# Challenges of Measuring Domestication and Foreignization in Translations

Igor Kudashev
University of Tampere[1]

## Abstract

In the past decades, the concepts of domestication and foreignization coined by Lawrence Venuti have become convenient catchwords for describing two opposite strategies of translating. Domestication is typically associated with adapting the text for the reader and foreignization with staying close to the original. The concepts of domestication and foreignization have been used in empirical studies worldwide. In recent years, quantitative measuring of the degree of domestication and foreignization in translations has become a popular topic among both researchers and students of Translation Studies. In this article, I will present a short historical overview and the state-of-the-art of the concepts of domestication and foreignization, discuss a number of challenges related to the measuring of the degree of domestication and foreignization in translations, and provide some recommendations for avoiding common pitfalls. As the measuring of domestication and foreignization is closely related to the Retranslation Hypothesis, which has been proven insufficient in multiple empirical studies, I will also propose an alternative version of this hypothesis.

**Keywords:** domestication, foreignization, Retranslation Hypothesis

## 1 Introduction

The terms *domestication* and *foreignization* coined by Lawrence Venuti (1991, 1995, 1998) have been used extensively in Translation Studies since the 1990s. In recent years, quantitative measuring of the degree of domestication and foreignization in translations has become a popular topic among both researchers (e.g. Van Poucke 2012; Belikova 2010; Kuusi 2014) and students of Translation Studies (e.g. Vottonen 2014; Laine 2015). The measurements usually aim at testing the so-called Retranslation Hypothesis (see Berman 1990; Gambier 1994; Chesterman 2000) on new material.

Being vague and abstract from the very beginning, the concepts of domestication and foreignization have been interpreted very broadly and even in contradictory ways (Paloposki 2011; Koskinen 2012; Van Poucke 2012). Outi Paloposki (2011: 41)

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[1] Although this paper is based on a presentation given when the author was working at the University of Helsinki, the paper itself was written after the author had transferred to his current position at the University of Tampere.

rightfully warns that these concepts need to be treated with caution when applied in empirical studies. In this paper, I will describe the challenges that need to be taken into account when estimating the degree of domestication and foreignization in translations. As the measuring of domestication and foreignization is closely related to the Retranslation Hypothesis, which has been questioned in multiple empirical studies, I will also propose an alternative version of this hypothesis. Finally, conclusions will be drawn and recommendations made for cases in which measuring the degree of domestication and foreignization can be regarded as reasonable.

## 2 Conceptual predecessors of domestication and foreignization

In a sense, the opposition between domestication and foreignization is a specific variation of the eternal dilemma between "literal" and "free" translation. The latter issue has been an object of discussion throughout the known history of translation, starting from Cicero and Horatius (e.g. Munday 2008: 19).

Lawrence Venuti's interpretation of this juxtaposition is largely based on the legacy of German Romanticism, first of all such authors/scholars as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Wilhelm von Humboldt, who commented on their translation strategies. In particular, Venuti refers to Schleiermacher's famous essay on different methods of translation, "Über die Verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens" (Venuti 1995: 74–75). In this essay, Schleiermacher argues that only two options are available for a translator: either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him (Schleiermacher 1977: 74).

Concepts very similar to Venuti's domestication and foreignization were also used at the same time and even earlier by francophone scholars, in particular Antoine Berman (e.g. Berman 1990).

## 3 Domestication and foreignization in Lawrence Venuti's works

Venuti does not provide an explicit definition of the terms *domestication* and *foreignization* in his works. In his later writings, he also uses them interchangeably with other term pairs, such as *fluent* vs. *resistant*/*minoritizing translation*. Due to this, his terminology has been criticized for being vague, ambiguous and inconsistent (e.g. Tymoczko 2000).

Many researchers (e.g. Tymoczko 2000; Snell-Hornby 2006: 145–146; Delabastita 2010: 132) have also drawn attention to the fact that the concepts of domestication and foreignization are emotionally charged and biased in Venuti's works. The following citation from "The Translator's Invisibility" has been circulated in many reviews: "Foreignizing translation in English can be a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism" (Venuti 1995: 20). It is worth

mentioning in this connection that Venuti was writing about the situation on the mainstream US market. This explains his strong preference for foreignization.

At the same time, Venuti has not provided watertight criteria for differentiation between domesticating and foreignizing translation strategies (Boyden 2006: 122). In fact, domestication and foreignization do not even constitute a clear binary opposition in Venuti's works (Koskinen 2012), and he does not specify concrete methods or techniques for achieving the desired goal (e.g. a higher degree of foreignization), either (Tymoczko 2000: 36–37).

Venuti's primary agenda was the ethics of translation, and his major contribution to this branch of Translation Studies is undeniable. At the same time, the impact of many vague terms introduced by him has been controversial. Tymoczko (2000), for example, states that ultimately, Venuti's concepts lead us backward rather than forward in the development of Translation Studies. As we will see later, this may partially be true, especially if these concepts are used to evaluate local translation decisions and not general issues like the ethics of translation.

## 4 Interpretation of domestication and foreignization by other authors

In the *Handbook of Translation Studies*, Volume 2, Outi Paloposki summarizes the further development of the domestication and foreignization concepts as follows (Paloposki 2011: 40; see also Snell-Hornby 2006: 147; Koskinen 2012):

> During the past two decades, the concepts of domestication and foreignization have developed into a convenient shorthand to describe two opposite ways (strategies) of translating […], in many cases losing their earlier (Venutian) link to an ethics of translation and becoming (often allegedly) value-free analytical categories in descriptive studies.

The concepts of domestication and foreignization have been used in dozens of empirical studies worldwide (Paloposki 2011: 41; Koskinen 2012). They have also been used as a topic and/or a theoretical framework in numerous Master's theses (e.g. Laaksonen 2010; Vottonen 2014; Laine 2015, to name just a few written in Finland).

The two concepts have been interpreted very broadly and sometimes even in contradictory ways (Van Poucke 2012: 121). Different authors highlight different aspects of the binary opposition "domestication vs. foreignization", e.g.:
 – Bringing the **author** to the reader vs. bringing the **reader** to the author.
 – **Text**-oriented vs. **reader**-oriented approach.
 – Closer to the source language **culture** vs. closer to the target language culture.
 – Source **language** oriented vs. target language oriented.
 – **Emotionally** unpleasant vs. emotionally pleasant (including challenging vs. comfortable, unsettling vs. fluent, strange vs. familiar translation).

The variety of keywords indicated above in bold raises two primary questions about measuring the degree of domestication and foreignization in translations: *what* exactly

is measured and *how* should it be measured? It is clear that the methodology and results of measuring, for example, the degree of linguistic similarity between the source and target texts (as suggested in Van Poucke 2012) would differ greatly from measuring the emotional reactions of readers (if we accept the interpretation of domestication and foreignization proposed in Koskinen 2012).

When measuring the degree of domestication and foreignization, the researcher should, first of all, provide a clear definition of these concepts. Unfortunately, this requirement is rarely met in research papers dealing with domestication and foreignization, which jeopardizes the reliability and comparability of the results presented in them. There is also a number of other challenges related to measuring the degree of domestication and foreignization in translations, and they will be discussed in the next section.

## 5 Challenges of the domestication vs. foreignization opposition and its quantification

### 5.1 Does "further from the source text" always mean "closer to the reader"?

If foreignization is associated with a text-oriented approach and domestication stands for a reader-oriented approach, this implies that any modifications made to the text have to be driven by readers' needs. However, consider the following possibilities:
  – The translator hasn't understood the source language text correctly.
  – The translator couldn't find a more accurate equivalent in the target language although one probably exists.
  – In case of retranslation, the translator wanted to formulate things differently from his or her predecessor(s).
  – Modifications were made upon the request of the client/publisher (which are not always derived from the readers' needs).

Is it correct to count every deviation from the source text as a reader-oriented shift without being sure about the reasons behind the modifications made to the text? If some passage in the translation has drifted further from the original text, has it automatically moved closer to the reader? For me, the answer to both of these questions is 'no', which brings us to the following conclusions.

First, it is not always possible to identify and/or classify modifications made to the text as either foreignization or domestication when understood in terms of text orientation vs. reader orientation. Second, domestication and foreignization interpreted in this way do not form a strict binary opposition. Third, a real translation situation is more complicated and involves more actors and factors than a simplified model in which any translation shift can be accounted for as serving either the author's or reader's needs. Fourthly, it is not correct to equate "closeness to the text" with "closeness to the reader". The metaphor of physical distance is misleading here (cf.

Koskinen 2012). The closeness of the translation to the original text can be measured (with some reservations, which are discussed below) but the discussion on the reasons behind the detected deviations needs to have an entirely different starting point.

## 5.2 Closer to what reader?

Discussions on translations, especially literary ones, show that estimates about the degree of domestication and foreignization differ a great deal. I would like to illustrate this with an example from a recent discussion at the University of Helsinki (Research seminar in Translation Studies 14.12.2015) on Liesl Yamaguchi's translation of Väinö Linna's *Tuntematon sotilas – Unknown Soldiers* (2015). It turned out that for those participants of the research seminar who knew what *Stalin's organ* (*Katyusha* multiple rocket launchers; *Stalinin urut* in Finnish, *Stalinorgel* in German) was, this expression sounded like a "neutral" translation from Finnish into English, but for those who didn't, it sounded like a (highly) foreignizing one.

In other words, estimates of the degree of domestication and foreignization depend largely on the reader's language proficiency, background knowledge, expectations, and so on. In light of this, can an individual reader (researcher) speak on behalf of the whole readership? Moreover, a neutral translation may become foreignizing and a foreignizing one may become neutral (or even domesticating) in the course of time, as the readers and their expectations change (Paloposki & Koskinen 2004; Koskinen 2012).

## 5.3 Closer on what level?

If measuring domestication and foreignization is equaled with measuring the closeness of the translation to the original text, several further problems arise. First, language is a complex multilevel phenomenon and exact translation at all levels (lexico-semantic, syntactic, stylistic, etc.) is impossible by definition, as something always changes in the process of translation. A translator usually has to prioritize some levels over others, depending on the text type and objectives (cf. translation of legal documents vs. translation of poetry).

The calculation of "closeness to the original" at every imaginable level is hardly possible or desirable. How should we sum of, for example, domestication at the lexical level and foreignization at the syntactical level? Instead of trying to "seize the unseizable", researchers should probably focus on individual aspects which are important for the selected type of texts (e.g. the translation of metaphors, culture-specific phenomena, etc.). And, if several levels are included, the researcher must allow different results from the assessment of these levels.

Secondly, the comparison of translation with the original text at the lexico-semantic, syntactic and stylistic levels (as, for example, Van Poucke 2012 suggests) easily makes researchers forget about the higher levels, such as pragmatics, as well as the function of the text. This, however, is a step back from the communicative theories of translation towards linguistic ones.

Thirdly, in empirical studies a quantitative comparison is typically made at the sentence level. As the analysis is time-consuming, only selected parts of a larger text may be analysed in this way (e.g. Van Poucke 2012; Laine 2015). Meanwhile, many translation solutions can only be estimated at the paragraph, chapter or even full text level. For example, if a translator has decided to omit a phraseological unit in one paragraph and compensated it in another paragraph, at the sentence level this will count as two domestications while in fact the translation as a whole is close to neutral. Narrowing the comparison of the source and target texts to the sentence level is, again, a drawback for Translation Studies.

Fourthly, justifying the methodology of measuring the closeness of translation is known to be challenging: "A further complication of the study and/or comparison of first and subsequent translations is the difficulty of finding reliable methods for measuring the 'closeness' – let alone 'greatness' – of the translations" (Koskinen & Paloposki 2010: 295; also see Kuusi 2014).

## 5.4 Is there a "neutral" translation?

Measuring domestication and foreignization implies that there is a scale with a zero point that represents a "neutral translation", which is neither foreignizing nor domesticating (cf. Van Poucke 2012). However, translation is domesticating by nature, as the source language is switched to the readers' native language. On the other hand, many original texts and, consequently, also translations contain some elements which are foreign to the target language readers, as the extralinguistic reality and languages differ (cf. also Venuti 2004).

The separation of these "natural" kinds of domestication and foreignization from "deliberate", "amplified" ones requires an "ideal translation" into the target language which would stay as close to the original as possible and, yet, conform to the target language conventions as much as possible. However, finding such an ideal "neutral translation" in each individual case is hardly possible neither from the theoretical nor the practical point of view.

This implies that measuring the *absolute* degree of domestication and foreignization of a translation in comparison to an "ideal" one does not make much sense. At the same time, it is usually possible to compare two or more translations with each other and decide on their *relative* degree of domestication and foreignization if the basis upon which the comparison is made is specified precisely enough.

## 6 Link of domestication and foreignization to the Retranslation Hypothesis

One of the reasons for the abundance of empirical studies devoted to measuring the degree of domestication and foreignization is that these concepts play a key role in the Retranslation Hypothesis (see Berman 1990; Gambier 1994, Chesterman 2000), according to which, first translations tend to be more domesticating than subsequent ones. Berman's arguments in favor of the Retranslation Hypothesis were that the quality of subsequent translations improves, and the target audience becomes better prepared for more foreignizing translations.

Abundant research has provided evidence both in support and against the Retranslation Hypothesis (Paloposki & Koskinen 2004, 2010). It is now generally agreed that Berman's initial scheme is not sufficient to explain retranslation (Paloposki & Koskinen 2010). However, researchers keep testing the Retranslation Hypothesis on new material by measuring the degree of domestication and foreignization in retranslations.

To my mind, these attempts are rather fruitless due to the challenges described above and due to the fact that even another piece of evidence in favor of the Retranslation Hypothesis would not refute the previous counter-arguments. I believe that the only way out of this vicious circle is to reformulate the Retranslation Hypothesis through *via negativa,* i.e. only in terms of what *may not* be said about the degree of foreignization and domestication in retranslations.

My proposal for the new Retranslation Hypothesis consists of the following statements:

1. The reasons for and circumstances of retranslation are too complex and multifold to make any universal conclusions on whether subsequent translations are, will be or should be closer to the original.

2. It is possible to make some generalizations about certain aspects of retranslation of a particular kind of texts in a particular culture and within a limited timeframe for a specified target group, if one takes into account these and other major factors which influence the selection of a translation strategy. Even then exceptions are possible, as many factors oppose each other.

Reformulated in this way, the hypothesis shifts the focus from the degree of foreignization and domestication in retranslations to the whole array of changes which happen during retranslation, and the factors standing behind them. There is really no need to restrict oneself only to domestication and foreignization, whatever these terms mean.

## 7 Conclusion

In this paper, I have outlined a number of challenges that need to be taken into account when estimating the degree of domestication and foreignization in translations. Now, I would like to summarize them and provide some recommendations to help avoid common pitfalls related to the measuring of domestication and foreignization.

Vagueness, ambiguity and various interpretations of the concepts of domestication and foreignization constitute a serious problem that jeopardizes the reliability and comparability of the research results. When estimating the degree of domestication and foreignization, a researcher should first of all provide clear definitions of these concepts.

Every deviation from the source text may not be counted as a reader-oriented shift. The reasons behind modifications made to the text are usually complex. They can probably be reliably estimated only by the translator of the text, if he or she keeps a log of his or her translation decisions.

Estimates of the degree of domestication and foreignization also depend greatly on the reader's language proficiency, background knowledge, expectations, and so on. Due to this, it is difficult for an individual researcher to speak on behalf of the whole readership when estimating the degree of domestication and foreignization. Involving more respondents in the study would increase its reliability.

Language is a complex multilevel phenomenon, and the calculation of "closeness to the original" at every imaginable level is hardly possible. Instead of trying to make a comprehensive evaluation of the degree of domestication and foreignization, researchers should probably focus on individual aspects which are important for the selected type of texts. One should also remember that many translation solutions can only be evaluated at the paragraph, chapter or even full text level.

The key question researchers should ask themselves before starting an empirical study aimed at measuring the degree of domestication and foreignization in a translation is whether it will bring added value to translation theory and practice. For example, obtaining arguments in favor of the Retranslation Hypothesis on new material will not refute previous counter-arguments against it.

I suggest that the Retranslation Hypothesis should be reformulated through *via negativa* in order to shift the focus from the degree of foreignization and domestication in retranslations to the whole array of changes which happen during retranslation, and the factors standing behind them.

If the aim of researchers is to see more adequate and user-friendly translations in the future, a stronger focus should probably be placed on readers' needs (e.g. which target groups prefer/need domesticating and which foreignizing translations and why), on studying concrete means and techniques for achieving the desired effect, as well as on the ethical and educational aspects of translation, which lie at the core of Venuti's works and which are probably becoming more relevant than ever in many respects.

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## About the author

Igor Kudashev works as a Senior Lecturer of Russian translation at the Faculty of Communication Sciences, University of Tampere. He also holds the title of Docent in Russian Translation at the University of Helsinki. His research interests include Translation Studies, Terminology, lexicography, and language technologies.
Email: igor.kudashev (at) uta.fi