

Agency in Structure: An Inquiry into Gideon Toury’s Target-Oriented Perspective

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The present paper aims to present a rereading of Gideon Toury’s formulation of the target-oriented theory in his seminal work *Descriptive Translation Studies — and Beyond* in the hope of making a contribution to the discussion on Toury’s emphasis on structures and regularities, whether or the extent to which this underemphasizes translators’ agency in the theoretical framework, and the research program he has set out for translation studies. In the present re-evaluation of this widely discussed issue, some influential criticisms of Toury’s target-oriented theory over the issue of agency are briefly laid out, and a rereading of *Descriptive Translation Studies — and Beyond* in the light of the issue of translators’ agency is presented. Through a close scrutiny of this work, the extent to which target-oriented theory incorporates individual action and decision-making will be discussed mainly with a focus on the relationship between norms and agents of translation, what the interdependence of product, process, and function (as position-in-the-culture) in Toury’s target-oriented theory reveals with respect to the way agency is incorporated in the theory, and the methodological relevance of the concept of contextualization to research into the relationship between individual translators and observation of regularities. This rereading attempts to provide inquiries into how the theory incorporates norms and agency, what the interdependence of product, process, and function (as position-in-the-culture) implicates on the role assigned to agency in the target-oriented theory, Toury’s concept of ‘contextualization’ and its role in painting a broader descriptive picture incorporating agency, and the methodological issues regarding the structure vs. agency debate.

Keywords: agency; target-oriented theory; descriptive translation studies; norms; contextualization

1. Introduction

Recent decades have seen an increasing recognition of translation as an activity that is “necessarily embedded within social contexts” (Wolf 2007, 1). Commonly termed as a sociological turn in translation studies, this process seems to have brought in its wake an increased attention to translators themselves, their agency, and the social contexts which they both interact with and are situated in. This new focus and the sociological approaches that accompany it have made translation studies yet another site for sociological discussions on

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structure and agency, how they affect and/or shape each other, and the extent of the relative influence they have on each other (Kinnunen and Koskinen 2010, 7).

In the face of these developments, general theories of translation which attempt to explain regularities in translations, such as Gideon Toury’s target-oriented theory and Itamar Even-Zohar’s polysystem theory, have been criticized to varying degrees, from the call to “renounce” the polysystem paradigm (Gouanvic 2005, 149) to attempts of making descriptive approaches “more ‘agent aware’” through a focus on translators as social agents (Inghilleri 2005, 142).

This critical attitude expanded translation studies with new foci and incorporated new theoretical and conceptual tools into it, be it as a way to complement descriptive translation studies or be it as a way to replace it. However, it also seems to have produced a commonly held assumption in translation studies circles that Toury’s project of descriptive translation studies favors structures and neglects individuals as agents.

The aim of the present paper¹ is to question this assumption by inquiring into the extent to which Toury’s target-oriented theory, as a project for descriptive translation studies, takes the individual into account, through a rereading of Toury’s seminal work *Descriptive Translation Studies — and Beyond* (1995).² In doing so, the present study will attempt to contextualize the agency vs. structure debate against the background of the theoretical and methodological foundations of the target-oriented theory, possibly revealing potential reasons as to why this theory might be understood as underemphasizing individual agency. To this end, I will first summarize some agency-related criticisms towards the target-oriented theory voiced by influential scholars in translation studies, and then present a detailed scrutiny of the place of agency in the framework of the target-oriented theory as laid out in *Descriptive Translation Studies — and Beyond*.

2. Influential Criticisms over the Emphasis Toury Places on Agency

One of the most striking and widely known agency-related criticisms towards the target-oriented theory is expressed by Anthony Pym, as symbolized by his famous sentence “there

¹ This is a revised and expanded elaboration on the unpublished oral presentation titled “‘The Translator’ in Gideon Toury’s Target-Oriented Theory” at the International Symposium on Philology (5th Asos Congress) presented on October 26, 2018.

² Instead of the revised 2012 edition, the original 1995 edition is used deliberately here to obviate any doubt as to whether the textual evidence used in this article comes from a revision to the original theoretical framework laid out by Toury.

were no people doing anything in that chapter” (1998, 108), speaking of the chapter on norms in *Descriptive Translation Studies — and Beyond* (1995). Pym argues that individuals' roles in the social processes are undervalued by Toury. To be more specific, Pym puts forward that there is no reference to agents in the mentioned chapter and “scarce” (1998, 108) reference to them in his previous works and in the book.

As a response to a later article by Toury (1998), Pym (1998) argues that Toury merely injected some human element into his framework by saying that norms are negotiated. Through the verb ‘negotiate’ which he takes to imply agents negotiating and other words such as ‘creativity’ and ‘social group,’ Toury shows “signs of the adjustment” concerning taking into account human agents more (Pym 1998, 108). If even the choice of such vocabulary amounts to a little but considerable adjustment in terms of taking individual agency into account, the close reading provided in the third section of the present paper would most probably suggest that there were actually considerably many people not only ‘doing things’ but playing active and effective roles in both their translation projects and the larger socio-cultural spheres where translating takes place. Both in the chapter on norms (see Meylaerts 2008, 92–93) and throughout the book (see section 3), translators and even other agents are considerably taken into consideration.

As a proponent of “translator studies” as a field, Andrew Chesterman (2017) also seems to be of the opinion that previous research programs do not place translators into their proper place. Even though Chesterman does not criticize the target-oriented theory directly in his proposition of “translator studies” (2017) as a branch of translation studies, the proposition itself is a grand modification of the map commonly known as the ‘Holmes-Toury’ map, a map which is largely accepted by Toury (except for a few important issues which are not relevant to this discussion). This can be plausibly argued to stem from a conceived need to assign a larger space to the study of translators as agents than have previously been done. And this implies the presupposition that there is (or has happened to be, in the wake of recent studies) a significant deficiency in both James S. Holmes's and Gideon Toury's conception of translation studies.

Chesterman concedes the possibility that his proposition might be no more than a shift of emphasis. However, even if that is the case, it represents the assumption that previous frameworks of translation studies that have been put forward (obviously including Toury and descriptive translation studies project) underemphasize studying translators as active agents. Even though Chesterman finds “more translators” in descriptive translation studies when

compared to Pym,³ his attempt clearly signifies a discontent about the extent to which agency has been assigned explicit and specific focus.

In his seminal book on systemic approaches in translation studies, Theo Hermans (1999) also criticizes Toury’s view of norms and calls for an approach to norms “in a wider context” than he claims Toury does, which he hopes will help us “set their [norms’] regulatory aspect against the translator’s intentionality, and thus to balance constraint with agency” (79–80). He states the obvious fact that translators do not just automatically act in conformity with norms but act through personal intentions, which, taken with his word choice “after all,” suggests that he considers Toury to fail to fully take into account the role of translators’ intentions, and thus their agency.

Moreover, during his closing remarks in the book, he makes a general claim concerning “descriptive and systemic approaches to translation,” suggesting certain issues including “translator’s agency” needs “closer consideration” (159). It is clear from these and the aforementioned remarks that Hermans himself also thinks that agency is somehow undervalued in descriptive translation studies.

Daniel Simeoni, who is most commonly known through his adoption of a Bourdieusian framework, makes similar points in this regard (1998). The criticism put forward in his article suggests that instead of endorsing a combination of the individuality of agents’ behavior and the social mechanisms structuring it, Toury emphasizes submission to norms, downplaying creativity and individuality-as-uniqueness. His incorporation of Bourdieu into descriptive translation studies is also commonly conceived as an attempt to make up for the supposed agency-negligence in Toury’s framework: “the question of the agency behind norms in general and behind translational norms in particular, begs for an answer” (6). He calls for placing more emphasis on the way agents shape structures through practice, as is clear in his following remark: “Toury chooses not to assign the structured character of practice to its simultaneously structuring power” (22).

To be more specific, he thinks that as individuals internalize structures—norms and general principles dominant in the (sub)culture—structures become “agentive” (*ibid.*). They become part of an individual’s self that changes rarely and hardly, making the issue less of a rule-following than a socialized practice. The individual acts through dispositions internalized

³ According to Chesterman, process-oriented and function-oriented descriptive studies have considerable room for the study of translators (2017, 325f.), despite some limitations justifying the introduction of “translator studies.”

during socialization processes. What Toury does instead, according to Simeoni, is to see norms and individuals as separate entities exerting effects on one another (and foregrounding mostly the effect of norms on individuals). More importantly, having internalized certain social structures during socialization, agents themselves become the structurer, that is, they play an active role in shaping, reproducing, or modifying structures, which makes the process a reciprocal one: “but translators govern norms as much as their behaviour is governed by them” (24).

In short, Simeoni, similarly to many other critics, expresses a desire to foreground agency in the descriptive picture, to establish equal standing between structure and agency in terms of affecting one another, as clearly seen in these remarks: “If we introject the concept of habitus in function-oriented Descriptive Translation Studies, it becomes as legitimate to see the system actuated by the overall structure, or by the agents themselves. Both play side by side” (ibid.).

Another translation scholar taking up the issue of agency vs. structure with a perspective that acknowledges the supposed lack of individuality in Toury's approach is Mirella Agorni. In her article “Locating Systems and Individuals in Translation Studies” (2007), she distinguishes between two kinds of approaches to translation studies in this regard. She sees an opposition between descriptive models and explanatory models, basing the difference between them on their differing focus (regularities vs. creativity of the translator):

From a strictly methodological point of view, however, it seems possible to draw a distinction between descriptive translation approaches that emphasize neutrality and objectivity in research (see for example Baker's work on the universals of translation 1993 and 1995, or Toury's insistence on norms 1995), as opposed to those highlighting issues such as translators' agency and choices, and questions of power and ideology. (Agorni 2007, 124)

We see the concepts such as ‘emphasize’ and ‘highlighting’ on the issue of structures vs. agency. As a way out of this supposed dilemma, she adopts the concept of “localism” from Maria Tymoczko (1999, 31–32 quoted in Agorni 2007, 129), and she seeks a way out of this dichotomy by focusing on the specific details of the context where the translation act takes place while relating them to the general framework of regularities.

There are many other pronouncements of the common view that Toury's target-oriented approach and especially his norm theory overlooks agency which cannot all be incorporated into a paper of this size. Some of these are in the form of brief comments rather than critiques

focusing on the extent to which Toury overlooks agency. However, I think it is important to mention some of them as they are representative of the common view that I try to lay bare and problematize in the present paper.

During a comparison of Antoine Berman and Gideon Toury, Siobhan Brownlie expresses the idea that “Toury tends to downplay the role of individual creativity, variability, and idiosyncrasies, while not denying these factors completely” (2003, 101). As we can see in many other comments on the issue, the word choice is not as absolute as Pym’s is, but vaguely comparative (downplay). To defend this assumption, Brownlie mentions an exemplary problem related to agency-negligence in passing, as it is not the main intention of the paper. She claims that Toury considers non-conformity to norms not an individual choice but a cause of change in a system, implying that the way individuals and norms are related in Toury’s picture is deterministic or mechanistic.

Reine Meylaerts also discusses this point and directs a criticism to the target-oriented theory. In her article “Translators and (Their) Norms: Towards a Sociological Construction of the Individual,” as suggested by the title, Meylaerts (2008) offers a short discussion on the structure vs. agency debate before presenting her case study; and, inspired by Simeoni’s (1998) work, she suggests adopting the concept of ‘habitus’ as a solution to the problem he points to in Toury’s framework. According to Meylaerts, “Toury’s model for Descriptive Translation Studies has privileged collective schemes and structures instead of individual actors” (2008, 91). Conceding that Toury makes call for research on the role of agents in the dynamics of norms, she criticizes Toury for leaving the relationship between agency and structure “un(der)conceptualized” (93).

Denise Merkle also criticizes Toury along very similar lines. Describing the ‘sociological turn’ in translation studies, she draws on H el ene Buzelin and Daniel Simeoni, describing the recent direction in translation studies to be one that is more agent-oriented. As for herself, she seems to agree with such a “direction,” arguing that these developments are complementary to Toury’s framework (Merkle 2008).

There are of course many other comments which suggest that there are problems related to agency-orientation or agency-structure relationship in Toury’s approach and especially his focus on norms. For reasons of brevity, they are not comprehensively reported in the present paper. After all, the rationale behind including them is not to provide a sufficient list but to demonstrate that this issue is worth problematizing.

It seems noteworthy that there is wide consensus on the idea that the issue of agency is a weakness of Toury's approach. Needless to say, there is some diversity in the criticisms on the issue but most of them share an interesting quality: agency is argued to be 'underemphasized,' 'underprivileged,' 'underconceptualized,' etc., which shows a general discontent with the extent to which agents are present in Toury's framework rather than a full objection to its absence. Even though such a vague form makes it rather difficult to explore the validity of this criticism, I will start with a cluster of questions along the lines of the following: 'Does Toury neglect the role of agency?'; 'Does Toury assume that individuals are mere players on a stage set by norms?'; 'Does Toury underemphasize agency?' and 'If so, to what extent exactly does he actually emphasize it?' to inquire into the issue in depth. The next section will be an attempt to explore the extent to which agency is dealt with by Toury through a close rereading of *Descriptive Translation Studies — and Beyond* (1995) with such questions in mind.

3. Agency in the Framework of the Target-Oriented Theory

This section will be an attempt to inquire into the place of agency in Toury's target-oriented theory as presented in *Descriptive Translation Studies — and Beyond* (1995).

The greatest concerns over lack of agency center upon norms. Therefore, it is crucial to clearly identify the relationship between their role in the general target-oriented framework and where they stand on the issue of agency.

3.1 Agency and Norms

Norms seem to be generally conceived as person-independent entities causing (in the sense of initiating) persons' behavior. However, Toury hardly ever talks about causation and when he does, he ascribes the initiative (as cause, or the ability to cause) to actual people, not structures, social mechanisms or norms, as in the following quotes:

Thus, the [prospective] [sic] position (or function⁶) [sic] of a translation within a recipient culture (or a particular section thereof) should be regarded as a strong governing factor of the very make-up of the product. (1995, 12)

Thus, there is no point in a product-oriented study without taking into account questions pertaining to the *determining force of its intended function* and to the strategies governed by the norms of establishing a 'proper' product. (1995, 13; my emphasis)

The concept of 'intended function' (or sometimes, synonymously, 'prospective position') is used frequently by Toury in the first chapters of the book to designate the place which agents in the translation process⁴ desire the translation product to hold in the target culture (see footnote 6 for a detailed description of the use of the word 'function'). Since it is implausible to suggest that Toury purports such trivially complex abstract entities as part of his ontology, the only remaining option is to interpret 'intended function' as intentions of individual agents, thus reading such remarks as the aforementioned quotes as an ascription of causal powers to nothing but individual agents.

Once the meta-level generality of Toury's linguistic expressions is stripped off, it is clear that Toury does not think that norms cause behavior. This idea is commonly attributed to him, reinforcing the assumption that Toury conceives individuals as puppets on a stage directed by the power interplay between varying norms. However, in the target-oriented theory, individuals have the power to shape norms as much as there are norms affecting them.

While it is quite common to consider the role of individuals or agents in Toury's views concerning norms as underemphasized, the role norms play with respect to the actions of individuals and the role individuals' actions play with respect to norms go hand in hand in Toury's framework. Translators actively shape the target culture through their translations (both through their activities and the products) (Toury 1995, 25), let alone shaping norms, which are tiny components within a culture. Also, Toury explicitly states elsewhere that norms are unstable, changing entities, attributing 'active' role to translators as well as other agents (critics, academics, etc.) in the process of such change:

Of course, it is not as if all translators are *passive* in face of [sic] these changes. Rather, many of them, through their very activity, help in shaping the process, as do translation criticism, translation ideology (including the one emanating from contemporary academe, often in the guise of theory), and, of course, various norm-setting activities of institutes where, in many societies, translators are now being trained. Wittingly or unwittingly, they all try to interfere with the 'natural' course of events and to divert it according to their own preferences. (62)

⁴ Be it a translator, an editor, or else, Toury mentions them under the concept of "translator" as a hypothetical construct possibly including either one actual translator or a group consisting of translator, editor, proofreader, publisher, etc. (1995, 183).

Indeed, Toury does not merely 'concede' that agents have active roles; he directly 'states' that "the relative role of different agents in the overall dynamics of translational norms" is not yet well-known and therefore "much more research is needed to clarify it" (62).

According to Toury, norms are intersubjective rather than separate entities existing independently. The objectivity of norms is synonymous with their intersubjectivity. Therefore, they do not have a subject-independent objective existence no matter how widespread, strong, sanction-inducing, and rule-like they may or may not be (54). Conceptualizing norms as ontologically intersubjective can be considered an avoidance of 'underemphasizing' agency, because it shows that the existence of norms and thus their very nature is always parasitic to agents acting within a culture, or in Toury's words, 'persons-in-the-culture.'

Furthermore, in his discussion on the difficulty of identifying translations in Hebrew culture during the enlightenment period where the norms governing both the original texts and translated texts were very similar to the point of making it difficult to trace instances of 'negative transfer' (unusual or non-conventional textual-linguistic features commonly associated with translations), Toury suggests specific focus on agents. His solution to this difficulty is gathering information on

individual figures involved in the act [of text production] - translators, writers, editors, and the like: where they lived, what kind of education they had, which languages can be ruled out for such persons under such circumstances, how likely they were to encounter certain texts rather than others in their immediate vicinity, and so on. (134)

By the help of such information on agents, answers concerning translational questions should be sought in his framework. Such a method is not only far from ignoring agents, but it also directly emphasizes inquiry into agents as a method of coming up with explanations on the main issues concerning translation.

Last but not least, agents' statements concerning the text production activities are one of the two major sources of information in inquiries into the very norms themselves. In Toury's methodology, norms can be reconstructed (inferred through evidence gathered by empirical research) by making use of textual and extratextual sources. In Toury's own words, extratextual sources are: "semi-theoretical or critical formulations, such as prescriptive 'theories' of translation, statements made by translators, editors, publishers, and other persons involved in or connected with the activity, critical appraisals of individual translations, or the activity of a translator or 'school' of translators, and so forth" (65). Therefore, it is in the very center of the

approach that agents' opinions and activities should be investigated to even come up with a claim on norms.

Hence, neither the existence of norms nor the way in which they are investigated shadows agents or their active role.

3.2 Agency in the Context of the Research Goals Set by the Target-Oriented Theory

For an in-depth understanding of Toury's framework and where the issue of agents stands in relation to it, it is crucial to analyze his emphasis on the interdependence of function, process, and product. This emphasis is clear throughout the book, as manifested in the following remark: "no explanatory hypothesis which is even remotely satisfactory can be formulated unless all three aspects are brought to bear on each other" (Toury 1995, 11). He explicitly warns against a potential danger concerning Holmes's map over the issue of the descriptive translation studies branch being classified into product-, process- and function-oriented, insisting on the idea that these should not be considered autonomous sub-branches. If such a mistake is made, the outcome would be the reduction of individual studies to "superficial descriptions" (ibid.). Therefore, one of the most crucial research goals of descriptive translation studies is to provide non-superficial descriptions incorporating whatever is relevant to the translation situation at hand. Focus on agency is included but not exclusively demarcated in this framework.

What the interdependence of these three aspects of translation bears on the issue of agency is manifold. To begin with, the translation process, which includes "the strategies a translator resorts to," affects the function and the product (14). As Chesterman (2017) acknowledges, there is considerable room for the translator and individual decision-making of agents in the process aspect of descriptive studies.

Also, the function (or position) is a concept that covers both 'intended function' and 'actual function,' that is, both the way the agents participating in the process (translator, editor, etc.) want the translation product to be conceived/received by persons-in-the-target-culture and the way it happens to be conceived/received by them after production. Therefore, the concept of 'intended function,' when stripped off its generality in Toury's meta-level discourse, actually bears directly on agents' aims, plans, desires, etc., and these are given 'logical priority' in their relationship with the translation product and process. Although there is a multitude of constraints shaping the translation process and thus the product, the expected future position of

a translation ranks the first in terms of hierarchy of force or effect (sharing this rank with the systemic position of translating, i.e., what the act of translating is commonly associated with in the culture). Taking the expected future position of a translation as a governing factor and seeing translating as a “teleological” activity means giving agents’ goals the strongest determining role in the actualization of whatever we call translation (Toury 1995, 14).

However, in ascribing merely ‘logical’ (not real) priority on intended function, Toury integrates agents, their strategies, value judgments (norms), and the culture in which they are embedded, arguing that relations and effects work in all directions (thus, interdependence), constantly shaping one another on many levels in accordance with dynamic functionalism (ibid.). This is actually one step ahead of emphasizing agents; what is emphasized here is contextualized agents (symbolized by Toury’s frequently used expression ‘person-in-the-culture’), very similar to what Bourdieusian frameworks attempt to do. In this sense, it would be fair to argue that the balance between agency and structure commonly desired by many critics is already present in the target-oriented theory.

Moreover, the agent is not only situated as a core component in the framework but also taken in great detail. The distinction between the intended and actual function, and the nature of ‘function’ in Toury’s conceptual framework suggest that agents’ effect on the structure is considered in two aspects. The desires of text-producers (as intended function) shape the process and product, while at the same time the conceptions of text-receivers (actual function) shape future intended functions, processes, and products. Hence, a close analysis of the idea of interdependence between function, process, and product suggests that the apparent underemphasis of agents in Toury’s framework is probably due to use of language rather than deficiencies in content.

3.3 Agency in the Contextualization Process

Another important component of descriptive translation studies as conceived by Toury is a way to make descriptions integrate as much of the phenomena under scrutiny as possible to get a whole (as much as possible) picture rather than isolating certain entities or aspects of it based on already established categories. This process is named ‘contextualization’ by Toury, and in the general structure of his framework, it is not limited to certain ‘a priori’ categories but left open-ended (1995, 26–28). In this general conceptual sphere, what contextualization

basically requires is to position the translation in the most appropriate context within the target culture by making use of the gradually accumulating information throughout the inquiry, which entails diving deep into the target (sub)cultural phenomena including but not limited to⁵ the target audience of a translation,⁶ the communicative situation in which the translation takes place,⁷ and the individual figures⁸ taking part in the translational act (translators, writers, editors, etc.).

In describing the process through which the inquiry in question is supposed to take place, Toury once again places in the center the intended function, i.e., the position a translation was intended to occupy in the target (sub)culture. The ultimate aim of inquiry is to find out what was intended by active agents of the process. However, the discovery procedure which may provide the researcher with an understanding of something (people's intentions) that is so difficult to find out empirically entails making use of many kinds of indirect data (not acquired by directly observing the individual agent), and the focus on how to deal with such data might give the illusion of a negligence of agents.

This brings us to the issue of the methodology and objectives of Toury's 'research programme' (in the sense used by Imre Lakatos [1970]), how it shapes the framework itself, and indirectly, the way it is conceived.

3.4 The Place of Agency in the Methodology of the Target-Oriented Approach

In line with the assumption of many contemporary approaches in the philosophy of science that observation is shaped by theory,⁹ Toury admits that the object of study in an empirical discipline is determined by the theory "which is always geared to cater for certain needs" (1995, 21). As such, the object of study 'purported' as an extension of the theory becomes translation as a fact of target culture in the context of the need to establish an empirical discipline that aims at describing, explaining, and possibly predicting¹⁰ translational phenomena (whatever is regarded as translation within a culture). Needless to say, it is quite natural for translation studies to take 'translation' as its object, however complex it might be to

⁵ See the contextualization of Chaim Nahman Bialik's translations (148–165).

⁶ See the sample contextualization on page 27 (ibid.).

⁷ See the sample contextualization on page 27 (ibid.).

⁸ See the suggested solution to the problem of identifying translations on page 134 (ibid.).

⁹ See the works by Karl R. Popper (1959), Norwood Russell Hanson (1958), Thomas S. Kuhn (1970), and Paul Karl Feyerabend (1981).

¹⁰ A triad influenced by philosophy of science, most specifically Carl Gustav Hempel (1952).

define (or in Toury’s case non-define)¹¹ it. And the concept of translation obviously covers both the act of translating and its outcome.

In this regard, relations between variables relevant for translation are sought with the hope of arriving at coherent laws (as the ultimate aim of prediction suggests). The relevant variables in question definitely include translators; it would be impossible to ignore this. However, data collected from individual translators is not an end in itself because a search for the relationships between variables is sought—as deemed necessary by the objective of ‘explaining.’ After all, scientific explanation by definition consists of general principles through which happenings concerning individual people or objects are explained. Therefore, a general theory of ‘translation’ cannot specify individual people even if the theoreticians formulating it are immensely preoccupied with personal details. In such a project, information on individuals can only be made use of as data. Individuals’ actions might be explained by theoretical/explanatory assumptions (which might or might not contain variables covering their free choice, decision-making procedure, environment, life-story, etc.); and this is what happens in the case of the target-oriented theory. However, they can neither be included directly in general principles, nor can they be explicitly mentioned as a distinct field of study.

Since the main parts of *Descriptive Translation Studies — and Beyond* are concerned with laying the foundations of a general theory, explicit mention of individual translators is neither required nor plausible. However, the crucial variables defined by the theory (e.g., intended function) clearly include them and necessitate work on them.

Another reason why most of the book may seem to ignore translators seems to be the high epistemological standards Toury sets in terms of methodology. The strong empirical focus of Toury makes it difficult to center upon data collected directly from translators. While the process of both single agents’ and groups of agents’ acts of translation is the main focus of research (translation processes—even individual ones—are attempted to be reconstructed), it is not considered ‘observable’ by Toury, and therefore, study procedures focus on translation products (1995, 34). Although extratextual sources are also crucial in Toury’s methodology, even they are generally in the form of texts. So, a focus on textual material stems from concerns regarding epistemological procedure rather than focus of interest.

¹¹ See part 2, chapter 1, section 4 “The Notion of ‘Assumed Translation’ and Its Contents” on page 29.

A striking example of this is when descriptive studies try to arrive at a translator's concept of translation, but use concrete texts and comparison rather than questionnaires, participant observation, or similar methods commonly associated with inquiring into agents' thought-world. This apparent oddity is mainly due to two basic methodological/epistemological concerns.

One of them is that the process of translation has traditionally been considered a black box, access to which is very limited. Many of the observation methods used to investigate other acts are taken to fare badly for translation. This is made explicit by Toury in the book's section on experimental methods in translation studies (221f.). In this section, Toury does not even regard think-aloud protocols (TAP) as sufficiently strong evidence (he suggests using them with caution) of the translation process since what is observed in TAP research is not processes directly, but products, just like comparative studies on translations. The only difference is that they are different kinds of products. (And when we think about it, they are actually other texts, produced by translators, similarly to translated texts.) Such extreme caution seems to be one of the methodological reasons behind the seeming underemphasis on translators in Toury's approach.

The second basic methodological/epistemological concern that probably reduces the number of direct references to individual translators is Toury's recognition that what we call 'the translator' is usually not a real person but a hypothetical construct, since we do not have access to the distribution of agency in the creation of the infinitely many bits and pieces of content and their probable and commonly frequent modifications. According to Toury, the translator as such is

a functional entity mediating between two existing texts, rather than a definite person. Even in the case of the most prestigious translators, whose translational products may well have been tampered with least of all, one can never be sure just how many hands were actually involved in the establishment of the translation as we have it, and most cases are not as extreme in any case. (1995, 183)

Such recognition of the lack of access is probably another reason why products and comparisons remain central to descriptive translation studies even though one of the basic goals is to come up with explanatory hypotheses concerning translators' decision process.

However, none of these methodological reservations prevent researchers working in line with the theory from looking into different data sources provided that they are methodologically

and epistemologically well-justified. As can be seen by Toury's positive reaction to experimental methods (he sees significant potential in them), he criticizes not the use of such methods but other problems concerning experimental studies.

4. Conclusion

With the advent of sociological approaches, theories, and conceptual frameworks in translation studies, descriptively-oriented general theories of translation including Toury's target-oriented theory have been increasingly criticized. Many scholars called for a much more intensive focus on agents of translation as well as theoretical and conceptual frameworks that are much more specifically tailored to revealing individuals' personal choices and roles. The analysis of some influential criticisms from leading translation studies scholars reveals two main strands of objection.

The first strand pertains to the assumption that the concept of norm is problematic since the choices made by actual individuals are overlooked and a collective scheme of behavior is theoretically imposed. However, the present rereading reveals that Toury does not attribute any causative factor to norms. The most prominent determining factor in Toury's framework is the concept of intended function. This concept makes direct reference to the desires/plans of individual agents in the translation process with respect to the position the target product is to assume in the target culture (1995, 12–13). Also, Toury explicitly states that norms are dynamic in nature and that translators and other agents (by way of translation criticism, translation ideology, translator training institutions, etc.) are actors in the shaping of norms (62). Therefore, rather than a deterministic outlook on social phenomena, the generality of Toury's discourse seems to be the reason why norms are commonly taken to be deterministic theoretical constructs.

A second strand of objection to the target-oriented theory over the issue of agency considers Toury to be underemphasizing agency in the sense that the research program laid out by the target-oriented theory does not place sufficient emphasis on research that takes individuals as its focus. In this regard, the present reading looked into the extent to which descriptive research as laid out by Toury focuses (or allows focusing) on individual agents. At this point, it seems true that studies which focus directly on individuals to uncover their decisions do not assume a central position. However, Toury's theoretical approach attributes a

very central position to finding out what was intended by active agents of the process (intended function). Also, Toury's concept of contextualization requires the researchers to position translations in their social and cultural context, which includes the individual figures taking part in the translational act (translators, writers, editors, etc.). This can be observed in the exemplary case studies provided by Toury in the final chapters of the same book that most comprehensively lays out the target-oriented theory. Therefore, Toury's apparent underemphasis on research procedures that directly take individuals as objects of study can be attributed to his concerns and reservations with respect to certain individual-oriented data collection methods such as TAPs and to the level of abstraction of a proposed "general" theory of translation.

Toury's methodological and epistemological concerns mentioned in section 3.4 might be regarded as underemphasizing research procedures that are more directly oriented towards taking agents as object of scrutiny. However, Toury explicitly states the importance of incorporating the description of agents, and especially of their roles and intentions as part of contextualization. Comprehensive inquiries into product, process, and function should play complementary roles in avoiding superficial descriptions and arriving at a broader view of the factors at play in the formation of translations.

One limitation of the present study was that I had to melt all criticisms into one pot and abstract general ideas to check against Toury's work due to reasons of space. More analytical studies which reconstruct each criticism/argument in detail and address them one by one in a series of articles can hopefully be conducted. However, the general idea that the target-oriented theory is not agency-negligent and that it not only makes room for agency but also provides a framework for descriptive studies which take individuals or groups of individuals as point of focus has hopefully been grounded well enough if not for anything than to stir further debate as to the more specific issues related to how agency is to be dealt with in the framework of the target-oriented theory.

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