



A foot in both camps: Redressing the balance between the ‘pure’ and applied branches of translation studiesⁱ

Federica Scarpa
University of Trieste
fscarpa@units.it

Maria Teresa Musacchio
University of Padova
mt.musacchio@unipd.it

Giuseppe Palumbo
University of Modena e Reggio Emilia
giuseppe.palumbo@unimore.it

Abstract. The aim of this article is to argue for an approach to translation research integrating/bridging the divide between the descriptive, theoretical and applied branches of Translation Studies (TS). Based on a perspective of translation as cross-cultural communication centred on language and as a professional activity where the translator makes decisions, the branch of Applied Translation Studies (ATS) is seen not just as an “extension” of the “pure” branches of TS (Theory and Description), or one where theoretical statements based on the results of descriptive studies are transmitted in a unidirectional way (Toury 1995: 17-19). Rather, the applied strand of TS covering translation teaching and practice, translation quality assessment, the development of translation aids etc. is effectively incorporated in the disciplinary core of TS, providing a site for testing theoretical statements, identifying problems and providing explanations to be fed into the theory.

Keywords: Applied Translation Studies, Descriptive Translation Studies, Translation Theory, Translator Training, Prescription

Introduction

Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) has been a dominant paradigm in Translation Studies (TS) since the 1980s and paramount in making TS an autonomous academic discipline. However, the principle of interdependency between the three branches of TS (Theoretical, Descriptive and Applied) advocated by Holmes (1988: 78)ⁱⁱ has not received as much attention, because the nature of their mutual relationship has not been specified in detail (Chesterman 2004: 97) and the three branches have not been given the same scholarly status. Holmes’s conceptual map of TS is in fact obviously weighted towards the descriptive and theoretical components, which Toury (1995: 14-19) envisages as mutually dependent and providing the disciplinary core of TS. Toury goes even further and maintains that the Applied Translation Studies (ATS) component (i.e. the study of the professional and more practical aspects of translation) is just an “extension” of TS proper (identified with the “pure” branches of the discipline), where theoretical statements based on the results of descriptive studies are transmitted in a unidirectional way to establish rules of translational behaviour formulated as prescriptive statements (cf. Toury 1991: 187; 189-191; 1995: 19). This bias has led some scholars to conclude that the term “applied” “appears to signal the point where work on the descriptive level concludes” (Rabadán 2008: 104) and that the applied branch has been consequently left “a little out in the cold” (Ulrych 1999: 51-52).

Another related problem with Holmes’s map is the distinction between “theory” and “practice”, which is discussed by Chesterman only in terms of

the division between Theoretical and Descriptive studies, a division that is seen by the scholar as “inadequately motivated, unless merely to distinguish between case-studies and research that proposes generalizations or explanations” (2004: 97). Chesterman argues for the distinction between theory and description to be loosened, noting that in modern paradigms of scientific research a distinction is customarily made between pure and applied research, or theoretical and applied studies, and theories of an explanatory nature are always based on descriptions of empirical dataⁱⁱⁱ. In his view, therefore, ATS remain relegated to a prescriptive (i.e. not descriptive) approach and tend to be excluded from the kind of research aiming to provide explanations or predictions of any kind. This view has recently been challenged by Vandepitte (2008: 572-573) within the framework of a more general criticism of the different criteria according to which the pure and applied branches are subdivided in Holmes’s map^{iv}. More specifically, Vandepitte criticises the separation in the map between topics covered by “pure” studies and those which are the alleged province of ATS, a separation that does not account for translation tools (ATS) being today an integral part of the translation process (DTS): “all topics within translation studies can be described objectively by means of a theoretical framework. And applied translation studies are also based on empirical findings” (emphasis in the original).

In much the same way, ATS have been brought back into the picture by Ulrych and Anselmi (2008) and Laviosa (2008). Ulrych and Anselmi (2008: 166) recognise that “ATS is opening up its horizons to encompass functional and descriptive elements” and call for “a constructive cooperation among scholars and practitioners working within the different branches of the discipline”. On her part, Laviosa (2008: 119-121) recognises a recent research trend where teachers of translation are drawing on the insights of corpus-based DTS with the long-term aim of formulating bridging rules postulating what translator trainees should do were they to adhere to the patterns of translational behaviour unveiled by descriptive scholars. This goes along the same lines as the practice-driven research that Hatim (2001: 6-8) called “practitioner research” and presented as one possible way of reassessing the “unhelpful” dichotomy between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’. Thus, practitioners willing to engage in research or in teaching, possess not only knowledge of the craft of translation/interpreting but also analytical knowledge and an “enquiring mind” ready to identify problems and the appropriate solutions and explanations for them. Seen in this light, research becomes “not only something done *to* or *on* practitioners, but [...] *by* practitioners” (Hatim 2001: 7; emphasis in the original).

In most such views, however, translation practitioners and descriptive scholars are still seen as two separate sets, with the systematic research carried out by the former into the product and process of translation being exclusively classroom-based and therefore not having the aims of both Theory and DTS of accounting “either for possibilities and likelihoods or for facts of actual behaviour” (Toury 1995: 19). Moreover, in recent literature the distinction between pure TS branches and ATS based on the *purpose* of the study i.e. “pure branches aim at knowledge, whereas applied sciences also aim at a particular change” (Vandepitte 2008: 572) seems to be largely unchallenged.

We argue for an approach to translation research linking up Description, Theory and Application in a truly interdependent way, where 1) descriptive scholars and practitioners are not merely cooperating to bridge the divide between DTS and ATS but are indeed the same people, and 2) applied

research should not be limited to drawing on the findings of DTS as envisaged in Toury's interpretation of Holmes's map. Whilst aiming at practical outcomes, ATS should be also a testing-bed for DTS findings and practitioners (i.e. teachers and/or translators) should crucially feed the results of their own research back into the theory. The first section of the paper is consequently devoted to a description of the applied approach we actually carried out in terms of its equal standing with Theory and DTS. The second part of the paper will finally deal with our view of the merit of empirically-based prescriptive attitudes in translator training.

Reinstating the applied paradigm within TS

Taking specialist translation as its main object of study, our perspective is based on translation as cross-cultural communication centred on language and as a professional activity where the translator has to make decisions. It also draws on previous attempts to find a common ground between empirical-descriptive studies and postmodernist perspectives oriented towards cultural studies and textual theories (Chesterman and Arrojo 2000). Notwithstanding some criticisms to such a dichotomy,^v we argue that it succeeds in reflecting the concept of translations as unique phenomena (cf. translation as a "cluster of concepts" in Tymoczko 2007) vs. translations as phenomena showing regularities. However, staying firmly within the empirical-descriptive perspective of this dichotomy, we aim at investigating the relationship between theoretical-descriptive approaches to translation and more applied perspectives on translation pedagogy and research which are oriented towards building a professional competence in the students. Examples are Hatim's (2001) already mentioned "practitioner research" and the "activist translation pedagogy and research" suggested by Scarpa (2008), where "activist" is to be understood not in its geopolitical meaning (cf. Tymoczko 2000) but in the sense of teaching translation by offering description-based solutions to translation problems.

Turning the mainstream perspective the other way round, it is argued here that the branch of ATS is not just an "extension" of TS proper where theoretical statements based on the results of descriptive studies are transmitted in a unidirectional way (cf. Toury 1991: 187; 189-191). Instead, also drawing on Ulrych's (1999) "evidence-based approach", the different sub-branches pertaining to the professional and more practical aspects of translation (translator training, translation aids etc.) are seen to lie at the heart of the discipline in providing a breeding ground for identifying problems and the appropriate solutions and explanations which will feed into the theory.

When a translation problem is identified and a decision has to be made between several possible solutions in the target language, discussing these solutions inevitably becomes *theorizing* about translation: "whenever [translators] decide to opt for one rendition and not others, they bring into play a series of ideas about what translation is and how it should be carried out. They are theorizing" (Pym 2010: 1). Translation teaching (an eminently "applied" context in terms of Holmes's map) is a context in which a lot of such theorizing takes place and we contend that some of this theorizing can provide useful insights for the "theoretical" discussions of translation. In particular, Pym (2010: 5) sees theorizing as having two different sides or moments to it: a "generative" one, which has to do with the formulation of different options for a given ST element, and a "selective" one, concerned with the decisions made between the formulated alternatives. The latter is the moment when reasons are found for selective decisions. Teaching and

other applied contexts can provide insights for both sides of theorizing. For example:

- classroom discussions have obvious relevance in terms of “generative” theorizing (and can in turn benefit from descriptive studies of what professional translators do when faced with certain problems);
- error analyses carried out on texts translated by translation trainees can provide useful insights on the ways translation solutions are generated;
- the use of translation aids (from dictionaries to CAT tools) represents a scenario where particular reasons or criteria for “selection” come to the fore; this happens, for instance, when translators who work with translation memories are required to reflect in the target texts the same sentence structure found in the source texts.

More generally, research carried out in applied contexts over the last two decades has already shown that its findings are of immediate interest for more theoretical discussions of translation. A study such as Hale and Campbell (2002), for instance, has implications that are particularly relevant for theoretical discussions of an issue such as translation difficulty (“Are there features of source texts that tend to be more difficult in principle and does this apply to any language pair?”).

Such an approach to translation research puts in a different perspective Toury’s observation that the recent evolution of TS has “been mainly in the field of descriptive translation studies, although there have been important developments within the applied branches, especially in more recent years” (Toury 1995: 19). In other words, the link between application and description has become much deeper than envisaged by Holmes’s map and Toury’s interpretation of it.

This is not to say that TS can be identified in “the sole quest for application-oriented techniques (in particular didactic techniques)” which “was often seen as the core of TS in the past” (Gile 2001: 150). Rather, our perspective aims at integrating theory and practice along the same lines as Ulrych’s methodology aimed at combining practical and theoretical aspects in such a way that “descriptive and applied branches of translation studies are taken into account as complementary facets of the discipline, each contributing to the study of the other” (1999: 49). Going one step further, in our own perspective DTS turns into a common methodological framework for both Theory and Application (cf. Chesterman 2004).

To illustrate this, our starting point is Table 1 showing, by the use of certain typical verbs in association with certain branches, what Toury (1995: 19) believes are the “inherent differences between the various branches” of TS (Ulrych 1999: 54).

Type of Relationship	Criterion (or Type of Condition)	Typical Verbs	Branch of TS
possible	theoretical	<i>can be</i>	translation theory, basic translation
probable	conditional	<i>is likely to be</i>	theory modified
existing	empirical	<i>is</i>	DTS
required	postulated	<i>should be</i>	applied extensions of TS

Table 1

In the table, the interdependency of DTS and Theory is provided by 1) the results of descriptive-explanatory research revealing what translation IS actually like by verifying theoretical assumptions about what translation CAN, in principle, involve and, in turn, 2) Theory predicting what translation is LIKELY to involve by expressing probabilistic laws of translational behaviour on the basis of the regularities found in translator behaviour (cf. Toury 1995: 15-16; Laviosa 2008: 119-120). In Toury’s paradigm, then, the only relationship to be bidirectional is that between Theory and Description, with the applied extensions of TS being left to draw on the insights of the two “pure” branches. As shown in Figure 1, the perspective is always unidirectional since “drawing conclusions is up to the *practitioners*, not the scholars” (Toury 1995: 17, emphasis in the original).

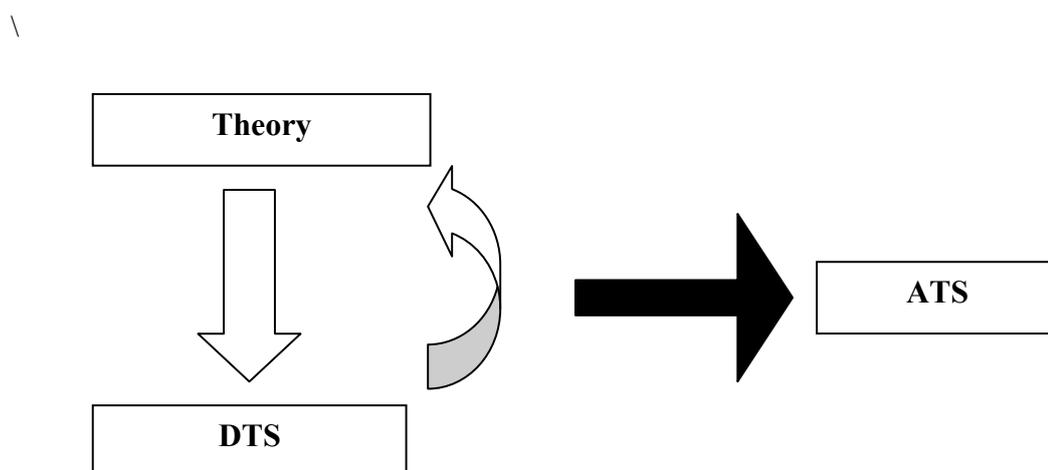


Figure 1

However, in the paradigm we advocate, interdependency is established among *all three branches* of TS because bidirectionality applies not only to the relationship between theory and “pure” descriptive research but also to the relationship between Theory and Application (Figure 2).

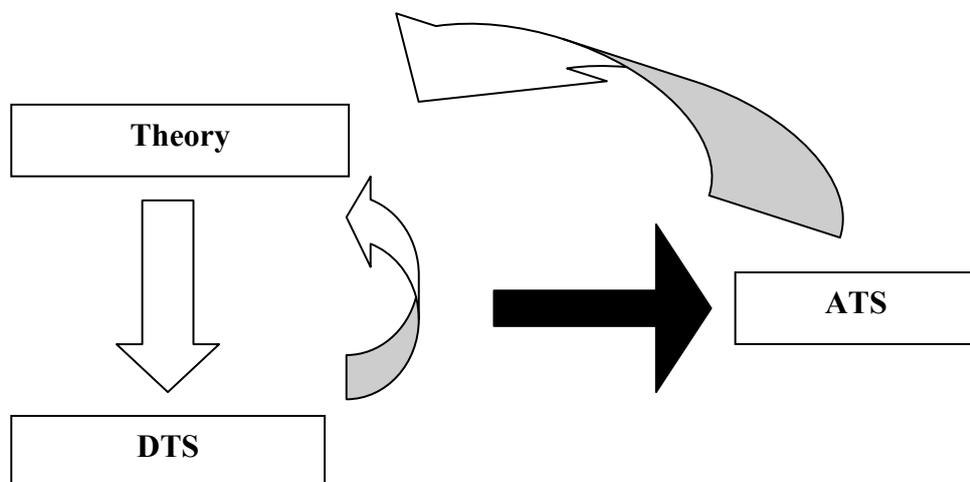


Figure 2

A major implication of such a perspective based on applicability is a blurring of the dividing line between DTS and ATS, with the method of Description becoming the common framework within which Theory and Application lie in a bidirectional relationship (Figure 3). Taking ATS as its focal point, it is envisaged that, instead of merely being brought to bear on ATS, any theoretical statements based on Description can also be modified by insights acquired in ATS and transmitted back to what has been hitherto considered as one of the two “pure” branches of TS.

In other words, in a TS typology based on the research purpose such as that recently suggested by Vandepitte (2008: 574), which draws on the traditional distinction between pure (“knowledge-oriented”) and applied (“knowledge + change”) studies, our applied research is itself based on the description of empirical data and aims at being explanatory and predictive.

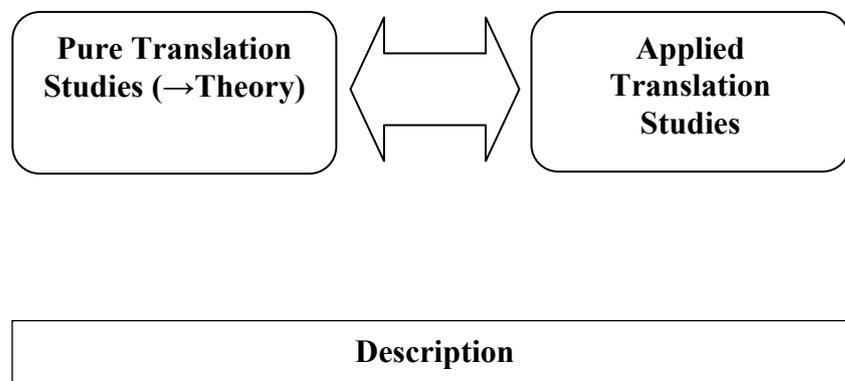


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This new framework accounts for the “bridging rules” between the insights of Theory + corpus-based DTS and translator training which practitioners should formulate (Laviosa 2008). It also accounts for approaches according to which theoretical statements must be based on solid empirical evidence found in authentic translations, such as the already mentioned “evidence-based approach”, which “along the basic tenet that theory always informs practice [...] entails the integration of theoretical, descriptive (i.e. evidence-based) and applied (practice-based) components and does not exclude the contribution of individual [...] expertise” (Ulrych 1999: 76).

Our paradigm also accommodates a theory of translation which is both explanatory and predictive because it is established by the joint contribution of descriptive and applied research, mostly into translation norms and/or universals. Consequently, the distinction between descriptive and applied translation scholars can no longer be one of methodology – which in both cases is descriptive – but must be based on the different *aims* of the research that is fed into translation theory, which in the case of applied scholars are somewhat predictably more professionally-oriented and pedagogic. However, this does not mean that applied research should be solely limited to the classroom environment, as in studies on the use of corpora in translator training (e.g. Stewart 2000). Rather, it means that applied researchers use a causal model to *test* the insights of “pure” descriptive research (not simply *drawing* on them) with the immediate aims of using them to improve the efficiency of translator training and translation quality assessment (e.g. to predict higher or lower quality translations) but also with the overriding aim of refining the theory (cf. Figure 5).

The different aims of applied translation research also define the specific kind of theory that applied translation scholars are mostly concerned with. Its close bearing on professional translational behaviour entails that applied research shies away from dealing with issues that reflect only marginally everyday translation situations. We are not referring here to the peripheral areas of what can be assumed to be a prototype concept of translation, such as ‘less typical’ ways of translating (e.g. paraphrasing, summarising and adapting) (cf. Chesterman 2004: 96), which in fact are becoming more and more common practice in today’s translation industry. The ‘marginal’ issues referred to here are those relating to a minority of the translators of the world, such as those who operate in situations of contemporary political conflict (Guantánamo, Iraq etc.), or issues relating to the ethics of professional translation which focus excessively on the creative and political side of

translation and do away altogether with the service side which, instead, overwhelmingly characterises today's translation industry. For example, from the results of Katan's (2009) survey on the extent to which translators actually have the autonomy to intervene, to mediate or tackle conflict, the translator's professional autonomy turns out, in fact, to be apparently (and, alas!, expectedly) low. In the same survey, another interesting finding is that, contrary to many translation scholars' interest in a higher "visibility" of translators as cultural mediators, there seems to be (rather surprisingly) very little dissatisfaction with a job that is seen as a "caring profession".

On the merit of "informed" prescriptive attitudes in translator training

As already mentioned, our perspective is based on translation as cross-cultural communication centred on language and as a professional activity where the translator is required to make decisions. Our approach is language-centred in the sense that language is the point of departure and arrival of the translator's decision-making process. As such, language is highly relevant to translating, but it is only a tool for communication, not the end of study in itself. This view of translation as being an exemplary case of language in use means that our linguistic approach to translation can be included in neither the early structuralist tradition, with its attendant conviction that linguistics alone could deal with and solve all the aspects related to such a complex task as translating, nor the highly prescriptive methods aimed at instructing people on how they should translate (cf. Ulrych 1999: 55-60).

According to Neubert (2000: 7-10) translation practice requires at least five competences – language, textual, subject, cultural and transfer competence. In particular, translating involves a decision-making process and professional translator training should provide trainees with some guidance on how to tackle the problems they will be confronted with once they go 'out there into the real world': "A professionally and educationally cogent training programme for translators should [...] present translating as an activity which takes place within a sociocultural context and that is subject to a whole host of constraints" (Ulrych 1999: 27). In other words, based on Holmes's two paradigms of DTS and ATS, the translation teacher/scholar has the responsibility to both describe *and* prescribe. The scientific method used in research starts from a problem, leading to a hypothesis, which is followed by a measurement, data collection, data analysis, a conclusion and a possible generalisation". Translation scholars/teachers transmit to translation trainees the outcome of their research in the form of a generalization of their findings – what, to the best of their enquiries, are regularities in translations.^{vi} In turn, trainees – usually once they have become professional translators/scholars etc. – may pose other problems, which will lead to further hypotheses. In this way research is carried forward and in turn reflected in translation training.

Studying translated texts "to see how people actually translated them for specific purposes within the given historical and cultural settings in which they acted" (Ulrych 1999: 60) and moving away "the emphasis of ATS from traditional prescriptive methods to the more up-to-date descriptive ones" (Ulrych and Anselmi 2008: 162) is therefore only the first of two steps. Following Ulrych's (1999) "evidence-based approach", the second step advocated in our perspective is introducing in the teaching of translation a new type of prescription as envisaged in an "activist translation pedagogy" to professional specialist translation (cf. Scarpa 2008). In this approach the

task of the teacher is seen as getting actively involved in presenting the students with descriptive norms based on solid empirical evidence drawn from professional translations but in a critical and, ultimately, prescriptive way, i.e. also offering practical solutions to translation problems.

Prescription is here used with the same probabilistic meaning that House (1997: 119; emphasis added) gives to the “highly complex and, in the last analysis, *probabilistic* undertaking” of translation criticism. By the same token, the prescriptive attitude adopted in translator training should always be founded on probabilities, or what Toury (1999: 21) calls “regularities”. As it happens, Toury (1995: 261; 1999: 23) himself has often criticised the prescriptive attitude of translation trainers, variously accusing them of presenting to students unrealistic scenarios or giving directives based on wishful thinking. In his view trainers are often likely to give a distorted presentation of what translation is and how it is practised, either because they are really detached from real-world professional translation or because, as professional translators themselves, they have an ideological agenda aimed at improving the state of affairs of the profession at large.

While acknowledging these reservations, we contend that, within a translator training context, there is certainly scope for a view of translation that is realistic and *honest*. In other words, we take it for granted that a certain amount of prescription is inevitable in any situation, such as translator training, which implies an imbalance in experience and expertise between the parties involved. In current social constructivist approaches to translator ‘education’, teachers are considered to ‘serve as guides, consultants and assistants who can help set the stage for learning events in which the students will evolve into professional translators’ (Király 2000: 18). If the translation teacher’s role is to empower students and to facilitate their learning, i.e. to ‘guide, advise and assist’ students in discovering what translations are regarded as being of acceptable quality in different contexts ‘out there in the world’, then the teacher’s greater experience and expertise can support students and prevent them from following paths that would lead them into blind alleys in their translation practice and subsequently in their profession. In other words, if teachers/trainers are supposed to act as ‘facilitators’, but are not there to offer support when students experience difficulty, in what way are they making their students’ progress easier? If that amounts to reinstating a modicum of prescription, one should not underestimate the fact that students left to their own devices often feel ‘stranded’ and soon lose motivation.

To warnings against normative formulations about translation such as Toury’s (1995: 261) statement that “there is absolutely no certainty that a normative pronouncement would draw on, or even reflect, any kind of behaviour which is truly regular within the culture it purports to represent”, we counter that one of our tasks as translator trainers who inevitably rely on “normative pronouncements” is that of trying to approximate this certainty. From this point of view, translator training could be equated with ‘informed prescription’, and the above-mentioned honesty on the part of trainers should guarantee that such ‘informed prescription’ is not just another manifestation of the ‘We Know Better’ stance that Toury (1995: 257) considers typical of translator training institutions.

By way of conclusion it might be useful to quote here Chesterman’s (2001) interpretation of Bell’s (2001: 155-156) metaphor of the Highway Code to distinguish a *descriptive* from a *prescriptive* statement. The statement of

the norm ‘cars drive on the left/right’ is “*descriptive* if made as part of an intellectual discourse by an individual properly accredited to make such statements *count as* descriptive (e.g. an academic) but *prescriptive* if made as part of a non-intellectual discourse by an individual properly accredited to make such statements *count as* prescriptive (e.g. a traffic warden)”. Why should academics only make descriptive statements? *Inter alia*, this entails that intellectuals and teachers are different people, whereas in academic environments they often coincide. Consequently, why should scholars not also be practitioners and keep a foot in both camps? Our perspective on translation research and teaching could therefore be taken to do something more than aiming at bridging the divide between applied and descriptive perspectives of Translation Studies, implying as it does that the true dividing line in a research approach to translation might lie between those researchers who also teach professional translation and those who do not.

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ⁱ A much shorter version of this article has been published in the Proceedings of the 8th Portsmouth Translation Conference “The Changing Face of Translation” (11th November 2008) with the title “Not just an extension: reinstating the applied branch within translation studies”.

ⁱⁱ The interdependency of the three branches being provided by each “supplying materials for the other two, and making use of the findings which they in turn provide it” (Holmes 1988: 78).

ⁱⁱⁱ This is somewhat problematic since it is difficult to draw a line between explanation and description – as Chesterman (2008) himself recognises.

^{iv} The different criteria being “method” for Theory and Description, and “subject” for translator training, translation aids and translation criticism (i.e. the applied sub-branches).

^v See for example Bell (2001), who argues that it is not clear where applied linguists interested in the phenomenon of translation exactly fit in this dichotomy, since textual theories and empirical/descriptive theories are also highly relevant to an applied linguist.

^{vi} By way of example, we can quote a corpus-based study published by two of the present authors (Musacchio and Palumbo 2009) which suggests that in English-Italian translation the insertion of intersentential connectives not having ST counterparts is not as widespread as is usually believed to be the case. Such a finding can (in fact, should) be fed back into classroom discussions, alerting students to the risk of inserting explicating items that may not reflect what was implied by the original text.