scholars everywhere. Although these books have serious virtues and atrocious flaws, here I will not attempt inventories in either ledger. The thing that

concerns me now is more basic than the stuff of a review: both these books argue that empiricism is a bad thing, so the study of translation should not be empirical, or at least not empirical in precisely the sense that first attracted me to the discipline. That is the one point with which I want to take issue. The engagement will hopefully help me identify something good in empiricism, or at least in the kind of empiricism that deserves a place in research on translation.

1. Baker tells stories

Mona Baker's *Translation and Conflict* (2006) is about narratives. Baker, though, does not have her own theory of narrative: she picks up fragments of theorizing from other people, then shanghaies those pieces into political activism, a place that not all of the original theorists had envisaged. That trip into activism is by no means objectionable in itself – we all need reasons to produce and reproduce knowledge, there never was any initial neutrality, and strong self-reflexive motivation is very much a welcome thing. The point I object to here is simply the moving process itself, on three technical counts:

- 1) When Baker sees narrative as a single underlying cause of all else (this seems to be the way she uses the term 'ontological'), that untestable assumption is manipulated so as to disregard all the alternatives and complements to narrative, notably the many forms of *dialogue*. The fact that people tell stories thus becomes a world populated by nothing but stories, which is an appalling impoverishment.
- 2) When Baker defines narrative, she does so in a way that does not require discursive linearity, to the extent that the researcher can effectively stitch together whatever rags she finds, effectively becoming the maker of the stories. (Yes, all narratives are constructed in reception, but usually on the basis of some linearity, in terms of one thing following another.)
- 3) Perhaps in order to elude that problematic responsibility for construction, Baker's approach is silent about the one thing we did learn when we studied narratology in the bad old days of literary theory: the problems of *voice* and the *position* of the narrator are somehow no longer of consequence, all of which is wondrous strange.

Let me elaborate each of these points in turn.

1.1. Narrative as ontology?

Baker cites the ontological view of narrative as follows: “Narration is the context for interpreting and assessing all communication – not a mode of discourse laid on by a creator's deliberate choice but the shape of knowledge as we first apprehend it” (Fisher 1987: 193).” (Baker 2006: 9). This is a difficult idea. Narration is not communication: it is *the* frame for *understanding* communication. It is not something someone produces – it is somehow there, in our understanding of all knowledge. So we must assume there is no understanding without narration, and this must include our understanding of narration (which could lead to a facile paradox: narration could somehow exist prior to our

understanding of it, yet it *is* the act of understanding, so there can be no logical anteriority – but let’s not go there today; there are easier games to play). Narration is, let us say, not conveyed and not created: it simply happens, unavoidably, to the same extent that understanding happens, and at the same time. Further, according to the citation, it is there at the beginning (“we first apprehend”) and it thus there forever (“is the context”, for all time), thanks to a non-narrative universalism essential to all essentialist discourse. The terms of this eternal origin are thereby unquestioned and unquestionable: since it is the very shape of understanding, narrative clearly cannot itself be understood by any wider frame. Further, logically, neither Fisher nor Baker could possibly explain how they came to realize this, except by revelation or illumination. Yes, this is *in nuce* a discourse of necessarily blind conviction, of fervor and belief, even of devotion, to the extent that the term ‘narration’ in the quote could happily be replaced by words of similar transcendence: ‘love’, ‘faith’, or ‘desire’, for example – they would all work the same way.

Having made this supreme investment in someone else’s transcendental axiom, Baker builds up her own imaginary: narrative becomes “the principal and inescapable mode by which we experience the world” (2006: 9), where primacy is once again eternal. It is also “a meta-code that cuts across and underpins all modes of communication” (2006: 9), where the ‘meta’ cuts from above, the ‘across’ slices the sides, and the ‘underpin’ pricks from below, constituting a completely three-dimensional torture chamber. No chance of anyone escaping from that one! What a relief that Baker is magically outside the box to describe the scene! (But wait a minute, how did she get there? And how can she possibly entice the rest of us out to her point of external enlightenment?)

Since this essentialism precludes the influence of anything apart from narrative, everything Baker comes across is absorbed into the construct, like cows into a tornado, or planets into a black hole. There are basically no other genres or text types. The competing reasons for the French government’s ban on women wearing hijab could well be narratives (2006: 22), but surely they are first *interpretations* of what the hijab represents? No? They have to be stories? Okay, whatever you say. And then we are told that ‘labeling’ is “any discursive process that involves using a lexical item, term or phrase to identify a person, place, group, event or any other key element in a narrative” (2006: 122). Alright, that sounds fine. But hang on: couldn’t labeling happen in any other discursive practice as well? Do all labels really have to be for a narrative? Aren’t labels one mode of knowledge creation, of getting a handle on the world, in a non-narrative way? Okay, whatever. Further, Baker tells us, “[s]cientific theories and reports are narratives in the sense that they are ultimately ‘stories’ that have a beginning, middle and end” (2006: 10), which is a welcome (then forgotten) appeal to linearity. The linearity is mostly the case in science, of course, at least in broad terms: we had a problem, we did an experiment, we found a solution, and that’s a story. But those texts are surely *also* expository presentations of information? So where does the ‘ultimately’ come from? Surely they are *first* narratives, and then something else? Who is able to shift us so sure-footedly from the beginning to the end of all time for all genres? This ‘ultimately’ can only ensue from a borrowed eschatology of revelation.

Or again, consider this particular piece of rehashing:

Participants in any interaction play different roles (announcer, author, translator, prosecutor, lecturer, military officer, parent), engage in the interaction in different capacities (speaker, reader, primary addressee, overhearer, eavesdropper), and take

different positions in relation to the event and other participants (supportive, critical, disinterested, indifferent, uninformed outsider, committed). The sum total of all these possibilities constitute [sic] what Goffman calls the frame space of a participant. (2006: 109)

This is good: those are indeed Goffman's terms. But was Goffman talking about narrative? Not exclusively. The terms in question are taken from Goffman's *Forms of Talk* (1981), where 'storytelling' and 'narrative' are only actually named on four or so pages. Goffman's prime model of communicative interaction was more like conversation, the way individuals communicate "in the presence of others" (1981: 1). That's what he was talking about! So why should Baker reframe him in this way (the same thing happens in her rehash of Clifford, Lienhardt and Kuhn on page 62)? What happened to the conversation part? Why has dialogue been mysteriously airbrushed from the conceptual map?

Something similar happens here, on one of the very few pages of Baker's book where translation is actually mentioned:

Translators and interpreters play a crucial role in disseminating public narratives within their own communities and ensuring that all members of a society, including recent migrants, are socialized into the view of the world promoted in these shared stories. (2006: 36)

Once again, there is nothing wrong here on the surface. One could carp at the unsupported assumption that translators and interpreters all do the same thing, always in the interests of the one dominant 'view of the world' (surely many translators, as members of specific language communities, also have other motivations?), but why should we care about individual cases? Something else concerns me here, something more sociological. What is the prime institution for socialization? What have we been building for centuries in order to fabricate the groundwork for social consensus? Just translators and interpreters? Does nothing else play a 'crucial role'? Surely *schools* deserve a mention here somewhere? And what happens in schools? Yes, there is the transmission of stories, certainly. And there is massive inculcation into ideologies and official languages, of course. But in many schools, those based on the principles of liberalism, there is also interaction, debate, conversion, dialogue, occasionally without any necessary restriction to "*the* view of the world", in the singular, apparently carried by public narratives that form a coherent, unified block. 'Socialization', for Baker, thus becomes entrapment in a monolithic controlled public space, enclosed on all sides by the spikes of stories. A society, for Baker, is a very big, dark, nasty storyteller. All good stories need a bogeyman.

Is there anything outside of narrative? What would non-narrative look like? If narratives can be changed and questioned, as Baker admits (since translators change the stories, and enlightened analysts can see through the myths, apparently), where do we get the power to do so? This is where Baker displays all the traits of an ideologue: she shows no awareness that her definitions and her actions clash with each other; there is no sense of productive contradiction. Instead of self-critical reflection, here you find something much neater. As you move into the book, the world divides into two classes of people, the good and the bad, until you reach a massive assumption of what the goodies all do as a coherent ideological group: "the existence of stable communities stimulated by higher ideals of

justice and truth rather than success and professionalism” (2006: 157). Ah, so there is justice and truth, somehow beyond narrative, perhaps in the pure higher air where all can be seen, or back in the days when we just missed out on being hippies? And the rest of us are stuck in the muck of money and professions (yes, money and professions are bad in this book), awaiting Baker to show us the way out of entrapment.

Baker’s text is undoubtedly a narrative, indeed a tale of facile redemption. So how could anyone actually swallow the essentialist fairy tale? Truth and justice...? With no argument or dialogue beyond stories?

Let me suggest, as I have been doing for some years and have intimated above, that one of the major ways of producing the kind of power able to move beyond narrative enclosure is dialogue, talk, exchange, always between non-equals, always productive of asymmetric dialectic, and never closed or monolithic. Dialogue is operative on just as many levels and in just as many insidious ways as narrative; it does not presume direct access to truth and justice; it questions the view of cultures as stable ideologies; it need not assume that there are just two classes of people in the world; it may indicate ways in which we can engage with the pernicious values that surround us. We can talk about what is wrong; we can negotiate solutions; and that talking and negotiating can itself create a dynamic, distributed kind of knowledge, able to move beyond the closures of initial narrative. Why not?

This is not difficult to think about. Baker’s sense of narrative as ideological entrapment is common enough in the educated media, where someone like Jon Stewart talks freely about a political party’s ‘narrative’ on a certain topic: “that’s their narrative”, meaning that they are so locked into their ideology that they cannot see the other party’s point of view. That happens. Yet in the same breath, the same commentator can call for a ‘national conversation’, to break through the deadlock of opposed narratives. In Baker, there is no conversation (national or otherwise), and no appeal to dialogue. Why? Because the first thing you need for a conversation is the confession that there is something you don’t know, or that another person might know differently, or even better.

In terms of international relations, the refusal of dialogue is pernicious enough. Yet when that same refusal extends to translation and interpreting, to the mediation activities necessary for a great deal of international dialogue, the results could be disastrous. Rather than seek understandings and cooperation, human subjects are here left telling stories about each other. And that is not a good place to be.

So should we oppose narrative to dialogue, simply because Baker represses the latter? That would be a clear mistake, of course. Just as stories are told as parts of conversations, just as they are adapted to the various communication participants, so narratives form just one class of elements in communicative exchange. Whether they are anything more, deep down in the brain or in the lost origins of human society, I really don’t know.

1.2. Testing narrative

Baker’s attack on empiricism is not particularly based on the essentialism of the narrative axiom; it has more to do with its application. The assault comes here, where Baker dispenses with linearity:

Narrative theory further allows us to piece together and analyse a narrative that is not fully traceable to any specific stretch of text but has to be constructed from a range of sources, including non-verbal material. (2006: 4)

That principle allows Baker to steer away from the kind of narrative analyzed in the sociolinguistics of Labov, for example, or indeed the stuff that old literary theorists deal with. Now you can go cherry-picking, taking the bits and pieces that suit you, and the resulting ideology is all a ‘narrative’.

Of course, Baker is free to define a technical term in any way she likes. But if you separate linearity from narrative, as is done here, there are certain consequences.

For example, if it becomes legitimate to pick a snippet from here, a clipping from there, and piece the two together as a person’s ‘narrative’, what are you doing with the rest of what that person says and does? If everything is narrative (let’s enter the monochromatic world for a moment), how many alternatives are discarded whenever a story is concocted on the basis of selective sampling? What happens to the complexity and dignity of the person? What happens to the richness of experience and thought? In Baker’s narrative, as it is applied, we all become one-dimensional characters, in the same way as translators become agents of the dominant ideologies and Goffman becomes a theorist of no more than narrative. Linearity at least makes you pay attention to the inconvenient bits. It makes you ask about the other things that concern the person in question, the situations in which they interact, the people they are narrating to and for. So when linearity is dispensed with, so too is that sense of complex, multiple experience, the construction of our individual voices, and the embedding of conversation in situation. Dispense with all linearity, and there is no way the reduction of the human and the historical can be challenged. The sampling cannot be wrong.

This happens in a prime piece of activist analysis, where the organization Translators without Borders (TWB) is taken to task because it purports to do good things while in reality it is nothing more than “an offshoot of a commercial translation agency” (2006: 159). Since there are only two groups of people in the world (truth-and-justice opposed to commerce-and-professions, remember), the company cannot be doing good, by definition. The proof is clearly seen in the fact that the commercial agency “proudly lists among its top clients several companies that are widely thought to be implicated in the very atrocities that TWB presumes to bring to our attention, including General Electric and L’Oréal” (2006: 160). Are we interested in how many translators work with TWB? In who they are and why they volunteer? In the unpaid projects they undertake? In the way they translate? In what they, as individual people, have to say about themselves? None of that enters into the analysis, since there is no need to deal with any actual story constructed by the group being considered. All we need are the names of two client companies, the unelaborated assumption that they are from the dark side (by an agentless “thought to be implicated...”, and that is enough); then the assumption that the only outcome of TWB is somehow to allow these baddies the pretense of humanitarian engagement (2006: 161). There can be no doubt that international capital buys altruistic image-building all over the world and every day of the week, but there could be doubt as to whether it is an entirely negative thing, and to whether that particular collusion really overrides all else – I don’t know. In this approach, there is clearly no empiricism of measuring more good than bad;

there are no complex people; there is no dialectic; opposition and pressure become the only solution.

There is some minor hypocrisy in this. Baker was running a business at the time of this book, making money, selling this particular text through an Anglo-American multinational, and coordinating a postgraduate program where students can pay up to 13,000 pounds a year to learn her truth and justice, or to breathe her air, and let's not forget she is professionally employed in the education system of a neo-imperialist state responsible for still-recent illegal wars. I am not sure her position is entirely pristine, and I am convinced that none of us will entirely withstand indiscriminate charges of guilt-by-association. One thing is for sure: this particular oneupwomanship, where one activist claims to be cleaner than the other, has nothing to do with translation (it concerns any kind of activism) and it mobilizes the most infantile narratives.

1.3. Who constructs the story?

The one-dimensional reduction of characters in Baker's narrative goes hand-in-hand with her presence as a supremely omniscient narrator, perhaps the ultimate retainer of justice and truth. And yet the one thing we learned from literary narratology, back in the day, was the devious duplicity of narrative positions.

The strange thing about this book is that not even Baker believes what she is saying. Or better, there is the narrator Baker who says all these gung-ho things, and the more authorial Baker who mitigates those same Manichean claims, in the name of some kind of academic intelligence. The clearest example of this is in the book's introduction:

Finally, much of what I have to say in this book will be interpreted as a strong condemnation of US, UK and Israeli policies towards the so-called third world in general and the Arab World in particular. I make no apologies for this stance. However, the fact that I have chosen to focus on the narratives of the political elites in particular regions must not be taken to imply that I see these elites and their narratives as representative of the relevant societies as a whole. Indeed, much of the critique of US, UK and Israeli policies I draw on here comes from American, British and Israeli sources. I am also aware that Arab and Islamic societies generate their own highly questionable narratives, often fuelling the very conflicts that continue to tear these regions apart. I have chosen to prioritize the narratives of the Anglo-American and Israeli political elites because, in my own narrative of current conflicts, they deserve special attention given the enormous war and media machines they have at their disposal. (2006: 6)

Well said! So how can the same person be aware of cultural heterogeneity in the paratext and then blissfully unaware of it in the text proper? Why these two different voices? Why should someone radically affirm X and then state that they know X is not really so? I posit that this strange scission of voices allows the person to know both X and non-X, and thus to be doubly knowledgeable, rather than having to admit they simply don't know.

If you read closely, this strategy is repeated throughout the text. One of Baker's favorite adverbials, for example, is 'arguably', as in the following (and many other places):

Arguably [...] we are constantly being socialized into barbarous narratives even today (2006: 12)

[TWB has] a casual and charity-based attitude to ‘doing good’ that is arguably self-serving and exploitative (2006: 162)

[The narrative paradigm] is radically democratic where the traditional rational paradigm is arguably elitist (2006: 163)

In all these instances, a gross reduction is technically presented as ‘something someone might argue’ but not as something for which there need be any evidence at all. That is, the proposition is both advanced and retracted in the same breath; the narrator says it but does not say it – they want it to be true but they evade responsibility for that desire. (More the pity: I would have loved to see an argument about the elitism of rationality, or the non-rationality of narrative, but this book offers no evidence on either count.)

We are left, then, with two intertwined voices: the activist, who advances statements that are designed to act without evidence, as events in themselves, and the scholar, who somehow still recognizes that something more is needed, in a virtual admission that the activist’s text has a status close to fiction.

Are these voices entirely separate? Hard to say. In an extensive interview in which this book is discussed, Baker does adopt a scholarly voice, in part because she is being interviewed by the scholar Andrew Chesterman, but then strangely drops her guard and relapses. For example, here is her hedged construction (“...for me at any rate...”) of German-language *Skopos* theory (based on her entire ignorance of the German language, but should that matter?):

We soon configure something like *skopos* theory as a narrative in our minds: the theory evokes (for me at any rate) an industrialized, affluent society populated by clients and highly professional translators who belong to the same ‘world’ as their clients, who are focused on professionalism and making a good living, and who are highly trained, confident young men and women. These professional translators and interpreters go about their work in a conflict-free environment and live happily ever after. They do not get thrown into Guantánamo or shot at in Iraq, and they do not end up on the border of Kosovo and Albania in the middle of a nasty war, where they would have to decide whether or not to fulfil their commission at the expense of treating potential victims with compassion and respect. (Baker and Chesterman 2008: 21-22)

The intriguing thing here is not particularly that Baker has invented a fantasy based on no evidence (one gets used to that sort of thing) or the way she does not feel obliged to present any evidence. Surely what she describes here was very close to her own professional life at the time, in the academia and gnomeland suburbs of Manchester? Surely the frustration that was expressed, here in 2008, was with her own ensconcing in Western security? And the logical response, at the time, was to fight the good cause with the weapons at hand: email lists and books, from the comfort of your own computer, in a genteel and conflict-free environment.

Since then, of course, events in Egypt have led Baker to dispense countless pieces of advice on what to believe and who to blame (do *not* believe ‘the Western press’, and blame them whenever possible), since she has somehow known the truth at every turn and can tell many stories to which she knows both the real beginning and the real end. At one poor point it seems that belief in ‘democracy and truth’ obliged her to justify a bloody military coup d’état – like Saint-Just (yes, I exaggerate the Romanticism and degree of engagement, but not the activist trap), whose radical belief in the people’s freedom led to the Terror, or perhaps like those who supported Napoleon as the savior of the Revolution (there was the democratic appeal to military control, after all). It is the classical fall of the engaged intellectual. No, I do not know what she should have done instead. And I sincerely wish that Baker, when she sees her ideals leading to blood in the streets, would also admit, be it just for a moment, that she herself did not really know. That confession, that ever-so-slight openness to self-doubt, to experience, and to public testing, might yet provide the starting point for a discovery of the world.

But activists cannot say, ‘I don’t know.’

2. Venuti changes everything

Translation changes everything (2013) is a collection of 14 essays written by Lawrence Venuti since 2000, promoted by the publisher Routledge as “incisive” and “essential reading for translators and students of translation alike”. In most of the essays, Venuti speaks eloquently as a literary translator working in the United States, explaining not just the aims of his various projects but also his reviews and rejections by publishers, as well as his strategies for a more pro-active and politically engaged translation culture. That discourse should be welcomed by literary translators: it reveals numerous ways in which translation is still sidelined in the United States; it seeks to give translators a voice in a culture that would otherwise keep them silent.

For students of translation, however, and thereby for the international *academic* discipline of Translation Studies, the scorecard is more mixed. Venuti puts forward three basic propositions: that translations bear traces of the translator’s unconscious (fine in theory, but pretty weird in Venuti’s practice), that translators should engage in more theory (ditto), and that translations themselves should no longer be either fluent or resistant, but should instead function as events (where I might be the only scholar prepared to agree with him, almost).

While bringing these three strands together, Venuti launches occasional side attacks on ‘empiricism’, and it is those that I want to deal with here. In a way, the attacks help fill in a few of the gaps left by Baker. I mean, we gather from implicatures that Baker does not like professionalism, and it is clear from her discursive method that she has no time for anything like the rational testing of hypotheses, but she really has very little to say about why such things should be bad. Venuti might be able to do just that.

2.1. Venuti interprets empiricism

For Venuti, everything has to be interpreted, and I very much agree with that basic proposition. It is somehow more general, and thus more anodyne, than Baker’s faith in everything being a constructed story. Venuti, like me, thereby takes issue with the

essentialism of Baker's narrative project, although he does so in slightly different words. He claims, first, that the narrative approach is associated with a 'presentism' in Translation Studies, where we are all arguing about the goodies and baddies of our own age and are thus overlooking "the use of the past" (2013: 6), somehow associated with a lack of historical studies of translation.¹ For me, there is no shortage of historical perspectives in Translation Studies, and narratives can be found as much in the past as in the present. On rather surer ground, Venuti claims that Baker's approach to "translated textuality" has "drastically limited the possible interpretants" (2013: 6), which is true enough (as we have seen, Baker expresses no doubts about her narrative constructs) but naïvely assumes that Baker is actually talking about translations (mostly she is not) and that she has some residual appreciation of textuality (which effectively flew out the window along with linearity). Those issues aside, Venuti is basically with Baker in her mistrust of empiricism. This time, though, the critic tries to say what empiricism is.

For Venuti, "empiricist epistemologies claim direct or unmediated access to a reality or truth" (2013: 67). The thing thus described sounds more like religious revelation, but let's go along with it, for the sake of an argument. Venuti seems to mean that the empirical attitude is somehow to look at something, describe it objectively, and thus derive its truth from no more than that – the observer or researcher is considered neutral, and all observers will reach the same truth. That model of empiricism is then opposed to an epistemology of 'interpretation' (the term that Venuti now champions), which realizes that subjectivity is always involved in any descriptive project and that different people will reach different truths. I do not think there is any doubt that the second model, basic hermeneutics, is superior to the first in that it is a better description of what happens in most research activity, if not in most acts of knowledge construction. However, I do not believe that any serious empiricist these days, or indeed anyone since the nineteenth-century positivism around Auguste Comte, would claim anything like 'direct or unmediated access to a reality or truth'. Here Venuti has divided good from bad in an ahistorical, unjust, and self-interested way. Just as his dichotomy of fluent vs. resistant translation resuscitated Schleiermacher's early nineteenth-century categories of foreignizing vs. Germanizing translations (in Venuti 1995), so this volume picks up the nineteenth-century Germanic discipline of hermeneutic critique and similarly presents it as something new, or at least not old-fashioned. That particular division of heaven and earth is very strange, out of step with our age, and done in ways that I frankly fail to fathom.

At its least unsophisticated point, Venuti's description of empiricism as 'direct or unmediated access' falls back on the work of the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, specifically to his contributions to *Lire le Capital* (*Reading Capital*, 1965/1971). In the introduction to that text, Althusser does indeed criticize empiricist approaches that seek to abstract knowledge from the object, as one might extract gold from the earth, and leave all the rest behind (1965/1971: 36, 183). That critique then fits in quite nicely with Venuti's interest in the 'remainder' (otherwise from Lecerle), which would be all the language left behind by rationalist abstractions, and the complaint is very valid. It also concords with Venuti's critique of the objectivist illusion, whereby empiricism "assumes that a real object or process is not constructed for knowledge but given, independent of the knowing subject, and upon observations that object or process yields a knowledge that is free of illusion or prejudice" (Venuti 2013: 242). However, what Althusser's specific critique does *not* associate with empiricism, at least not in the place cited, is the repeated

testing of knowledge, the active constructing of hypotheses that are used in history, are reformulated when they fail, then come back again to embrace a wider or smaller object, in a constant dialectic of knowledge production. Althusser himself actually did a lot of testing of that kind in his earlier *Pour Marx* (1965), where he discarded many Marxist tenets that had not survived the test of history.² And in *Lire le Capital*, Althusser and Balibar do a very famous piece of knowledge mining, extracting from a very complex set of texts the one principle of Marx's 'epistemological break' with the past, which could then be applied in the present to separate the true from the false Marxism. Without that second moment, without the repeated *testing* of abstractions and re-theorization of conceptions, empirical knowledge would merely be like the stolen gold that the Spanish nobles kept in their cellars, unaware that it could be used to start the history of capitalism.

The problem with Venuti's critique is that the focus remains exclusively on the initial confrontation with the object, and not with empiricism as a continual process of historical testing, comparison, and debate. There is no interest or concern with the way failed hypotheses lead to new hypotheses, in an ongoing collective process that is actually an endless conversation within and across interpretative communities. There is no room for the kind of epistemology formulated by Popper, for example, when he posits that "what characterizes the empirical method is its manner of exposing to falsification, in every conceivable way, the system to be tested" (1959/2002: 20), where this 'constant exposing' requires recourse precisely to excluded parts of the object. In Popper's experimental empiricism, defined by the falsifiability of propositions, scientific truth is the collection of hypotheses that have failed. And that seems a long way from any marauding extraction of gold.

Venuti does not go into any of that, unfortunately: Althusser appears to be cited as an authority, and that is that. Venuti is clearly not interested in any kind of empiricism that is not the nineteenth-century positivism opposed by Marx (which is what Althusser was talking about); he seems totally unaware of thinkers like Quine and Feyerabend, and of course Popper, who called themselves empiricists but very clearly distinguished reality from the object of knowledge and who consistently argued *against* the possibility of extracting anything like pure, neutral knowledge (as aptly noted by Goldstick 1985: 372). Empiricism is apparently just the one Enlightenment blindness, contaminating all.

When he does enter the twentieth century, Venuti doesn't shrink from giving an example of how an empiricist translation scholar, indeed one of the founders of our own research community, erroneously assumed 'direct or unmediated access' to knowledge, apparently. He cites James S Holmes as follows:

"Translation theory, for instance, cannot do without the solid, specific data yielded by research in descriptive and applied translation studies, while on the other hand one cannot even begin to work in one of the other fields without having at least an intuitive theoretical hypothesis as one's starting point." (Holmes 1988: 78; cit. Venuti 2013: 8)

Venuti's accompanying commentary contains the following (I collect the snippets that run the furthest off course, but you can find the linearity online):

Here Holmes makes the empiricist assumption that knowledge is merely given to observation rather than constructed on the basis of theoretical concepts. [...] Holmes's model is scientific, deploying the inductive method [...] treating translation theory as derived from empirical fact. (Venuti 2013: 9-10)

Huh? Surely Holmes is saying precisely the opposite here? He says that you need a theoretical hypothesis *before* you can start working on any object of knowledge (“one cannot even begin [...] without [...]” – so his epistemology is partly *deductive*, not just inductive. And that need for initial theory means, of course, that you *cannot ever* have direct or unmediated access to knowledge. What is even stranger is that Venuti's citation of Holmes willfully reduces the discussion to just two teams: in citing Holmes, Venuti omits the little word ‘two’, found in “the other *two* fields”, which comes from a model in which there are actually *three* fields, with constant dialectical play between them. Why should Venuti shamelessly omit that little word ‘two’? Was his unconscious playing up? In Holmes's actual text there is never any question of deriving theory from ‘empirical fact’, and even less question of separating theory and texts from the history of practice (the field that Venuti represses in the citation). Further, Venuti claims that in Holmes “theoretical speculation is *reduced* to a ‘hypothesis’” (2013: 9; italics mine), when what Holmes actually talks about is the need to have “*at least* an intuitive *theoretical* hypothesis” (italics mine again) – that is, one should *ideally* have more than a hypothesis (“at least” means, I think, this plus more if possible) and the hypothesis ensues from a process of theorization. Just in case there is any doubt about the extent of Venuti's sly (or unwitting) fudging here, I give the full co-text of the original citation, taken from the volume that Venuti himself edited:

[...] in what has preceded, descriptive, theoretical, and applied translation studies have been presented as three fairly distinct branches of the entire discipline, and the order of presentation might be taken to suggest that their import for one another is unidirectional, translation description supplying the basic data upon which *translation theory* is to be built, and the two of them providing the scholarly findings which are to be put to use in applied translation studies. In reality, of course, *the relation is a dialectical one, with each of the three branches supplying materials for the other two*, and making use of the findings which they in turn provide it. *Translation theory*, for instance, cannot do without the solid, specific data yielded by research in descriptive and applied translation studies, while on the other hand one cannot even begin to work in one of the *other two fields* without having *at least an intuitive theoretical hypothesis as one's starting point*. (Holmes 1988, cited in Venuti ed. 2000: 182-183; italics mine)

Get it? As much as Venuti insists, correctly, that all texts have to be interpreted, we might still hope that some interpretations are better than others, that there is still a testing process, and that empiricism concerns that repeated testing. Further, I propose, an interpretation that reduces three to two, dialectics to naïve positivism, and empiricism to mere observation, is definitely to be found wanting.

Venuti's inexplicably dismissive stance with respect to empiricism (Holmes's text was deleted in the 2012 version of *The Translation Studies Reader*, and Quine disappeared

even earlier), and thus with respect to evidence and learning from experience, leads him down some rather dark alleys. Here I follow only part of the way – it gets scary.

2.2. Venuti enters psychoanalysis

Venuti claims that translators make slips that reveal something of their unconscious. That is unproblematic – there are slips of the tongue, slips of the pen, and slips in translations, and the surprising thing would be if such things did *not* happen. So what?

It is not difficult, for example, to take the above minor omissions and see them as a product of Venuti's unconscious desires while copying: he so much wants empiricism to be excluded from his vision that his pen unwittingly censors any suggestion that empiricism is at all different from essentialist revelation. Would you buy that?

Venuti's interest in psychoanalysis makes sense in terms of his view of empiricism. Freud's profound insights were largely pieced together from phenomena that were excluded or sidelined by the dominant positivist sciences of his day, so the idea of recuperating such things here fits in well with the idea of studying the 'remainder', the dross that empiricists apparently want to separate from their gold. The problem with textual psychoanalysis, though, is that the lone analyst can sometimes spot things that no one else sees, and there is no way of falsifying their claims (this was one of the reasons why Popper considered much of psychoanalysis to be unfalsifiable, and thus unscientific).

For example, the Chilean poet Neruda penned the line "los ojos más extensos del cielo" (literally, 'the most extensive eyes in the sky'), which was rendered by the American translator Walsh as "the sky's most spacious eyes" (cit. Venuti 2013: 42ff.), which is fair enough except that the English apparently makes Venuti think of a line from the popular anthem *America the Beautiful*: "O beautiful for spacious skies", well known by American patriots. So 'spacious eyes' conjures up 'spacious skies'? Perhaps it does – I don't know (I'm not American). But I asked 23 other translators in the US about this particular line, and none of them volunteered that particular association. So my empirical flirt suggests that Venuti's reading could be in an extreme minority, although of course it cannot say that it is in any way wrong. Why should this matter? Well, here is the argument that Venuti builds on the spacious eyes:

The unconscious desire in Walsh's translation is that a major Chilean poet, noted for his leftist attacks on American capitalism, should instead express his affection towards the United States [...] (2013: 45)

So the translator Walsh was unconsciously promoting the CIA's infiltration of Allende's Chile. Wow! Of course, if you accept the premises of psychoanalysis (where the interpreter must also be interpreted), that kind of analysis could be telling us more about Venuti's own unconscious, possibly about his frustrated desire for literary translation to be overtly political invention, in the sense of left-versus-right politics. That problem would appear to be his, much more than it belongs to the text or to the translator (for that matter, if everything is interpreted, how can "Walsh's translation" actually *have* an "unconscious desire"? – desire only works in the interpretations, here as interpreted by Venuti).

The cute thing about this personal exorcism is that Venuti does try to be empirical. He musters evidence by sending emails to "some accomplished translators of Spanish-

language poetry” (as if the skies-eyes association concerned Spanish), but he only tells us about how one of them replied. To judge by that reply, Venuti’s question proffered the reading he wanted confirmed, which is quite different from my own empirical foray, where I simply asked about free associations. No matter, here is how the one reply begins: “One never knows, but my guess is that ‘for spacious skies’ was not conscious” (Eliot Weinberger, cit. Venuti 2013: 44). Let’s assume the others remained politely silent. And even this reply, which would be Venuti’s one piece of overt hypothesis-testing, says nothing to confirm Venuti’s reading (to say something is unconscious is not to say anything about its motivation), and in fact it says the one thing that Venuti clearly cannot say, neither here nor anywhere else: ‘One never knows.’

That is not an isolated example, unfortunately. I cannot help but imagine the phone conversation where Venuti asked the translator William Weaver why, in the 1970s, Weaver had rendered ‘tagliatelle’ as ‘noodles’. Answer: “because they are noodles.” So Venuti insists: Why is ‘ricotta’ rendered as ‘cheese’ in what should be a “ricotta-coated moon”? Answer: “I used ‘cheese’ because we used to say ‘the moon is made of green cheese’. But also thirty years ago nobody in the US knew what ricotta was” (2013: 122ff.). You can almost hear Weaver hanging up the phone and muttering ‘Damn academic theorists...’.

Venuti doesn’t give up. Here is his interpretation of Weaver’s dated common sense:

A translator too can identify unconsciously with a national cultural discourse, here with the empiricist privileging of transparency that has long prevailed in British and American thinking about language. (2013: 122)

What? Weaver’s reply was empiricist? Much as I too would personally prefer to see ‘tagliatelle’ and ‘ricotta’ in the translations, now that English-speakers actually care about good food, I can’t for the life of me see how empiricism gets entangled in this rather pathetic exchange. For that matter, in what way is ‘transparency’ the same thing as ‘empiricism’? I saw the tagliatelle and they looked like noodles? Hardly. The proper attitude is surely to go out and eat: those *tagliatelle al dente* taste nothing like the little things swimming in chicken-noodle soup, and the way to discover the difference is to try new things, empirically, to see what happens. How can this example possibly be used as an argument *against* empiricism?

Yes, we seem to be arguing at cross-purposes here. I take empiricism to be the stuff of experience, experiments, trial-and-error, producing knowledge from an active engagement with the world. Venuti, I suspect, is aligning it with the Enlightenment emphasis on reason and clarity of expression and unadventurous food. For him, it is in a bad old past; for me, it is very much alive and kicking in the present. And the issue is far too important to be embroiled in questions of whether ‘ricotta’ is better than ‘cheese’.

2.3. *Dictionaries or communities of interpretation?*

The argument against ‘transparency’ harks back to Venuti’s critique of ‘fluent’ translations, taken to be what happens when translators try to remain textually invisible (Venuti 1995). The argument has its merits; my only concern here is the way it has been needlessly embroiled in a puerile campaign against empiricism. The argument is also contradicted by Venuti’s own expository prose (clear in syntax, at least) and his defense of something

called ‘theory’, which translators should engage in because, he says, “without the formulation of theoretical concepts, commentary about translation remains imprecise and quickly turns impressionistic” (2013: 235). So precision is okay – it is later opposed to a “lack of precision” in pedagogical prescriptions (2013: 235) –, but democratic transparency is not? What is the nature of this precision, and why is it not also a part of empiricism? Or do hypotheses not require precise theorization? I suspect that part of the answer lies in Venuti’s use of authority, not his own authority but more that of French theorists and convenient dictionaries. *Je m’explique*.

There is nothing particularly remarkable in Venuti’s borrowing of concepts from French theory: from Althusser (as above), Lecercle, Badiou, and others. That has been par for the course in American literary theory over the past few decades, and is in no way specific to translation or anti-empiricism. What interests me is the way references to the foreign theorist, in a different language, gain discursive authority: since monolingual readers are mostly obliged to trust the academic commentator as a guide, indeed as a translator, one tends to assume there is more value in the foreign text than at home. One thus attributes a basic kind of presumed authority to the theory cited; there can be no real engagement with its bases.

Now for something similar, but closer to home. The occasional hypersensitivity of Venuti’s comments and criticisms, perhaps due to his distanced appreciation of foreign languages, is repeatedly backed up by recourse to the authority of dictionaries: he describes the translator’s first “intertextual” relation as being with “current bilingual dictionaries”, repeatedly mentioned as a first point of reference and an implicit basis for final decisions (2013: 2, 6, 14, 80, 110, 166, 168, 216, 246). This is intriguing for several reasons. For those of us who actually live in foreign languages, dictionaries are rarely to be trusted; they would tend to be the *last* port of call, when all else fails. There are many social levels in language, many regional varieties of most languages, and numerous expressions that are marked as creations in time, often in a flashing present – those values are mostly *not* captured in dictionaries, or are expressed differently in different dictionaries (many dictionaries are produced to reform or harmonize languages, or to impose dominant varieties), or are simply more recent than the printed authority. I suspect that very few of us would actually want to throw away the culture and just keep the dictionary – we live embroiled with the remainder, if you will. And yet that throwing-away is precisely what Venuti’s justifications would seem to be doing, using the dictionary as recourse to authority: “with the aid of the OED an instructor can demonstrate that ‘tardy’ is one of several poetical archaisms” (2013: 168). Okay, but who needed the demonstration? The readers who activate texts? Then there are cases where the dictionary is used against what experience might suggest. For example, in his sortie into Catalan, Venuti tells us that the expression ‘plegar de la feina’ (to knock off work) is colloquialism or slang (2013: 271), whereas for me it is standard usage – it is actually one of the expressions you first learn in Catalan textbooks. Or again, Venuti insists that “[t]he Catalan ‘la volta [...] del cel’ is current usage, rather ordinary, whereas the English ‘vault’ is a poetical archaism” (2013: 225), whereas I feel, on the basis of daily experience with the language, that the Catalan expression is low-frequency and poetic. Venuti will tell me I’m wrong because some dictionary somewhere says I’m wrong; my daily experiments suggest otherwise. So who is right?

As might be imaged from his theoretical statements Venuti's confessed translation method *à coups de dictionnaire* leads to fairly regular infelicities in his translations from Catalan, along with some superbly creative solutions springing from his deeply lived involvement with American English. John Style and I discovered this when comparing our versions with his (Style and Pym 2015). For instance:

Farrés:	no penso defraudar
Style:	I promise I won't let you down
Pym:	I do intend to deliver
Venuti:	I'll [...] not worry about letting anybody down. (Stairway, 1949)

Here the Catalan "no penso" certainly says "I do not think [about]", and that is what Venuti has translated, but followed by the infinitive, in a colloquial spoken utterance, it becomes more like "I have no intention of...". Venuti has missed that orality. Similarly:

Farrés:	tot fent una parada
Style:	just making a stop
Pym:	although only pausing
Venuti:	with everything halted (Gas, 1940)

Here "tot" means "everything" and "fent una parada" means "making a stop", but when the two come together in colloquial spoken language, the "tot" is short for "tot i que", meaning "despite" or "even though". That spoken sense has been entirely missed here.

At the same time, Venuti also has fairly regular moments of brilliance, particularly when he exploits the potentials of spoken American English:

Farrés:	Enrenous-enrenous i silencis-silencis.
Style:	Sounds astir and silences silences
Pym:	Scandalous scandals and silent silences
Venuti:	Hustle-bustle and hush-hush.

The point is this: instead of working from actual interactions with living language, Venuti's self-justifications effectively cut off dialogue by referring to authorities. So much for endless processes of interpretation! And what applies to research somehow does not apply to language?

The appeal to hermeneutics does not mean that anything goes, of course: individual speakers can be wrong, dictionaries can be right, and interpretation operates within social limits, in translation and in research. In the linguistic examples just cited, the empiricism is a question of probabilities, in turn attributable to socially different samplings of language use, so there can be no absolute questions of right or wrong – much less of 'demonstration'. And yet there can be an empirical process, in science and in daily life in languages.

In other cases, though, certain modes of interpretation are considered aberrant within a research community that has access to more or less the same data, and empirical method nevertheless presumes to locate mistakes. An example would be Venuti's repeated use of data showing that translations account for less than four per cent of books published in English, while the proportion is regularly above 20 per cent for many European

languages. So we are told that there is a global imbalance in the translation flows, and that this is unethical, a sign of cultural hegemony (as argued elaborately in Venuti 1995). Simple mathematics can nevertheless show that, accepting exactly the same data, the languages producing many books are going to have lower percentages of translations into them, and languages producing fewer books will have higher percentages, so there is no necessary imbalance indicated in these particular percentages (see the calculations in Ginsburgh and Weber 2011). I have been trying to point this out for over a decade (since Pym 1999, Pym and Chrupala 2004), but the elementary mistake is still being made, repeatedly:

Because the rate of translation into English is so low – roughly 2-4% of annual book output in the United States and the United Kingdom, compared to 20-25% in countries like Italy and Spain – a reader may be unable to find a selection of translations from the work of the same foreign author, even from the same language. (Venuti 2013: 114; cf. 158-9, 161, 234)

You can easily test the model on a few numbers (yes, put a bit of empiricism in your interpretation). For the period 1995-2000 the *Index Translationum* lists 33,663 titles translated into English, as opposed to less than half that (15,744) into Italian. So which language is likely to have more translations of a given foreign author? The crucial point is not in the truth of the numbers, but in Venuti's oblivious desire to make them say things they really cannot say.

In this second example, you could say that there are two 'interpretative communities', one for which the raw data are convincing proof of hegemony, and another for which there is an alternative explanation for the same data. Members of the first community might see the members of the second as being 'apologists for global imbalance'. And members of the second might see the first community as being 'numerically illiterate'. Both communities, however, are acting empirically, testing hypotheses on the basis of data. What is at stake is not empiricism as such, but the minor rationalism (in this case basic arithmetic) that the second community might use to try to make the first community revise their restricted interpretation. If it is simply a matter of one speaker against the dictionary, then there is nothing like this rational argument to be made – the one set of data admits more than one interpretation (or theory, or indeed translation, in Quine's terminology). However, if there are reasons of some kind, and thus ground for discussion, debate, and dialogue, one enters a struggle of interpretations, a contest, an appeal for one interpretation to be preferred over the other, in a way that can be seen in questionably Darwinian terms:

The preference is certainly not due to anything like an experiential justification of the statements composing the theory; it is not due to a logical reduction of the theory to experience. We choose the theory which best holds its own in competition with other theories [...] (Popper 1959/2002: 91).

I am not so sure that the 'best' theories inevitably win out (Baker and Venuti are not exactly losing!). Yet I certainly accept the way that empiricism, in this modernist frame, clearly does *not* imply any simple appeal to the object itself; it does *not* mean you have only one interpretation that blinds you to other perspectives. In our example here, the appeal of the

second interpretation is to a mathematical operation that has proved useful in countless other fields as well, and so is likely to win a certain kind of open argument (and thus hopefully produce knowledge about translation flows, rather than justify or challenge hegemony).

Venuti does see this kind of struggle happening, but he sees it in very different terms:

[...] the unethical should be seen [...] only as knowledge affiliated with a group that has achieved such dominance in an institution as to exclude or marginalize the competing knowledges of other groups. (2013: 185)

I am assuming that only one interpretation or set of related interpretations can achieve institutional dominance at any specific historical moment, and with that dominance multiplicities are excluded or repressed. (2013: 191)

So if one interpretation wins, if it becomes ‘dominant’, then that dominance is unethical and must be opposed? This is contradicted in Venuti not only by the strange appeals to the authority of dictionaries (repositories of ‘dominant’ interpretations?) but also by a particular ethics of the event, the truth of which requires no data. From these two anti-empirical positions, one can happily oppose repression without doubts or second thoughts, thanks to a narrative that admits only of dominance and opposition to dominance, and where translators, and their illuminated theories, can bravely deploy “a postmodern translation practice with a political agenda” (2013: 150). At the end of the day, Venuti’s anti-empiricism is not so far removed from Baker’s.

3. This is not against theorization

My purpose here is merely to question two approaches that I believe to be gravely ill-informed about the current state of scientific method. This is not the place for me to expound what empiricism really is or should be, as if I had definitive answers. I would nevertheless like to deflect facile critiques by arguing briefly from the other side as well: non-reflexive hyper-descriptivism can be just as benighted as is untestable revelation.

More simply: You can’t do empirical work without creative hypotheses, evolving models, and theorization (this was Popper’s main argument, of course: empiricism needs *more* theorization, more deduction, rather than bottom-up induction). So my argument is not about any simple opposition such as theory versus description. Research is about both, together, necessarily, always.

There are a few strands of research in current Translation Studies that occasionally feign ignorance of their framing narratives and instinctive interpretations, and which would do well to take more critical heed of both. The claims that ‘facts’, ‘data’ and ‘description’ can somehow automatically lift our studies out of a millennial pre-scientific age might be dated from (second-generation) Descriptive Translation Studies in the 1980s: in order to escape from ideological prescriptions, let us now produce objective descriptions, it was exclaimed, as if there ever were any such thing as an ideologically neutral description. The same self-deceptive gambit can be found at the origins of translational corpus work, for instance: here is what people think about translations, so now let us see if it is *really* true

(as if there were any neutrality in the idea that linguistic elements have the same use-value and can thus simply be added up). And more recently, the networks and numbers of bibliometrics have promised to bring us the true image of our own development as a mutually-citing research community, with similarly short theorization of all the values the numbers do not represent. As the old Gadamer (1990/1993: 342) noted, one of the postmodern Towers of Babel, spuriously rising above languages and cultural specificities, is the supposed truth of a mathematics that requires no interpretation.

Let me save a few special gripes for two growing trends.

The first is the recruiting of methodologies from sociological ‘actor network theory’ (e.g. Buzelin 2005), where the relations of a network are ideally put together little by little, primarily by interviewing as many people as you can and pursuing their manifested interrelations, including those that involve the researcher. When applied strictly (see for example Law 1997), this methodology allows for no prior or external theorization: everything evolves from the research process itself, including the social groups involved (all actors are initially hybrid), the relations of power (including the power of the researcher, since this is a highly self-reflexive approach) and the very categories of analysis itself (which cannot be summarized or schematized, only performed). So networks are traced and complex stories are told, and it is all good performative fun, really. I sense that much of this comes from Deleuze (the same inspiration was behind Althusser and Lecercle), from instructive awareness that there is always far more in the world than the reductive categories of Western analysis. My discontent, however, comes when this approach is degraded to an appeal to mere description, always on the same level, as if we did not have larger motivating ideas that set up our projects, that direct them one way or another, and that announce our ideological engagements. In short, when description, no matter how self-aware, pretends to eschew theorization, I think we are kidding ourselves, cultivating a regime of false humility, and producing research that is noted more for its methodology than for its knowledge, efficiency, or capacity to solve problems. Happily, very few of the studies that apply Actor Network Theory to translation actually apply the method in any strict way.

My second example is the surprisingly similar use of mixed-effects statistical models in translation process research (as in Balling 2008): you collect data on all the variables you can think of, then you test all their correlations, and from the significant correlations emerges your model, your constructed object of knowledge. This looks like great empiricism, capturing a complex reality, and it is indeed the kind of research that I like to have available when deciding, for example, how eating certain foods or not doing certain exercises affects my risk of a heart attack, or how likely I am to get certain kinds of cancer when I live in certain areas, or the probabilities with which certain kinds of fuel consumption affect global warming. That kind of empiricism produces complex information that can help us make some very important decisions, and one of the social roles of intellectuals is indeed to provide such calculated probabilities. In the cultural field, though, that very complexity tends to involve adverse side effects. First, it promotes the illusion that the pertinent categories do indeed leap from data, rather than being produced by creative hypotheses. Second, it thereby bolsters the concomitant illusion of the neutral intellectual who merely relays a passive nature. And third, the complex, statistical conclusions are often difficult to communicate to wider audiences, which means that reductive theorization then comes in at the end anyway, in an attempt to attract newspaper

headlines and the like (as happens in studies on cancer or climate change for example – although I admittedly can't cite any headlines at all from regression models applied to translation). Far better, I suggest, to invest time and thought in modeling your object of knowledge, in reflecting critically on that modeling, and then using the statistics as a way of checking and modifying those processes of theorization.

There is no superior truth or discovery procedure in the numbers by themselves: mixed-effects regressions would not have led Marx to formulate the concept of surplus value, or Freud to discover the unconscious. But neither would have narrative analysis or constant re-interpretation.

4. A quick conclusion

Let me close with a story about why I am interested in the issue.

My problem with anti-empiricism stems not just from my belief that twentieth-century empirical methods have incorporated many of the anti-positivist critiques. I think there is virtue, and a political role, in empiricism itself, at least when understood in opposition to authority and revelation. This I discovered when studying the twelfth-century European intellectuals who translated from Arabic in Hispania (there were many other heroes, earlier and later, but those are the ones I have studied a little): they championed observation, theorization, and public debate, radically *opposing* appeals to divine truth and ecclesiastical authority. Empiricism was, and remains, a fundamental challenge to discourses in power: whenever we hear 'X is Y because I say so, and I know', then the empiricist is entitled to retort: let me see the evidence, let me re-interpret the data, let me propose an alternative concept, let me debate this within and across communities. And the empiricist can adopt that attitude because they begin from one initial premise: 'I don't know; let us find out.'

I am frankly embarrassed to be associated with an academic discipline that can consider the positions of Baker and Venuti seriously. There is nothing at all wrong with anyone proposing alternative approaches, theories, missions, activisms, whatever; there is nothing wrong in looking at narratives or accepting that everything must be interpreted and re-interpreted (this is precisely what I have been doing here, after all). But if those propositions are attached to blunt anti-empiricism, to the exclusion of testing and reasoned debate, to the concomitant acceptance of non-empirical authority and revelation, then the one thing I would really love to hear a member of that particular community say, along with Baker and Venuti, is this: 'I don't know.'

Notes

¹ I do not agree with Venuti's claim that "the past decade has witnessed relatively few projects in which translations have been means studied in specific cultural situations at specific historical moments" (2013: 6). I don't know what planet he has been on for the past ten years – I could point in the direction of a healthy array of historical studies, a good many of them in the shape of doctoral theses. This sweeping misrepresentation is then potentially contradicted by the assertion that "the empirical orientation of translation studies marginalized research into issues of philosophy and cultural politics" (61). The philosophical and cultural orientations are indeed oriented toward the present, whereas it is precisely the empiricism of Descriptive Translation Studies that has produced the many historical studies that Venuti seems to have missed.

² In *Pour Marx* (1965) Althusser deploys at least two uses of the term ‘empirical’. On the one hand, it is the “concrete activity of people”, thus an interaction with the world, a practice, alongside the technological and ideological practices; on the other, it is the epistemological refusal to distinguish between the ‘real object’ and the ‘object of knowledge’, which leads to the illusion that science draws truth from the real rather than actively *producing* knowledge. This second usage of the term functions to separate ‘empiricism’ from ‘Theory’, or dialectical materialism, which effectively stands above trial-and-error because it has discovered superior truths. Understandably, this is not the usage one cares to insist on these days.

References

- Althusser, Louis. 1965. *Pour Marx*. Paris: Maspero.
- Althusser, Louis, et al. 1965/1971. *Lire Le Capital*. Trans. Ben Brewster as *Reading Capital*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Baker, Mona. 2006. *Translation and Conflict. A Narrative Account*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Baker, Mona, and Andrew Chesterman. 2008. “Ethics of renarration”. *Cultus* 1(1): 10-33. <http://goo.gl/Qp63jm>. Accessed January 2015.
- Balling, Laura W. 2008. “A brief introduction to regression designs and mixed-effects modelling by a recent convert”. In Susanne Göpferich, Arnt L. Jakobsen, Inger M. Mees (eds) *Looking at Eyes: Eye-tracking studies of reading and translation processing*. Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur. 175-192.
- Buzelin, Hélène. 2005. “Unexpected Allies: How Latour's Network Theory Could Complement Bourdieusian Analyses in Translation Studies”. *The Translator* 11(2): 193-218.
- Fisher, Walter R. 1987. *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Gadamer, Hans Georg. 1990/1993. “Die Vielfalt der Sprachen und das Verstehen der Welt” (originally published 1990). In Hans Georg Gadamer, *Kunst als Aussage (Gesammelte Werke, Band 8)*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. 339-349.
- Ginsburgh, Victor, and Shlomo Weber. 2011. *How Many Languages do We Need? The Economics of Linguistic Diversity*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Goldstick, Daniel. 1985. “Lecture d’Althusser”. *Philosophiques* 12(2): 363-391.
- Holmes, James S. 1988/2000. “The Name and Nature of Translation Studies”. In Lawrence Venuti, ed. *The Translation Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge. 172-185.
- Law, John. 1997. “Traduction/Trahison: Notes On ANT”. Department of Sociology, Lancaster University. <http://goo.gl/DZeSGi>. Visited April 2015.
- Popper, Karl. 1959/2002. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Pym, Anthony. 1999. “Scandalous Statistics? A note on the percentages of translations into English”, *Source. The Newsletter of the Literary Division of the American Translators Association* 29: 7, 19.
- Pym, Anthony, and Grzegorz Chrupala. 2004. “The Quantitative Analysis of Translation Flows in the Age of an International Language.” In Albert Branchadell and Lovell

- Margaret West (eds) *Less Translated Languages*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins, 27-38.
- Style, John, and Anthony Pym. 2015. Translations of Ernest Farrés Edward Hopper. <https://goo.gl/4CAu3s>. Accessed March 2016.
- Venuti, Lawrence. 1995. *The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Venuti, Lawrence. 2013. *Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice*. London and New York: Routledge.