On Randomness

Imogen Cohen
University of Amsterdam

The question of how complexity theory challenges our views of translators as agents of change (or as agents of anything at all, for that matter) was raised indirectly a decade ago by Andrew Chesterman in his article "On explanation" (2008). As the title suggests, Chesterman's article explored how we explain the work of translators and, in doing so, it explored the very nature of explanation itself. But the article concluded with one crucial question: how much of what translators do can, in fact, be explained? In other words, how much of translatorial behaviour is actually random?

When Chesterman wrote his article, he made no distinction between randomness proper – or "perfect unpredictability" (Byrne and Callaghan 2014) – and randomness borne of complexity, but my paper addresses this question, paying particular attention to literary translators. It does so by drawing on six landmark experiments within the field of psychology and applying them to the field of literary translation (Cohen 2018). These experiments suggest (1) that there is a significant element of randomness to (literary) translation, and (2) that we, as TS scholars, probably 'see' patterns in that randomness where there are none. The definition of randomness is taken from Taleb (2010), a definition particularly pertinent to the humanities and social sciences, and one which takes complexity into account.

Introducing complexity theory into the field of literary translation studies also challenges the binary opposition between *hermeneutic* and *empirical* approaches which has traditionally divided the field.

Key words: complexity, explanation, literary translation, randomness, uncertainty

References
Byrne, D. S., and Gill Callaghan. 2014. *Complexity theory and the social sciences: the state of the art*. First edition. ed. New York: Routledge, Taylor&Francis Group.
Chesterman, Andrew. 2008. "On explanation" In *Beyond Descriptive Translation Studies: Investigations in homage to Gideon Toury*, ed. by Anthony Pym, Miriam Shlesinger and Daniel Simeoni, 363-379. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins
Cohen, Imogen. 2018. "On randomness" *Target, International Journal of Translation Studies*, 30:1, 3-23
Taleb, Nassim Nicolas. 2010. *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. New York: Random House