

# INSIGHTS INTO THE DISCIPLINARY BEHAVIOR OF TRANSLATION STUDIES

## *El comportamiento disciplinario de la Traductología*

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**ABSTRACT:** All along its recent history, Translation Studies' course has been very tumultuous. It has produced too much research and has been associated with a myriad of disciplines and concepts. However, this hyperactivity raises serious questions about the epistemological and disciplinary behavior of the discipline. This study aims first at gaining more insights into Translation Studies' hyperactivity through a mixed methods study performed on a number of research articles. Second, it would investigate the concept of disciplinarity and apply it to Translation Studies in order to understand the epistemological behavior of the discipline and diagnose the causes behind its hyperactivity. Finally, the research would combine the findings of the mixed and conceptual studies in order to reach reasonable conclusions and suggest optimal solutions for a better disciplinary behavior.

*Keywords:* Translation Studies; translation theory; disciplinarity; descriptive; epistemology.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The path of Translation Studies has been, until today, very tumultuous. The relatively young discipline has been through numerous turns and shifts (Snell-Hornby 2006) and has also been associated with almost every kind of epistemological concepts, such as *sous-discipline* (Mounin 1976), interdiscipline (Snell-Hornby 2006), or even nomad discipline (Lane-Mercier 2009).

Translation Studies is also famous for actively interacting with neighboring and, sometimes, non-neighboring disciplines. Historically, Translation Studies depended very much on Linguistics and slowly approached other disciplines, such as Semiotics, Psychology, Comparative Studies, Cultural Studies, among others. Today, the field is showing a growing fascination for Cognitive Sciences.

This hyperactivity within the discipline raises many serious questions. On a general note, hyperactivity is a sign of health, renewal and inner development and maturity. However, the intensity and the scattering of Translation Studies' hyperactivity became worrying.

This study aims first, at shedding light on this hyperactivity through a mixed methods study performed on a number of articles retrieved from five Translation Studies related journals; second, at re-positioning the debate at the epistemological level by defining the concept of disciplinarity and applying it to Translation Studies, and, third, at suggesting potential solutions to calm down the hyperactivity.

### 2. MIXED METHODS STUDY: TRANSLATION STUDIES' HYPERACTIVITY

This part discusses a mixed methods study performed on a number of articles retrieved from Translation Studies related journals as mentioned above.

## 2.1 *Purpose statement and strategy of inquiry*

The following mixed methods research is an approach that combines both, qualitative and quantitative methods. It follows the concurrent mixed methods procedures, in which, both, quantitative and qualitative results are combined to provide a comprehensive analysis and answer the research question.

The purpose of this research is to study the disciplinary and epistemological behavior of Translation Studies. Quantitative methods will be used to examine the development of the different fields of Translation Studies, precisely, the descriptive and the conceptual fields. At the same time, conceptual and theoretical articles on translation theory and Translation Studies will be thoroughly examined in order to extract the position of Translation Studies scholars towards translation theory and Translation Studies. The reason for combining both methods is to acquire a better understanding of the research problem, which cannot be fully examined through only a quantitative study.

## 2.2 *Data collection procedure*

The data used in this research is purposefully selected to help the research reach its aim. It reflects the real image of the research industry behind Translation Studies. The journals were selected after a rigorous examination of their aim and scope. Each of the selected journals is believed to help the research gain more insights into one or more aspect of Translation Studies.

The journals selected for this research fulfil a number of requirements set to ensure a more reliable, accurate and comprehensive results, namely:

- Peer reviewed. Peer reviewed journals ensure a high research quality, which enhances the reliability of the results of the study.
- A long history of publishing translation related articles. This would enhance the detectability and traceability of the evolution of the theoretical thinking associated with Translation Studies.
- Publications in both, French and English. Examining publications in both languages would guarantee more comprehensive results, since it helps the study gain more insights into both traditions in Translation Studies.
- A large scope of research. A broad scope of research would ensure more comprehensive results since the articles are more likely to discuss various matters and call upon related disciplines.
- In accordance with the aforementioned criteria, the research selected the following journals:
- *Babel: Revue internationale de la traduction - International Journal of Translation: Babel* is the journal of the International Federation of Translators (FIT). It is designed for translators, interpreters and terminologists and publishes articles on translation and interpreting theory, practice, pedagogy, technology, history, sociology, and terminology. This journal also includes articles on the development and evolution of the discipline. The articles are published mainly in French and English.
- *Meta: Journal des traducteurs - Translators' Journal: Meta* deals with all aspects of translation and interpretation, such as, theories of translation and interpreting, teaching translation, stylistics, comparative studies, terminology, computer-assisted translation, machine translation, among others. It publishes articles in French and English.
- *Target: Target* publishes articles on translation from any part of the world. It adopts an interdisciplinary approach and focuses on research on the theory, history, culture and sociology of translation. Articles have a theoretical, empirical, or applied focus. The publications are mainly in English.
- *The Translator: The Translator* publishes research on a variety of issues related to translation and interpreting. It publishes articles written by both researchers and practitioners. Contributions, written mainly in English, cover a broad range of practices related to translation and interpreting.

- *TTR: traduction, terminologie, redaction*: TTR addresses issues related to translation, terminology and writing. It publishes articles in French and English.

All the articles from all the journals, since the date of their first publication until today were examined. In total, 4767 articles were examined out of which 3449 were related to translation. Each of the 3449 articles was given a series of keywords labelling the nature of the article (conceptual, descriptive, experimental, contrastive...), the problem it discusses (translation theory, literary translation, translation training, translation evaluation...) and the disciplines it calls upon (history, semiotics, literary studies, gender studies...).

This data was used for quantitative purposes. This study will only feature one of the many quantitative observations, namely, the percentages of the different types of studies performed within the discipline.

Only the articles discussing translation theory and Translation Studies were, later, thoroughly examined for qualitative purposes. The qualitative research intent is to draw out how researchers feel about translation theory and Translation Studies. The findings were classified into three parts: the positive aspects of translation theory and Translation Studies, the negative aspects of translation theory and Translation Studies, and researchers' suggestions. The qualitative data was finally gathered into one timeline table retracing researchers' feelings and suggestions from the late sixties until today. This article will only discuss two of the many qualitative findings, namely, one case of obstinance and redundancy and another case of misconduct within the discipline.

### 2.3 Results and observations

The first observation is quantitative. The following pie chart shows the statistical distribution of the type of 3033 articles out of 3449, the difference being editorials and in memoriam. All the percentages were calculated with respect to the 3033 articles involved in this quantitative study.

The very low number of conceptual articles suggests that the theoretical aspect of Translation Studies is still an underdeveloped field compared to other fields in the discipline.

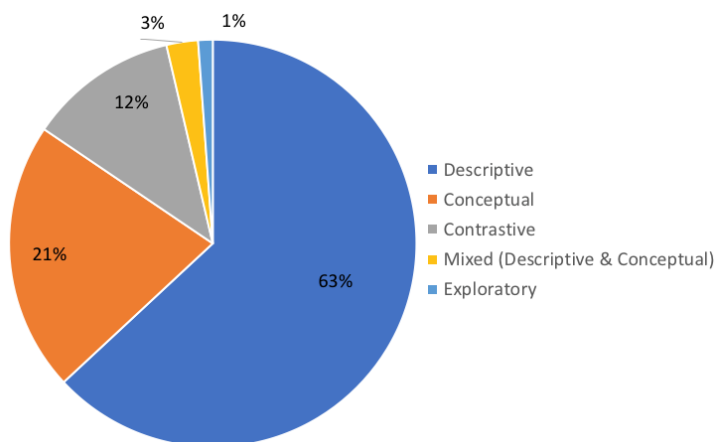


Figure 1-Statistical distribution of articles' types in Translation Studies

This wide gap suggests that the hyperactivity of Translation Studies may be exclusive to the descriptive field. This state of things is completely unhealthy, since it reveals an epistemological asymmetry within the discipline.

Second, the qualitative results show multiple cases of obstinance and redundancy within the discipline. Soon after its emergence in the seventies, Translation Studies scholars began to criticize the lack of theoretical and epistemological background supporting the discipline. The figure below shows the many times researchers complained about the lack of solid theoretical and epistemological foundations, as well as the many suggestions they made to this end. The citations without quotation marks are translations provided by the author of this article.

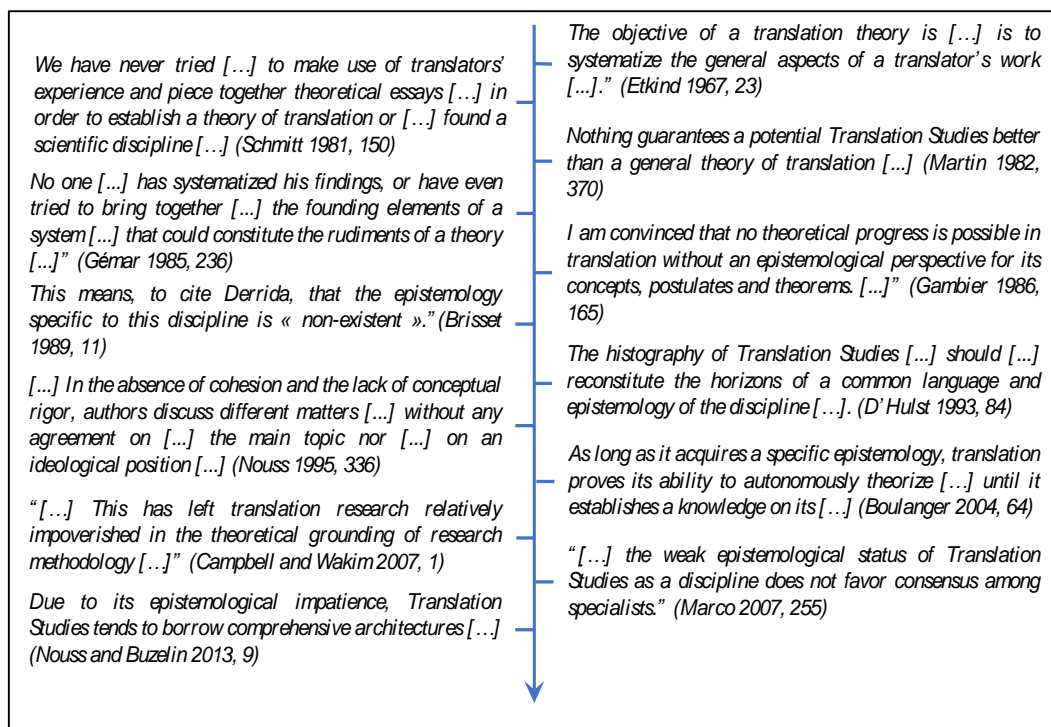


Figure 2-Timeline of researchers' complaints and suggestions

Translation Studies seemed, however, not to be responsive to such complaints and suggestions. The obstinance and redundancy both confirm the schism between the theoretical and the descriptive field in Translation Studies. This scattering could be explained either by the fact that the descriptive field may be monopolizing the activity of the discipline and disregarding the theoretical field, thus, preventing it from developing ; or by the fact that the theoretical field may still be incapable of assuming an epistemological identity and generating a general theory that pulls the discipline together.

Third, the qualitative results also show many cases of misconduct. Simultaneously with the emergence of Translation Studies many researchers praised the discipline for acquiring a growing scientific aspect (Goffin 1971). The profusion of descriptive and contrastive studies confirmed this tendency. Some researchers were, however, still not satisfied by the degree of scientificity Translation Studies had acquired and demanded even more (Gile 1991). Not long after, researchers started complaining about

an excess of scientificity harming the discipline (Tymoczko 1998; Brownlie 2003; Ladmira1 2010; Nous 2011; Neunzig 2011; Basalamah 2012). This extreme reaction came, indeed, as a response to the profusion of descriptive and contrastive research. The table below shows the conflicting views about the scientificity of Translation Studies. The citations without quotation marks are translations provided by the author of this article.

RESEARCHERS COMPLAINING ABOUT LACK OF SCIENTIFICITY	RESEARCHERS COMPLAINING ABOUT EXCESS OF SCIENTIFICITY
<p>«Many practitioners reject the idea of scientific investigation [...] others do not believe science can shed much light on the intricate processes and interactions involved [...]» (Gile 1991, 154)</p> <p>«[...] our discipline shows a remarkably low degree of scientificity on all counts [...]» (Marco 2007, 257)</p>	<p>«CTS must take care not to diminish itself, falling into the fetishistic search for quantification that plagues many “scientific studies” and makes them ridiculous, empty exercises» (Tymoczko 1998, 7).</p> <p>«I shall explore below the ways in which the descriptive approach could be more self-aware and self-critical» (Brownlie 2003, 40).</p> <p>«This is the position adopted by those I call the contrastivists – those I am criticizing now because they failed to address translation itself – in opposition to those who properly qualify to the status of Translation Studies scholars» (Ladmira1 2010, 9).</p> <p>«The turn of descriptive studies [...] cannot but reinforce the tendency towards more empirism. But, what about fundamental and conceptual research in Translation Studies, if it does exist?» (Basalamah 2012, 14).</p> <p>«[...] If thinking in Translation Studies should follow a certain systematicity, it still tends towards flexibility [...] Altogether, if Translation Studies tastes the spirit of systematicity, it does not necessarily respect its essence» (Nous 2011, 14).</p> <p>«[...] we are beginning to notice a certain “empiricism for empiricism’s sake” within the field. A huge number of studies and experiments are being carried out into very isolated issues or issues of very little scientific relevance» (Neunzig 2011, 16).</p>

Table 1-The conflicting point of views towards the scientificity of Translation Studies

These contradictions within the discipline could be interpreted by the fact that researchers of the descriptive field, influenced by a growing and general tendency towards sciences, may have abused of the scientificity Translation Studies had acquired thanks to the efforts of the researchers of the theoretical field. The theoretical field, however, seems to be stuck into repetitions and defensive reactions, thus, lacking creativity and innovation.

This misconduct suggests that not only the descriptive field could be monopolizing the discipline's activity, but also that it is maybe misusing the theoretical findings in a harmful way. Whereas the theoretical field stands helpless. This has had unfortunate consequences on the discipline, since it encouraged research in very narrow issues and of no relevance for translation theory.

#### 2.4 *Conclusions of the mixed methods study*

Translation Studies appears to be a scattered and unbalanced discipline. The descriptive field is monopolizing the greater part of the activity of the discipline and misusing the theoretical achievements. While the theoretical field appears to be incapable of assuming its role.

This incompatibility between the descriptive field and the theoretical field suggests not only that Translation Studies is epistemologically asymmetric (figure 1), but also that there is an epistemological dysfunction scattering the discipline (figure 2, table 1). Generally, every discipline needs a theoretical field that generates theoretical and conceptual models and a practical field that puts these findings into practice. This is obviously not the case for Translation Studies. The two fields seem not to be related.

Moreover, the impotence of the theoretical field could be explained either by the fact that the hyperactivity of the descriptive field is, indeed, leading the theoretical one into stagnation, or that the discipline is epistemologically incapable of producing theoretical models.

This state of things raises serious questions about the very *raison d'être* of Translation Studies. Is Translation Studies a discipline, in the pure epistemological meaning, capable of producing theories, methodologies and concepts like any other discipline, or is it just a means for describing and reporting translators' activity from around the world?

### 3. CONCEPTUAL STUDY: THE CONCEPT OF DISCIPLINARITY

The previous part suspected a state of hyperactivity within the descriptive part of Translation Studies coupled with a state of incapacity within the theoretical field. This raised a pure epistemological question about the disciplinary character of Translation Studies. This part would then investigate this concept and apply it to Translation Studies in order to reach a, hopefully, rewarding answer to the question.

Even though the world has moved from the disciplinary era into a post-disciplinary one, where knowledge is produced on a larger scale and traditional disciplines are reconceived, the very concept of disciplinarity remains undefined. Many studies have been, indeed, made to this end. However, no consensual definition is available. This study would then try to piece together, from all readings, the main characteristics that transform any field of knowledge into a well-established discipline. Each characteristic is later applied to Translation Studies in order to see if the latter fulfils all the requirements of disciplinarity.

First, a discipline is a gross entity that belongs to knowledge. It exists, first, in the mind (Frodeman 2014, 16), and is not an organized assortment of theories or practices or applications or texts (Frodeman, Mitcham and Klein 2010, 8). Organizing the discipline or institutionalizing it is not a prerequisite for its existence. In other terms, universities, research centers, journals and other academic entities help normalize a discipline, but do not, in any way, give birth to a discipline that was not existing before.

There has been a thinking movement related to translation way before the emergence of Translation Studies. This gross entity took the form of notes or introductory remarks written by translators since the dawn of history. Ballard (2007) traced back the emergence of this gross entity in the minds of translators to the era of Cicero (106-48 B.C.). According to the former, Cicero was the first to keep a tangible proof of what he thought about his translations. In his writings (46 B.C.), Cicero (cited in Ballard 2007) justified his translations by referring to the sense rather than the letter, thus, raising one of the most debated problems in translation theory, namely, literal versus free translation.

Second, a discipline is dynamic (Frodeman, Mitcham and Klein 2010, 3-4). This means that the area it covers within the knowledge itself is constantly changing due to many factors, namely, social, cultural, communicational, economic and political factors. More specifically, the boundaries of a discipline are constantly narrowing or widening by means of various circumstances. This dynamism ended up in what is known today as interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinarity.

This dynamism is, indeed, one of the most prominent aspects of Translation Studies. The discipline has never failed to approach new disciplines and borrow whatever it needs from them. This behavior, praised by some, criticized by others, led a number of researchers to consider Translation Studies an interdiscipline (Snell-Hornby 2006), or even a nomad discipline (Lane-Mercier 2009) due to its constant movements and changing affiliations.

Third, a discipline has multiple identities. It cannot be assigned to one category, whether it being social, economic, political or cultural.

A discipline has first, a socio-cultural dimension due to the fact that it emerges, basically, from thoughts pertaining to a particular society, bearing a particular culture, within a particular space and time frame. The massive immigration to the United-States, for example, created new identities and a new feeling of regionalism and ethnicity within the same society. Some university faculties, back then, found themselves, very much like the American society, divided into departments each one claiming the identity of a particular group (Black Studies, Native American Studies, Jewish Studies...) (Klein 2005, 165). This socio-cultural dimension is also a catalyst for the dynamism of the discipline which is meant to constantly adapt to the new socio-cultural circumstances.

Translation Studies has shown its ability to adapt to different social and cultural circumstances. The different schools and theoretical movements (French, German, Russian, Chinese, Anglo-Saxon) within the discipline account for it.

During their normalization and institutionalization, disciplines acquire an economic and political dimension. They become no more a gross entity but an organized system of knowledge. Universities, research centers and peer reviewed journals play the key role. At this stage, the discipline also acquires its diachronic dimension. This means that, it achieves its first historical instance and acquires a new instance, namely, institutionalization. Practically, at this stage, a discipline acquires a growing visibility, self-reflexivity and international recognition.

This is not necessarily the case for Translation Studies which is still lacking visibility and recognition. This could be due to many factors, such as, the absence of a consensual academic curriculum, and maybe the lack of funding.

Fourth, a discipline is complex. It consists of many components or systems, which are brought to life through the normalization or institutionalization of the discipline, namely, a basic epistemic content, methodologies, strategies and research.

The basic epistemic content is the topic or the subject of the discipline (Frodeman 2014, 16). For instance, terminology is concerned with terms, zoology with animals, etc. The epistemic content gives the discipline its identity and guarantees its durability and stability. It shows up in a series of concepts and definitions which are agreed upon to form the rudiments of the discipline.

The basic epistemic content of Translation Studies remains, until today, unclear or even inexistent. Translation Studies scholars still do not know what Translation Studies is exactly interested in: is it the product of translation or the process or even the mental process or literary translation or translation strategies, among others.

The methodologies of a discipline may be theoretical or experimental (Frodeman, Mitcham and Klein 2010, 162). They are a series of theories or experimental techniques and procedures that are directly linked to the epistemic content either to study it, or to address the problem it bears.

All along its existence, Translation Studies borrowed methodologies from other disciplines (Linguistics, Sociology, History...) to address particular issues and problems. However, in the absence of a solid epistemic content one cannot discuss neither the effectiveness and efficiency of such methodologies, nor the adequacy of the borrowing acts.

The strategies of a discipline are at the same time academic and market-oriented. They take care of the academic aspect of the discipline, from integrating it into the educational system to designing a core curriculum, preparing the teaching material, developing an effective learning strategy or setting up comprehensive criteria for evaluation, among others. As well as responding to the on growing demands of the professional market by tailoring an academic course that fulfils its needs.

As mentioned above, Translation Studies is still encountering difficulties in the institutionalization process. This means that the strategies of the discipline are either weak or non-existent.

Research can be interested in the basic epistemic content to redefine it or even confirm or infirm the existing definitions. It can also focus on the methodologies in order to find new ones or develop the existing ones, and can be concerned, as well, with the academic and market-oriented strategies.

There is, today, a profusion of articles, conferences, journals and studies related to Translation Studies. However, the discipline has failed to produce ground-breaking, innovative and creative research, either because research is following the same descriptive model and not targeting the right issues and/or because Translation Studies community, once again, lacks funding.

Fifth, each discipline should be committed to a particular paradigm or a disciplinary matrix (Kuhn 1971). A disciplinary matrix is a set of beliefs that provides researchers of a particular field with rules on how to approach and solve a problem. These general beliefs consist of theories, concepts, methodologies, procedures or any other relevant structure. A disciplinary matrix has, generally, a broader scope and is not as accurate as the basic epistemic content or the methodologies of a discipline. It does not belong to one specific discipline, but many disciplines may be committed to the same disciplinary matrix.

Translation Studies seems to have performed many paradigms shifts or turns, according to Snell-Hornby (2006). Soon after the emergence of Translation Studies, researchers shifted their focus from the source to the target, the prescriptive to the descriptive, the linguistic to the functional and the atomistic to the systemic. This was one of the most significant shifts in the history of translation theory, after Nida's formal and dynamic equivalence. This paradigm shift was, indeed, mainly inspired by the poly-system theory, post-colonial theories and positivism. Translation Studies proved to be loyal to these paradigms, however whether they match the needs of the discipline or not is not to be discussed, since the discipline has no clear topic or epistemic content.

To sum up all what have been said on disciplinarity, a discipline could be defined as a socio-cultural thinking movement that becomes organized into four major components, precisely: topic, methodologies, strategies and research through the process of institutionalization.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

This last part aims at combining the findings of the mixed methods study and the conceptual one in order to answer the main question of the research and make some suggestion for Translation Studies.

Whether Translation Studies is a discipline or not is of no relevance. There is obviously a thinking movement associated with translation and there have been attempts to normalize this theoretical thinking. Nevertheless, the efforts to institutionalize Translation Studies are minimal and more efforts need to be deployed to achieve more visibility and recognition.

Whether Translation Studies' boundaries are solid enough or not, or whether it is excessively borrowing from other disciplines is also of no relevance. In other terms, whether Translation Studies is an interdiscipline (Snell-Hornby 2006), a multidisciplinary field (Woodsworth and Simon 1988), a nomad



discipline (Lane-Mercier 2009) is of no major importance. The dynamism and adaptability of every discipline compel it to exchange with other disciplines. However, recent disciplines need, undoubtedly, to be more dynamic and have much more adaptability than the traditional disciplines. Translation Studies' behavior, or any recent discipline's behavior, should not be compared to that of a traditional discipline. Translation Studies emerged in an era where the scope of specialization became very narrow, thus leading it to exchange more with other disciplines to broaden its scope and achieve more creativity and innovation.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Translation Studies is a healthy and well-behaving discipline. It has been the case since its normalization in the seventies. The crisis is due to one major reason, the absence of a solid basic epistemic content. This explains why no theoretical achievement qualified to the status of a general theory of translation. A basic epistemic content is supposed to unify the discipline and grant it durability and stability. However, translation theory was almost every time interested in the disparities rather than the similarities. This is why translation theory is stuck in binarism: literal versus free, meaning versus form, domestication versus foreignization, process versus product, literary versus pragmatic, among others.

The translation process depends, undoubtedly, on many variables, such as: language, culture, text type, work environment, time, translator, initiator. This is why submitting this process to study is no easy task because the process itself is not reproducible.

However, within this same process there is one invariable, or stable factor, the mental process behind translation. This is the only stable that unifies all kinds of translation and translators, and, therefore, the only stable that can be submitted to study without falling into the traditional binarism of translation theory.

Hence, if Translation Studies wants to come out of the crisis it has always been through, it should firmly adopt one epistemic content, precisely, the mental process behind translation. This would guarantee the unity, stability and durability of the discipline, and, would allow the discipline to finally produce a general theory that explains each and every kind of translation and translators.

Translation Studies methodologies are now being borrowed for momentary purposes. This has led many researchers to criticize this behavior, considering that Translation Studies is over-relying on other disciplines.

If Translation Studies adopts a new epistemic content, it still needs to borrow the right methodologies to study it. However, the borrowing activity would not be random but purposeful. This would comfort the disturbing hyperactivity the discipline is now suffering from and would ease the worries of those who criticize the over-reliance of Translation Studies. In this case, Translation Studies would borrow the methodologies it needs from other relevant disciplines, and, then, include them into a comprehensive research model that allows it to take a look into the black box of the translator. Translation Studies would provide the raw material, precisely, the know-how and the black box, and borrow the necessary tools from other disciplines in order to solve the puzzle.

The new basic epistemic content requires a new disciplinary matrix. The positivist paradigm has, in fact, objectified translation and has transformed it into a means for cultural observation and comparison. Translation Studies needs now to move towards exploratory, post-positivist, post-culturalist and cognitivist approaches that allow it to bring the discipline back to life, by generating more creative and innovative research, far from the descriptive model that has been haunting the discipline for almost fifty years now.

This research does not claim to have found the ultimate solution to the problem. It hopes, however, to open more insights and shed new lights on the behavior of the discipline and provide potential solu-

tions. More research should undoubtedly be carried out to this end, especially to find the right methodologies and comprehensive research models that match the needs of the new basic epistemic content. This new change would also open the door for a new way in translation training: the skill-based training.

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