

## The Nascence of Translation Studies in the Western World: A Review of the Historical Background

*Hicham Beddari*

Ibn Zohr University, Agadir, Morocco

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**ABSTRACT:** The aim of the present paper is to offer a generic historical overview of the nascence of translation studies as an institutionalized and a full fledged discipline. The study underscores the rudimentary approaches and concepts to translation that have come to the fore at various points in time of the western culture, starting from the work of Roman commentators (Cicero and Horace more specifically) through the second half of the twentieth century when translation studies presented itself as a new discipline. It is, without argument, James Holmes' famous and widely cited paper, in which he delineated the scope and structure of the field of translation studies, that served as a valid reference for translation scholars to formulate translation theories, gave rise to empirical research and envisaged the future of the discipline. Establishing itself as a standalone field of scholarly study, Translation studies has been observed to gradually expand and interface with different disciplines bringing a new perspective to translation theory.

**KEYWORDS:** Translation studies, approaches, discipline, interdiscipline, history.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Translation, as a formal academic discipline, is relatively new, only a few decades old. The inception of the field of study in focus is reported to date back to 1972 onwards when James Holmes presented his groundbreaking paper under the theme of 'The Name and Nature of Translation Studies (TS)' in Copenhagen. Owing to The aforementioned 'founding document', in Edwin Gentzler's (2014) words, the field of TS gained much ground with respect to procuring ample scope and institutional structure. In the western world, prior to the emergence of this discipline, translation history (the 'pre-discipline' phase, a phrase borrowed from Gentzler) went through different phases of overheated debates and life-threatening moments due to the prevalent and dominant ideological beliefs of the Church, as will be discussed below, regarding the translation of the sacred texts. Early discussions of the translation practice came to light with Cicero and Horace's famous and frequently cited dichotomy of literal (word-for-word) and free (sense-for-sense) translation. In this study, the evolution of the basic lines of the history of translation since the Roman times up until the second half of the twentieth century (when the new discipline was labelled by a generally accepted term, and began to intersect with branches outside of its demarcated sphere), is chronologically traced. The following generally cited historical epochs can be mentioned in this regard, namely Antiquity, Renaissance and Reformation, Romanticism, Victorians and Modern Times. This review, albeit incomprehensive, casts considerable light on the dynamic nature of the field in focus before and during its nascence. Accordingly, TS has been a point of departure in the development of a plethora of theories, approaches, and methods running up to the present time.

### 2 TRANSLATION STUDIES: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DISCIPLINE BEFORE THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

It is widely accepted that translation is an ancient activity, and the need for it seems to arise since the earliest days of human interaction. The appearance and the spread of a multitude of languages across the globe, and the demise of the Babel myth (based on the idea of having one language for the entire mankind cited in the Genesis) made it necessary for people to communicate to one another, and thus translation came into being.

Although translation is an ancient activity, translation studies, as an academic discipline, is "relatively young, no more than a few decades old" (Baker, 2001: 277). Many designations had been coined to refer to the aforementioned discipline. Some scholars refer to it as the 'Science of Translation' (Nida 1969), others as 'Translatology' or 'Traductologie' (Goffin 1971), but the most generally accepted label, undoubtedly, is 'Translation Studies' (ibid: 277).

The vast majority of Western scholars affirm that the history of translation dates back to the Roman commentator Cicero (first Century BCE). His contribution to the field under discussion lies in his clear distinction between, the widely cited dichotomy, literal (word-for-word) and free (sense-for-sense) translation. In his famous work *De optimo genere oratorum* [On the Best Kind of Orators] where he discussed the translations of the Greek orators Demosthenes and Aeschines, he writes:

I did not translate as an interpreter, but as an orator, keeping the same ideas and the forms, or as one might say, the figures of thought, but in a language which conforms to our usage and in so doing, I did not hold it necessary to render word-for-word, but I expressed the general style and the force of language

(quoted in Munday, 2001: 19)

It is self-evident that word-for-word translation is by large avoided and sense-for-sense is employed for the purpose of preserving the spirit and the creative energy embedded in the original text language. Word-for-word translation has also been relegated to the sidelines by Horace in his popular passage from his *Ars Poetica*. He highlighted the importance and role of the creative translation where word-for-word approach is shunned (Munday, 2001: 20). Both Cicero and Horace's views and comments regarding the translation practice influenced translators of the centuries to come.

From a religious perspective, the theologian and translator Saint Jerome (347-420 AD) engaged in 'disseminating the word of God' by translating the Bible into Latin (Bassnet, 2002: 53). In line with Cicero and Horace's viewpoints, he declares that he is in favor of the sense-for-sense translation. For him, imitating the wording of the source text (ST) creates an absurd translation, and "cloaks the sense of the original" (Munday, 2001: 20). However, free interpretation instead of literal translation of the religious texts in that period of time would certainly jeopardize the translator's life and condemn him for heresy. Bible translation remained an issue of great concern for translators, and a controversial topic for many centuries. However, the advent of Reformation marked a paradigm shift in the role of translation. It was employed as a 'weapon in both dogmatic and political conflicts as nation states began to emerge and the centralization of the church started to weaken, evidenced in linguistic terms by the decline of Latin as a universal language' (Bassnet, 2002: 53).

The first translation of the Bible into English was the Wycliffe Bible in the late 14th Century (1380 and 1384). The primary goal was to enable each and every person, especially the layman, to have easy access to the 'crucial text' in an intelligible language. Translating the Bible into the vernacular languages were in opposition to the ideology of the Church, and deemed this kind of translation as a heretical act (ibid: 54). Martin Luther (1483-1546), the German Catholic priest and professor of theology, played an important role in the Reformation and the enhancement of the German language. When translating the New Testament and the old Testament (with the help of his collaborators) into German, he opted for employing 'regional yet socially broad dialect'. Otherwise stated, he expressed the scriptures in a language that is spoken and easily understood by the laypeople. Luther's major contribution to translation lies in his shift of focus towards the target readers, and the target text (TT) both in terms of style and meaning. Like St Jerome, literal translation was firmly rejected by Martin Luther (Munday, 2001: 23).

In the seventeenth Century, people started to formulate theories in relation to how translation should be practiced, which is deemed to be a great leap forward in translation theory. Early attempts at systematic translation theory were made by three prominent theorists: John Dryden, Etienne Dolet, and Alexander Fraser Tytler.

Dryden (1680), an English poet and translator, succinctly categorized the translation process into three basic types. These types were to have a great impact on the subsequent writings on translation. These are:

- (1) Metaphrase, a word by word approach, which corresponds to literal translation.
- (2) Paraphrase, or translation with latitude, which corresponds to 'sense-for-sense' translation.
- (3) Imitation, where the translator can abandon the text of the original depending on the situation at hand, and it corresponds more or less to adaptation.

On this account, Dryden was in favour of paraphrase, 'advising that metaphrase and imitation be avoided' (Munday, 2016: 43).

Another important theorist who significantly contributed to the formulation of translation theory and the development of the French language is the French humanist Etienne Dolet (1509-46). He managed to formulate principles of translation in a

prescriptive fashion. In his 1540 publication 'La manière de bien traduire d'une langue en aultre' (quoted in Munday 2016: 44-45), Dolet established five principles for translators sorted in descending order with the most important first:

- (1) The translator must understand the sense and meaning of the original author, although he should feel free to clarify obscurities.
- (2) The translator should have a perfect knowledge of both SL and TL
- (3) The translator should avoid literal translation
- (4) The translator should avoid obsolete and not frequently used forms.
- (5) The translator should arrange words in a way as to avoid clumsiness.

Here again, the main goal for the translator is to reproduce the 'force and spirit' of the SL text into the TT (sense-for-sense), and shy away from word-for-word approach.

Alexander Fraser Tytler's systematic study of translation, in English, (1797: 209-210, quoted in Munday, 2016: 45) defined a 'good translation' based on three general laws or rules:

- (1) The translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work.
- (2) The style and manner of writing should be of the same character with that of the original.
- (3) The translation should have all the ease of the original composition

Two basic concepts are to be noted and marked the debate over the translation process in the seventeenth and eighteenth Century. The first notion related to the former century is imitation, and the latter century's main discussion is about the recreation of the spirit of the ST (Fidelity). With the coming of the Romanticism in the beginning of the nineteenth century, new issues came up to the surface. The Romantics scholars gave considerable attention to issues of 'translatability or untranslatability and the mythical nature of translation' (ibid: 47).

The German philosopher and translator of Plato, Friedrich Schleiermacher played a pivotal role in this regard. Unlike any scholar discussed above, in his famous seminal essay 'On the different methods of translating' Schleiermacher differentiated between two different types of texts, and affirmed that considerable attention should be given to his dyadic text type. With regards to the translation of literary and philosophical works, he proposed two paths for translators: 1) move the reader towards the writer (alienating) or 2) move the writer towards the reader (naturalizing). Hence, he declared that his preferred strategy is the first one (Munday, 2016: 47-48). It is axiomatic that Schleiermacher's method aimed at making the reader understand the foreign concepts and culture in its own terms, and 'make additional demands on readers, re-educating them in the process and bringing them to a respect for the difference' (Malmkjær & Windle, 2011: 23). Schleiermacher's approach was to exert much influence on translation theorists and researchers of the succeeding generations, including Katerina Reiss's text typology, Lawrence Venuti's strategies of domesticating and foreignizing, George Steiner's 'hermeneutic motion', and Walter Benjamin's vision of 'language of translation' (Munday, 2016: 49).

Translation theory of the nineteenth and early twentieth century in Britain was characterized by a mounting interest in 'the status of the ST and the form of the TL' (Munday, 2001: 29). Such concern was clearly shown in an overheated debate between Francis Newman and Matthew Arnold. Newman was an avid fan of archaic translation that is infused with 'foreignness', whereas Arnold favoured the use of 'transparent translation method' (ibid: 29). This debate, pursuant to Susan Bassnett, gave rise to the 'devaluation of translation (because it was felt that a TT could never reach the heights of a ST and it was always preferable to read the work in the original language) and to its marginalization (translations were to be produced for only a select élite)' (Bassnett 2002: 75 quoted in Munday, 2001: 30).

The study of translation developed into an academic discipline only in the second half of the twentieth century. Modern theories of the field are assembled in a new independent discipline of scholarly study referred to as Translation Studies. The following section will discuss the advent of this subject area.

### 3 THE NASCENCE OF TRANSLATION STUDIES

Translation studies (TS), as a formal academic discipline in its own right, is only a few decades old. Systematic examination of translation had its roots in the second half of the twentieth century when scholars in Europe began to formulate theories of translation as a separate discipline, instead of being studied as an adjunct to Linguistics or Comparative Literature. The very name of this international and interdisciplinary field came into existence thanks to the publication of James Holmes' landmark paper entitled 'The Name and Nature of Translation Studies' in 1988 (but presented far earlier in 1972 at the Third International Congress of Applied Linguistics in Copenhagen) (Munday, 2016: 16). This paper, as stated by Edwin Gentzler, is regarded as 'the founding document of the discipline, and certainly in many countries the name and methods have held strong' (2014: 17).

It fundamentally delineated the scope and structure of the new field. The emerging discipline is meant to tackle “the complex of problems clustered round the phenomenon of translating and translations” (Holmes 1988b/2004: 181 quoted in Munday, 2016: 11) at the interlingual and intercultural levels, more importantly. Following Lefevere, the discipline in question “concerns itself with problems raised by the production and description of translations” (Lefevere 1978: 234 quoted in Shuttleworth and Cowie, 1997: 183). Holmes devised a distinct system of classification in relation to the nascent discipline. TS has been divided into two main areas: *pure translation studies* and *applied translation studies*. Pursuant to Holmes, pure translation studies aim at 1) describing the phenomena of translation (**Descriptive Translation Studies**); and (2) developing general principles to explain and predict such phenomena (**Translation theory**). Pure translation studies are then subdivided into **theoretical** and **descriptive**. Conversely, applied translation studies concern themselves with particular practical applications of translation activities including the following subdivisions: 1) **translator training**, 2) **translation aids**, 3) **translation criticism** (Munday, 2016: 16-18). Holmes’ framework of what TS covers is diagrammatically presented as follows:

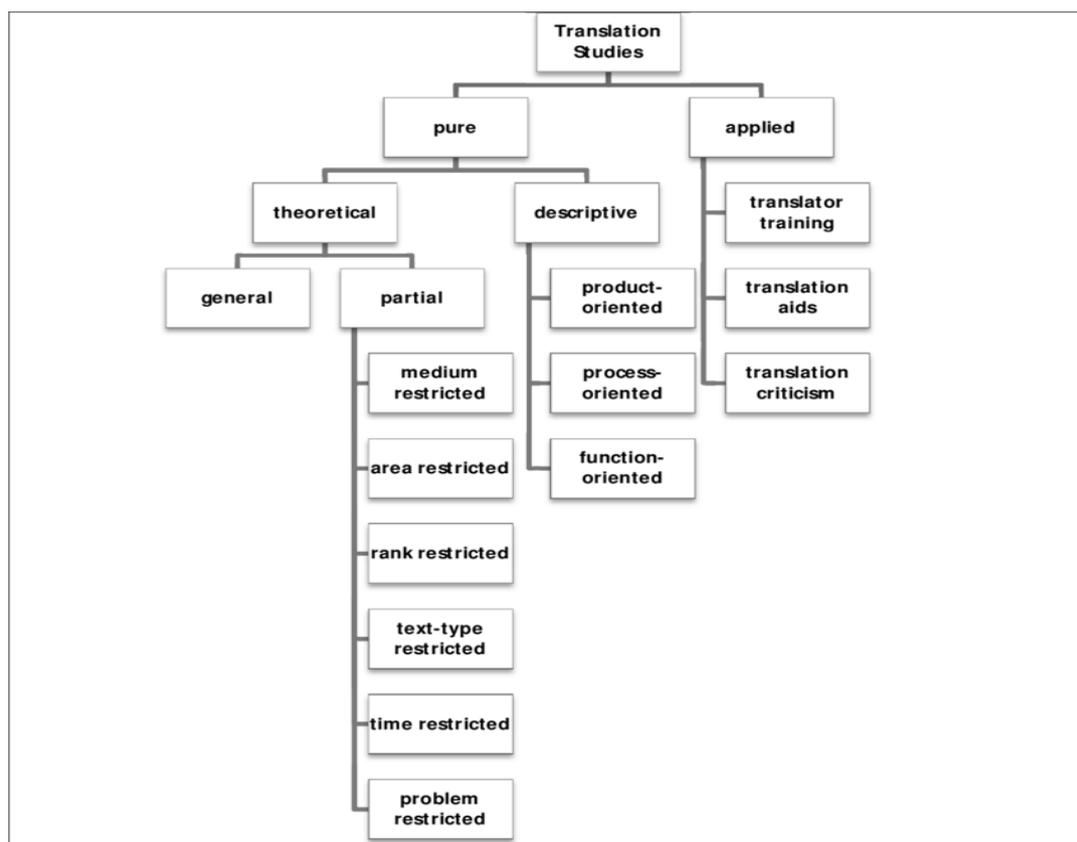


Fig. 1. Holmes’s ‘map’ of translation studies

It is important to point out that many attempts have been made to rewrite and revise Holmes’s mapping of the field of TS paving the way for the emergence of new sub-branches that fall within the discipline in question, namely, Snell-Hornby (1991), Gideon Toury (1995), Anthony Pym (1998) and Amparo Hurtado Albir (2001). Having said that, Holmes’ map of the discipline is still employed, up to the present time, by translation scholars as a valid reference, (Leonardi, 2010: 73).

Prior to Holmes’ proposed framework of TS, there has been a lack of consensus with respect to the label that ought to be utilized to refer to the burgeoning discipline under debate. Eugene Nida (1964: 3) is reported to be one of the forerunners in labelling TS as ‘science of translating’ claiming that ‘the transference of a message from one language to another is...a valid subject of scientific description’. Accordingly, Holmes firmly rejected this label because “it implies that the field belongs with the sciences, which it does not” (Chesterman et al, 2003: 201). It should be pointed out that the aforementioned label has also been employed by scholars of great erudition in the realm of translation, such as John Catford, George Mounin, Werner Koller and Wolfram Wills, to name only a few. These scholars adopted a linguistic-oriented approach to translation, which was strongly criticized for being source-oriented and marginalizing the ‘extra-linguistic factors’ (Leonardi, 2010: 74).

In the early 1970s, another term came to the fore, and was accorded low priority by Holmes. The French word *Traductology*, whose English counterpart was *Translatology* but became broadly dispersed comparatively speaking, was coined by Brain Harris to refer to “the scientific study of translation”. It has been considered as ‘unnecessary neologism’ by a large number of translation theorists, and ‘has – at least in English – been widely replaced by more recent, less scientific-sounding designations such as TRANSLATION STUDIES” (Shuttleworth and Cowie, 1997: 175).

In the late 1970s, there emerged a new term called ‘translation theory’ or ‘the theory of translation’. It has been employed to examine the translation phenomena in a more systematic way. However, the use of this term caused much confusion, and faced a high level of resistance owing to the fact that a number of scholars perceived “this approach as providing guidelines about how translation should be done” (Leonardi, 2010: 74).

After much debate and discussion on the issue of coining a comprehensive standard term that describes the new discipline as an autonomous and full fledged field in its own right, it seems that there is a broad recognition, amongst translation scholars, that Holmes’ suggested name (TRANSLATION STUDIES) is generally accepted without argument (Chesterman et al, 2003: 201). Nowadays, translation studies, as discussed above, is understood as an academic field that focuses on the problems of translation bridging the gap between theory and practice (Leonardi, 2010: 75). Altogether, in Baker’s (2001: 277) words, the new discipline is perceived to concern itself with “the study of translation at large, including literary and non-literary translation, various forms of oral interpreting, as well as DUBBING and SUBTITLING”.

Since its emergence in the early 1970s and during the 1980s, TS is noticed to have grown up considerably in the past few decades. It rapidly developed into an interdisciplinary field that “fostered a research culture where theory and practice would speak to each other and to the outside world” (Boria et al, 2020: 8). That is to say, opening up to and interfacing with theories and paradigms borrowed from other disciplines in a more bi-directional way. This interdisciplinarity, adapted from Hatim and Munday (2004: 8), brings together a plethora of fields such as linguistics, philosophy, literary studies, language engineering and cultural studies.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Translation is an ancient activity. The need for this cross-linguistic and cross-cultural practice arose when people began to find themselves in need of communicating to one another. As time elapses, translation is noticed to have long been debated by a wide range of scholars and translation theorists before it established itself as a separate and full fledged discipline. The earliest pioneering figures of western translation theory are, undoubtedly, Cicero and Horace followed by St Jerome, who trod a similar path to that already taken by the Roman commentators. Their approaches to translation strongly advocated sense-for-sense and disparaged word-for-word to a large extent. An important chapter of translation in the western world was marked out with the Bible translations. Martin Luther, one of the dominant figures in the realm of translation, played a pivotal role in the Reformation. He pointed out the important relationship between style and meaning, and similarly relegated literalism to a lower position, more significantly. The seventeenth century was marked by the formulation of the first systematic translation theories. John Dryden, the leading figure of that era, approached translation issues by establishing three basic types: metaphrase, paraphrase and imitation, which were to exert great influence on the succeeding generations’ writings. The translator’s moral duty (Faithfulness/Fidelity) towards the author’s original work and the readership was the focal point of the eighteenth century. The nineteenth century knew the birth of Schleiermacher who suggested the creation of a separate sublanguage that goes in line with the form and language of the original in relation to the translation of literary and philosophical works. The nascence of translation, as an academic discipline, took its main substance from the famous seminal work of James Holmes in the second half of the twentieth century. From that time on, TS is observed to develop into an interdisciplinary field intersecting with a myriad of theories and approaches from other disciplines up to the present time.

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