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Revisiting the Paradigm Revolution in Descriptive Translation Studies from the Perspective of the Scientific Research Programme

Jiawei Yang^{1,*}

¹ College of Foreign Languages, Chongqing College of Mobile Communications, Chongqing, China

* Correspondence: Jiawei Yang, College of Foreign Languages, Chongqing College of Mobile Communications, Chongqing, China

Abstract: Prior to the mid-1970s, translation studies were long dominated by source-text-oriented and prescriptive paradigms focusing on a priori equivalence, exhibiting clear signs of theoretical degeneration when confronted with the empirical reality of non-equivalence. Drawing on Imre Lakatos's methodology of scientific research programmes, this paper systematically revisits the paradigm revolution of Descriptive Translation Studies initiated by Gideon Toury. Toury successfully bridged the epistemological break within the discipline by establishing an irrefutable two-tier hard core comprising "target-culture orientation" and a "norm-centered" framework, along with a negative heuristic that forbids a priori "right-or-wrong" criticism and subjective attribution. Furthermore, by consolidating a protective belt comprising auxiliary hypotheses and analytical tools such as "adequacy and acceptability," "assumed translation," and the "coupled pairs" model, the programme effectively absorbed empirical anomalies including assumed translations. Its positive heuristic facilitated the formulation of probabilistic behavioral laws, namely the law of standardization and the law of interference, and expanded the theory into sociological translation studies, enabling translation research to achieve a progressive problemshift from isolated case descriptions to the prediction of macro-level regularities. This study further argues that Toury's programme remains highly instructive in the contemporary era of artificial intelligence-generated content. When confronted with the emerging empirical phenomenon of human-AI symbiotic translations, exploring new operational norms for the translation industry in the digital intelligence era still necessitates a steadfast empiricist commitment to objective description.

Keywords: translation studies; descriptive translation; scientific research programme; paradigm shift; translation norms

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1. Introduction

Prior to the mid-1970s, translation theory remained largely speculative, shaped by philosophical inquiry and prescriptive linguistic approaches. The prevailing academic orientation centered on source-text authority, with sustained emphasis on abstract notions of translatability and essentialist interpretations of equivalence. By the late 1970s, however, equivalence-based frameworks had lost theoretical traction. As this foundational concept receded, translation studies found itself increasingly detached from established disciplinary anchors, prompting scholars to articulate its distinct epistemological foundations. A fundamental reorientation became necessary to consolidate translation studies as an autonomous, empirically grounded discipline [1].

The concept of description emerged at this pivotal moment in the field's development. Descriptive Translation Studies constitutes a dynamic scientific research programme, conceptualized as an evolving framework for systematic inquiry. Drawing upon methodological insights from the philosophy of science, this approach rejects both strict falsificationism and paradigm-driven discontinuity, instead emphasizing

progressive theoretical development through structured problem-solving. From this methodological standpoint, the historical emergence of description reflects a necessary departure from a priori linguistic models fixated on equivalence [2, 3]. This paper examines the conceptual genesis of description, the articulation of its core theoretical commitments, the adaptive evolution of its auxiliary assumptions, and its capacity to generate productive shifts in research focus—thereby illuminating the transformative role of this paradigmatic shift in shaping contemporary translation scholarship.

2. Disciplinary Background of Descriptive Translation Studies

To profoundly understand the revolutionary nature of the "description" concept and its breakthrough as a scientific research programme, one must first examine the deep challenges faced by the translation discipline in the 1970s. These challenges were not only methodological but also involved fundamental questions concerning the nature and scope of knowledge in the field [4].

Before the publication of a foundational work on the definition and scope of translation studies, the boundaries of the discipline were highly ambiguous and largely shaped by conventions inherited from adjacent fields such as contrastive linguistics and comparative literature. Prior to the emergence of descriptive approaches, most theoretical frameworks operated on an implicit assumption: that theory should prescribe norms for translation practice and guide translators toward an idealized outcome. It has been observed that prescriptive approaches often propose universal standards, reflecting an aspiration toward an idealized model [5]. Their typical formulation takes the form "all translations should (or should not) possess a certain feature." This approach exhibits three core limitations: overgeneralization, unwarranted generalization from exceptional cases, and reliance on an unrealizable ideal. Its underlying logic rests on an assumption of perfection—namely, that a translation can simultaneously achieve full equivalence and complete naturalness. Several influential frameworks dedicated themselves to establishing a fixed relationship—such as identity or equivalence—between source and target texts.

However, under a philosophy-of-science framework emphasizing empirical adequacy, this paradigm displayed clear signs of theoretical stagnation. It is recognized that any developing theory inevitably encounters phenomena inconsistent with its predictions. In actual cross-cultural communication, many existing translations—shaped by factors including prevailing cultural norms, literary conventions, regulatory frameworks, and institutional support structures—frequently involve omissions, additions, adaptations, and systematic departures from the source text. Faced with such evidence, prescriptive approaches often dismissed these instances as deviations from normative standards or excluded them entirely from the domain of legitimate translation. This consistent avoidance of explanatory responsibility resulted in a growing gap between theoretical constructs and observable reality. It has been noted that traditional source-oriented theories attempted to define an a priori, rigidly bounded "invariant core," a construct that proved arbitrary in application. When a research programme sustains internal consistency only by progressively narrowing its scope—excluding numerous historically and empirically attested phenomena—and by introducing ad hoc assumptions, its capacity to explain real-world practices inevitably diminishes [6]. Consequently, longstanding debates concerning the relationship between source and target texts reached an impasse, hindering disciplinary advancement.

Beyond the conceptual rigidity of equivalence-based models, a broader epistemological critique was advanced from a semiotic perspective. In an early semiotic study of translated texts, it was argued that traditional source-oriented theories treated translation simplistically—as a direct transfer of verbal information across linguistic and cultural boundaries—thereby reducing a complex inter-systemic semiotic process to a narrow linguistic operation [7, 8]. This reductionist view presupposed a symmetrical correspondence between source and target language systems, overlooking a key aspect of the dual status of translated texts. A translation is not merely a linguistic substitute for the

source text; it functions as an autonomous entity within the target cultural system. By seeking normative authority from external disciplines, the functional orientation of translation—its purposeful embedding in specific communicative contexts—was overlooked. Translation does not reconstruct the source text in isolation; rather, it fulfills particular functional roles within the receiving culture. Therefore, neglecting purpose and disregarding the target-culture orientation of translation undermines its semiotic integrity. The discipline required an empirical turn grounded in description—shifting attention from hypothetical models to actual translated works, and from abstract considerations of translatability to concrete analysis of translated products and their functional roles in the target context.

3. Methodological and Epistemological Breakthroughs

3.1. *Progressive Problemshift*

Facing the crisis of a degenerating programme, Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) was advanced as a methodological and epistemological innovation, moving beyond traditional equivalence-based frameworks and reframing the fundamental question of "what constitutes translation." When conceptualized as a scientific research programme, mature science forms a dynamic structure composed of interrelated theories featuring a central theoretical core, a surrounding protective layer, and guiding methodological principles—both restrictive and constructive [9]. DTS established a new theoretical core and redefined these guiding principles, thereby achieving a progressive problemshift.

A progressive problemshift serves as the principal criterion for assessing whether a scientific research programme—or a coherent sequence of theories—exhibits genuine scientific advancement [10, 11]. Within this framework, evaluation focuses not on isolated theories but on the evolution of problems addressed across successive theoretical developments. To qualify as progressive, such a shift must satisfy two cumulative conditions. First, theoretical progress: the new formulation must generate excess empirical content relative to its predecessor or competing approaches—that is, it must yield novel predictions not previously anticipated. Second, empirical progress: a portion of this excess content must be empirically confirmed. A theory achieves a progressive problemshift only when it not only accounts for established phenomena but also directs inquiry toward the discovery of previously unknown facts that are subsequently verified. In contrast, a degenerating trajectory emerges when anomalies accumulate and responses consist solely of ad hoc adjustments—hypotheses introduced solely to resolve contradictions, lacking independent testability or predictive capacity. Scientific development, therefore, proceeds not through abrupt falsification by decisive experiments, but through the gradual ascendancy of a new programme capable of subsuming prior explanatory successes while generating and confirming novel predictions.

3.2. *Irrefutable Two-Tier Hard Core*

The concept of 'description' shifted focus away from prescriptive judgments about fidelity to the source text and instead incorporated the full range of observable translation phenomena—including those that appear unconventional, divergent, or non-equivalent—into a coherent scientific explanatory framework. This move liberated the discipline from rigid normative constraints. Once the general trajectory of the scientific research programme was established, a robust theoretical foundation—the 'hard core'—was required. Adherents of the programme adopt a methodological stance that renders this core foundational and immune to direct falsification [12, 13]. By articulating two interlocking foundational principles, the approach achieved a fundamental epistemological reorientation in the study of translation (Table 1).

Table 1. Core Structure of Descriptive Translation Studies

Core Structure	DTS Theoretical Connotation	Disciplinary Significance and Epistemological Breakthrough
Hard Core	1. Target-culture orientation: Translation is primarily a fact of the target culture.	Provides an irrefutable methodological starting point that cannot be directly falsified by experience, completely overturning the prescriptive premise of source-text centrism.
	2. Norm-centered: Translation is an intersubjective behavior constrained by sociocultural norms. Forbids a priori “right or wrong” criticism using the linguistic features of the source text as an absolute benchmark; forbids simply attributing phenomena that deviate from the source text to the translator’s cognitive deficiencies or incompetence.	Protects the hard core from the direct impact of “counterexamples” in traditional theories, ensuring the objectivity of the research perspective and the consistency of the explanatory mechanism.
Negative Heuristic		
Protective Belt	The “adequacy” and “acceptability” framework; the “assumed translation” concept; the “coupled pairs” comparative analysis model.	Provides flexible auxiliary hypotheses and analytical tools that can be continuously modified, perfected, and fine-tuned based on the feedback of empirical data to absorb theoretical anomalies.

First Tier: Target-culture orientation. Translations are conceptualized as ‘facts of target cultures.’ This principle redefines the ontological status of translated texts: their identity, functional role, and cultural significance are not predetermined by equivalence to a source text, but emerge from their concrete positioning and operational function within the polysystem of the receiving culture.

This principle draws upon theoretical insights concerning cultural dynamics as a complex, evolving configuration of interrelated subsystems—such as dominant and marginal elements, or canonical and non-canonical forms. Within this view, translated literature constitutes an active, functional subsystem rather than a passive textual derivative. It may serve to address cultural gaps, introduce innovative formal or thematic models, or reinforce prevailing conventions. Consequently, all cultural artifacts—including translations—are necessarily situated within and shaped by the target cultural system. This perspective ensures internal logical coherence in the theoretical starting point and replaces earlier evaluative frameworks anchored exclusively in source-text fidelity.

Second Tier: Norm-centered analysis. The descriptive paradigm positions ‘norms’ as the central explanatory construct for translational behavior. A foundational critique challenged the long-standing assumption that interlingual relations operate solely at two levels—language systems and textual outputs—with corresponding disciplines of contrastive linguistics and translation studies. Contrastive linguistics primarily investigates systemic linguistic competence across languages, whereas actual translations manifest as concrete communicative instances. Bridging the gap between abstract systemic knowledge and real-world usage requires an intermediate level representing socially embedded regularities—namely, norms. This tripartite structure—system, norm, speech act—recognizes norms as shared, socioculturally grounded patterns that mediate between universal linguistic possibilities and individual expressive choices. A norm reflects prevailing or customary usage within a given community, not prescriptive ideals. Accordingly, norms are understood as intersubjective, socioculturally grounded regularities situated between broad systemic potentials and idiosyncratic individual actions. Traditional theories often reduced translation to a narrow notion of ‘translatability,’ presupposing fixed adequacy conditions and equating translation with

only those outputs satisfying such criteria [14]. Such reductionism risks marginalizing the vast majority of empirically attested translations that fall outside predefined boundaries, thereby obstructing systematic inquiry into how translations are actually produced. Translational behavior cannot be reduced to interlingual comparison alone; every translation simultaneously functions as a text in its target language, engaging with local textual traditions and conventions. Actual translations occupy a variable position along a continuum defined by two complementary considerations: alignment with source-oriented expectations and integration within target-language conventions. This position is not predetermined but emerges through practice and reflects the interaction of distinct normative influences. Rather than allowing restrictive notions of translatability to dominate the field, the domain of interlingual communication is productively structured as a three-layered model: system, norm, speech act. Situating translation within this framework—and maintaining a target-oriented empirical focus—enables genuinely scientific investigation of translation as a real-world phenomenon.

3.3. Negative Heuristic

Translation is never a pure linguistic transfer conducted in a cultural vacuum, but a highly purposeful act shaped by societal and cultural contexts. Norms account for the consistent patterns observed across translations within a given spatio-temporal setting, rather than treating them as arbitrary individual choices [15].

The 'negative heuristic' delineates research boundaries by specifying which analytical approaches are methodologically inappropriate. Its central function is to prevent direct falsification attempts targeting the foundational assumptions of the research programme. Within Descriptive Translation Studies, stringent negative heuristics are applied. First, it prohibits a priori evaluative judgments that treat linguistic features of the source text as an absolute standard of correctness. Instead of asking, 'Is this a correct translation?', researchers must reframe the question as: 'Is this text regarded as a translation within the target culture?' Since such texts are empirically attested as accepted translations in their receiving context, their status constitutes an objective fact; their existence cannot be invalidated by applying source-language criteria, thereby shifting focus from subjective fidelity assessments to objective textual description and functional analysis. Second, it prohibits attributing source-target discrepancies solely to translator-related limitations such as cognitive or linguistic insufficiency. While differences between source and target texts are inevitable, traditional criticism often labels them as 'interlanguage' phenomena or 'errors', routinely ascribing them to inadequate proficiency or competence. The negative heuristic rejects such ungrounded explanations. When systematic deviations occur, researchers are required to identify the underlying sociocultural factors—namely, translational norms—that shape these outcomes. Such deviations reflect negotiated compromises between adequacy and acceptability, rather than random or defective output. From the perspective of classical equivalence-based frameworks, many real-world translations—including heavily adapted, abridged, or even 'pseudo-translations' (texts accepted as translations without verifiable source texts)—constitute apparent counterexamples threatening theoretical coherence. Through these two prohibitions, the negative heuristic safeguards the explanatory integrity of translation studies: empirical instances of non-equivalence do not undermine the legitimacy of the field itself, nor trigger degenerative recourse to subjective psychological explanations like 'translator incompetence'; instead, the sociological construct of 'norms' remains the consistent, systematic basis for interpretation.

3.4. Protective Belt

To protect the irrefutable hard core, a mature scientific research programme must build a "protective belt" composed of auxiliary hypotheses, observational theories, and methodological rules around it. When empirical anomalies are encountered, the scientist's task is to adjust, modify, or even replace the auxiliary hypotheses in the protective belt to absorb the anomalies and protect the hard core. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, by

continuously refining this protective belt, robust capabilities for theoretical maintenance and self-repair were demonstrated.

At the inception of theory building, the binary framework of "adequacy" and "acceptability" was introduced into the protective belt. Adequacy refers to adherence to the source text and its underlying linguistic and textual norms; acceptability refers to adaptation to the target culture and literary norms. Any actual translation decision is a dynamic process of compromise negotiated between these two complementary theoretical dimensions. This auxiliary hypothesis provided a highly operational macro-coordinate system for descriptive research. Simultaneously, to fully detach the traditional "equivalence" concept from prescriptive implications, the concept of "family resemblance" was employed. Members of the translation category do not share a single, fixed a priori essential attribute (such as semantic equivalence), but rather exhibit an overlapping and crisscrossing network of relationships much like the fibers of a spun thread. Equivalence is thus reconstructed as a "functional-relational" empirical concept: as long as a text is accepted as a translation in the target culture, a certain equivalence relationship inevitably exists between it and the source text. The researcher's task is no longer to "referee" whether a translation is equivalent, but to "describe and discover" what specific form this equivalence takes under particular sociocultural conditions. This theoretical approach successfully transformed equivalence from a prescriptive standard into a descriptive analytical object, firmly supporting the target-oriented hard core.

As the theory developed, a highly rigorous and replicable empirical research procedure was constructed for the protective belt. The concept of "assumed translation" was proposed as the logical starting point for research: all texts presented or regarded as translations in the target culture should be included in the research corpus. In concrete micro-level comparisons, "coupled pairs"—consisting of replacing segments in the target language and the replaced segments in the source language—were introduced as the core analytical unit. Comparing "coupled pairs" does not mean starting from the source text to seek equivalence in the target text, but rather beginning in reverse from the target cultural system. It starts with "assumed translations" accepted in the target culture, analyzing the text's "acceptability" and function within the target system, before subsequently introducing the source text and mapping the features of the target text back onto the corresponding parts of the source text, thereby establishing "coupled pairs." Between the "replacing segments" and the "replaced segments," a shared "invariant" is established, which can be a unit of content or a functional element. Based on this invariant, the researcher uses the same set of terminology to describe the translation relationship between the problem and the solution. A "top-down" hypothetical hierarchical order (discovery procedure) was proposed to sequentially test equivalence relationships. The sequence of testing is typically: adequacy → text-formal relations → function-linguistic relations → linguistic-formal relations. In this discovery procedure, once the highest-level relationship is found within a coupled pair, it is preferentially assigned a dominant status; however, this does not mean the analysis concludes. Researchers must continue through the entire discovery procedure to reveal whether other lower-level auxiliary relationships exist, as the sum of all relationships determines the overall translational equivalence of this coupled pair. Through a "pendulum-like cyclic" analysis moving between countless individual "coupled pairs" and the entire text, the actual translation equivalence concept of the entire corpus is ultimately established, achieving a leap from local description to the formulation of macro-level regularities and laws.

The ultimate purpose of this procedure is to reconstruct the translator's decision-making process and considerations during the act of translation by discovering deviations and regularities within coupled pairs, thereby revealing the "translational norms" operating between the poles of "adequacy" and "acceptability." Translational norms are divided into three levels: First, preliminary norms, which relate to macro-level translation policies (choosing which texts to translate) and the directness of translation (whether indirect translation via a mediating language is tolerated). Second, the initial norm, which determines whether the translator generally leans toward "adequacy" or "acceptability."

Third, operational norms, which involve norms for specific micro-level decisions, further divided into "matricial norms" that affect macro-textual segmentation, additions, and omissions, and "textual-linguistic norms" that govern specific lexical and syntactic choices [16].

A hallmark of a progressive research programme is not merely its ability to explain known facts, but its capacity to transform former "anomalies" into novel facts that demonstrate its theoretical strength. The treatment of the "pseudo-translation" phenomenon stands as a classic case in descriptive translation studies. Pseudo-translations inherently lack corresponding source texts, rendering any analysis aimed at investigating the degree of equivalence entirely invalid here. However, far from challenging the hard core, pseudo-translations became powerful empirical evidence. The reason authors of pseudo-translations expend great effort to forge a translation identity for a text is precisely to leverage the specific cultural prestige associated with the label "translation" in the target culture, or to introduce novel literary models into the domestic system by drawing upon the distinctive functional positioning of translation. This fully supports the core proposition that "the identity of a translation is constructed by its target cultural function." Although "assumed translation" is highly operational as a methodological starting point, it also faced criticism from scholars who argued that for the sake of cross-cultural comparison, it implicitly presupposed universalist postulates regarding source texts, transfer mechanisms, and relations, potentially diverging from the original descriptive intent. To address this criticism and strengthen the protective belt on a philosophical epistemological level, the concept of "institutional facts" was introduced from the theory of the social construction of reality. This theory distinguishes facts into "brute facts" (at the physical/biological level) and "institutional facts" (which require human institutions to exist, such as money, citizenship, language, etc.), and it has been explicitly argued that translation clearly fits the definition of the latter. The logical structure of social institutional facts is "X counts as Y in context C." In translation studies, the reason a text is a "translation" (Y) is not because it intrinsically possesses certain universal, objective linguistic attributes, but because a specific target cultural community (C), based on shared intentionality, has conferred upon it this social status. By grounding the concept of "assumed translation" in shared social conventions, this approach removes residual universalist presuppositions, anchoring translation studies on the foundations of empiricism and social constructionism, thereby consolidating the philosophical legitimacy of the descriptive translation studies programme.

3.5. Progressive Problemshift and Predictive Laws

If a research programme merely focuses on retrospectively explaining known data, it remains vulnerable to theoretical stagnation. A progressive problemshift requires not only the absorption of anomalies through theoretical refinement but, more critically, the generation and empirical confirmation of novel, previously unanticipated universal patterns [17]. The development of descriptive translation studies benefited from a "positive heuristic" that guided the discipline away from isolated case descriptions toward an epistemological advancement—namely, the abstraction of probabilistic regularities governing translational behavior.

A "positive heuristic" refers to a set of methodological guidelines that shape long-term research strategies, direct inquiry, and support the construction of increasingly refined models for representing reality. Within descriptive translation studies, this heuristic first appeared as a decisive call for an empirical orientation. There was a clear shift away from speculative, normative approaches—such as a priori assumptions about what translation ought to be—toward systematic, corpus-based descriptive analysis. The central operational procedure involves rigorous comparative textual analysis to identify recurrent patterns of translational behavior within specific sociocultural settings; these patterns then serve as empirical indicators for inferring underlying normative tendencies operating in those contexts. As the body of case studies expanded, the programme progressively addressed questions concerning what translation tends to be under

particular conditions. From this foundation, two probabilistic regularities with broad cross-contextual tendencies were formulated: the first is the tendency toward growing standardization, reflecting a consistent inclination in translated texts to align with dominant conventions of the target language and culture—often resulting in textual simplification or homogenization; the second is the tendency toward interference, whereby features of the source language—including lexical choices, syntactic structures, and textual organization—systematically appear in the target text, irrespective of translator intention, producing characteristic features commonly observed in translated language. These two tendencies constitute macro-level empirical generalizations emerging from large-scale descriptive work. The transition from explaining individual instances to forecasting broad behavioral patterns marks a key indicator of theoretical maturity and scientific advancement [18].

When confronted with internal theoretical tensions, some research programmes respond by suppressing inconsistencies or applying superficial adjustments. In contrast, subsequent developments within descriptive translation studies demonstrated sustained theoretical advancement through careful refinement of auxiliary assumptions. It was explicitly clarified that the identified tendencies are not deterministic laws but probabilistic generalizations whose observable strength depends on multiple contextual variables. For example, when the target literary system occupies a relatively peripheral position—or when the source culture holds substantial international recognition—the target culture often exhibits greater openness to source-language features; under such conditions, the tendency toward interference becomes more pronounced relative to standardization. Conversely, when translation aims for integration into the mainstream of the target culture—and the target culture is in a phase of strong internal coherence—the tendency toward standardization gains prominence. Translator expertise also plays a significant role: less experienced practitioners tend to reproduce source-language structures unconsciously, whereas seasoned professionals are more likely to apply deliberate standardization strategies or introduce context-sensitive adaptations [3, 19]. Commentary on these tendencies noted that focusing exclusively on linguistic features may suggest apparent tension between them—the standardization tendency reflects adaptation to target-language norms, while interference reflects retention of source-language traits. Comparative analysis with other descriptive frameworks revealed that certain widely cited generalizations primarily extend or elaborate the standardization tendency, while giving limited attention to interference. It was argued that omitting interference significantly reduces explanatory capacity. For instance, the use of translation memory tools enhances terminological consistency (a standardization effect) yet simultaneously introduces syntactic patterns derived from software-driven segmentation—producing measurable interference effects. Thus, both tendencies operate concurrently across different dimensions, and retaining interference as a distinct analytical category remains essential for capturing the full complexity of translational phenomena. Their co-occurrence is governed by contextual factors: translations occupying marginal positions in the target culture tend to conform closely to local linguistic norms, whereas those benefiting from high source-culture prestige encounter greater tolerance for source-language influence. A further theoretical refinement introduced a sociological and economic model of risk management into the descriptive framework, proposing that both standardization and interference function as complementary communicative strategies aimed at minimizing uncertainty in professional practice. Fundamentally, they represent adaptive responses shaped by prevailing reward structures: in most routine commercial or cultural translation contexts, innovation carries low incentive value, while deviations perceived as unfaithful or unnatural may incur significant professional cost. Under such asymmetric incentive conditions, translators naturally prioritize reliability. To ensure acceptability of expression, they frequently select conventional, well-established target-language formulations—manifesting standardization; when confronting complex or ambiguous source-text structures, they may retain original syntactic arrangements to safeguard

semantic fidelity—manifesting interference. By integrating linguistic observation with sociological and economic reasoning, this refinement resolved surface-level conceptual tension and substantially enhanced the programme's predictive scope and explanatory depth—a hallmark of cumulative scientific progress.

4. Towards Sociological Translation Studies

It has been observed that the development of a research programme should not be self-enclosed. Integrating internal history of science with external social history helps reveal the deeper intellectual foundations of this research programme and its sustained theoretical vitality. A key observation is that the conceptualization of 'description' and the emphasis on norms and systemic frameworks emerged not in isolation, but within the broader intellectual and geopolitical context of twentieth-century Europe. The theoretical orientation draws upon structuralist traditions and theories concerning language contact. Crucially, the conceptualization of norm operation within a polysystem reflects broader socio-cultural dynamics associated with nation-building processes in certain contexts. During periods when emerging cultural systems sought to integrate external influences while reinforcing native literary and linguistic continuity, polysystem theory and related studies on translation integration served as academic frameworks for understanding such large-scale cultural adaptation mechanisms. Further conceptual linkage has been established between norm-based approaches and sociological concepts such as 'habitus' and 'field'. If norms represent broad, socially embedded patterns operating at the collective level, then 'habitus' accounts for how such patterns become internalized within individual cognitive structures—clarifying how macro-level expectations are interpreted, mediated, and enacted by practitioners [12]. This sociological perspective effectively addresses earlier critiques suggesting an overemphasis on abstract systems at the expense of human agency and situated practice.

5. Conclusion

The descriptive paradigm in translation studies marked both a theoretical turning point and a progressive problemshift in the Lakatosian sense. Confronted with the limitations of equivalence-based frameworks and the diminishing explanatory capacity of prescriptive approaches, this paradigm established two foundational theoretical commitments: orientation toward the target culture and a norm-centered analytical framework. These commitments shifted the discipline away from a priori philosophical speculation and linguistic prescriptivism, enabling translation studies to assume the status of an empirical science. Its supporting conceptual architecture—from the methodological premise of assumed translation, through the micro-analytical device of coupled pairs, to the formulation of the standardization and interference tendencies—demonstrated strong internal coherence, self-correcting capacity, and predictive utility. Moreover, its sustained integration of sociological perspectives and empirical support from corpus-based research underscores its openness and long-term viability as a progressive research programme. This descriptive approach not only addressed the central historical question of why description was necessary for translation studies in the 1970s but also laid a methodological foundation for interdisciplinary expansion and ongoing theoretical evolution.

The theoretical implications of this paradigm continue to resonate beyond the twentieth century. Today, rapid advances in generative artificial intelligence, large language models, and retrieval-augmented generation are precipitating a new technological paradigm shift in translation. As AI transforms translation practice across the industry, the discipline stands to benefit from re-engaging with the core epistemological stance of the descriptive programme: moving beyond evaluative judgments of correctness toward systematic empirical investigation. AI post-edited texts now constitute observable phenomena within target cultures; accordingly, research priorities should focus on identifying emerging norms in human–AI collaborative

settings—describing how human translators actively reshape notions of adequacy and acceptability in interaction with AI systems. Statistical modeling in large language models intensifies the standardization tendency, often yielding highly uniform and linguistically flattened outputs. In response, the role of the human translator evolves into a functional norm: strategic involvement before, during, and after AI generation to reduce hallucinations and counteract excessive homogenization. By mapping dynamic revision patterns across the human–AI translation workflow, researchers can reconstruct the sociocultural and cognitive constraints shaping collaborative practice. Maintaining a rigorously empirical descriptive stance remains essential for integrating novel phenomena arising from digital transformation and for formulating probabilistic behavioral regularities—thus preserving the scientific predictive power and adaptive vitality of descriptive translation studies in the human–AI symbiotic era.

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