A TRANSLATION STUDIES PERSPECTIVE ON THE TRANSLATION
OF POLITICAL CONCEPTS*

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Translation Studies, a name first proposed in 1972 by the Dutch-American scholar and translator James S. Holmes,1 is a discipline, or interdiscipline, that has grown enormously over the intervening years as it has emerged from the shadows of more established academic fields to become increasingly a focus of academic study in its own right. Translation Studies is the study of the process, product and phenomenon of translation. By its very nature it may encompass any language, any text type, any genre, any geographical or temporal point, more or less any aspect of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic activity. If we are to use Roman Jakobson’s famous classification of three types of translation,2 we can say that in recent years Translation Studies has increasingly broadened out from “interlingual translation” (which Jakobson called “translation proper”) to encompass various forms of “intralingual translation” (paraphrase or rewording within the same language, including creative writing and editing) and “intersemiotic translation” (translation between verbal and non-verbal sign systems which includes subtitling, film adaptations, sign language, advertising, the link between the visual and the written).

Because of its reach, Translation Studies is also a controversial field theoretically, since it has often pitted linguists and applied linguists who dominated its earlier days, against those operating in various forms of Cultural Studies and, more recently, Sociology. The reach of the discipline has also expanded hand-in-hand with technological developments that

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1 Originally presented as a paper at the Third Applied Linguistics Conference in Copenhagen in 1972, Holmes’s “The Name and Nature of Translation Studies” only became widely available in a posthumous collection of his work: James S. Holmes, Translated! Papers on Literary Translation and Translation Studies (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Rodopi, 1988).

have revolutionized everyday working practices; the translator as a focus of study is now understood not as a derivative and transparent conduit of a static text but more as an interested, intercultural communicator or intervenor surrounded by or taking advantage of the technology and paraphernalia of the globalized office and engaged in an intercultural process that alters both source and target cultures. The current thrust of much research has centred on new forms or conceptions of translation itself: the visibility or invisibility of the translator, post-colonialism and translation, translation and power and ideology, translation and censorship, language policy and translation, translation and globalization, creativity and translation, the evaluation of so-called translation “universals,” corpus-based translation studies, hybrid texts and “in-between” authors, to name but a few. And this does not cover the growing sub-field of Interpreting Studies, concerned with spoken translation, whether it be at an international conference, a business meeting, at court proceedings, an immigration interview or in a doctor’s surgery. The span of Translation Studies is therefore enormous and each new development may incorporate theory from related fields: Critical Discourse Analysis, Post-colonialism, Film Studies, Narrative Theory, amongst many others.

Many of the most successful interdisciplinary translation studies adapt such a theoretical model taken from another discipline combined with close textual analysis of originals and translated texts within their socio-cultural environments. Such a descriptive branch of translation studies, long promoted by the Israeli scholar Gideon Toury, aims at uncovering the basic norms or trends obtaining in the translation process, that is, the “preliminary norms” (such as the policy which determines the selection of texts for translation), the “initial norm” (that is, whether the translator opts for a source-text or target-language oriented approach), and the “operational norms” (relating to the completeness of the target text and processes).