Introduction

Before developing the main argument of this essay, two preliminary remarks are in order. First, what follows represents a working hypothesis rather than a set of established truths. It deals with questions (as opposed to answers), which emerge on the basis of a number of assumptions that are discussed within the fields of the philosophy of science and logics. And secondly, these questions fit into a wider on-going research project that concerns a descriptive study of cultural adaptation. That is why this essay focuses on film adaptation studies. However, the epistemological issues that follow may well apply to other disciplines in the humanities that aim at a descriptive approach. To illustrate this point, occasionally, examples are taken from translation studies and from genre studies. Hence, before launching the main argument, the following section exposes first the basic features of what hereafter is understood to be a “descriptive” approach.

Descriptive adaptation studies

The denomination “descriptive adaptation studies” (henceforth DAS) refers to a set of (at first mostly literary) translation studies that were initially called the “polysystem” (henceforth PS) studies of translation. The PS approach was originally developed in the late 1960s by two Israeli scholars, Itamar Even-Zohar and Gideon Toury. However, in 1995, Gideon Toury and his followers replaced the PS label with the denomination “Descriptive translation studies” (henceforth DTS).\textsuperscript{1} In the early 1990s and afterwards, scholars have suggested proposals to adapt the PS approach to the study of (mostly film) adaptations.\textsuperscript{2} In a recent study called *Descriptive Adaptation Studies. Epistemological and Methodological Issues*, I raise the question if and how a parallel DAS approach would be possible and useful.\textsuperscript{3}

For the purpose of this essay, it is important to understand the label “descriptive” as


a multi-layered concept that both includes and excludes a number of features. Needless to say, the inclusion or exclusion of some of these features remains controversial within the philosophy of science, and it requires attention that transcends the limits of this essay. Consequently, for practical purposes, what follows only scratches the surface of some very complex questions that emerge with respect to a “descriptive studies” debate. First of all, a descriptive approach attempts to state facts and to eschew value judgments. This raises the question if and how description can be distinguished from prescription. One may say that statements of fact trigger a true/false mode of interpretation: they raise the question of whether the content of the statement is true or false. A statement of fact is said to be true if its content matches the world as it is. Such claims fit into what philosophers call “correspondence theories of truth” because some kind of correspondence is assumed to exist between the content of a statement and the reality it refers to. If the content of a statement of fact does not fit reality, the proposition is said to be false. A statement of value, on the other hand, can neither be true nor false because it does not refer to a specific property of a phenomenon, but rather to a predicate assigned by a subject to the said property of a phenomenon. The expression of a value relies, therefore, rather on what pragmatists call “sincerity” or “felicity”. Addressers may be sincere or not when describing their (inter)personal values, and addressees may agree or disagree with the evaluation. To illustrate the distinction, one may consider the following two statements:

(1) “This screenplay was written by Billy Wilder and I.A.L. Diamond.”

(2) “I like this movie.”

According to this view, statement (1) states a fact, the truth-value of which may be checked through what researchers call mind-independent means. Statement (2) expresses a value. The question whether this statement is true or false does not apply. One may agree or disagree though with this statement.

Furthermore, description is understood as observer-dependent – a misunderstanding that occasionally persists among critics, as if description could be value-free and objective. If description is understood as empirical or observation based, this implies that it is induction-based rather than deduction-based. From this follows that description depends on corpus-based research. It begs the question whether the concept of “knowledge” should be restricted to sensory perception or not. Finally, a descriptive approach must deal with the question if and how one can distinguish description from explanation, and how description, if it is restricted to sensory observation, relates to prediction, which refers to phenomena that cannot be observed because they have not happened yet.

It is within this wider epistemological framework that the question emerges as to “if

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6 Even though it is generally accepted that induction is impossible without deduction, this does not imply that one cannot consider the latter separately from the former. From a cognitive perspective, one could even argue that it is physically impossible to think consciously of both induction and deduction at the same time, even if both processes would occur simultaneously.
and how” it is possible to distinguish between descriptive and prescriptive definitions, or to put it differently, if and how it is possible to select and define an object of study in a descriptive rather than in a prescriptive way.

**Common language use – common problems**

A common way to ask for a definition in both everyday language and academic discourse consists in using the “What is”-formed question: What is an adaptation? What is translation? What is a genre? What is *film noir*? And an equally common way to answer such questions consists in providing an “X is”-formed definition. If within a descriptive approach definitions are meant to be descriptive, “X is”-formed definitions should produce statements that are true or that are at least truth evaluable. However, when looking at some common definitions, the assessment of their truth-value turns out to be problematic. Below are a few examples:

1. “*Film noir* is not a genre”\(^7\) vs. “*film noir* is a genre”\(^8\)
2. “*Boomerang* (1947) is a *film noir*”\(^9\) vs. “*Boomerang* (1947) is not a *film noir*”\(^10\)
3. “We experience adaptation (as adaptations) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation”.
4. The vast majority of adaptations are presented and/or perceived as originals.\(^12\)

If definitions blatantly contradict each other, how is one to determine which statement is true and which is false? The definitions show that confusion emerges when different phenomena are labelled the same way and/or when similar phenomena are named differently.

**Previous suggestions**

How then to clarify the definitional issues that various disciplines within the humanities struggle with? The following discussion hinges on two attempts made previously to amend some of these problems: one concerns genre studies, the other adaptation studies. I begin by referring to Tzvetan Todorov’s proposal to distinguish between theoretical and historical genres,\(^13\) and my own proposal to define “adaptation” in a “functional” way.\(^14\)

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\(^9\) Durgnat, "Paint It Black".


\(^12\) I add this definition for the sake of argument. Support for this definition can be found in many adaptation studies. See for example, Cattrysse, “L’Adaptation filmique de textes littéraires”.


\(^14\) Cattrysse, “L’Adaptation filmique de textes littéraires”.

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I choose these two proposals among many others because they are firstly related to suggestions made by earlier theories of definition. Secondly, Todorov’s proposal and my own may find further improvements in these earlier proposals. I shall return to both issues below.

**Todorov’s theoretical and historical genres**

In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Todorov proposes to distinguish between what he calls “theoretical” genres and “historical” genres. The latter are the result of historical observation. They represent genre types as found and accepted by the culture and laymen. By contrast, theoretical genres are deduced from a theory (of literature). They represent genre types as created or defined by theoreticians. Todorov’s proposals have been criticised on more than one account. I briefly mention two as explained in Altman’s *Film/Genre*. Firstly,

this opposition begs the question of the critic’s position within the culture: all historical genres were once theoretical genres, defined by critics of a former culture according to a theory then current.\(^\text{15}\)

Thus, the Fantastic could have been labelled a “theoretical” genre when it emerged in 1970, following on French structuralist theories, but it may be seen now – almost half a century later – as a historical one. Altman’s criticism suggests that my theoretical genre may be your historical genre, and vice versa (see below).

A second recurring criticism applies to Todorov’s notion of “historical” genre. Joining previous suggestions within genre studies, \(^\text{16}\) Todorov’s definition of “historical genre” shifts focus from the text towards the interaction between a text and its receiver:

> This emphasis on reading patterns risks provoking a “sorcerer’s apprentice” effect: once the magic word “reader” is pronounced, there might be no controlling the ultimate effect. Once labelled by writers and critics, genres might well fall into the hands of untutored readers or out-of-control audiences.\(^\text{17}\)

However, Altman somewhat ironically urges his readership to rest assured:

> Thus far this threat has not materialized. On the contrary, the most important English-language genre theory of the last two decades, Alastair Fowler’s *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (1982), resolutely returns to classical emphasis on textual structure within traditional genres and canons of texts, instead of releasing responsibility for genres to readers and audiences. ‘The kinds, however elusive, exist,’ says Fowler (p.73), permanently closing off the debate.\(^\text{18}\)

Altman’s continued study of genres proves that the debate is far from closed. However, I quote these reactions to Todorov’s suggestions more extensively because similar proposals were made within the field of PS adaptation studies, and even though adaptation scholars have generally ignored these proposals, it is not hard to imagine that some adaptation scholars may have resented a PS functional definition of the object of study for the same reasons.

**The PS functional definition of translation/adaptation**

\(^\text{15}\) Altman, *Film/Genre*, 9.


\(^\text{17}\) Altman, *Film/Genre*, 11.

A PS study of adaptations proposes what it calls a functional definition of the object of study. It redefines the common word “to function” as “to be presented and/or to be perceived as [...] within a specific time-space context”. Hence, a functional definition of a “film noir,” a “western” or an “adaptation” is “any phenomenon that functions as such,” or “any phenomenon that is presented and/or perceived as a film noir, a western, or an adaptation within a specific time-space context.”

A PS “functional” definition of the object of study presents a number of advantages and disadvantages. Both remain under-investigated to this day. On the positive side, a functional definition of the object of study offers a flexible and dynamic method to describe how phenomena have been presented and perceived in one or more specific historical contexts. For example, the phenomena that functioned as “film noir” in France in the summer of 1946 are very different from those that functioned as “film noir” in France ten years later. In 1946, French film critic Nino Frank discussed five “new,” recently-released American movies, whereas in 1955, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton’s A Panorama of American Film Noir presented more than four hundred American movies, some of which had been released more than a decade before. Different phenomena may thus “function” in the same way. A functional approach allows for these different phenomena to be studied too.

However, a PS functional definition also holds limitations. If different phenomena may function in the same way, similar phenomena may function in different ways. Since a functional definition of the object of study limits its focus to what X is taken for, irrespective of what X actually is, these phenomena escape the scope of a functional definition. For example, phenomena that are similar to (functional) adaptations, but do not function as such cannot be recognized as adaptations within an approach that limits its scope to phenomena that “function” as adaptations. For the same reason, a functional definition of the object of study cannot deal in a consistent way with phenomena that have been called “pseudo-adaptation” or “pseudo-original”. If one defines “adaptation” as any phenomenon that functions as an adaptation, a phenomenon that functions as an adaptation cannot be called a “pseudo-adaptation.” To call it a “pseudo-adaptation” is to use one name in reference with two different (types of) phenomena: on the one hand, there are phenomena that “function” as adaptations, and on the other hand, there are phenomena that are said “to be” adaptations (or pseudo-adaptations). While the former definition includes both object-immanent features and perceiver interaction, the latter focuses on object-immanent features only.

Theories of definition: a few conceptual tools

19 Gideon Toury, In Search of the Theory of Translation (Tel Aviv: Porter Institute, 1980), 83; Cattrysse, “L’Adaptation filmique de textes littéraires”, 110.
21 See for example, Borde and Chaumeton, A Panorama of American Film Noir.
22 Pseudo-translations or pseudo-adaptations represent phenomena that are presented and/or perceived as the translation or adaptation of X where afterwards X is found out not to exist. See Cattrysse, ‘L’Adaptation filmique de textes littéraires. Le film noir américain’; Cattrysse, Pour une théorie de l’adaptation filmique.
I have discussed the problem of a PS functional definition of the object of study on previous occasions, but it is only recently that I came across the writings of philosophers like Richard Robinson, Norman Swartz, and Anil Gupta, and so discovered the existence of a sub-discipline of the philosophy of science called "theories of definition". Even though these theories go back to ancient Greek thinkers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, scholars within translation and adaptation studies — and perhaps also in genre studies — seem to have been unaware of this work. The following suggests that a DAS approach could benefit from certain analytical concepts designed by these theories of definition. To illustrate this point, I discuss two distinctions that are commonly known to theorists of definition: the distinction between the real and the nominal aspect of definitions, and the distinction between stipulative and lexical definitions.

The real and nominal aspect of definitions

For the sake of simplicity, I suggest that the word “definition” be understood as a practice or product that describes and/or explains the meaning of something. What needs defining, theorists call the *definiendum*, and what defines it the *definiens*. For example, Gérard Genette’s term “heterodiegetic narrator” could be a *definiendum*, and one *definiens* could be “a narrative instance that is not a character in the story”. To define things, people commonly use words, but theories of definition study also other types of definitions, such as ostensive definitions for example, as when instead of explaining verbally what the word “dog” means, I point to a dog walking across the street. However in this essay my primary concern goes to verbal definitions, which may consist of one single word, multiple words, or complete sentences. In the fields that concern us here, “translation”, “adaptation”, “film noir” or “film genre” are such words, that is *definienda* the study of which, I argue, could benefit from the said theories of definition.

When using words, one can say that, on the one hand, they refer to more or less specific phenomena in the world, while on the other, words also refer to themselves and to language use. In common parlance, we distinguish between the sense of a word and its reference. Following this, one may study at least two different aspects of a definition: a “real” aspect and a “nominal” aspect. To be honest, I slightly adapt here a distinction that was suggested already by John Locke. Following Hilary Putnam’s terminology, I consider the real-nominal opposition as a distinction, which is understood as perceptual, rather than as a dichotomy, which is understood as metaphysical. That is why instead of speaking of

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25 Theories of definition are not mentioned by either Todorov or Altman.
“real” and “nominal” definitions, I suggest distinguishing between the real and the nominal “aspect” of definitions. Whereas the “real” aspect of a definition refers to the whatness of the denoted thing – quid reis or de re – the “nominal” aspect concerns the whatness of the meaning assigned to the words – quid nominis or de dicto. Put differently, a de re interpretation of a definition looks at phenomena as they exist independently of their naming; a de dicto interpretation tries to gain a clearer view of the essential semantic features of the word(s) that were used.\(^\text{30}\) When definitions consist of sentences, philosophers debate a similar, even though controversial distinction between the truth-value of “analytic” and “synthetic” propositions. “Analytic” propositions are said to be true by virtue of their meaning, while “synthetic” propositions are meant to be true by how their meaning relates to the world.\(^\text{31}\) Sentence (1) offers an example of an analytic proposition while sentence (2) presents an example of a synthetic proposition.

(1) All bachelors are unmarried.

(2) All bachelors are unhappy.

 Whereas the truth-value of the first proposition can be established \(a\) \(priori\) i.e. before any experience, on the basis of the tautological or overlapping semantics of the words “bachelor” and “unmarried”, one can only establish the truth-value of the second proposition \(ex\) \(post\) \(facto\), i.e. after the experience confirming or disconfirming that bachelors are indeed unhappy. The relevance of the latter observations will become clear below, as I apply these and following definitional concepts to the study of (film) adaptations, and the definition of *film noir* and film genres more in general.

**Stipulative and lexical definitions**

As stated above, theorists distinguish between different types of definitions. However I argue that two types of definitions in particular could be of use here: “stipulative” and “lexical” definitions. “Stipulative” definitions decree or specify how a user is going to use a term X. A stipulative definition may deviate from or be opposed to a more common usage of the term. “Lexical” definitions report on “the actual ways in which some actual word has been used by some actual persons.”\(^\text{32}\) That is why they are also called “reportive” or “reportative” definitions.\(^\text{33}\) Hence, whereas a stipulative definition of X describes or should I say prescribes \(a\) \(priori\) a number of features a phenomenon should display in order for that phenomenon to qualify as X, a lexical definition investigates the word use first in an empirical way in order to describe it \(a\) \(posteriori\). Whereas a stipulative definition is stipulated at the subject level of the analyst, a lexical definition is observed and studied on the level of the object of study. Finally, whereas stipulative definitions are necessarily synchronic because they must be valid for each and every actual user in one actual \(ad\) \(hoc\) time-space communicational context, lexical definitions may be studied both in a synchronic

\(^{30}\) Gupta, ‘Definitions’, np.


\(^{32}\) Robinson, Definition, 35.

\(^{33}\) Swartz, ‘Definitions, Dictionaries and Meanings’, np.
and in a diachronic way.

**Definitional problems**

How may these definitional tools be relevant to film or cultural adaptation studies? This section points first to some problems: adaptation commentators commonly use “X is”-formed definitions. Based on the above discussion, I argue that they are semantically confusing and epistemologically invalid.

**Semantic confusion**

“X is”-formed definitions are semantically confusing because they do not specify whether they should be interpreted *de re* or *de dicto*. Moreover, “X is”-formed definitions misleadingly suggest that the word is the thing and that it presents the thing in a perspective-less way. The use of the ontological verb “to be” (or an equivalent) makes it impossible for a definition to be used as either a stipulative or a lexical one. Hence, a more careful answer to questions such as “What is adaptation?” or “What is *film noir*?” may be to say that they are words. This kind of answer makes it possible to apply the definitional distinctions explained above. One may consider the semantics of words on the one hand (*de dicto*), and referenced practices and products on the other (*de re*). Both words and word use on the one hand, and practices and products on the other, may change over time and in space; and so may their semantic and referential relationships. Furthermore, if concepts are explicitly posited as words, I can specify how I am going to use that word in one particular time-space context; for instance, in a stipulative way or in a lexical way. Within adaptation studies certain commentators have claimed that adaptation is impossible while others have argued that it is ubiquitous. As indicated above, within genre studies some critics have asserted that *Boomerang* (1947) is a *film noir*, while others have claimed the opposite. An explicitation of the aforesaid definitional concepts may help to explain this paradox. These semantic nuances involve epistemological consequences, which highlight their relevance. These epistemological consequences explain why “X is”-formed definitions may present problems of logical validity.

**Logical validity**

The distinction between the nominal and the real aspects of words, and the one between a stipulative and a lexical definition, refer to the well-known epistemological distinction between description and prescription. Fig. 1 summarizes some of the basic features that are associated with both approaches (see also above). To consider the real aspect of word usage, i.e. its relation with the world, and to study a lexical definition is to focus on description rather than prescription. Conversely, to consider the nominal aspect of a definition and to work with a stipulative definition is to focus on prescription rather than description. Whereas the former practice is induction-based, the latter is deduction-based.

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Induction requires words to fit the world, while deduction requires the world to fit the words. It follows that the choice for a descriptive, i.e. more induction-based definition as opposed to a prescriptive, i.e., more deduction-based definition, carries implications with respect to the need, or not, for research and generalizations to be based on high quality sets of occurrences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Real aspect – lexical definition</th>
<th>Nominal aspect – stipulative definition</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Prescription</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction-based: describes what is</td>
<td>Deduction-based: prescribes what should be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corpus based research dependent</td>
<td>Not corpus based research dependent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth-value relevant: words fit the world</td>
<td>Truth-value irrelevant: world fits the words</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1

Considering the real aspect of word usage refers to the (features of the) phenomena it names, and a study of a lexical definition concerns the historical word usage of a specific set of users in one or more particular time-space contexts. In both cases, words as used by the analyst (= subject level) must fit the world (= object level), which is why they require a pre-established corpus. Conversely, considering the nominal aspect of word usage or a stipulative definition calls for phenomena to comply with the pre-defined features. Ergo: no pre-established corpus is needed. Finally, from this follows that descriptive definitions should be true or their truth-value should be verifiable, whereas with respect to prescriptive definitions, the question about their truth-value is irrelevant. Hence, to the extent that “X is”-formed definitions do not specify whether they concern the real or the nominal aspect of the word X, and to the extent also that the use of the ontological verb “to be” (or an equivalent) prevents them from representing a stipulative or a lexical definition, “X is”-formed definitions are not clear about the epistemological implications (as distinguished in Fig. 1) they involve. “X is”-formed definitions do not show whether they aim at description or at prescription, whether they describe what things are or prescribe rather what things should be. From this follows that “X is”-formed definitions are unclear about whether they are rather induction-based and thus corpus based research dependent or rather deduction-based, and thus corpus based research independent.

If “X is”-formed definitions are meant to be descriptive, they need to fulfil the requirements of the features mentioned in the left column of Fig. 1. This means int. al. that they are corpus-based research dependent. However, the colloquial “What is”-formed question or “X is”-formed definition generally claims to apply to all past, present and future occurrences of a category. For example, an “adaptation is X”-type of definition pretends to grasp the features of all past, present and future adaptations. Since that is impossible, it inevitably triggers the inductive fallacy of the faulty generalization. Karl Popper’s warning comes to mind: “No matter how many instances of white swans we have observed, this does not justify the conclusion that all swans are white”. 35 From this follows that non corpus

based research supported generalizations about what “adaptation-in-general” is or does, or what adaptation theory does or does not do – especially if the concept is used in the singular, as if there existed one universal and homogeneous set of thoughts about adaptation – or what “we” adaptation scholars all over the world do or do not do, are premature to say the least. Yet, this type of statements is common practice within film adaptation studies, if not elsewhere. Here are a few examples:

- What adaptation is: see, for instance, Linda Hutcheon who realizes that a definition is difficult, but still spends a whole chapter trying to determine what “is” an adaptation.36

No coherent corpus is mentioned. A similar problem emerges when critics propose once-and-for-all classifications of types of adaptations. See, for instance, Geoffrey Wagner’s fidelity-based distinction between what he calls “transposition,” “commentary” and “analogue.”37

- What adaptation does: see, for instance, adaptation critic Robert Stam, who claims that “often [sic] we find a kind of condensation of characters”,38 or Julie Sanders, who signals that “adaptation is frequently [sic] involved in offering commentary on a source text.”39 Neither critic cares to specify what particular adaptations they are referring to exactly.

- What adaptation theory is: see for example, James Naremore, who notices that “most writing on adaptation as translation […] betrays…,” or Thomas Leitch, who claims that “much of the literature on adaptation has concentrated on…,”40 or “adaptation theory tends to assume….”41 etc. His readership is assumed to imagine a commonly understood notion of “most writing,” “adaptation theory,” etc. No corpus-based research is mentioned.

- What “we” adaptation scholars do: The practice referred to here consists in addressing the reader of an essay or a monograph with the first person plural “we.” Again, instead of performing long and tedious audience research, this “we” quickly assumes one global addressee who is assumed to hold the same personal values as the addressee. See, for example, adaptation scholar Sarah Cardwell, who ponders an imaginary documentary on the life of Elizabeth I: “Would we [sic] consider this documentary an adaptation? Surely the answer is no.”42 See also Hutcheon, who talks about “when most of us consider the move…,”43 or Robert Stam stating that “we in no way abandon our rights or responsibilities to make judgments about the value of specific film adaptations.”44 Who is this “we”? The global community of adaptation scholars or some “mutual citation club of

36 Hutcheon, A Theory of Adaptation, 33ff.
40 Naremore, Film Adaptation; Thomas Leitch, Film Adaptation and Its Discontents. From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2007), 71.
41 Ibid., 120.
42 Cardwell, Adaptation Revisited, 16.
43 Hutcheon, A Theory of Adaptation, 39.
44 Stam, ”Beyond Fidelity”, 75.
like-knows-like”? Interestingly, media scholar Robert C. Allen asks the same question when discussing “the purposive collapsing of addresser, characterized addressee and implied viewer” in television news programs, TV shows, games shows and talk shows. Of all possible commentators, Allen quotes none other than . . . Robert Stam, who seems very familiar with this rhetorical device and labels it “the regime of the fictive We”:

> Television news [...] claims to speak for us, and often does, but just as often it deprives us of the right to speak by deluding us into thinking that its discourse is our own.\(^46\)

Similarly, sweeping generalizations about unspecified adaptation theories, adaptation theorists and “we’s” try to delude actual readers into thinking that the discourse is their own, and that its claims are true. The above suggests that only statements referring to well-defined corpora of theories, theorists and “we’s” can claim truth evaluability.

Problems get worse if one tries to cover the trans-historical essence of too many, too disparate and too variable phenomena into one single, synchronic, once-and-for-all type of definition or name. As the French say, “Qui trop embrasse, mal étreint.”\(^47\) Such a definition is bound to become unworkable. A commonly known example of this practice concerns the use of “umbrella words.” The term “umbrella word” refers to words that are commonly used to refer to very different things. They explain the contradictory statements mentioned above. Words like “translation” or “adaptation” represent such umbrella terms. Within the field of descriptive translation studies, scholars have fairly soon discovered that the word “translation” refers to too many, different phenomena to be useful. Trying to come up with once-and-for-all types of definitions encompassing all past, present and future translations and processes of translating showed that such definitions had to be so inclusive as to be no longer exclusive. PS translation scholars Toury and Lambert ultimately conclude that:

> Translated texts as well as [...] translation processes vary in terms of culture, language, historical period, source- and target-text types and functions, mode of transfer, communication channel and many other factors. There is hardly any single feature which is sine qua non for rendering products, and/or the processes which yield them, as translational entities.\(^48\)

That is also why in his updated *Descriptive Translation Studies*, Toury repeats that:

> Any a priori definition, especially if couched in essentialist terms, allegedly specifying what is “inherently” translational, would involve an untenable pretense of fixing once-and-for-all the boundaries of an object which is characterized by its very variability.\(^49\)

Now, many years later, adaptation critics have also come to realize that the word “adaptation” refers to many different phenomena, and that to label all these phenomena with one name is problematic.\(^50\)


\(^{46}\) Quoted in ibid.

\(^{47}\) He/she who grasps at too much loses all.


\(^{49}\) Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies*, 31. Bold in original.

\(^{50}\) See for example, Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited*, 9; Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 15; Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 19; Mike Ingham, "The Mind’s Ear: Imagination, Emotions and Ideas in the
In conclusion, to the extent that “X is”-formed definitions are not supported by an explicit and representative corpus of occurrences, their truth-value cannot be verified or falsified. To the extent that they are supported only by a random set of occurrences or by one that was compiled rather ad hoc and ex post facto, for example on the basis of their representativeness to illustrate a previously made claim, over-generalisations will be easy to disconfirm simply by assembling a different set of occurrences. For example, for each of the abovementioned statements about what adaptations are or do, or what adaptation theory does, etc., a statement claiming the opposite can be made, based simply on the assembly of a different set of occurrences. Finally, “X is”-formed definitions are also problematic when understood to be prescriptive. The use of the ontological verb “to be” is misleading because it suggests statements of fact the truth-value of which would be relevant.

**Suggesting solutions?**

In a backwards way, the preceding suggests that the above-mentioned definitional tools could improve discourse on adaptations, translations – and perhaps other objects of study – in terms of both semantic precision and logical validity. This section examines some possibilities.

*The real aspect of a definition: corpus-based research*

![Image](image.jpg)

Fig. 2

It was suggested in Fig. 1 that adopting a descriptive approach implies looking at the real aspect of the definition. If it is impossible to study all past, present and future adaptations before defining and describing them, there is a simple alternative: to study only

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a few of them first. In other words, a solution to the aforementioned inductive problem consists in establishing a well defined, precise corpus of occurrences first and to clarify that conclusions pertain to the investigated corpus and to that corpus alone. Critics may agree or disagree with the way sets of occurrences were assembled, but they can verify or falsify every claim that was made with respect to the explicitated corpora. In other words, explicating a corpus does not guarantee that statements are true, but it assures scholars that statements are truth evaluable. Further research may investigate other corpora and confirm or disconfirm the findings that were made. Corpus-based research does not imply objectivity. On the contrary, it acknowledges the relevance of perspective. Sceptics who claim that the explicitation of any corpus always colours research results state the obvious. This is only a problem to whoever believes it is possible to define an object of study from outside any point of view. Explicitating the perspective of a study instead of hiding it, as “X is”-formed definitions tend to do, makes it possible to check for example whether divergent observations can be ascribed to the different analytical perspective that was adopted, or whether the divergence should be attributed to a mistake. In the first case, the divergent observations may reveal different but accurate and complementary aspects of reality; in the second case, the observations are conflicting instead of complementary, and at least one of the observations must be false. This distinction can easily be explained with the help of cartoonist W.E. Hill’s well-known 1915 drawing of “My Wife and My Mother-in-Law” [Fig. 2]. If person A sees a young girl in the drawing, and person B sees an old woman, the opposite views may be attributed to a different perspective. If person C however sees a pink elephant, this view will generally be accepted to be erroneous and person C will kindly be asked to go see a doctor.

PS translation studies has insisted since its beginnings on the importance of corpus-based research. Yet, it is only since the mid-1990s that the topic has received serious meta-theoretical attention in descriptive translation studies. To my knowledge, meta-theoretical reflection on how (film) adaptation studies could benefit from systematic corpus-based research has yet to start.

However, if the establishment of a limited corpus of occurrences saves Das from the inductive deadlock, that of never being able to study all past, present and future objects of study first, the very establishment of such a corpus immediately throws up another: if I want to study a film noir, or a translation, or an adaptation without an a priori description or definition of the object of study, how am I to recognize a phenomenon such as a film noir, a

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translation or an adaptation when I see one? This question turns the focus from the real aspect of a definition to its nominal aspect.

The nominal aspect of a definition: How to recognize the object of study?

Popper’s observation about the white swans signals thus another limitation of inductive logic. If I want to verify whether all swans are white, how am I to recognize a swan as a swan before defining and describing one in the first place? Rick Altman translates the question to his topic, which is genre studies.53 Translation scholar Gideon Toury on the other hand carefully avoids the problem when he speaks of the “representativeness of more systematically observed translational characteristics.”54 If I am looking for translational characteristics, how do I recognize characteristics as “being” translational? Similarly, when studying adaptations, how do I recognize a thing as an adaptation? I need to define first what I will be looking for, i.e., an adaptation, before being able to perceive it, assemble it, describe it, and explain it. Consequently, induction must be triggered by deduction, even though deduction may in its turn be induction-based. This reflection shifts the focus from the left column of Fig. 1 to the right column, looking int. al. at the nominal aspect of definitions. Perhaps stipulative and lexical definitions may help descriptive studies to escape from this definitional impasse.

Stipulative definitions

To the extent that a stipulative definition prescribes first the features a phenomenon should present, in order for that phenomenon to be considered, a stipulative definition cannot be corpus-dependent. In that sense, stipulative definitions solve the problem of exhaustive corpora of occurrences. Stipulative definitions solve at the same time the chicken-and-egg problem mentioned above because they deductively decree first what one is going to look for and study. Stipulative definitions may be narrow or wide. Both have advantages and disadvantages. A good example of a narrow stipulative definition of "adaptation" can be found in Irmela Schneider’s 1981 Der Verwandelte Text: Wege zu einer Theorie der Literaturverfilmung (Transforming the Text: Towards Another Theory of Screen Adaptation). In it, the author defines how she understands this concept:

[Film adaptation] is about the processing of a literary model in filmic images, whereby intentional analogies with the literary text can be observed, which precludes one from considering the literary model as a mere content provider. The process of film adaptation itself is understood as an aesthetic practice.55

Schneider’s definition is temptingly final and concrete. One may assume, indeed, that the more concrete a stipulative definition of X, the easier it will be to decide if a phenomenon

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53 Altman, Film/Genre, 6.
54 Toury, Descriptive Translation Studies, 1.
qualifies as X or not. However, Schneider’s definition is very restrictive. The author explicitly reduces the phenomenon of film adaptation to that of the Literary film with capital L. She even narrows the concept down to those adaptations which add aesthetic value to the literary source. Who is the judge of those aesthetic values remains to be seen. Schneider’s definition shows that the more restrictive a stipulative definition, the more exclusive it is. It may thus discard phenomena which, for various reasons, one could consider to be relevant to a study of adaptations.\(^{56}\) For example: What about adaptations which do not “intend” to be faithful, or do not add “aesthetic value”? And what about adaptations that are based on literary texts which are not judged to be canonical? Clearly, these questions do not represent a problem for Schneider because in her mind, these phenomena “are” not adaptations – Schneider labels them “Bebilderungen” or “illustrations”\(^ {57}\) – but other scholars have called and studied such phenomena as adaptations.\(^ {58}\) Hence, similarities on both the real level of properties and on the nominal level of predicates may argue for an inclusion of these phenomena into the field of adaptation studies.

If stipulative definitions are too exclusive, there is a simple way to correct that problem: to stipulate a wider definition of “translation” or “adaptation.” This is what Lambert and Robyns seem to suggest with respect to translation studies:

We may [...] define translation in the largest sense as migration-through-transformation of discursive elements (signs), a process during which they are interpreted (re-contextualized) according to different norms, codes, and models.\(^ {59}\)

Wide stipulative definitions such as this one have helped PS studies open up the scope of research and study phenomena that were excluded from both traditional translation and adaptation studies.\(^ {60}\) However, as the wider stipulative definition of Lambert and Robyns already suggests, such definitions run the risk of becoming too inclusive. Using Lambert and Robyns’ definition, everything may be seen as a translation. In the end, restrictive as well as wide stipulative definitions recall Wittgenstein’s experience with definitions:

It is not possible to spell out necessary and sufficient conditions for an activity to be a game [read: adaptation, translation, ...]. (...) One invariably finds an activity that one’s definition includes but that one would not want to count as a game, or an activity that the definition excludes but that one would want to count as a game.\(^ {61}\)

Stipulative definitions do have the advantage over “X is”-formed definitions that they allow to explicitate the judging subject (see above). However, rather than describing what a phenomenon actually is, stipulative definitions decree a priori what features a phenomenon should display in order for that phenomenon to qualify as, say, an adaptation. This raises the

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\(^{56}\) The notion of “relevance” remains a matter of contention. It is part of a wider debate about the descriptive vs. normative selection of the object of study. See Cattrysse, *Descriptive Adaptation Studies*, 334–35.

\(^ {57}\) Schneider, *Der Verwandelte Text*, 293.

\(^ {58}\) For references, see for example, Cattrysse, ‘L’Adaptation filmique de textes littéraires”, 3ff.

\(^ {59}\) Quoted in Patrick Cattrysse, “Audiovisual Translation and New Media”, in Robert Hodgson and Paul A. Soukup eds., *From One Medium to Another. Basic Issues for Communicating the Bible in New Media* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward and American Bible Society, 1997), 77.

\(^ {60}\) See for example, Cattrysse, “L’Adaptation filmique de textes littéraires”, 20; Cattrysse, “Film (Adaptation) as Translation: Some Methodological Proposals”, 60.

question how prescriptive definitions fit into a descriptive approach. Perhaps the study of lexical definitions allows for a more descriptive approach.

**Lexical definitions**

To study the lexical definition of a word is to empirically observe and describe its usage in one or more particular contexts. Consequently, unlike the use of stipulative definitions, the study of lexical definitions requires, again, the previous establishment of a quality corpus. In other words, instead of pretending to have studied all past, present and future uses of the word “adaptation,” one establishes first a limited but precise set of definitions and uses. The researcher describes how users 1, 2 and 3 have used the word X and what it has meant in contexts A, B and C. Such an approach is particularly useful when dealing with words that are very common, such as “film noir” or “western,” or umbrella words such as “translation” or “adaptation”; words which are not only used by a professional in-crowd but by “ordinary” people.

Furthermore, a study of the lexical definition of say “film noir,” “translation” or “adaptation” avoids the catch 22 problem mentioned above of how to recognize the object of study. When studying the lexical definition of “film noir,” or “translation,” or “adaptation,” the words simply appear as such in language use. Interestingly, lexical definitions may be studied in a synchronic and a diachronic way. For example, in a previous study, I examined the lexical definition of film noir as provided in eleven “relevant” filmographies published between 1940 and 1990. Filmographies were considered to be “relevant” if they presented one hundred or more film noir titles. In this way, a corpus of 604 movie titles was compiled. As indicated above, a diachronic study of the lexical definition of film noir may start with Nino Frank’s use of the term in 1946, referring to five specific titles, and move on from there to the historical use of the words "film noir" in other time-space contexts.

Does this mean that the study of lexical definitions offers the perfect solution to all problems? Unfortunately not. The reader will have surely noticed the similarity between the lexical definition on the one hand, and Todorov’s historical definition (as opposed to a theoretical definition) and my own 1990 PS functional definition of "adaptation" on the other. The lexical, historical or PS functional definition of the object of study focuses on how subjects within a specific historical context present and perceive phenomena, and name them. Hence, they all run into the problems mentioned above: the fact that similar phenomena may also function or be labelled in different ways. Any approach that limits its scope to one name or one label necessarily misses those similar phenomena that go under a different name. Furthermore, as indicated above, Altman explains that in the field of literary studies, academics were not happy to see the initiative of defining their object of study being taken away and left "into the hands of untutored readers or out-of-control audiences”. It is not hard to imagine normative adaptation critics feeling the same way. This may explain why a functional study of adaptation remains under-investigated until this day.

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62 Cattrysse, "L’Adaptation filmique de textes littéraires"; Cattrysse, *Pour une théorie de l’adaptation filmique*.
63 Altman, *Film/Genre*, 11.
Conclusions

It would seem that a more explicit distinction between the real and the nominal aspect of a definition, and the more explicit use of either lexical or stipulative definitions – instead of “X is”-formed definitions – could improve descriptive adaptation studies in terms of semantic precision and logical validity.

To distinguish between the real and the nominal aspect of a definition is easy. Already in his 1946 essay, An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation, philosopher Clarence Lewis suggested the use of quotation marks. Following this convention, a word used without quotation marks indicates its reference to the named thing and its properties. It involves the explicitation of a well-defined corpus. Conversely, the mention of a word with quotation marks refers to the word as a list of predicates and hints at a number of nominal options. Applying this convention in a consistent way could remove some of the semantic confusion that was mentioned above.

With respect to the distinction between stipulative and lexical definitions, it should be clear that a descriptive approach does not plead for the eradication of the former in favour of the latter. Rather, it argues for a clearer distinction between both types of definitions. Lexical definitions refer, in effect, to objects of study that are empirically investigated, described and if possible explained. However, in order to do just that, researchers need analytical tools and methods that meet the epistemic standards of descriptive research. Stipulative definitions constitute exactly the analytical tools that are necessary in a research program. They must be decreed and agreed upon in a synchronic way by a group of researchers assembled in one hic et nunc communicational situation. It is with the help of these stipulative definitions that researchers investigate objects of study and communicate the results of those investigations to each other. To maintain a clear distinction between a stipulative and a lexical definition is also easy. It only requires a certain discipline in language use. In order to show that a definition is meant as a stipulative one, one could write: “I define X (say "adaptation" or any other word) as Y.” In order to explain that a definition is studied as a lexical one, one could write: “A, B and C define X (say "adaptation" or any other word) as Y.” In this case, A, B and C represent the limited and explicitated corpus of definition users on the basis of which the study of lexical definitions is made. At all times, one would then avoid the colloquial writing: “X (say “adaptation” or any other word) is Y.”

The stipulative-lexical distinction also helps to amend Todorov’s distinction between a theoretical and a historical definition, and the aforesaid PS functional definition of the object of study. As stated above, Todorov’s theoretical definition resembles the stipulative definition if it is understood as created by the analyst before using it. Todorov’s historical definition corresponds to the lexical definition, the one an analyst finds as used by others within a specific time-space context. Confusion starts when the analyst finds definitions that were created by so-called theoreticians. In this respect, the stipulative-lexical distinction may

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64 Quoted in Swartz, “Definitions, Dictionaries and Meanings”, np.
65 That is why perhaps philosophers also call them "descriptive definitions". See for example, Gupta, ‘Definitions’, np.
help out: anyone can either define a word *a priori*, i.e., create one’s own definition before using it, or decide to adopt the definition as found in the usage by others. From this follows that definitions are not *per se* theoretical or historical, stipulative or lexical. The label depends on the point of view that is taken: whether the definition is created or stipulated at the subject level of the analyst, or whether it is found at the object level of the object of study. In that sense, your theoretical or stipulative definition may indeed be my historical or lexical definition, and vice versa. In other words, the referent of these concepts is deictic.66

Finally, the stipulative/lexical distinction helps to complement the blind spot mentioned with respect to the PS functional definition of the object of study. Whereas a functional definition seems to correspond to a lexical definition, the additional use of a stipulative definition helps to distinguish between what X is and what X is taken for. Hence, a community of adaptation scholars may *a priori* decide what they are going to consider as adaptations and adaptational relationships (as opposed to other types of relationships), and then move on to study what phenomena have been presented and/or perceived as such. The combined usage of stipulative and lexical definitions allows them to describe how and explain why different phenomena have functioned in similar ways, while similar phenomena have functioned in different ways.

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66 The word “deictic” comes from linguistics and refers to words like “here,” “now,” or personal pronouns like “I” or “you.” Their referent depends on who speaks where and when.