

外研社学术文库·翻译研究

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象牙塔与语言工作面之间的对话

CAN THEORY HELP TRANSLATORS?

A Dialogue Between the Ivory Tower and the Wordface

(英) Andrew Chesterman
Emma Wagner 著



外语教学与研究出版社

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND RESEARCH PRESS

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近几十年来,翻译理论研究空前繁荣,文化转向更是带来了新的研究视角和方法。从语言学研究方法到目的论、多元系统理论、翻译规范、解构主义、后殖民主义、女性主义、TAPs、译者主体以及机器翻译等等,可谓流派纷呈,让人目不暇接。理论研究者从各个不同的层面和角度考察翻译活动,研究的主要方法也从规定性研究为主逐渐转向以描写性研究为主。然而,我们不断听到这样的问题:这些理论对实践有用吗?如果没有,它们存在的意义何在?或者换一个角度,译者是否需要理论的指导?目前越来越多的学者逐渐趋向于认为并不是所有的理论都要用于指导实践,理论除了指导实践,还可以认识和解释实践。因此,翻译研究的范围不应该局限于仅仅为了用来指导实践,即对“怎么译”的研究¹,而应在更广阔的范围内展开,研究“何为译”、“为何译”等问题²。在这种观点的指导下,国内外译学研究的领域不断拓展,呈现出繁荣景象。

然而,我们无法否认翻译理论与实践之间无法脱离的联系。一方面,理论研究的灵感多来自于实践,完全脱离现实的理论无法生存;另一方面,译者对能够帮助他/她们从事翻译活动的理论的迫切需求也不容忽视。这使我们看到了研究者与实践者之间交流对话的紧迫性和必要性。《理论对译者有用吗?》(*Can Theory Help Translators?*)一书结束了研究者或实践者自说自话的局面,以独特的形式展开一场身处象牙塔中的翻译理论研究者 and 劳作于语言工作面(wordface³)的译员之间的对话。

作者之一 Andrew Chesterman (AC) 是翻译界知名学者,芬兰赫尔辛基

¹ 谢天振, 2001, “国内翻译界在翻译研究和翻译理论认识上的误区”, 《中国翻译》第1期。

² 参考许钧 2004 年 12 月在广东外语外贸大学的讲座内容。

³ 直译为“语言工作面”, 是本书作者之一 Emma Wagner 模仿“煤层工作面”(coalface) 创造的新词, 意指译员的工作是在语言层面上的实践。

大学教授，已出版的著作包括 *Memes of Translation* (《翻译理论思想元素继承》)，*Contrastive Functional Analysis* (《对比功能分析》) 和与 Jenny Williams 合著的 *The Map: A Beginner's Guide to Doing Research in Translation Studies* (《路线图：翻译研究方法入门》) 等。

另一位作者 Emma Wagner (EW) 女士曾在剑桥学习现代语言学，在巴斯大学获得口笔译文学硕士学位，英国译协 (ITI) 成员。她自 1972 年开始在欧洲委员会从事翻译工作，任翻译部负责人，管理涉及欧盟 11 种官方语言的 250 名译员。1998 年，Wagner 在欧洲委员会发起了一场“反对含糊” (Fight the Fog) 运动，鼓励作者和译者用清晰的语言写作并翻译 (write clearly)。

本书肇始于 Emma Wagner 对 Chesterman 的著作 *Memes of Translation* (1997) 一书的批判性回应，认为该书对从事实践工作的译员没什么用处。二人随后的讨论形成了本书的雏形。全书保留了对话的形式，主要围绕翻译理论和翻译实践之间的关系问题展开讨论，共分七章，每章多以标题形式提出问题，随后的讨论围绕该问题展开。Chesterman 和 Wagner 在各自领域内丰富的知识与经验使得这场讨论广泛而深入，其中涉及的主题包括翻译理论的目的和译者需要 (第一章)、译者的身份和翻译的隐喻 (第二章)、译者的隐身和职业地位 (第三章)、翻译的功能、目的、类型和译文读者 (第四章)、翻译策略 (第一、五章)、质量评估、译者道德 (第六章) 和翻译辅助工具 (第五、七章) 等。Chesterman 就这些问题介绍了翻译研究的各种成果，而 Wagner 则提供了在欧盟翻译实践中的丰富例证，他们的意见既有共识也有分歧，无论对研究者还是实践者，本书都提供了一个了解对方、参与对话的机会。

第一章题为“翻译理论跟译者的问题有关吗？”。要回答“理论对译者有用吗？”这个问题，首先要考虑的是“翻译理论理应以帮助译者为目的”这样一个设想。两位作者首先以“椅子理论”为例，讨论了作为理论应当涉及的方方面面。实践者认为目前的翻译理论脱离实际，忽视译员们每天处理大量非文学翻译的事实而过多专注于文学翻译。大部分译者希望理论能提供一些具体的建议、指导原则甚至是教条，只要它们具备现实性和可应用性。或者，至少能界定一系列可以谈论翻译的术语。故此，Chesterman 介绍了译学研究从规定性向描写性的转向，并指出规定性研究的弊端。Wagner 提出“在更好的描述的基础上建立更好的规定：产生更好的指导” (leading to better guidance: better prescription based on better description)。最大的问题是，人们对翻译理论究竟属于哪一学科存在不同的理解，是人文学科、自然科学还是

应用科学？不同的答案决定了翻译理论研究的不同范畴。显然，实践者所期望的翻译理论属于应用科学。这里 Chesterman 介绍了几种概念性工具 (conceptual tools)：转换词类 (transposition)、脱离语言外壳 (deverbalization)、象似性 (iconicity)、关联性 (relevance) 和改善原稿 (improving the original)。这些工具确实有助于译者的翻译实践，并使 Wagner 相信规定性的理论对译者是有用的。

第二章“我是谁？我在做什么？”是关于译者的身份问题。Wagner 问道，翻译理论能否为译者提供一些普遍的角色模式来解决译者面临的身份危机？二人依次讨论了一系列关于翻译的隐喻，希望以此来揭示历史上译者的自我观念和公众形象的变化，如：译者是建筑者 (builder)，翻译是复制 (copying)、是模仿 (imitating)，译文是不忠的美人 (belles infidèles)，译者是“食人者” (cannibal)、创造者 (creative role)、操纵者 (manipulator)、文化间的守门人 (gatekeeper between cultures)，翻译是解码和重新编码 (decoding and recoding)、交流 (communication)、目的性行为 (skopos theory)、狂欢 (carnival) 等等。从上述隐喻中我们可以看到，译者的身份和地位发生了巨大的变化，至少在理论中如此。当然，这些隐喻有些为实践者所认同，有些则无法认同，如解构主义的译论。此外，也要考虑到欧盟翻译的特点，如根据官方规定，没有原文和译文之分，有的只是时间差别而已，所有语言的版本都具有同样的法律地位。总而言之，在实践中译者扮演着各种各样的角色：偶尔进行复制或模仿，幸运时创造，有时解码并重新编码，时常进行交流，也许还有少量的操纵（但希望“从不食人”）。多数译者在不同时间扮演上述种种角色，这取决于所译文本的种类和目的。

第三章题为“我译，故我隐”。译者在翻译中的隐形是现代译学的一个热点问题。然而，Wagner 指出“我们的工作就是不被看到和中性，而不是把自己的个性强加于原文而扭曲它”。故此，Venuti 提倡的阻抗式翻译显然是不被非文学翻译的实践者所接受的。这里有两个问题，一个是缺乏正确的评价（不同于个人的显形），另一个是作为一种职业缺乏认可。二人针对前者讨论了翻译的语言特点、译文中的显化假设 (explication hypothesis) 等。Wagner 还举例说明译者对原文中的错误的处理方式。Chesterman 认为缺乏职业认可问题分为内部和外部两方面的进展。在内部是翻译作为一种理论的进展；在外部反映在学科的结构发展、社会地位以及大学水平的译员培训等方面。关键的概念在于联合，如果世界范围内的合格专业译者能够联合起来，建立一个适当的国际标准；如果各个国家的译者培训可以协调一致、相互承认，那么，翻译职业的地位将会大为提高，翻译标准的维持也会容易得多。因此，“我

联，故我在”(I link, therefore I am)。

第四章主要讨论“这都是为了什么？”的问题，也就是翻译的目的是什么。翻译的目的无疑对翻译策略的选择起着至关重要的作用。Chesterman在本章回顾了从不同方面对翻译进行的分类，如目的论、关联理论、Bühler、Sager等人不同的分类模式，就翻译类型来说，还有Peter Newmark的语义翻译和交际翻译、Juliane House的显型翻译和隐型翻译以及Christiane Nord的文献型翻译和工具型翻译等等。如此众多的分类法反映出理论界的重复工作，发明大量术语，不但令实践者感到困惑，而且实际内容并没有太大进展。同样的情况在本书内出现不止一次，为理论研究者敲响了警钟。实践者需要的是有实际作用的指导原则，例如对翻译目的和预期读者进行实用性分类，以方便客户指定，从而采取相应的翻译策略，避免盲目翻译。翻译目的和预期读者决定了翻译的策略。

了解了目的和读者，下一步的问题就是“我如何达到目的？”，因此两位作者在第五章重点讨论了翻译的策略问题。总的来讲有三种策略，即检索策略、创造性策略和文本策略，其中文本策略又包括综合(global)与局部(local)策略。Chesterman展示了三种具体的文本策略，即句法策略、语义策略和语用策略。要制定正确的策略，就有必要预测各种策略会产生的效果。然而对翻译效果的预测目前为止多集中在文化和社会层面上，具体的效果很难准确说明。此外，TAPs (think-aloud protocols) 和对译者“习性”(habitus)的研究是对实践者策略的描述性研究，Wagner的同事列出了一系列的“距离策略”(distancing strategies)，译者在翻译中遇到难题时，这些策略可以帮助译者从侧面思考，换一个角度看问题。距离策略对翻译理论研究无疑具有相当大的启发作用。

译文产生之后，我们要问的另外一个问题就是“这个译作质量如何？”(第六章)。对翻译的质量可以从四个方面进行评估，即翻译作为产品、作为过程、作为服务以及作为原文的附属，这同时也导致了评估的复杂性。译者的翻译过程实际上也是评价和选择的过程；在翻译研究中，读者(学者、评论家和教师)对译文进行评估；当然还有客户对翻译产品的评价。根据Wagner的介绍，目前翻译行业的质量标准，如ISO-9002、DIN2345等，都是与过程相关的。这些标准规定了译文产生的过程，其中隐含的假设是：如果过程没有问题，那么译文就会合格。新的标准和行业规范亟需建立，以保证翻译产业的正常发展。

在理论界，研究多集中于对翻译产品的分析，尤其是对译文中出现的错误的分析。没有错误就等于好的翻译吗？当然这是对译文消极的质量研究，

而对翻译规范 (norm) 的研究则是从积极方面进行的。两位作者针对四种翻译规范进行了细致的分析, Wagner通过生动的例证阐释了各个规范间的相互矛盾和译者忠实的对象不统一等问题。至此, 又提出了译者的道德问题。有趣的是, 让研究者大费口舌的意识形态和道德问题 (例如性别化语言), 对译者来讲却十分简单: 这取决于翻译公司的政策, 而非个人的信仰。当然, 译者有拒绝翻译的权利。

最后一章“我需要帮助!”围绕翻译辅助工具展开。译者当然不是只用大脑在翻译, 随着科技——尤其是计算机技术的进步, 种类繁多的辅助工具极大地改变了译者的工作方式。例如, 个人计算机的应用使译者可以直接输入和编辑文字, 淘汰了欧洲委员会翻译部传统的由译员口授录音、打字员录入的翻译方式。然而出乎意料的是, 一些译员抱怨, 计算机浪费了他/她们的时间。译员要不断地适应新的软件, 此外, 最主要的是大量的时间浪费在调整文件格式等琐事上面, 这些琐事原本是打字员的工作。因此他/她们希望能保留或者发展传统的口授翻译方法。尽管这是比较极端的看法, 但也反映了现实状况, 计算机的使用是否分散了译者的注意力? 当然, 计算机也给译员们提供了前所未有的便利条件, 信息检索即是其中之一。译员不再需要依靠纸质词典, 也不再需要到图书馆苦苦查找, 互联网就是他/她们最强大的资源库, 从在线术语表到全文检索功能, 大大提高了信息检索的效率。通过互联网, 译者之间的相互协作也更为便利。

谈到翻译辅助工具, 当然离不开机器翻译。两人主要讨论了欧洲委员会翻译部目前所使用的 Systran。显然, 研究者对机器翻译的效果比较乐观, 认为其廉价并且快速。然而, Wagner的观点不同, 通过对 Systran 使用情况的介绍, 她指出 Systran 的主要功能在于信息浏览而非高质量的翻译工作。更受译者欢迎的是计算机辅助翻译 (computer-aided translation) 的另外两种手段, 即全文检索和翻译记忆 (translation memory)。通过强大的存储功能, 它们可以检索并调出曾被翻译过的原文和译文, 从而提高译者的工作效率。然而, 辅助工具毕竟只是辅助, 它们终究无法替代译者的选择和决策过程。这一章的主要内容似乎偏离了“理论对译者是否有用”这个主题, 而多是关于“科技是否对译者有用”的问题。

理论对译者有用吗? 这个问题当然不是简单的“有”或者“没有”可以回答的。以这个问题为契机, 本书通过象牙塔和语言工作面之间的对话, 打开了二者相互交流、了解的大门。这场对话使我们耳目一新, 看到了以前没有看到的方方面面。实践者可以通过本书在较短的时间内了解翻译理论的概貌。研究者也可以从中得到种种警示和启发, 例如, 翻译理论对非文学翻译

实践的忽视、理论的重复建设和专业术语的不统一等问题。此外，实践中应用的距离策略、翻译产业面对的现状等都具有一定的理论价值，有待进一步研究。本书的不足之处在于，尽管每章都设置了话题，然而由于对话形式的随意性，偏离话题的现象还是时有发生。另外，理论和实践自说自话的现象依然存在，两位作者很多时候是在对着读者而不是对方讲话⁴。真正的交流应该不在于对话的形式，而在于交流的内容和传达的信息。无论如何，本书不失为促进理论和实践交流的一个良好开端。

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⁴ Mossop, Brian (2003) "Andrew Chesterman and Emma Wagner: *Can theory help translators? A Dialogue between the Ivory Tower and the Wordface* (Book Review)", *Target* 15 (2):372—375.

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1. Is translation theory relevant to translators' problems?

EW

'Translation theory? Spare us...' That's the reaction to be expected from most practising translators. Messages from the ivory tower tend not to penetrate as far as the wordface. (The wordface is the place where we translators work – think of a miner at the coalface.)

Most of us had a brief brush with theory in our student days, when we absorbed whatever was needed to get us through our exams... and then proceeded to forget it, as we got to grips with the realities of learning how to do the job. There can be few professions with such a yawning gap between theory and practice.

About a decade ago Lars Berglund (1990: 148), a technical translator in Germany, wrote a damning article about the irrelevance of translation studies:

With the current approach, translation studies of the kind pursued at West German universities produce few results of interest to people outside the community formed by the translation scholars themselves. ... We need more orientation toward the needs and interests of practising translators and their clients.

Has anything changed? Have translation theorists produced anything of relevance for practising translators or their clients?

Recently Graham Cross (1998: 27), a British translator, reviewed the Routledge *Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, concluding that it was

a remarkable storehouse of interesting information. But my doubts about the book's aims remain. Will it help one to become a better translator? I doubt it. ... Does it help to give the translation profession a feeling of self-esteem and worth? Hardly. ... From the point of view of my working life, it is interesting but irrelevant.

So tell me, how wrong are we? What's translation theory about? Can it help us to become better translators and give us a feeling of professional self-esteem?

AC

Your opening move raises some big issues. I'll start with your last point and work backwards.

Can translation theory help translators? In a way, I have a lot of sympathy with what I suppose is the assumption behind this question: that's one reason why we are writing this book, after all. But let's ponder the assumption a bit first: that translation theory **SHOULD** have this aim.

Would you pose the same question of other kinds of theory, I wonder? Should musicology help musicians or composers to become better musicians or composers? Should literary theory help writers and poets to write better? Should sociology help the people and groups it studies to become better members of society? Should the theories of mechanics and cybernetics help engineers and computer scientists to produce better robots? I guess your answers to these questions will not be identical: I myself would be more inclined to answer yes to the last one than to the others. To the sociology one, I might answer that it should at least help people like politicians to make better decisions. But the ones on musicology and literary theory seem a bit different; such theories seem more to help other people understand these art forms, rather than the artists themselves. In particular, such theories might help academics (theorists) to understand something better, and hence, in some abstract way, add to the sum total of cultural knowledge.

So is translation theory more like musicology and literary theory, or like sociology, or like mechanics and cybernetics? From the point of view of a practising translator, it may seem more like the mechanics type.

As such its value (its only value?) is in its application, in its social usefulness. This connects with your initial coal-mining metaphor (to which I shall return later!). We are mining coal, so let's have a theory that makes the job easier, helps us to mine more efficiently...

On this view, theorists are somehow seen to be 'up there', like teachers, in possession of knowledge to hand down, or at least with the duty of finding out such information; and we translators are 'down here' (underground?): just tell us what to do, tell us how to do it better, please... What kind of a professional self-image emerges here?

Most modern translation theorists find this view very odd. To them, it seems to represent an old-fashioned prescriptive approach, an approach that sets out to state what people should do. For several decades now, mainstream translation theory has tried to get away from this approach: it has been thought unscientific, un-empirical. Instead, we theorists should seek to be descriptive, to describe, explain and understand what translators do actually do, not stipulate what they ought to do. From this descriptive point of view, it is the translators that are 'up there', performing an incredibly complex activity, and the theorists are 'down here', trying to understand how on earth the translators manage. These theorists see themselves as studying the translators, not instructing them.

Having said this, I do think that lots of bits of translation theory are nevertheless relevant to translators... But let's see, as this dialogue progresses.

I wonder if we can agree on what the aims of a translation theory ought to be? And on what the research object of such a theory might be, what we would expect it to cover? The word 'theory' originally meant a way of seeing, a perspective from which to contemplate something, so as to understand.

So a lot depends on your point of view, on your theory of what a translation theory should be.

As a way of opening this topic, I invite you to imagine that someone has just invented a new academic discipline, known as Chair Theory. This purports to be a complete theory of the chair. (Chairs are man-made objects, like translations...) What would you imagine Chair Theory to cover, what would its aims be, what would its various subsections be?

EW

If Chair Theory existed, I think it should:

- a) observe: find out about all the types of chair that exist; study chairs through the ages, chairs around the world;
- b) analyze: distil a few generalizations out of all the observation:
 - * definition of chair and main categories of chair;
 - * constraints of chair design (human anatomy; intended function – dining chair, office chair, deck chair, etc.);
 - * constraints of chair production (materials available, manufacturing methods, etc.);
- c) guide: set out the underlying principles and doctrines of the craft.

Its purpose should be to help the producers and users of chairs by:

- * saving them all the work of observing and analyzing for themselves;
- * coining a common language for use by chair makers, chair users and chair theorists;
- * setting tentative standards, providing some guidance as to what can reasonably be expected of a chair, depending on the intended function.

Only when they have done all this should chair theorists be allowed to indulge in cogitation about Plato's Ideal Chair and the 'chair *an sich*', and to ask difficult questions like 'Are chairs possible?', 'Is a chair still a chair, even when there's no one sitting there?', etc. Above all they should resist the urge to base their theories on the few chairs they happen to have sat on (or made!) themselves, or seen dotted around the university canteen.

Replace the word 'chair' by 'translation' and you can see what I think translation theory should be about. Roughly.

So you say that for the past few decades translation theory has been getting away from a prescriptive approach and has tried to describe, explain and understand what translators do actually do. Sounds interesting! But in the past two and a half decades I've spent working in the largest translation service in the world, there have been very few sightings of translation theorists of any stripe – prescriptive, descriptive or otherwise. Nor have our products or problems been deemed worthy of study. Translations of *Alice in Wonderland* are obviously so much more interesting than the multilingual legislation,

reports and correspondence that we churn out on an industrial scale to fuel international cooperation.

AC

Chair theory might also be interested in such themes as chairs and power (thrones...), chairs and communication (seating arrangements...), carpenters' decision-making processes, the relation between chairs and other furniture, how chairs age, when they become outdated and need replacing...

Translation theory has been interested in corresponding matters, and has in fact dealt with all your required topics. It has done a lot of observing – your category (a) – although most of this work has been on literary translation, true. This focus has been partly for practical reasons: there are lots of literary translations to observe, especially if you also happen to be interested in cultural history, and a lot of this translation-theoretical work has been in the tradition of comparative literature and cultural studies. Literary translation has traditionally had a high status, after all: such texts are seen as Culturally Important.

But in recent years there have also been many publications on technical translation, scientific translation, and what some people call 'pragmatic translation' – i.e. looking at non-literary texts (such as those you deal with). Some of this research comes out of text linguistics and genre studies. Typical topics might be: characteristic problems in translating machine operation instructions, tourist brochures, legislative texts, recipes, academic abstracts, etc.

Your categories (b) and (c) have also received some attention, although opinions would be divided over the appropriateness of talking about guidelines and 'doctrines' here, as if the job of the theory was to advise people what to do. This approach has perhaps gone furthest in Bible translation, where there is a long tradition of guidelines and principles expressly designed to help future Bible translators. This seems to be the approach that you would like to see more of. Many scholars would prefer to think in terms of hypotheses or generalizations or probabilistic laws, based on observation.

EW

Most translators, on the other hand, would be happy to have some concrete advice and guidelines, even doctrines, as long as they are practical and realistic. It is regrettable that 'prescription' has been out of fashion in linguistics for the past few decades – the same decades that have seen the emergence of the would-be professional translator. Surely no profession can be based solely on observation and imitation of what other professionals do, plus a few probabilistic laws? Imagine a doctor or nurse newly arrived in a remote African country, faced by a malaria epidemic. What would they do? Just ask around and copy the others? Would they be expected to rediscover the aeti-

ology of malaria, study the life cycle of the mosquito, and find a cure, without any guidance from their own theoretical training or from the research scientists and epidemiologists back home? These are all rhetorical questions, of course.

How can we translators lay claim to professional status, and assert ourselves as professionals rather than charlatans, if our research scientists fight shy of real-world problems and the advice that would help us to solve them? There seem to be no clear guidelines on how to select people for translator training, how to assess a translation, how to specify the purpose of a translation, how to measure and thus ensure reader satisfaction.

Translation theorists haven't even coined a comprehensible language in which we can talk about translation (surely the first step in moving up from faith-healer status?). Admittedly we do at least have two words, **translation** and **interpreting** to refer to the separate activities of translating the written word and interpreting the spoken word. But that's about as far as it goes. 'Translation' is a blanket term, used to refer to a huge range of activities and products. At the bottom end of the range, we find the tourist in a Greek supermarket, wondering whether that packet of white powder is sugar, salt, detergent or rat poison. When someone tells them which it is, that's a translation. And a very useful one too. Who wants to put rat poison in their coffee? At the top end of the range, we have Ted Hughes' translation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. There are many different products between the two extremes of 'Is-it-rat-poison?-translation' and 'Ted-Hughes-translation', and people often argue about them, because they expected one sort but were given the other. It has just happened again, here at the wordface. I spent part of this morning reading an exchange of e-mails with the Irish Association for Applied Linguistics about how to translate the European Year of Languages slogan *Languages open doors* into Irish. A literal translation would, it seems, be ugly and meaningless. Finally my colleague Donal Gordon came up with the wonderfully poetic translation *Teangacha – as ballaí fuinneoga* which means something like 'languages make walls into windows'. No sooner had I distributed the final list of translations than my Irish secretary Iseult popped her head round the door to say "Well, that's not a very good translation – *fuinneoga* means 'windows', not 'doors'..." Donal had provided a 'Ted-Hughes' translation; Iseult was looking for 'Is-it-rat-poison?'.

Couldn't translation theorists help us by defining some terms, so we can differentiate?

AC

You have a point, yes. In my view, one of the best contributions translation scholars can make to the work of professional translators is to study and then demonstrate the links between different translation decisions or strategies and the effects that such decisions or strategies seem to have on clients and readers and cultures, both in the past and in the present, under given conditions. Such corroborated correlations between cause and effect should be part

of a professional's awareness: if I do this (e.g. if I correct this error in the source text), it is likely that, under these particular conditions/with this text-type etc., the effect will be such and such.

In the past, such correlations were simply assumed to justify prescriptive statements such as 'do this, don't do that'; it was believed that if such prescriptions were followed, good effects would ensue; if they were not followed, bad effects would ensue. In this way, translation norms arose, to be passed on as rules of thumb from teacher to apprentice, and from one translator to another. Such norms were usually assumed to be universal truths, but they were unfortunately often contradictory. Always translate as closely as you can to the original; always avoid translating too closely, word for word. Translate verse as verse; translate verse as prose. Your primary loyalty is to the original author; your primary loyalty is to your reader.

From the contemporary, empirical point of view, the problem with such prescriptive statements was that they were rarely explicitly tested. They often seemed to be no more than the projections of a particular scholar's beliefs, or a particular translator's opinions, generalized from a particular kind of translation. If we can formulate such prescriptions as explicit hypotheses and then test them properly, we may get closer to being useful in the way you envisage... We might even be able to find new hypotheses of cause and effect that had not been thought of before.

It is surely naive to expect that there should be somewhere, in some theorist's head, some kind of blanket advice that has universal applicability and just needs to be inscribed on a suitable stone tablet for instant use.

EW

It would certainly be naive to expect to find a single solution 'in some theorist's head'. For a start, there is often no single solution, but there might be a range of standard solutions. Secondly, I don't expect to find it in one person's head. In my view, 'theory' should not be just some individual's brain-child: it should arise from observing practice, analyzing practice, and drawing a few general conclusions to provide guidance. These conclusions should naturally be tested in practice. Leading to better guidance: better prescription based on better description.

Current medical practice for the treatment of malaria was not the brain-child of a single theorist; it resulted from years of observation and analysis, the identification of different types of malaria and corresponding treatments, practical clinical trials, constantly improved and adapted to circumstances (Hippocrates' advice to 'retire to the hills' not being practicable in all cases)... I'm sure all doctors and nurses know the standard ways of treating malaria, or could find out pretty fast – just as all lawyers know how to draw up different kinds of contract, and all architects know about different sorts of buildings. That's why we generally respect and depend on doctors, nurses, lawyers and architects. All I want is to put translators up there with respected professionals.

AC

Agreed. The big problem, I think, is that people have different opinions about what kind of a discipline translation theory actually is. Does it belong to the humanities? If so, we are presumably looking for greater understanding of what translations essentially are, the role translators play and have played in society and in intercultural relations, how some translated texts have enriched whole cultures, and how translators have sometimes been exploited for political and ideological ends, etc.

Or is it more like a natural science? If so, we are looking for explanations of various kinds, just as we might seek explanations of any other natural phenomena. Why do translators tend to write more explicitly than their source-text authors? Why do translations often seem instantly recognizable as translations – how do they differ from parallel texts (non-translated texts of the same type)? Why do certain kinds of translations show more evidence of interference than other kinds? On what criteria do translators make their decisions? Even: why do clients often give translation jobs to non-native speakers of the target language? We might also be interested in studying the effects that translations have on their readers, and on the target cultures more generally. How do readers actually react to translations? How do they judge the acceptability of a translation? How can we measure translation effects? What do we discover if we compare client reactions with reader reactions?

Or is translation theory rather an applied science, with a research programme that starts with the need to solve particular problems or improve existing solutions? Professional translators seem to expect that this is what the theory should be doing. Well, general linguistic theory has helped to produce computer aids to translation – text-processing programs, spellcheckers, automatic dictionaries and thesauruses, termbases, translation management and workbench systems, computerized collections of parallel texts and previously translated texts, and then of course there is machine translation itself.

Apart from these concrete tools, what translation theory can also do is offer a set of conceptual tools. These can be thought of as aids for mental problem-solving, or for the development of the translator's self-image, or even for the enhancement of job satisfaction. At least, I hereby make this claim! When we get to the end of this book, you can decide whether the claim is justified or not...

EW

The conceptual tools sound interesting. Can they be used for problem-solving in the act of translation – to provide a toolkit of theoretical concepts that translators should bring to their job? For example, to solve the problem of dull, unreadable translation of the type shown below? This is a trap that many translators fall into with routine texts which they think 'don't matter'. Yet I