
Theo Hermans. *Translation in Systems: Descriptive and Systemic Approaches Explained*. Translation Theories Explained Ser. 7. United Kingdom: St. Jerome, 1999, 195 pp.

Translation in Systems, by Theo Hermans, the seventh book in the series Translation Theories Explained, edited by Anthony Pym, tackles the task of explaining the different translation theories by looking at both the descriptive and systematic approach to translating. Hermans explains that the purpose of his book is three fold: “to explain the descriptive and systematic

approach to the study of translation; to engage critically with some of the key ideas; and to suggest possible directions for further theoretical and methodological reflection.” Hermans’ research for this book was conducted during a sabbatical term with support from the Humanities Research Board of the British Academy.

The book consists of a preface by the author, a preamble, twelve different chapters divided into different sections, a glossary defining key terms with page references, a bibliography and an index. The table of contents, with not only the main chapter headings but also the smaller sub-headings,

and the index, allow a reader to locate easily the page or section of a chapter that contains the specific information that he or she is looking for. The glossary is helpful in grasping what some terms mean in their simplest state, and the bibliography contains a list of other resources that might be useful for further research. The author admits that he only knows a "handful of Western Languages" and that much of the research done on translation was beyond his reach; however, this may be a case of the author being unnecessarily modest; Hermans has compiled a very extensive bibliography with a wide range of sources.

The preamble entitled "Mann's Fate" consists of a very catchy story about why translation studies are imperative to the literary world. He tells the story of Thomas Mann, a writer who knew that in order to reach a larger audience his work would have to be translated from German into English. These English translations, however, brought into question problems commonly associated with translations. For example, is it more important to do a literal word for word translation, or is it the overall intent of the work that must be preserved? These questions, along with others, set the

stage for the book that follows.

Hermans looks at translation as having many different components. He recognizes that labels attached to translation studies such as "descriptive," "empirical," and "target oriented" play a major role in defining people's view on the subject and he sets about the importance of sorting labels "without necessarily settling on a single designation" in the first chapter. This approach allows terms and definitions to remain fluid and gives them the ability to be applied to situations throughout the book. Translation to Hermans is not just the word-for-word literal translation; he favors a more complex approach to translation, with many different levels and layers of understanding, and quotes Levey, who says, "translating can be compared with a game with complete information, like chess, where every next move takes account of all previous moves."

Hermans spends much of his work, chapters 1-7, discussing the descriptive approach to translating, a theory that rejects the idea that the study of translation should be centered on forming rules and guidelines to assist one in translating. According to Hermans, it encourages the interest in

translation as it occurs, in the present and in the past: "It seeks insight onto the phenomenon and the impact of translation without immediately wanting to plough that insight back into some practical application to benefit translators, critics and teachers." This is where the systematic approach comes into play in that it encourages a "functional and target oriented approach to translation." The idea of systems in translation theory function to help formulate orderly ways of looking at translation theory and separating theory from the actual literary texts. Hermans discusses the study of systems in three chapters with different subheadings and topics such as "Polysystem's Sources," "System, Ideology and Poetics," and "Translation as a Social System," allowing the reader to follow the different aspects of systems as they are gradually applied to the study of translation.

Although the work is full of information, at times an overwhelming amount, Hermans breaks up his compilation of people's ideas on translations with anecdotes and real life situations that enable the reader to fully understand the impact that translations have in a historical sense as well as seeing how this has affected the way people

currently view translations. For example, he mentions a 19th century case in which the French author Bombet published a novel about the lives of a few musical composers and presented it as his own work. At the same time, an Italian author, Carpani, claimed that Bombet's novel was just a translation of his work from Italian to French. Bombet, at the end of his life, finally admitted that he had translated and adapted Carpani's work without ever mentioning the original author's name because his publisher had told him that a book hailed as a translation from another language "would not find a single reader in France." One of the common problems associated with translation, as pointed out by Hermans in this story, is that translations are often not looked upon as reputable works and that there is a stigma attached to them even today.

Hermans' successfully presents his threefold purpose throughout the course of his work. He gives broad definitions for the different approaches to translation, works critically with key ideas, and proposes very important questions about translation in general that can lead to new insights on the subject. He concludes his work by saying

that both descriptive and systematic approaches to translation are important to understanding the theories of translation as a whole: “They challenge and replenish both theoretical speculation and text based research. They can be the critical conscience of translation

studies, urging historical awareness as well as theoretical reflection, attention to words as well as to the conditioning of our ways of making sense of them.”

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