

Debates Over Quantitative and Qualitative Research

Methods in Translation Studies: A Critique Essay

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Introduction

Translation studies is generally agreed to be interdisciplinary in nature. Its professionalization in recent decades, as in many other disciplines that do not have a clear-cut scope and “single coherent methodology” (Saldanha, 2014, p. 17), is accompanied by the pang of making methodological choices in its academic pursuit, usually framed as the dichotomy between a quantitative approach and a qualitative one. While there is no denying that together these two approaches play a pivotal role in shaping the contour the research landscape, it is also true that either approach responds to different and discrete research needs. As translations studies as a field grapple with the tension between a nuanced hermeneutic tradition and a positivist numerical approach, it would be worthwhile to return to this pivotal debate.

This short critique essay briefly but critically examines both approaches, confined mostly to translation studies using examples including my own research project. It delves into their respective advantages, disadvantages, and contributions. Scrutinizing the two research paradigms from examples of translation studies, this essay focuses on the nuanced interplay between data-driven analyses and the exploration of subjective, contextually rich dimensions. It also invites deeper appreciation of the different “epistemological and ontological positions” (Saldanha, 2014, p. 23) within the discipline of translation studies, while noting chances of compatibility between empirical research with a critical-interpretive approach.

Critiquing Quantitative Research Methods in Translation Studies: “If you can’t count it, it doesn’t count”

Punch (2016) famously notes that the main differences between a quantitative approach and a qualitative one lie in the nature of their data, and in their different associated methods for collecting and analyzing data. Thus a quantitative research is defined as “empirical research where the data are in the form of numbers” (Punch, 2016, p. 4). Diehard proponents of this approach believe it to be the only approach for any research to count as serious and scientific, a position summarized by their opponents in one stereotypical slogan as “If you can’t count it, it doesn’t count.” (Grønmo, 2020, p. 21).

What does such a quantitative approach entail? Robson and McCartan (2016) comprehensively summarize typical features of a quantitative research:

- Measurement and quantification are central. Accuracy and precision of measurement is sought.
- The scientific approach is adhered to, with the same general principles as natural science.
- A deductive logic is adopted where pre-existing theoretical ideas or concepts are tested.
- Design of the research is pre-specified in detail at an early stage of the research process.
- Reliability (consistency over time and with different observers) and validity (showing they measure what is intended) of measurements is important.
- Detailed specification of procedures is provided so that replication of the study is possible.
- Statistical analysis of the data is expected.
- Generalization of the findings is sought (usually in the form of statistical generalizability which requires the sample of participants studied to be representative of some wider population).
- Objectivity is sought and distance maintained between the researcher and participants.
- Standardization is sought in the interests of control and accuracy. This often involves decontextualization (i.e. stripping the situation researched from its context, or ignoring the possible effects of the context).
- A neutral, value-free position is sought.

(adapted from Robson and McCartan, 2016, p. 19)

These features, when applied coherently and meticulously, offer a powerful toolkit for systematic analysis in translation studies by employing numerical data and statistical expressions. A few key advantages merits closer discussion and highlighting.

The first major advantage a quantitative method offers is **large-scale analysis**. Any quantitative method by definition would allow for analysis of large datasets, enables researchers to draw generalizations across different languages, texts and phenomena, what sometimes is simply called a “big picture”. This possibility of numerical synthesis and generalization, a ‘zooming out’ feature, could potentially yield important insights that are oftentimes overlooked when researcher “zoom in” too closely.

Before the advent and popularity of large-scale analysis, epitomized by corpus-based research in translations studies, many translation studies projects focus typically on one text, or one-pair of texts. Now blessed with the evolution of readily accessible softwares in corpus-design, researchers now enjoy the luxury of compiling their own electronic corpus, incorporating not one, but all possible relevant works. As Munday (2022) notes,

a larger scale in this sense, when conducted appropriately, would often mean richer understanding of the phenomena being investigated, when larger corpora of natural occurring texts could be “processed and analyzed with software to investigate the use and patterns of the word-forms it contained”, yielding better “quality of linguistic evidence, particularly on collocations and typical uses of lexical items, vastly superior to the analyst’s intuition” (Munday, 2022, p. 291).

Wong and Lee (2023) is a great example in illustrating the breadth of coverage this approach offers. By data-profiling the characters and toponyms in the Chinese Buddhist Canon, the largest extant collection of medieval Buddhist texts available, they have successfully applied the lexicon-based Name-entity recognition (NER) on the canon and then extracted all character-toponym associations. This would allow scholars in translation to easily carry out further investigation equipped with a much larger dataset at hand.

My own research project investigating the trends and changes of Early China Texts in English translations, likewise, would not be feasible without this data-driven approach because it would require a large amount of raw data incorporating all major texts available, without which no conclusions whatsoever is possible.

The second major advantage of a quantitative approach is its **objectivity** and **efficiency**. Numerical data can be analyzed and expressed in a way that’s mathematical and statistical in nature, reducing to the least possible degree of subjective interpretations. In theory they should be replicated easily. It would also be more efficient in the entire process. When the amount of data is huge, it would be an especially important factor of feasibility in any researcher’s initial research design.

Jenn and Fraisse (2023) offers an excellent example in how a multilingual parallel corpus greatly facilitates further research on the translations of the novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. Since this novel’s birth in the late 19th century, it has traversed continents and cultures, enjoying global acclaim to this day. If a researcher is to embark on an investigation of this translations across the globe, they will be faced with a daunting task of first of all going over hundreds of editions in dozens of languages. Instead of resigning in despair, a quantitative approach has already yielded fruitful results. In 2017, the Global Huck project was initiated to “identify global editions of *Huckleberry Finn* and having scholars contribute comments about the cultural work that each translation does in specific cultural contexts” (Jenn and Fraisse, 2023, p. 178). This project was later incorporated into a larger Rosetta Project, which included global versions from low-resourced languages. The result of these two projects is a fascinating digital research infrastructure, encompassing worlds of metadata and dozens of language pairs. With data such as all the titles in the target language, year of publication, the name of the translator/publisher, comparisons of translations of this novel could achieve a degree of objectivity and efficiency like never before.

The limitations of this quantitative approach, often seen in attacks on the positivist position, include, among others, simplification of complex phenomena, loss of context, overemphasis on quantifiable aspects and limited insight into the translation process.

By reducing complexities into numerical datasets, the approach risks sacrificing the minor details for the big picture and neglecting nuanced aspects. Moreover, by decontextualizing, the research process often struggles to capture the intricacies of cultural, social or historical context. In translation studies, this may often result in a lack of insight of translator's agency and a neglect of a particular culture or literary tradition that is nurturing a certain work. Impressive as many research projects are with their statistical expressions, they are of limited value unless they have aided our understanding of the translation as a process and as a product.

For example, Tian and Liu (2023) set out to investigate the literary style of the author Amy Tan, by applying a multidimensional analysis (MDA) through the use of Multidimensional Analysis Tagger (MAT) and *Python* is run to calculate the Pearson correlation coefficient. However, by excluding some but not all of the same author's writings, while decontextualizing the data from the author's literary worlds spanning four decades, we are left with more questions than insight regarding what her literary style is really like.

This criticism is of course not a broadside against all its merits. In fact, post-positivist research, while still heavily reliant on quantitative methods, have greatly improved its applicability in the translation studies by acknowledging "the limits of a purely positivist approach" (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p. 22). For my own research project to succeed, a quantitative method through corpus analysis is a must to gauge the trends and changes of translation of Early China Texts in English translations, but it alone will never suffice until supplemented by context-rich interpretations.

Critiquing Qualitative Research Methods in Translation Studies:

"If you can count it, that ain't it"

A qualitative approach is "generally associated with the interpretivist position" and in translation studies include mostly "critical discourse analysis, interviews, focus groups, questionnaires" (Saldan, 201, p. 22). This approach follows the hermeneutic tradition and was in fact the default approach for earlier generations of translation scholars. Some literary "puritans" even go so far as to claim that "If you can count it, that ain't it" (Grønmo, 2020, p. 21).

Robson and McCartan (2016) have provided a useful summary of the typical features of quantitative research:

- Accounts and findings are presented verbally or in other non-numerical form. There is little or no use of numerical data or statistical analysis.
- An inductive logic is used starting with data collection from which theoretical ideas and concepts emerge.
- A focus on meanings.
- Contexts are seen as important. There is a need to understand phenomena in their setting.
- Situations are described from the perspective of those involved.
- The design of the research emerges as the research is carried out and is flexible throughout the whole process.
- The existence and importance of the values of researchers and others involved is accepted.
- Objectivity is not valued. It is seen as distancing the researcher from participants.
- Openness and receptivity of the researcher is valued.
- The generalizability of findings is not a major concern.
- It takes place in natural settings. Artificial laboratory settings are rarely used.
- Both the personal commitment and reflexivity (self-awareness) of the researcher are valued.
- It is usually small scale in terms of numbers of persons or situations researched.
- The social world is viewed as a creation of the people involved.

(adapted from Robson and McCartan, 2016, p. 20)

Qualitative research still deals with data. It is just that the nature of this type of data is fundamentally different from data from a quantitative line of inquiry. In this sense, qualitative research is defined as “empirical research where the data are in the form of non-numbers” (Punch, 2016, p. 4). With its data from observations, interviews, documents and audiovisual materials, key strengths and limitations are succinctly summarized in Creswell (2023).

Qualitative research is an umbrella term encompassing a range of methods. However, what they have in common—and where their key strength is place—is their focus on the rich contexts, the idiosyncrasies, the cultural nuances, and the subtleties of engagement.

As a result, they could potentially unlock richer understanding, capture contextual relevance, provide insight into translator decision-making, extend flexibility in catering to demanding interpretational conundrums, and offer a holistic perspective in the questions surveyed.

In their studies on the English translations of the great classical novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Liu, Cheung, and Moratto (2023) focus on the issue of lexical bundles in

fictional dialogues in the novel. Their initial corpus-analysis, impressive as it is as a stand-alone project, is complemented by their further qualitative explorations. The biographies of different translators are compared. Reading their life experiences into the linguistic choices they made, the result is a convincing examination and comparison of translators' styles. This is achieved because lexical bundles are treated not merely as numerical expressions, but choices translators tend to make given the context of a certain chapter, in a certain social background, and as specific idiosyncrasies.

In another example, Li (2015) introduces a case study of just one text, the Early China text *Liezi*, to demonstrate how a qualitative pursuit can yield profound insight without resorting to any statistical expressions. Through her rigorous questioning of the concept of translation fidelity, she manages to peel layers of illusions of the equivalence mindset. Instead of using comparison of different translations to ascertain the best possible version, the current practice of sticking to the problematic idea of fidelity should make way for a new paradigm, and establishes that the best practice instead would be

discovering the insights different translations offer into the relationships between the original and translated texts, source and target languages, as well as questioning the construction of texts as “original source texts” through translation by recognizing the potential fluidity and multiplicity of the source text itself (Li, 2016, p. 109).

A case study such as this one endeavors to understand the case—the text *Liezi* here—in depth, in its natural setting among a sea of other Early China texts, recognizing its complexities in interpreting. The entire process is holistic, “aiming to preserve and understand the wholeness and unity of the case” (Punch, 2016, p. 151).

Criticisms of the qualitative method, for example of a case study, would call into question the generalizability. While Punch (2016) has argued that by conceptualizing and by developing propositions, a case study could be potentially applicatied to other cases as well, not all scholars are equally comfortable with the implications. Other criticisms include its subjectivity and bias, with interpretations easily influenced by individual perspectives, resulting in a loss of objectivity. Its difficulty in replication of result, its lack of quantifiable data, and its time-consuming process are taken to task as well.

The limitations are obvious, but should be considered in the background of responding to different research needs. In the end, it is not what it lacks that matters, but what it offers. This, I believe, is the way to weigh its significance. By offering valuable insights into the subjective and context-dependent translations, the limitations are more fair warnings against potential abuse than signs for outright abandonment.

Pitching the qualitative approach against the quantitative one is already out of fashion. Most scholars now would agree that they are merely different approaches and indispensable in their own right. In more recent times researchers have called for the use of both approaches—the mixed method—to respond to the complex needs of modern research projects. For example, the researcher might opt for “an initial qualitative phase followed by a quantitative phase, or vice versa” (Saldanha, 2016, p. 23). The point is to make the complementing approaches work in tandem to explore the intricate layers of a research project. This approach is also appropriate for my own research project, because it lends me both the data-driven power of statistical analysis, and the hermeneutic power of interpretation of individual translation choices. Together they have the potential of bringing out the most of an ambitious investigation that zooms both in and out of the English translations of Early China Texts.

Conclusion

This short critique essay surveys the main strengths and limitations of both the quantitative and qualitative research method in the realm of translation studies. While a quantitative approach offers valuable insight into the measurable aspects of translation at a large scale, a qualitative approach could complement its limitations by unveiling the subjective and culturally-sensitive dimensions that shape translators’ choices. Recognizing the complementary nature of the two approaches, the critique justifies the use of a mixed-method approach in my own research project to harness the strength of both approaches, while bearing each’s limitations in mind. A good research project should accommodate the intricate interplay of these two approaches and transcend the methodological barriers.

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