

**Zeitschrift:** Bulletin CILA : organe de la Commission interuniversitaire suisse de linguistique appliquée

**Herausgeber:** Commission interuniversitaire suisse de linguistique appliquée

**Band:** - (1989)

**Heft:** 49

  

**Artikel:** Well, what about a linguistic theory of literary translation?

**Autor:** Toury, Gideon

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-977964>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 12.04.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## Well, what about a LINGUISTIC theory of LITERARY translation?

### 1. Theory and theories

As is well known, theories are constituted in response to needs. Consequently, different theories inevitably fulfill different functions as well as apply to different objects, at least different aspects of a seemingly one object. This is so even if all aspects/objects, on the one hand, and all theories, on the other hand, appear under one name. «Translation» and «translation theory» are no exception.

### 2. Translation and translation theory

Cultural circumstances differ from one case to another, in space and/or time. This makes the realization of the notion of «translation» an ever-changing one. However, the ways translation (and translating) manifest themselves in «the world of our experience» are not erratic, such as the factors which govern them originate in the *target* culture and reflect its own interests (TOURY, 1980).

One a so-called cultural-semiotic approach to translation is adopted (TOURY, 1986), translation can no longer be defined in any substantial terms. Rather, the term is taken to refer to all phenomena that «man in culture» is willing to regard as covered by it, on no matter what grounds. And it is precisely the conditions under which various realizations of the notion emerge which form the locus of translation studies as a scholarly discipline. What all this amounts to is the establishment of the interdependencies between the following three factors:

(a) the *function* a translation fulfills (or is devised to fulfill) in the target culture,

(b) the *make-up* of texts which are regarded as «proper» translations, in terms of fulfilling that function, and

(c) the strategies and procedures resorted to during the *process* whereby such a product is established and introduced into the target culture (hence, by extension, the cultural function of the act of translating [a']).

Translation studies is an *empirical* discipline, then (HOLMES, 1988, 71). Its aim is to provide a systematic account of every phenomenon pertaining

to a certain segment of reality: *description* and *explanation* as well as [a certain amount of] *prediction* (HEMPEL, 1952, 1; 20). If this threefold goal is to be attained, the inherent changeability of the notion of «translation» should be built into the very *theory* of translation, whose task it is to supply a framework for the systematization of these accounts.

### 3. «Literary» translation and «literary translation»

«Literary translation» would seem to form but one subclass of the general category of «translation». In fact, however, the term is afflicted by ambiguity. As I have claimed elsewhere (TOURY, 1984), it refers to two things, which, for convenience sake, could be labelled «‘literary’ translation» and «literary translation», respectively:

(i) the translation of texts which are regarded as «literary» in the *source* culture; in an extreme case – *any* translation of these texts, in a modified version – one which aims at the retention of the «web of relationships» exhibited by the source text (SNELL-HORNBY, 1987);

(ii) the translation of [any] text such as the product be accepted as «literary» by the *recipient* culture.

Of course, the two may concur. The point is they need not. In other words, neither the identity of a source text as literary nor the reconstruction of its «web of relationships» guarantee the end-product position in the target literary system. Moreover, the reverse is possible too, even in our modern times. Thus, for instance, Freud’s scientific writings have recently undergone translation into Hebrew in such a way that no serious Israeli regards the end-product as a text in psychoanalysis; just «a good piece of writing». The translator was even awarded the most prestigious translation prize in the country for his performance, namely, by a literary-oriented board.

The basic opposition between «‘literary’ translation» and «literary translation» stems from the fact that «literature» does not boil down to a group of texts which allegedly have something inherently «literary» about them. Rather, it is first and foremost a *cultural institution*: in every culture, certain phenomena (models, techniques, features, and – by extension – texts) *function* as, rather than *are* literary. In fact, it is a network of ad hoc systemic relationships which lends them the status of «literary facts», namely, within a particular system (TYNJANOV, 1967). Obviously, only rarely will two systems really concur; and since the «literariness» of a text is governed first and foremost by the internal structure of the *target* system, «literary

translation» (ii) may well necessitate the imposition of «conformity conditions», namely, to the models and norms which are deemed «literary» in the latter. The price is obvious: shifts from the reconstruction of the features of the source text, even those which mark it «literary» within the source system.

This is of special significance when the differences between the source and target literary traditions are considerable. Precisely this would be my interpretation of the basic difficulty with regard to the translation of Wolfgang Borchert's «An diesem Dienstag» in the Indonesian context, referred to by Paul Kußmaul in the present colloquium (KUSSMAUL, 1988). For, beyond the linguistic and cultural problems on the micro-level, this would involve the introduction of a modern short story into a literature which completely lacks an appropriate niche for it.

#### 4. *A linguistic theory of literary translation?*

On the basis of this all too partial presentation I would venture the following outline of an answer to the question:

- Any kind of translation involves linguistic utterances. Therefore any claim that a linguistic theory is «impossible», or «inconceivable», would seem at best odd.
- However, all a linguistic theory can hope to account for is those aspects of translation which lend themselves to linguistic treatment, in the first place. In other words, it can *apply* to translation, but not *exhaust* it.
- Given the fact that the difference between «‘literary’ translation» (i) and «literary translation» (ii) is *non-linguistic* in essence, a linguistic theory seems feasible mainly with respect to the former, i.e. the translation of SL literary texts, where the focus is indeed on textual-linguistic features.
- As to «literary translation», a linguistic theory may well be of some use in terms of *description*, of less use in terms of *explanation*, of almost nil use in terms of any true *prediction*.

All this does not render a linguistic theory of literary translation invalid. It does, however, cast serious doubts on its *usefulness*, especially once a decision to regard translation as a *cultural* phenomenon has been made.

Tel Aviv University  
The M. Bernstein Chair  
of Translation Theory  
Tel Aviv, Israel

Gideon TOURY

## References

- HEMPEL, Carl (1952): *Fundamentals of Concept Formation in Empirical Science*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press. [= *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, II, No. 7.]
- HOLMES, James S. (1988): *Translated!: Papers on Literary Translation and Translation Studies*. Amsterdam, Rodopi, 117 p. ISBN 90-6203-739-9.
- KUSSMAUL, Paul (1988): «Linguistische Analyse und Übersetzungskritik von Wolfgang Borcherts 'An diesem Dienstag'». *Bulletin CILA*. (present issue)
- SNELL-HORNBY, Mary (1987): «Translation as a cross-cultural event: *Midnight's Children* – *Mitternachtskinder*». In: *Indian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 13:2, 91–105.
- TOURY, Gideon (1980): *In Search of a Theory of Translation*. Tel Aviv, The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, 159 p. ISSN 0333-7367.
- TOURY, Gideon (1984): «Translation, literary translation and pseudotranslation». In: *Comparative Criticism* 6, 73–85.
- TOURY, Gideon (1986): «Translation: A cultural-semiotic perspective». In: SEBEEK, Thomas A. et al. (Eds.): *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*. Berlin – New York – Amsterdam, Mouton de Gruyter, 1111–1124. ISBN 0-89925-137-4.
- TYNJANOV, Jurij (1967): «Das literarische Faktum». In his *Die literarischen Kunstmittel und die Evolution in der Literatur*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 7–36.