Handbook of Translation Studies Online

Handbook of Translation Studies Volume 2 (2011), pp. 88–96. Current revision: 2016.

Previous version(s) of this article: 2011ISSN 2210-4844

Methodology in Translation Studies

Peter Flynn & Yves Gambier

Lessius University College | University of Turku

Table of contents

https://doi.org/10.1075/hts.2.met2 ► Translations: German, Spanish, FrenchPRINTER-FRIENDLY

Handbook of Translation Studies Volume 2 (2011), pp. 88–96. Current revision: 2016.

Previous version(s) of this article: 2011 © 2011–2016 John Benjamins Publishing Company

Methodology could be defined as the study of or the body of knowledge relating to method(s). Viewed in other terms, it can be considered as the hallmark or defining feature of a discipline or an approach within a discipline. In this respect any methodology is the site of constant contention, refinement and re-evaluation (Kuhn 1962). So strictly speaking, a discussion of methodology should also include the position(ing) (Marcus 1998: 98) of the scholar or school with regard to it, both inside any given approach and other approaches adjacent to it and within the discipline as a whole. This has been the case in Translation Studies, viz. the long-standing debate on the use and effectiveness of the Liberal Arts Paradigm and Empirical Science Paradigm (Gile 2005) in tackling and understanding translational and interpreting phenomena. The same holds for the various turns in Translation Studies, all of which are manifestations of its attempt to expand, define and establish itself as a specific academic discipline (Snell-Hornby 2006)1. Furthermore, an awareness of positioning and its ethical and political implications for researchers has given rise to studies in this area (see Committed approaches and activism; Gender and translation; Political translation; Post-colonial literatures and translation)2. All of these turns have brought changes in methodology with them or have rejected previous approaches and their respective methodologies. As Interpreting Studies has developed and outlined its own methodological concern, the discussion that follows will focus on translation.

Many disciplines within the humanities borrow concepts and methodologies from each other. Given the complexity of translation proper and the numerous ways of approaching it as an object of study, translation scholars often adapt methodologies from elsewhere and tailor them to fit the data, practices, situations and population they are examining. These methodologies are built on a set of sometimes unarticulated assumptions and previously articulated givens and concepts that often are at odds with translation data. Historically speaking within Translation Studies, these adaptations have arisen from former inroads into comparative linguistics and literature or more recently from forays into sociology and cultural and post-colonial studies. Such adaptations are not without their perils, particularly given the fact that Translation Studies has gradually identified and articulated its own basic assumptions, methodological concerns, research criteria and questions. As Michaela Wolf points out in Sociology of translation, there is indeed a danger in "outsourc[ing] the problem of methodology". In this respect, a given methodology cannot be disassociated from the phenomena it has been designed to scrutinise or a fortiori from the concerns of the scholars who have drawn up the method in the first place. Among other things, outsourcing the problem of methodology to other disciplines may cause us to lose track of the intricate links between (translation) phenomena and method. This would further involve our forsaking the rigour required to adapt and fine-tune a method in order to increase its explanatory power with regard to a particular set of data under scrutiny, in our case translation data in whichever form.

1.Data types and methodologies

The form of translation data under scrutiny will already give us an indication of which method of investigation to use. In what follows an attempt will be made to draw up an overall scheme of approaches to translation, moving from more general relations of data and method to specific data sets and their related methodologies.

In tracing developments in Translation Studies over the past thirty years one can notice a growing interest in studying the socio-cultural contexts in which translation is carried out. Translation indeed intersects with a multiplicity of other (language) activities ranging from highly institutionalised practices like (international) law (see Legal translation), politics, education (see Curriculum; Language learning and translation; Translation didactics) and science (see Scientific translation; Technical translation) through various forms of (multinational) business and media communication (see Journalism and translation; Audiovisual translation) and translation for the arts (see Drama translation; Literary translation) to lesser visible everyday interaction, including translation in the informal economy. In this respect scholars have expanded their focus to include such complex contextual factors, next to studying individual translations or bodies of translated text, all with a view to enhancing the explanatory power of their studies and hence increasing our understanding of translation as a socio-cultural fact.

Within the complexity touched on above we can already recognise a number of basic factors relating to translation, each with its own set of methodological implications, i.e. discourses, practices, contexts and actors, not to mention the intricate relations between them. Given these intricate relations, it is important to note here that the four factors, i.e. discourses, practices, contexts and actors have been separated out from the messy reality of translation for methodological purposes only.

1.1Discourses

Translation discourses are understood here in the broadest possible sense as including translations as such, all the (multilingual) interaction involved in bringing about these translations and all subsequent comment, evaluation or explanation coinciding with or issuing from translations. Traditionally speaking, translation scholars have often used qualitative approaches in studying literary texts, then moving on to other genres, which in fact form the bulk of translation work worldwide. Such studies have been helped enormously by the advent of powerful computers that can treat large bodies of source and target texts or translation corpora. Corpora, their construction and analysis, along with the findings gleaned from corpora and their interpretation, have brought with them their own set of methodological concerns (see Corpora). Under the heading of discourse we can also include compilations and studies of historical writings on translation (Robinson 2002, among others). Contemporary studies of such discourse often draw on modern recording techniques like audio and video to record structured or unstructured interviews or talks with individuals or focus groups. Among the methodological concerns related to such studies are issues of face-to-face interaction and the nature and form of the knowledge being co-constructed in such interactions. Discourse of this type can also be obtained through open questions in (on-line) surveys. Such discourses, whether in written or in spoken form, have been subjected to various forms of analysis including (critical) discourse analysis, studies in narrative, gender and power analyses, etc.

1.2Practices

Next to actual translation activities as such, practices are understood here as also comprising a multiplicity of factors that go along or coincide with these activities, including the theories, ad hoc, fully developed or otherwise, informing the activities and the tools used in the process. Studies of norms or ethics in or the various functions of translation are mainly based on the assumption that translations and their related ‘paratexts’ (translators’ comments, forwards and prefaces to translated works, etc.) are actual entextualisations of particular translation practices at given times and places in the world. It then remains to be discovered whether and to which extent the norms or ethics revealed actually reflect common translation practices at a given time and place. Here we can see how it is impossible to separate discourses from practices in the real world. In more recent studies, scholars have used Bourdieu’s framework (Bourdieu 1980) – not without criticism and adaptation – to explain practices in terms of a translator’s habitus in a given subfield of translation. A translator’s habitus would typically include a set of embodied translational practices, either acquired through formal training or through experience or both. As translators often specialise, they often know or have to learn the best way to go about things in their subfield. In this way, they can accumulate (or even sometimes lose) what Bourdieu called forms of capital. This not only involves economic capital (monetary gain) but also symbolic capital like, prestige, recognition, etc., or cultural capital like knowledge, expertise, etc. Such forms of capital are intricately linked to forms of practice. These notions have often been used in studying literary translation but can be equally applied in studying other subfields of translation. In contemporary studies, aspects of practices can be observed in situ by using qualitative methods such as (participant) observation and think-aloud protocols, for example. Various aspects of practice can also studied by using modern computer tools like screen and key loggers, and eye tracking software to gather quantitative data (see Cognitive approaches; Translation process). The accumulated capital resulting from particular practices can be understood as forms of validation of such practices.

1.3Contexts

The contexts involved, which are as various in nature as translations, are not considered here as fixed or static givens encompassing or surrounding translation, but rather as sets of factors, both “real” and discursive that need to be established by empirical study in each case. Context is understood as being real and also as being co-constructed through discourse. An example of this would be a translation agency (see Agents of translation). An agency will typically have its own working space and operate globally or locally or both. But it will also present itself and its ethos discursively to its clients: how it perceives/constructs the subfield of operations and the best practices involved. In this way those running the agency help shape the context in which they work.

The further we go back in history the harder it becomes to determine the contexts of translation activity or to trace the actors involved. In the main, we only have recourse to written materials found in books and archives, all of which requires the rigour of historical inquiry (see Translation history). Next to explorations of older periods, studies have been made of actual translations in colonial and post-colonial contexts and of a range of issues related to the contexts of these translations and the actors involved, not least the colonial institutions commissioning translations or individuals and groups translating in resistance or compliance to orders of hegemony extant at the time. Many of these studies draw on insights from other disciplines like cultural studies, post-colonial studies, (critical) discourse analysis and narrative, building and problematising the classical role of the translator as cultural mediator or bridge builder. Others draw on insights from sociology and ethnography in laying bare translation practices in given cultural spaces and periods.

Determining contexts in contemporary situations is no easy task either. With increased activity over the internet and other global media, context cannot be considered as being framed by regional or national borders. Again this needs to be determined by study in each case. Furthermore, as was argued above in the case of the translation agency, scholars have increasingly come to consider context as also being constructed and maintained by actors working in given institutional or cultural spaces (Goodwin & Duranti 1992). In this respect contexts to have be considered along with the actors who participate in them.

1.4Actors

The term actors cannot be reduced solely to “the translator” and includes all those involved in a translation event, some of whom will have a greater impact on the event than others (Latour 2005). Actors have been traditionally considered as belonging to the same language or cultural community (see below), but given the existence of on-line or virtual communities, whose members are scattered across the globe, this can hardly be the case. These insights will most probably change our views on traditional communities. In this respect, scholars have turned to such notions as “communities of practice” (Wenger 1998) (see Networking and volunteer translators). As was already mentioned in relation to practices, various aspects of actor participation can be observed by using qualitative methods such as (participant) observation, think-aloud protocols or by using modern computer tools like screen and key loggers, and eye tracking software to gather quantitative data (see Cognitive approaches; Translation process). It goes without saying that these overlapping factors have been identified and set apart for methodological purposes only, that in the real world they coincide and are in fact inseparable.

Functional approaches to Translation Studies had already identified a set of criteria for examining translation as a form of social action, viz. the various features of Skopos Theory, for example. These features can be used as specific nodes of inquiry, the theory as a whole providing a methodological framework in which to place various sets of data collected. It must be pointed out, however, that the researcher should not consider this theory as a catch-all self-explanatory system and forget the specifics of the subfield under investigation, including the genres being translated within it. In this respect, the explanatory power of functional approaches can be further enhanced by quantitative and qualitative analyses. Here too, the various roles involved are not givens and also need to be established through study.

1.5A Family Snapshot: Viewing the four factors together

To recapitulate, two main methods of analysis can be used to study any of the four factors outlined above: quantitative or qualitative or a combination of the two. Listed under quantitative methods we have noted surveys, (cloze) tests, corpus analyses, key-logging, eye-tracking, screen-logging and related statistical analyses. Under qualitative methods we have noted various forms of text and discourse analysis, narrative and related studies, interviews with individuals or focus groups, think-aloud protocols, ethnographies, inquiries into power, gender and other sets of relations.

Again, no matter where and how translation takes place, be it carried out by those working for the United Nations or the European Parliament or by an immigrant child helping her parents buy a piece of furniture at a local store in the “new” language, it is and remains inherently complex (see Natural translator and interpreter). Scholars will therefore examine the literature for descriptions or definitions of translation that will allow them to frame the phenomena they plan to study. It is safe to assume that such descriptions and definitions will include these four factors to varying degrees or may foreground one or two of them. Once the prominent factors have been identified in the description of the phenomena, particular methods of analysis will then suggest themselves. Take this quote on ‘translatorship’ by Gideon Toury, for example:

Consequently, ‘translatorship’ amounts first and foremost to being able to play a social role, i.e., to fulfil a function allotted by a community -- to the activity, its practitioners and/or their products -- in a way which is deemed appropriate in its own terms of reference. The acquisition of a set of norms for determining the suitability of that kind of behaviour, and for manoeuvring between all the factors which may constrain it, is therefore a prerequisite for becoming a translator within a cultural environment3.”(Toury 1995:53)

The quote can be understood as a succinct family snapshot of translation and was formulated with a view to studying norms in translation. Nonetheless, it comprises a whole programme of research for translation scholars and hence brings with it a set of methodological questions and implications. The main term in the quote is ‘translatorship’ which can be broken down into the four factors and examined accordingly. The suffix -ship added to the word translator implies, among other things, the “quality or condition”, the “status” or the “competence” pertaining to individual translators or groups of translators (practices and actors). “Quality or condition, status and competence” are all aspects that are recognised to varying degrees in a society and its institutions (discourses, practices and contexts). In relation to translators, this recognition can take various forms, ranging from institutionalised training and certification to broader types of consensus and recognition in particular social groups which become manifest in such things as awards, prizes, prestige, etc. All of this can be considered as forms of accumulated capital in the Bourdieusian sense (actors, practices and contexts). Competences are developed through training and practice, or even through practice alone, and status is adjudicated and proclaimed either institutionally through accreditation or by popular consent and acclaim (actors, contexts, practices). It can still be argued, despite the growing number of institutes of higher education offering programmes in translator training, that the condition or quality of being a translator need not necessarily be the consequence of institutional training and certification. Again this is an empirical matter which has to be determined by examining it in the light of any of the four factors.

So, one can ask what is understood by “translatorship” in institutional terms. Here both quantitative and qualitative methods can be used to study the discourses, practices, actors and institutional contexts involved4. One can then ask what “translatorship” means outside the institution, when the knowledge and competences developed during training are put into practice and further developed. It is then that translators learn to play a more complex social role (Toury 1995:23) outside the relatively protected educational environment they have come from. Here too other institutions (e.g. European Commission and Parliament, government translation agencies, etc.) and associations (international, national or regional associations of translators and interpreters) may play an important part in defining and regulating what this social role means in practice (see Institutional translation). One could then ask what “translatorship” means in an even broader social sense. Which form does this social role then take. Again the four factors discussed above can be used as separate lines of inquiry. It must be noted, however, these four factors once examined in the various setting mentioned till now may reveal conflicting views on what translation, “translatorship” and social role mean.

Translators’ social roles become visible or manifest in their discourses, practices, the contexts in which they work and which they help to construct and maintain, along with the networks of actors they are involved in. Once again these factors can be approached and examined qualitatively or quantitatively or both, which has given rise to a whole array of studies ranging from (on-line) surveys of the profession to ethnographic studies of translators at the European Commission. Following the cultural turn in Translation Studies, the social role and status of translators has been studied from a variety of perspectives, most of which have mainly used qualitative approaches to explore power and gender differentials and imbalances.

2.Concluding remarks

With regard to how quantitative and qualitative methods may complement each other, we would like to point out the following: quantitative methods can be used to gather large amounts of data on a variety of subjects, e.g. the number books or documents translated at a given place or time, findings from large and smaller scale corpora, views or opinions on a variety of translation issues in a group or society, etc. Qualitative methods, like discourse and text analysis, in-depth interviews, etc. can be used to discover less visible theorising, ideologies, political and other stances on gender and power that quantitative studies like focused surveys may not reveal. In this respect, each approach can be used to expand on or provide more depth to findings from the other. As regards using a combined approach, this would perhaps be far too time consuming and labour-intensive for the individual researcher, and hence would seem more appropriate in group research projects. Whether the research project is being carried out by an individual or by a group, triangulation can be used both within and across quantitative and qualitative research methods to reduce bias and heighten explanatory power. This would involve, among other things, using various methods to gather data, having the same phenomenon investigated by multiple researchers or using various theories to explain the findings gleaned from a study.

Notes

1.For related debates on developments within the humanities in general and sociology in particular, see Bourdieu 2001.

2.For a discussion of the main issues in the debate on reflexivity and research, see also Marcus 1998: 181-202.

3.See Katan 2004 on translation and culture. For a discussion of various interpretations of the term as such, see Duranti 2001.

4.For a detailed set of areas and aspects on which qualitative and quantitative studies can be carried out, see “Competences for professional translators”, DG Translation, European Union at ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/programmes/emt/index_en.htm (25/01/2011)

References

Bourdieu, Pierre 2001 Science de la science et réflexivité. Cours du Collège de France, 2000–2001. Paris: Raisons d’agir.

1980 Le sens pratique. Paris: Les éditions de minuit.

Duranti, Alessandro 2001 Linguistic anthropology. Princeton: Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511810190 BoP

Gile, Daniel 2005 Research issues in Translation Studies. Online reference materials. European Society for Translation Studies at www.est-translationstudies.org/publications/publications.html [Accessed 3 February 2011]

Goodwin, Charles & Alessandro Duranti (eds) 1992 Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. BoP

Katan, David 2004 2nd edition. Translating cultures: an introduction for translators, interpreters and mediators. Manchester: St Jerome. BoP

Kuhn, Thomas S 1962 The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Latour, B 2005 Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Marcus, George E 1998 Ethnography through thick and thin. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Robinson, Douglas(ed.) 1997 Western translation theory. From Herodotus to Nietzsche. Manchester: St. Jerome. TSB

Toury, Gideon 1995 Descriptive Translation studies and Beyond. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.4 BoP

Wenger, Etienne 1998 Communities of practice. Learning, meaning, and identity. Cambridge U.K/ New York: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511803932

Further reading

Brenda Nicodemus & Laurie Swabey (eds) 2011 Advances in Interpreting Research. Inquiry in action. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. . https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.99 TSB

Briggs, Charles L 2002 “Interviewing, Power/Knowledge, and Social Inequality.” In Handbook of Interview Research Context & Method, F. Jaber (eds), 911–922. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications.

Gabriela Saldanha & Sharon O'Brien 2013 Research methodologies in TS. 280p. Manchester: St Jerome.

Holliday, Adrian 2007 Doing and Writing Qualitative Research. London: Sage Publications.

Jaber, F. Gubrium, J.F & Holstein, J.A(eds) 2002 Handbook of Interview Research Context and Method. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications.

Sandra Hale & Jemina Napier 2013: Research Methods in Interpreting. A practical Resource. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. TSB

Singleton, Royce & Straits, Bruce C 2010 Approaches to Social Research. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Related articles

Cognitive approaches

Committed approaches and activism

Competence

Corpora

Curriculum

Empirical approaches

Ethnographic approaches

Interdisciplinarity in Translation Studies

Interpreting Studies

Journalism and translation

Natural translator and interpreter

Networking and volunteer translators

Paratexts

Political translation

Post-colonial literatures and translation

Scientific translation

Sociology of translation

Technical translation

Think-aloud protocol

Translation Studies

Translation didactics

Translation history

Translation process

The turns of Translation Studies