

Journey through the Discipline: A Review of *Metatranslation: Essays on Translation and Translation Studies*

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Yidan Hu

Situating translation in wider cultural landscapes, *Metatranslation: Essays on Translation and Translation Studies* presents a curated selection of fourteen essays authored by the leading representative of descriptive translation studies, Theo Hermans. He advocates reading translations as translations — regarding them as metatexts — whether this acknowledgement is prompted by a preface or simply by the word ‘translation’ on the title page. Through this anthology which spans nearly four decades, readers embark on a transformative journey, witnessing the evolution of translation studies from its nascent stages of descriptive paradigm in the 1980s to its present-day state as a dynamic, introspective discipline. This journey underscores the recognition that translation

is not merely a technical act or textual comparison, but rather a complex interplay of cultural power dynamics and the inescapable involvement of the researcher.

Drawing from a deconstructive standpoint, these essays are grouped into three principal sections: approaches of translation studies, key concepts of translation studies, and the nexus between histories and translation. This critique specifically offers a review of the initial section, approaches of translation studies, explicating the evolution of scholarly perspectives from conceiving translation as merely a ‘proxy’ or ‘resemblance’ that represents another discourse to recognising it as a form of social behaviour intricately intertwined with historical and culture-specific contexts (Hermans, 2023, 57). Translation thus cannot be reduced to or

captured by a singular disciplinary framework.

The opening pair of essays in the first section, 'Translation's Other' and 'Paradoxes and Aporias in Translation and Translation Studies,' question the prevailing conceptualisation of translation that frequently disenfranchises and elides the translator as the subordinate of the author in the pursuit of asserting equivalence. Each essay contributes to the transformative journey by elucidating how this traditional view obscures intricacies inherent in translation practice. Hermans maintains that translation is not mere replicas but exhibits a plural, hybrid and polyphonic nature which implicates the study of translation in value systems, resonant with ethnography and historiography's engagement with cultural translation. As such, translation studies can benefit from adopting self-reflexive methodologies akin to ethnography and historiography, utilising hermeneutics,

narrativity, and second-order observation for critical analysis.

The subsequent essay, entitled 'Translation, Irritation, and Resonance,' advances the discourse on translation's positioning by situating it within an emerging sociology of translation. A systems theory approach was adopted, positing translation as a dynamic social system that accentuates its pivotal role in extending communication across linguistic barriers. The system's cohesion stems from its congenital function, which fosters the development of normative guidelines governing representation. Through structural coupling, the translation system adapts to the diverse demands of its environment, including the complexities of modern localisation needs. The notion of second-order observation is further elaborated by relating to social systems theory, scrutinising how translators make choices and interpretations that extend beyond just the translated text itself, in an endeavour to uncover underlying biases,

cultural influences, and historical contexts that shape the translator's decisions (Hermans 2023, pp.60-63).

The essay 'What Is Translation?' while serving as a comprehensive overview underlines the elusive nature of a formal definition for translation but suggests that it can be broadly understood as mediating differences through similarities. Concrete assumptions, particularly those narrowly construing translation as merely a target-language utterance, as proposed by descriptivists like Gideon Toury, are found to be vulnerable (Hermans 2023, p.69).

Alternatively, insights from literary studies hint at viewing 'literature' as a contextual label. Prototype theory, propounded by Sandra Halverson, provides another perspective, albeit critiqued by Maria Tymoczko, who suggests treating translation as a cluster concept.

Consequently, the essay concludes that translation defies precise definition, urging methodological caution and open-

mindedness in its study across various contexts.

'Untranslatability, Entanglement and Understanding' examines the discourse surrounding untranslatability in the context of world literature debates and the publication of Barbara Cassin's *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (2014). By exploring three historical examples from the Early modern era wherein translators encountered significant challenges yet devised pragmatic solutions, it transcends the dichotomy of 'translatability' and 'untranslatability'. Translation in this sense is an ongoing effort with the outcomes always being temporary and circumscribed. The perpetual task of translation implies that different translations might reflect different interpretations, and none of them can be deemed ultimate or definitive. Hence, approaches toward translation should by no means be confined to mistranslations and non-translations. Rather, it is crucial to consider the historical conditions shaping

the translator's decisions, thereby delving into entanglements that characterise the practices of individual translators.

To conclude, the first part of an exploration of various approaches thus provides sage access routes into key areas of the discipline, a torchlight through which newcomers into the complex array of themes that currently characterise translation studies can be led. These essays reflect a notable shift from the once-established descriptive paradigm of translation to a more nuanced and unsettled viewpoint that calls for interdisciplinary approaches. This transition marks a recognition of the increasing complexity intrinsic to translation studies, signalling a need for deeper exploration and critical enquiry into its multifaceted nature. This section underscores not only the necessity of translating the subject matter of translation studies into its own lexicon but also the diverse approaches employed in doing so. The focus is on both theoretical and

methodological issues, providing numerous examples and a critical overview of the challenges ahead.

Despite the rich discussion on different theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, there is a notable absence of differentiating specific spheres of translation studies and conducting a nuanced examination concerning the varied nature of different translated texts. Whether it be literary translation, museum exhibitions translation, audiovisual translation, or legal translation, each genre presents its own set of challenges and considerations that deserve meticulous attention and analysis, as this volume attempts to be all-embracing research. Moving forward, further research is needed to indicate the extent to which these approaches apply to different types of translated texts. Aside from this, Hermans's discussion has leaned excessively towards the textual narrative, assuming translation primarily is a production of language (culture) or the

text for various audiences. With the rise of multimodality where the language-based view of meaning-making in the translation process is challenged, the notion of 'text' is queried. Other modes which have the potential to equally constitute meaning such as pictures and sound also merit exploration in translation studies, especially in hybrid texts such as comic translation and children's picture book translation. Of particular note is that his

investigation also leaves much to be desired in addressing technical innovations within the industry, as these resources for translators introduce both affordances and constraints.

Works Cited:

Hermans, Theo. 2023. *Metatranslation: Essays on Translation and Translation Studies* (London & New York: Routledge)