

# Why study translation universals?

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**Abstract:** Research on translation universals has its roots in the need to make generalizations about the features that distinguish translations from non-translations. They go back to the old tradition of negative comments about the failings of typical translations. These comments concern the relations between translations and the target language, and between translations and their source texts. With the rise of descriptive studies, and the use of corpus research methods borrowed from linguistics, the search for the typical features of translations became more systematic. A number of hypotheses about potential universals have been proposed, and tested on different languages and language pairs. Some of them are evidently false; on others, the jury is still out. If some hypotheses continue to be supported by empirical evidence, the question then arises of how they might best be explained. There has been fierce criticism of some of the assumptions underlying the search for universals, including the use of the term ‘universal’ itself, but the approach has also brought clear methodological benefits.

## 1 BACKGROUND

If we want to describe the linguistic profile of a translation, or a set of translations, we examine the similarities and differences between the translation(s) and other kinds of texts (I will call these other texts “reference texts”). That is, the analysis is essentially a comparative one.

Perhaps the oldest form of this kind of analysis is a comparison with normal, non-translated texts in the target language. Comparisons with these target reference texts have led to the well-known generalizations about the typical features of translations, the ways they differ from non-translations in the same language. Translations are said to be clumsy, marked by “strange strings” (the term is from Mauranen 2000), odd collocations etc. Interestingly, these generalizations were evidently mainly based on translations done into translators’ native languages, so one could not explain these differences by appealing to the translators’ inadequate mastery of the target language.

Many of the earlier remarks of this kind originate from observations concerning literary translation, which is indeed mostly done into the native language. The differences noted were all taken in a negative, pejorative sense; they all showed how translations were inferior to normal native-language texts.

A second long-standing approach has been to compare translations to their source texts. Here again, the main emphasis has traditionally been on the pejorative nature of any shifts discovered. One classic statement is that of Berman

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Acta Translatologica Helsingiensia (ATH) Vol 1, 38–48. 2010.  
Helsingfors: Helsingfors universitet, Nordica, svensk översättning.

(1985), who listed a number of what he called “deformations” which he felt characterized (literary) translations. They tended to clarify ambiguities, use a flatter style and a less varied lexis, lose much of the rhythm of the original, and so on. Apart from such intrinsically critical approaches, comparisons between translations and source reference texts have also led to more specific conceptual tools: types of difference begin to be referred to as translation shifts (as used e.g. by Catford 1965), and types of similarity come to be specified in terms of various classifications of equivalence (such as the five types proposed by Koller 1979).

Conceptual analysis in Translation Studies has given rise to a much richer set of terms and concepts covering the source-target relation than those used to describe the relation between translations and the target language. The notion of equivalence is notoriously tricky, and has given rise to a wide literature (for a recent review, see Pym 2010). Shifts have also been defined and classified in a great many ways. Competing terms have also arisen, such as strategy, technique, tactic, operation, all of which are argued to have their own special nuances (see Gambier 2009 for a critical survey). In contrast, the naturalness relation with the target language has been much less productive of conceptual differentiations. We have the notions of textual fit, acceptability and appropriateness, but that seems to be about it. (Adequacy-to-skopos is a different kind of relation altogether, a functional one, not purely textual.) I have suggested elsewhere (Chesterman 2007b) that we might use the term “drift” to describe a deviation from a target-language norm, a mark of non-naturalness; but we do not yet seem to have a set of drift types that could be compared to Catford’s shifts. And, as far as I know, the relation of naturalness or fit has not given rise to the kind of analytical debate that we find concerning equivalence.

In translation teaching, assessment of translation quality has of course always been implicitly based on comparisons with the two kinds of reference texts we are discussing. A translation is deficient if it is judged too unnatural, or too different from the source text. Translation errors are correspondingly classified into two major groups: those which misrepresent the meaning (or style) of the source, and those which abuse the grammar or stylistic norms of the target language. And teachers do their best to inculcate the ideals of accuracy and naturalness (as well, of course, as the functional ideal that a translation should have its desired effect).

Generalizations based on both these types of textual comparison have implicitly involved a third kind of comparison: translations are compared with other translations. Only in this way can we arrive at any kind of generalization about textual features that might be specific to translations as such. In the early 1990s translation scholars began making use of this kind of comparison more explicitly, with the advent of corpus studies.

## 2 THE RISE OF UNIVERSALS

After the 1970s Descriptive Translation Studies moved away from the kind of prescriptive approach illustrated e.g. by Berman's deformations mentioned above. Translations began to be considered as a text type in their own right, a kind of "third code", not simply defective versions of the target language. Toury proposed what he called "laws" of translation which were intended to be descriptive generalizations (1995 and earlier versions). One law stated that translations tended to manifest interference from the source text; another said that translations tended to display a more standardized style than the original. These were hardly new ideas as such, but the status of Toury's claims was not pejorative but descriptive. The implication was that if indeed translations do manifest these features, this is something interesting, and prompts us to explore why this might be. We can examine the conditions under which such tendencies might be more or less pronounced. In this way we would learn more about how translators worked, and what kinds of constraints different kinds of target culture might exert over translations entering the culture.

But it was Mona Baker's initiative at Manchester that brought corpus studies methodology to generate and test new claims about the typical features of translations (e.g. Baker 1993; Laviosa-Braithwaite 1996). A large comparable corpus of translated English was set up, and similar corpora have since been established elsewhere (for the Savonlinna Finnish corpus, see e.g. Mauranen 2004). Following Baker (*ibid.*), scholars began calling their (potential) generalizations "translation universals", on the model of the linguistic search for language universals.

Despite some problems (see below), the term "universal" became widely used in translation corpus studies. New research questions began to be posed, and at the same time Translation Studies took an important step into empirical quantitative research. In terms of research design, this meant either starting with a hypothesis (about the existence of a universal) which was then tested, or else starting with a corpus analysis and culminating with a new hypothesis derived from the data.

In an attempt at conceptual clarification, we can distinguish two kinds of potential "universal", corresponding to the two kinds of comparison discussed above (see e.g. Chesterman 2004). An S-universal formulates a generalization about a difference between translations and source texts, and a T-universal claims something about typical differences between translations and non-translations in the target language. Note that both types are concerned with *differences* with respect to their reference texts. No-one has claimed as an interesting translation universal the fact that all translations tend to be equivalent in some way to their source texts; or that all translations count as texts in the target language.

Here is a brief list (from Chesterman 2004) of some of the main universals that have so far been claimed or proposed as hypotheses. (For further discussion of many of the individual hypotheses, see for example the articles in Mauranen and Kujamäki 2004.)

### *Potential S-universals*

- *Lengthening.* Translations tend to be longer than their source texts. This was included in Berman's list of deformations mentioned above, as a negative feature of translations. But as a descriptive claim it occurs earlier, at least in Vinay and Darbelnet 1958: 185. In this latter work, the claim is based on translations between English and French. The hypothesis has not met with much support, as far as I know, and is presumably heavily dependent on the linguistic features of the languages concerned.
- *Interference.* This is one of Toury's "laws", and is widely assumed to be a valid claim. But there is also wide variation in the conditions under which it occurs, and under which it is accepted.
- *Standardization.* This is also a Toury "law", and is obviously linked to some more specific claims, such as several of the following ones in this list. As with interference, the evidence in favour of this general tendency is fairly clear, although here too there is variation under different conditions.
- *Dialect normalization.* This too appears to be widespread, and is scarcely surprising. See especially Englund Dimitrova 1997.
- *Reduction of complex narrative voices.* Free Indirect Speech is one such complex voice, and there is evidence that this form tends to become simpler in translations, e.g. to be shifted to a less ambivalent form of reported discourse. See e.g. Taivalkoski-Shilov 2006.
- *Explicitation.* This is one of the most widely studied and debated potential universals. The idea that translations tend to be more explicit than their originals goes back at least to Blum-Kulka 1986, and has since been taken up in many studies (see e.g. Klaudy 1996; Englund Dimitrova 2005). However, the concept itself has proved problematic; it has been interpreted in many conflicting ways, which makes it impossible to compare results (e.g. Becher 2010). In its most general form, as a claimed universal covering all translation of all kinds, it seems to have been falsified, although this has not always been recognized (see e.g. Pym 2007).
- *The retranslation hypothesis.* This claims that later translations of a given (literary) work into a given target language tend to get closer to the source text. The idea goes back to Goethe, but has been much debated (see the special issue of *Palimpsestes* 4, 1990). Some evidence supports the claim, but much evidence

does not. It is certainly not a genuine “universal”, but may apply under certain conditions. As with explicitation, there are many conceptual disagreements that have not yet been resolved (see e.g. Paloposki and Koskinen 2010).

- *Reduction of repetition.* This has been noted by several scholars (e.g. Toury 1991: 188; Baker 1993).

### *Potential T-universals*

- *Simplification.* This was one of the main conclusions drawn by Laviosa-Braithwaite (1996) in the first major study using the Manchester comparable corpus of English translations, compared with non-translated texts in English. She used a number of measures of simplification, which have since been applied by others. These included lexical variety (translations showed less variety); lexical density (translations had a higher proportion of functional words to lexical words, i.e. they were less dense); and use of high-frequency items (translations had a higher proportion of high-frequency items). These measures suggest that translations tend to be simpler than comparable non-translated texts.
- *Conventionalization.* This is the idea that translations tend towards more conventional usage: not more conventional than their source texts (which would come under the standardization S-universal, above), but than comparable target texts (see e.g. Baker 1993).
- *Untypical lexical patterning.* This is manifest in the “strange strings” I mentioned earlier (Mauranen 2000). If this claim holds good, it seems that translations exhibit two contrary tendencies: to over-use the most typical words and structures of the target language (cf. simplification), but also to show signs of untypical usage.
- *Under-representation of target-language-specific items.* This is the “unique items hypothesis” proposed by Tirkkonen-Condit (e.g. 2004) and since studied in a number of contributions (see e.g. Chesterman 2007a). The idea is that target-language items that are formally very different from a given source language (and in this sense “unique”) will tend not to be used so often in translations, as they will presumably not occur so readily to the translator’s mind, on the assumption that mental processing is based primarily on the source-language form. (Translations into Finnish, for example, will have fewer-than-expected instances of particles like *-pa* or *-kin*, if the source languages lack similar particles.)

Research into potential translation universals is not only a question of establishing whether they exist or not, and if so, under what conditions. If they do exist, we would also like to be able to explain them. Explanations have been sought at different levels. For some, if a universal seems to exist, this in itself is some kind of explanation of a particular phenomenon. If all translators do X, it

is not surprising that a particular given translator also does X. (Cf. the notion of generalization as a kind of explanation, e.g. in Croft 1990.)

Most obviously, we can assume some kind of cognitive cause, something in the mind of translators that affects the way they process texts simultaneously in two languages. One of the most interesting proposals of this kind has been Halverson's hypothesis of gravitational pull (Halverson 2003, 2007). This is a hypothesis about the way target-language prototypical or highly salient forms would exert a pull on decision-making processes: these salient forms would occur first to the translator's mind, and lead to some of the T-universals such as simplification. Similarly, the forms of the source text would also exert a pull, leading to interference etc. Halverson describes the effects of these pulls in terms of cognitive grammar.

Another kind of explanation would be to appeal to the way translators are trained. They are trained to be good communicators, to take cultural distance into account, to think of the reader, and so on. They are taught about the norms they will be expected to meet. This might explain why they tend to explicate, to clarify, and so on.

Pym (2008) has proposed yet another potential explanation for some universals. Discussing Toury's two laws, he argues that both could be explained by translators' desire to avoid risk. For instance, translating literally (which might involve interference) is a way of playing safe if you are not sure of the exact meaning of the source; and using high-frequency forms is also a way of playing safe not only from the point of view of getting the message across to a wide readership, but also in regard to minimizing the risk of unnatural language (especially if you are not translating into your first language). One might also appeal to situational factors: the stress of a tight deadline might well affect the time available for processing, leading to the need to choose quick, safe solutions.

S-universals can also be explained to some extent in terms of contrastive analysis, including contrastive rhetoric. Language and style differences between source and target languages can obviously account for some generalizations covering translation between given language pairs (such as the claim about translations typically being longer). And the more these differences are found between different language pairs, the more "universal" they become.

### 3 CRITICISM

Research on universals has not gone without criticism. One problem is terminological. It was perhaps unfortunate that we started talking about "universals" in the first place, as this meant shifting the meaning of a term borrowed from elsewhere. In linguistics, a language universal is indeed claimed to be universal, manifested in all languages. There are around 6000–7000 languages

in the world. Any such language universals will have to be of a very general and abstract nature, and indeed they are often formulated in mathematical terms. (See e.g. Croft 1990.) Hypotheses about language universals can nevertheless be tested against a vast number of the world's languages. In the case of translation "universals", however, the situation is different. The total number of translations in the world, past and present, is of a very different magnitude. This means that claims about "universals" must be understood in a weaker sense in translation research. For this reason, some scholars prefer to use other terms, speaking of general tendencies or patterns, or indeed simply generalizations, qualified and conditioned as necessary.

Tymoczko (1998) and others have pointed out a related weakness. When a corpus of translations is set up in order to generate or test hypotheses about universals, it is by no means obvious what should count as a translation and thus qualify for inclusion in the corpus. Do we just take translations done by native speakers of the target language? Just published translations? Just "good" translations? Just translations done by trained professionals? What about amateur translations, fan translations, translations done by small children? Bad translations? Are these not also translations, of a kind? And what about adaptations, versions etc. – where to draw the line? And translations done by teams rather than individuals? The list of such complications seems endless.

The upshot of this line of criticism is that we should give up making universal claims which are impossible to substantiate, and rather look more closely at the conditions under which less-than-universal generalizations might be valid. Several universal claims have in fact been shown to be false, in their universal sense, although they may be valid as lower-level, conditioned generalizations for particular types or modes of translation. A related point is that so far, hypotheses about universals have only been tested on a very limited range of languages or language pairs.

Critics have also pointed out that the way universal claims are formulated and operationalized is sometimes far from explicit. A good example is the vague idea of explicitation. Blum-Kulka's original proposal (1986) concerned the distribution of markers of cohesion, but the general notion of explicitation has been so differently interpreted and classified since then that general conclusions cannot be drawn. (See Becher 2010, mentioned above.)

A different critical point is made by those who see research into universals as basically pointless: it just seems to highlight features of translations that are already quite well known – as features of poor translations. Recall the mention above of the pejorative claims traditionally made about translations. All these new corpus studies show, say these critics, is that these pejorative views were right: that is what translations are typically like, there is nothing new here.

Another argument has been that many of the phenomena so far discussed could be just as well explained as being pragmatic universals of language use in general (House 2008).

#### 4 SO WHY STUDY UNIVERSALS?

One reason is purely methodological. As mentioned above, research on universals has encouraged translation scholars to develop better empirical research designs, to be more precise about their claims, to work with large corpora, to think more in terms of generating and testing hypotheses. In this respect, the development has helped to strengthen Translation Studies as an empirical discipline. It has also encouraged us to ask why-questions. If evidence is found for a given generalization (whether universal or not), it immediately prompts us to wonder why this is the case, and our inquiry moves from description to explanation.

I would agree with those critics who dislike the term “universal” (although I have used it myself). But it makes good sense to look for generalizations of all kinds, including those that are conditioned, i.e. restricted in some way. For instance, a generalization might be claimed for translations of a given text type, or time period in a given culture, or done by a given kind of translator, under certain conditions, between given language pairs, in a given direction, and so on. Such generalizations would add to our knowledge about how translations are conditioned and constrained by all kinds of factors: textual, linguistic, psychological, social, cultural, historical... We do not have to make universal claims in order to say something interesting. In this respect, research on universals does raise new research questions: if the retranslation hypothesis, for instance, does not hold universally, under what conditions does it hold? When do translators tend to simplify? In what kinds of translations do we find the clearest evidence of non-typical lexis?

One recent development in the study of universals takes the opposite step, which is also interesting. Suppose that claims we make about typical translations do not in fact apply just to translations but also to other kinds of texts. Our so-called universals would not be just those of translation, then (as suggested, indeed, by Blum-Kulka 1986). Ulrych (2009), for instance, has examined several kinds of “mediated discourse” apart from translation: texts that have been edited, speeches and films dialogues that have been transcribed, and so on. In these other mediated texts she found evidence of explicitation, simplification and normalization very similar to cases found in translation. And what about the language usage of bilinguals or language learners, speaking a non-native language? Perhaps we have here another set of reference texts, against which we could compare our translations. It might turn out that translations were not so

special after all. Or, on the contrary, that the features that made translations different from other kinds of mediated texts were things we have not yet thought of at all.

A final reason to study universals is their pedagogical relevance. This application exploits the connection we have noted between the traditional pejorative observations and the more recent descriptive formulations. The pedagogical argument runs as follows: if it is the case that translations tend to have certain features, and these features are judged to be negative, we can perhaps improve the quality of our students' translations by deliberately teaching them about potential universals. This is thus an exercise in consciousness-raising. A few such projects have been done as part of a translator trainer programme, but conclusions are still unclear. (See e.g. Jääskeläinen 2004, reporting a pilot experiment on repetition.)

In other words, this pedagogical application exploits a connection between a potential universal and quality. Recall Tymoczko's criticism that we have no agreed criteria for deciding what to include in a corpus of translations. It might make sense to incorporate a quality variable in any corpus: this would add complexity to the design, but also add some social relevance. Current corpora are based on published translations, for obvious reasons; but not all published translations are of high quality, and not all are by target native speakers. Adding a quality variable would also rule out claims of universality in the strict sense, of course.

But perhaps that was a mistake in the first place, a misjudgement about the optimum level of generalization to be aimed at. Perhaps it would be more fruitful to search for less-than-universal patterns in translation profiles, under different sets of conditions, and thus make more modest claims.

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