

**Hermans, Theo (1999): *Translation in Systems. Descriptive and System-Oriented Approaches Explained*, Manchester, St. Jerome Publishing, 195 p.**

Paul St-Pierre

Volume 45, numéro 2, juin 2000

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/004297ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/004297ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (imprimé)

1492-1421 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

St-Pierre, P. (2000). Compte rendu de [Hermans, Theo (1999): *Translation in Systems. Descriptive and System-Oriented Approaches Explained*, Manchester, St. Jerome Publishing, 195 p.] *Meta*, 45(2), 376–377.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/004297ar>

HERMANS, Theo (1999): *Translation in Systems. Descriptive and System-Oriented Approaches Explained*, Manchester, St. Jerome Publishing, 195 p.

This is a particularly useful volume. In it, Theo Hermans presents the approach to translation studies known as Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS, for short), or Polysystems approach, an approach associated in particular with the names of Gideon Toury and Itamar Even-Zohar. As someone close to DTS, Hermans presents a sympathetic but not uncritical reading of its strengths and weaknesses, while at the same time suggesting new directions which could be taken. After exploring the question of what constitutes a new paradigm for research (shared concepts and hypotheses, and a critical mass of researchers) and whether DTS qualifies as such (it does), Hermans presents the basic tenets of the approach, citing his own "Introduction" to *The Manipulation of Literature*. The seven tenets are: 1) a "literary frame of reference" (though DTS, especially in the work of José Lambert, is no longer exclusively devoted to the study of literature), 2) contextualization of texts (texts considered in their "functions, connections, and interrelations"), 3) the hypothetical and provisional nature of the approach (thus the importance accorded case studies, used to test the theoretical stance), 4) its descriptive nature (accounting for the "occurrence and nature" of translations, rather than providing value judgements or "advice or guidelines for good translating"), 5) the exclusively target-oriented and functional orientation of the approach (which Hermans shows to be in part misguided, in that translations are not solely and exclusively facts of the target system), 6) its systemic nature ("replacing the old unilateral relation between a translation and its original with a multilateral matrix anchored in the translating culture"), and finally 7) its "interest in the norms and constraints that govern the production and reception of translations." After having presented these "points of orientation," chapters are devoted to what constitutes a translation (in terms of DTS "a translation is what is regarded as a translation"), to the methodology used to describe them (and the vexing question of 'scientificity'), to the norms and constraints which determine the nature and practice of the translation and relate it to society and history. In terms of this last point, it is worth quoting a passage from the volume: "Translation is of interest because it offers first-hand evidence of the prejudice of perception. Cultures, communities and groups construe their sense of self in relation to others and by regulating the channels of contact with the outside world. In other words, the normative apparatus which governs the selection, production and reception of translation, together with the way translation is conceptualized at certain moments, provides us with an index of cultural self-definition. It would be only a mild exaggeration to claim that translations tell us more about those who translate and their clients than about the corre-

sponding source texts.”[95]. There follow three chapters dealing with systems: Even-Zohar’s polysystems in the first (with its limitations), and, in chapters nine and ten, extensions of “system-oriented approaches,” notably those based on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and Niklas Luhmann. A short chapter is devoted to various criticisms addressed to DTS (the relativism of the approach does not lead to the elaboration of criteria for improving the quality of translations; emphasis should be placed on transfer and not exclusively on the target text; emphasis should be placed on the translator’s subjectivity rather than on the determinations of translation; the emphasis on systems makes it impossible to deal with questions of social causality; the political uses and effects of translation are elided in its divorce from context). The final chapter opens out onto new perspectives and possibilities for DTS and for translation studies in general. A glossary of terms, an extensive bibliography and an index fill out the volume.

This is a very well-written and well-structured account of the descriptive translation studies approach. The account itself is more than merely descriptive; it constitutes, rather, an engagement, on the part of one of the key specialists in the field, with some of the issues at the very heart of the approach (Does description presuppose neutrality? Do norms lead to laws? Is it possible under the polysystem theory to place texts in relation to their contexts?), issues which are of concern to researchers in the field of translation studies.

PAUL ST-PIERRE

*Université de Montréal, Montréal, Canada*