
**Reviewed by Dirk Delabastita (Namur)**

Students and general readers wishing to familiarize themselves with Translation Studies and its many competing theories through compact and reliable surveys have been well served recently. In 2008 Jeremy Munday published the second edition of his *Introducing Translation Studies*. For those who read French, there is Mathieu Guidère’s *Introduction à la traductologie* (second edition), which came out in 2010. In the same year Anthony Pym launched his *Exploring Translation Theories*, which is the theme of the following observations. Pym sets out to offer a comprehensive survey of modern Western translation theories, beginning with the classic equivalence-based models of the post-war years and moving on towards recent practices and theories such as localisation and cultural translation. Allow me to start with my conclusion by saying that Pym’s book is a must-have for any Translation Studies collection, private or public. It is well-written, perceptive and most helpful as a survey of the field. It is chock-full of ideas to agree with and to disagree with but above all to think about.

*Exploring Translation Theories* — which sometimes refers to itself as a “course” — comes complete with its own website (http://www.tinet.cat/~apym/publications/ETT/additional_material.html). There the reader finds a range of extra features, including excerpts from the Japanese and Spanish versions, a link to video interviews with several leading translation scholars, a link to the Facebook page on the book, a set of “Notes for translators (and other careful readers)” and so on. The website also features a list of errata, defeating the reviewer who had dutifully prepared his own list. But a few small inaccuracies have remained unspotted: “This, says, Chomsky” (p. 95: superfluous comma), “rpex” (p. 97: faulty Russian transcription), “(deception).This” (p. 98: space missing); “Gutt, E-A.” (p. 171: point missing); Shlesinger 1989 reference in bibliography (p. 176: title not italicized).

I shall here concentrate on the book, which, despite the alarming name of the typeface used (“Akzidenz Grotesque”), is elegantly produced. No one expects a book about theory to be a page-turner, but Pym has managed to make it as reader-friendly as possible. Inserted diagrams, summaries, glossaries and surveys offer the relief and respite of simple recapitulation where intellectual fatigue may be around the corner. The author has a distinctive no-nonsense style of exposition.
which sometimes borders on the oral and the colloquial, giving the impression that you are attending a lively lecture rather than ploughing through a theoretical course book. The main chapters in the book all have the same basic structure, ending with a set sequence of sections: “Frequently had arguments” (i.e. critical arguments often used against the theory but also their possible rebuttal), “Summary”, “Sources and further reading” and finally “Suggested projects and activities”. The latter are questions and tasks that may be used in a classroom setting and that challenge us to think, work and discover for ourselves, far beyond the intellectual comfort zone of merely having to follow the author’s speculative moves.

This is the kind of book that many readers will typically use for reference purposes, but, offering a sustained argument as it does, it is worth reading from cover to cover. The introductory chapter explains the differences between theorizing, theories and paradigms. From there onwards the successive chapters present the various paradigms that Pym discerns in the field: natural equivalence, directional equivalence, purposes, descriptions, uncertainty, localization and cultural translation. This sequence is roughly chronological. While the aim is not to give a history of translation theory, a very real sense of the discipline’s history does emerge from the discussion. The theories are contextualised and amply cross-referenced, and sufficient care is taken to avoid the impression they are disembodied ethereal entities (ideas come from people with a place in the world and with all kinds of motives and institutional forces driving them). Logical continuities and gaps between the theories are highlighted throughout the book, whether historical connections may be assumed or not. Pym wisely refrains from imposing a master narrative on his account, but he does rely on one specific concept — equivalence — to provide a sense of structure and continuity. This concept often becomes the bête noire of post-linguistic translation theories, but partly for that very reason it remains an important point of reference in any theoretical discussion of translation. How and why has equivalence been criticized or redefined?

Chapter 1, “What is a translation theory”, is by far the briefest in the book (five pages only) and arguably the least satisfactory. The author seems to be eager to start delving into the various translation theories: their discussion should not be needlessly postponed or complicated by arcane epistemological or methodological complications. Pym explains that implicit theorizing (which translators are said to be doing “all the time”, p. 1) can lead to models of translation which are based on powerful guiding ideas; such theorizing can become more public and more explicit and so become a theory; and specific theories can be said to belong to the same paradigm when they show a certain coherence between them and a shared point of departure.

Despite its brevity, Pym’s initiation into the philosophy of knowledge makes good sense and a very large part of me applauds the author’s pragmatism. But
then, this is specifically a book about theory and certain decisions about what is to be included in this theoretical exploration and what is left out are made in the name of methodological principles. For instance, as Pym makes clear from the beginning, there is “no real treatment of empirical research on interpreting, adaptation studies of film or theater, or the ways translation has been dealt with from the perspective of gender studies” (Preface). While acknowledging their importance for the discipline, Pym argues that such forms of research “have not played key roles in the development of translation theory as such” (ibid.). For further information on them he refers us to several other introductory books (Munday, Pöchhacker) and readers (Venuti, Pöchhacker/Shlesinger), which are graciously described as companion volumes (which they are in a very practical and even commercial sense, all of them being in the Routledge catalogue).

This sounds fair enough but the snag is that not all readers will feel equally confident about how to delineate translation theory “as such”. How autonomous is the object “translation” to begin with, both as a concept and as a reality with respect to other forms of linguistic contact, rewriting, adaptation or intertextuality? How autonomous is “theory” as a knowledge-based and knowledge-seeking way of engaging with reality? What to make of the apparent or real differences between “scholarly” and more “poetic” or “philosophical” types of theory? Does it matter that translation theory is to a significant extent made up of concepts and ideas imported from other fields? Can theories remain impervious to ideology and the effects of power? Can we allow theories in an academic setting to meet or mix with political activism? How to articulate the relationships between what James S Holmes would have called “general” theories of translation and the “partial” ones (e.g. work done in the field of media translation or in localization)? How “general” are “general translation theories” anyway if their empirical foundation and range of historical reference are restricted to Western languages and cultures? Who can judge if someone has played a “key role” in theory development or not?

Mona Baker, Martha Cheung, Michael Cronin, Yves Gambier, Sherry Simon and Maria Tymoczko are some of the well-known scholars whose work is largely or completely sidelined in this book. This may well be justified of course and Pym makes no pretension to encyclopaedic completeness anyway. But if this means that these scholars would have made no relevant contribution to “translation theory as such”, you wonder if the author should not have gone more deeply than he did into the questions that surround this notion.

What Pym does with the material that gets included is of a very high intellectual standard. Exploring Translation Theories is a mine of insights which strike the reader either by their originality or because they are presented in such an enlightening context or worded with such clarity.
Chapters 2 and 3 both deal with equivalence. The former discusses the paradigm of “Natural equivalence” which is assumed to exist prior to any specific translation activity and which is therefore bidirectional or reciprocal (thus, back-translation is possible). Authors discussed include Vinay/Darbelnet, Nida, Catford, Koller and Seleskovitch. Even though it raises many problems, this paradigm “brings together the central problems of translation theory” and “all the other paradigms can be seen as responses to it” (p. 23). Chapter 3 discusses theories that share the idea of “Directional equivalence”. Translations can be equivalent to their source texts, but back-translations are problematic because translation involves active decisions made by the translators so that the process becomes one-way. While theorists believing in natural equivalence tend to develop detailed sets of multiple translation procedures, adherents of directional equivalence will suggest that the overall logic of translator’s choices can be described with twofold typologies, such as foreignizing/domesticating, overt/covert, etc. Kade, Newmark, Lévy, and Gutt’s application of relevance theory, among others, are discussed under this heading. And so is Nida, whose thinking had in the previous chapter already been considered as incorporating a notion of natural equivalence, but this is typical of how Pym likes to work. Some distinction or link is observed or constructed, then subjected to critical scrutiny, and it is in this confrontation of ideas and counter-ideas that the intellectual oxygen is released and the unsuspected richness of the ideas reveals itself. The difference between natural equivalence and directional equivalence is after all very relative.

Chapter 4 on “Purpose” looks into how the Skopos theory of Hans Vermeer and others responds to the equivalence paradigm. Equivalent translation is reduced to the status of being a somewhat special case, since translators should give priority to the target-side purpose of the translation, and this tends to involve changes in form, meaning or function. Predictably, Reiss, Nord, Holz-Mänttäri and Hönig/Kussmaul are brought into the discussion as well. More surprisingly, the discussion extends to the French translator-trainer Daniel Gouadec, who has a background in the translation industry. Gouadec emphasizes the role of translators working in teams and he insists on the importance of a detailed pre-translation job description to remove possible sources of doubt in advance. This is most interesting in itself — and the comparison with the Skopos theorists creates extra depth — but one may be forgiven for wondering if this is the kind of work that has “played a key role in the development of translation theory as such”.

Chapter 5 on “Descriptions” discusses Descriptive Translation Studies, which had started challenging the traditional equivalence theories somewhat earlier than Skopos theorists and with a critique that took it in a very different direction (despite a shared interest somehow in the target side of translation processes). The descriptive approach “emphasized the need to carry out research on translation”
(p.64); it refuses to take a prescriptive stance, it has elaborated concepts such as shifts, systems, norms, laws, universals and assumed translation, and it has branched out into corpus-based studies and into sociological approaches among other things. Gideon Toury remains centre-stage throughout but is flanked by a wide range of descriptivists from Anton Popovič to Sonja Tirkkonen-Condit.

In the introductory chapter, Pym says that theories can become “better, more refined, or more exact in their descriptions and predictions, in accordance with an accumulation of knowledge” (p.3). In his Postscript he notes that “[t]he descriptive paradigm stands at the center of translation research” (p.165). This would seem to assign a special role to Descriptive Translation Studies, which is not merely a historical paradigm among six others but also, and even more importantly, a manifestation of the scholarly ambitions and epistemological positions of those who want to develop Translation Studies as an empirical and research-based discipline. I find that this special status is given too little attention. Throughout the book Pym is always quick to ask the question how a given theory can be useful to translators in their professional practice, but too rarely does he address the research issue. Does the theory fit the empirical evidence and does it offer more accurate ways to study the complexities (and, yes, the uncertainties) of how translation works in the real world? Unlike Jeremy Munday (2008), Pym has decided to focus on the theories per se and not on the research or the applications. This is a fascinating project but also one which is somewhat compromised from the beginning inasmuch as theories do not exist for their own sake. Theories may emerge from research and they drive and frame the research of the future. For those who see Translation Studies as a research-based discipline, this is a fundamental point. For the same people, the observation that the Benjamin/Derrida connection — which is discussed in the next chapter — “is not a paradigm that has produced significant research” must count as a major problem and not just as an afterthought (p.116).

Chapter 6 has the title “Uncertainty” and it has epistemology at the centre of its concerns. Not the kind of epistemology that looks into the specificity of theories or their functions (see above), but the epistemological scepticism that fares so well in the general intellectual climate of the post-structuralist period. Deconstruction springs to mind in this context and receives considerable attention, but it is related to several other theories that somehow reflect a keen awareness of the uncertainties of interpretation and/or of interlingual communication. It is the only chapter in which Pym routinely oversteps the chronological restrictions which prevail in the rest of the book; he takes us back not only to Croce, T.S. Eliot and the inevitable Walter Benjamin, but also to Plato’s dialogue “Cratylus”, to St Augustine, Luther, Locke and Peirce. The discussion also covers constructivism, game theory and theories of semiosis, which are among the different “theories of how to live with uncertainty”. This becomes the longest and the most complexly organised
and thus the toughest chapter in the book; you sense the intensity of Pym’s struggle to keep everything on board.

If there is much within the uncertainty paradigm that has its roots in philosophy and even in a certain mysticism, Chapter 7 on “Localisation” jolts us into the altogether different universe of contemporary technology, the language industry and economic globalisation, where the striving for worldwide efficiency requires standardisation and automation, where uncertainty is something to be ignored or eliminated, and where cultural diversity is something to be managed and streamlined. Localization goes together with internationalization which allows one-to-many patterns of translation and which seems to reinstate the traditional model of equivalence-based translation with the help of digital technology. As Pym notes, the ideas and practices discussed in this chapter “do not constitute a translation theory in any strong academic sense” (p. 120). On that basis Pym could or should have decided to leave them out, but one is glad he did not, because there are theoretical implications which he draws out in a truly fascinating discussion.

The final chapter, 8, deals with “Cultural translation”. It covers various approaches that speak about translation without necessarily looking at source texts, target texts or text transfers; the term is used in a more or less metaphorical manner in discussions of intercultural communication, post-colonialism, hybridity, migrations, and the like. Homi Bhabha’s trendsetting work in this area is discussed along with other and very different discussions of “translation without translations” ranging from the tradition of social anthropology to Even-Zohar’s transfer theory and Callon and Latour’s sociologie de la traduction.

Following the last chapter we find an interesting “Postscript” entitled “Write your own theory”. Now that the job is done, Pym can truly speak in the first person, set himself free from the obligation to remain impartial, and “position [himself] with respect to the various paradigms” he has been describing. He might as well show his cards, since, after all, “there can be no neutral description” (p. 165). But if this last point is valid for the Postscript it also questions everything that precedes it. How impartial has Pym been? We have already indicated some areas of possible disagreement. But making abstraction of those we can give Pym credit for trying to treat the seven paradigms in an even-handed manner. None remains free from criticism, all have “valid things to say” (p. 165). It should be noted, incidentally, that Pym can be a sharp polemicist, as in the following oblique comment on certain colleagues:

…one could choose not to work with a set of theories because, for example, they are based on no empirical data, display imprecise and contradictory thought, betray a short-term consumption of fashionable concepts, are ploys in search of academic power, and are deployed by fly-by-night intellectuals who will move on to something else next year anyway. (p. 160–161)
Apart from not specifying any names, Pym does not pull his rhetorical punches here, but such examples are very rare.

In the end the individual reader is advised to try the author’s personal strategy: “We should feel free to move between the paradigms, selecting the ideas that can help us solve problems” (p. 165). This eclecticism goes one step further than merely upholding “a plurality of paradigms” (p. 4), since it weakens the binding character of paradigms as frameworks within which to think and to work. That is an attractive idea for all those who dislike intellectual pigeonholing and the branding strategies of academic marketers. Ironically, it also erodes the paradigmatic logic on which this thought-provoking book is built.

References


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