

Hypotheses about translation universals*

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Contemporary proposals about universals are descriptive hypotheses about (a) the relation between translations and source texts (the equivalence relation), and (b) the relation between translations and comparable non-translations in the target language (the relation of textual fit). The article analyses the main trends in the thinking about translation universals, pointing out connections between the prescriptive tradition, work in literary translation criticism, and current corpus-based research on universals. In order to characterize some of the main similarities and differences between these different approaches to universals, I use a classification of different kinds of hypotheses. After introducing these central notions, I place modern descriptive research in its historical context and then consider some of the terminological, conceptual and methodological problems of this kind of research.

Different kinds of hypotheses

Most research involves, at some point, the generation and/or testing of hypotheses. This is a normal part of the scientific process of investigation and observation, of constructing and testing theories. I shall use the notion of a hypothesis here in order to analyse and compare different kinds of claims about translation universals.

A hypothesis is a tentative statement. It is not a statement of fact, but a claim that something *might* be true or worth considering. Some scholars prefer not to talk about hypotheses but prefer “claims”, or “arguments”; what I want to say below does not depend on the term “hypothesis” itself. We can distinguish various kinds of hypotheses. Some are more typical than others in particular fields of research, but all are relevant in the interdiscipline of translation studies. (For further discussion, see Chesterman 2000.) The main characteristics of hypotheses are of course well known in the philosophy of science (see e.g. Cohen and Nagel 1934, Popper 1963, Hempel 1966).

The basic hypotheses are *explanatory* ones. These are statements that suggest explanations for a given phenomenon; they suggest probable causes, reasons,

influences. Alongside these there are *descriptive* hypotheses: these make claims about what something *is*, what characteristics or structure it has. A descriptive hypothesis is a claim about how to describe something, and hence how to relate it to, and distinguish it from, other things. More specifically, it is a claim about particular features that (you think) are common to *all instances* of the thing you are describing. Formulating descriptive hypotheses is thus part of the categorization of phenomena.

Both explanatory and descriptive hypotheses can be tested via *predictive* hypotheses. For instance, if you think you have a good idea of the causal conditions that lead to a given phenomenon, you can test this idea by predicting that whenever these conditions exist, the phenomenon will follow, and then check how good your predictions are. Predictive hypotheses are usually more specific than explanatory ones, so that they can be better tested. Descriptive hypotheses also incorporate predictions: if all instances of a phenomenon are claimed to have feature F, this implies the prediction that the next instance you find will also have the feature F.

Explanatory and descriptive hypotheses combine to form a theory of the *explanandum*, the phenomenon they claim to describe and explain.

Suppose you are developing a theory about bananas and people's use of them, for instance. One relevant descriptive hypothesis might be that bananas have non-edible skins: this is one characteristic of all bananas, you claim, which distinguishes them from other kinds of fruit that have edible skins. Formulated as a prediction: all future bananas found or studied will have this feature. If you then find a kind of banana with a skin that can be eaten, you have to reject or refine your hypothesis. Formulating a descriptive hypothesis is thus a way of trying to see what the distinguishing features of something are. Testing a descriptive hypothesis is a way of checking how general the description is: does it really apply to all cases? If you then move on to wonder *why* banana-skins are like this, you need to generate explanatory hypotheses. (Because they preserve the fruit better than edible skins would? Would this explanation also apply to other such fruit?...)

Finally, there are *interpretive* hypotheses. These are claims about what something means, how it can best be understood or interpreted. Interpretive hypotheses are typical of hermeneutic research, although the actual term "hypothesis" is not so current in this sense. Niiniluoto (1983: 174), however, argues that the basic method of hermeneutic research is indeed the presentation and testing of "interpretive hypotheses". (See also Føllesdal 1979.) In my own work, I have used the term in order to underline a basic similarity between positivist and hermeneutic research approaches: both seek to make justified claims (hypotheses) that can be subsequently evaluated and tested in different ways.

A key word in interpretive hypotheses is the word *as* (in English). Translating, for instance, has been seen as a great many things: as rebuilding, recoding, changing clothes, performing, travelling, eating the dead... Each new way of seeing highlights

different aspects of it, and allows different insights. You test interpretive hypotheses in practice (not directly, against empirical evidence): do they indeed bring new insights, new understanding? Do they stimulate us to generate other new hypotheses of various kinds? Some scholars prefer not to use the term “hypothesis” in this meaning, because the process of hypothesis-testing works differently for these claims. Yet interpretive hypotheses also have a predictive sense: they implicitly predict that their adoption will bring new understanding etc. If it turns out that they do not seem fruitful, they eventually fade away.

With these conceptual tools in mind, let us now take a historical look at what scholars and translators have thought about translation universals. Any such thinking must have to do with descriptive hypotheses: the underlying goal is to discover something about what all translations have in common, something that distinguishes them from texts that are not translations. This would contribute to the general categorization of texts. If we find evidence of such features, we can then look for explanatory hypotheses which would plausibly account for them. We must start, however, with a preliminary interpretive hypothesis, about what we mean by a translation universal.

In simple terms, we can define a translation universal as a feature that is found (or at least claimed) to characterize all translations: i.e. a feature that distinguishes them from texts that are not translations. More strictly: to qualify as a universal, a feature must remain constant when other parameters vary. In other words, a universal feature is one that is found in translations regardless of language pairs, different text-types, different kinds of translators, different historical periods, and so on.

“Universal” prescriptions

The first evidence of universalist thinking about translation goes back to the prescriptive claims of early writers about what all translations should be like. In many of these writings we find a kind of ideal picture of a Platonic translation, and this image is described in terms that are assumed to apply indeed to all translations. Classic examples abound in the early literature: Dolet’s and Tytler’s translation principles, for instance. Here they are, paraphrased:

Translations should not be word-for-word renderings of the original.

Translations should avoid unusual words and expressions.

Translations should be elegant, not clumsy. (Dolet 1540; three of his five general principles)

Translations should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original.

Translations should be in the same style as their source texts.

Translations should be as natural as original texts. (Tytler 1797)

Hidden beneath these prescriptive statements about the universal characteristics of good translations there actually lie predictive hypotheses. What the authors of these statements are implying is this: *if* a translation has such-and-such a feature, people (readers, I myself) will react by thinking that it is a good translation. In other words, I say that this is the right way to translate. (For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Chesterman 1999.)

The weaknesses of this approach are obvious. These undifferentiated claims assume that all translations are of the same kind, and that the same quality criteria always apply. They are usually based on either Bible or literary translation: both these are rather special cases, so generalizations cannot validly be drawn from them. The claims are thus based on overgeneralizations. One way to get round this fallacy is to narrow the scope of the claims so that they apply not to all translations, universally, but only some of them, a subset. Recall the two prescriptive principles of St. Jerome (395), one for each of two different kinds of translation:

- Translations of sacred texts must be literal, word-for-word (because even the word order of the original is a holy mystery and the translator cannot risk heresy).
- Translations of other kinds of texts should be done sense-for-sense, more freely (because a literal translation would often sound absurd).

These too are implicitly predictive hypotheses, for the same reason as the previous cases mentioned.

“Universal” criticisms

Running alongside the Platonic translation ideal we also have another stream of thought seeking to establish generalizations about translations. It is a direct consequence of the prescriptive approach. Because the ideal translation must necessarily remain an ideal, all translations fail in some way. All translations are less than ideal; they are secondary, deficient, they always lose or change something, they betray the original, they are not faithful, or not beautiful, or both.

This view of the typical features of translations is presented by some critics of literary translations, and often by the general public who read translations of tourist brochures, menus and the like. The literary critics complain because translations are too free, and the general public complain if the translations they read are not free enough — i.e. if they sound unnatural.

One of the most recent examples of the first kind of criticism is represented by much of the work of Antoine Berman. Berman, it must be said, is not writing about *all* translation; but he does intend his comments to pertain to all literary translation, to all of this subset. Here is his list of what he calls the “deforming tendencies” of literary translation (Berman 1985; see also Munday 2001: 149–151).

- Rationalization (making more coherent)
- Clarification (explicitation)
- Expansion
- Ennoblement (more elegant style)
- Qualitative impoverishment (flatter style)
- Quantitative impoverishment (loss of lexical variation)
- Destruction of rhythms
- Destruction of underlying networks of signification
- Destruction of linguistic patternings (more homogeneous)
- Destruction of vernacular networks or their exoticization (dialect loss or highlighting)
- Destruction of expressions and idioms (should not be replaced by TL equivalent idioms)
- Effacement of the superimposition of languages (multilingual source texts)

A similar line of argument is to be found in Milan Kundera's ideas about translation, particularly the translations of his own works (Kundera 1993:123f.). He complains of the way translators violate metaphors, seek to enrich simple vocabulary, reduce repetition, spoil sentence rhythms by altering punctuation, even change the typography. It is interesting to note how some of these putative deficiencies recur in the descriptive work we shall come to below.

Examples of the second kind of reaction (the reaction to unnaturalness) can be frequently found in letters to newspapers by people complaining about translations of administrative documents, and in the amusement of tourists when faced with what has come to be known as Tourist English (see the Internet for examples!).

This pejorative approach also suffers from overgeneralization. In particular, it suffers from a restricted view of what constitutes an acceptable translation in the first place. This view is so narrow that a great many translations are automatically criticized, although they might be perfectly acceptable according to other criteria than those selected by the critic in question, e.g. relating to strict formal equivalence or flawless target language. With respect to the alleged weaknesses of much literary translation, one can point out that most readers of literary translations may well prefer a freer, more natural version anyway. More importantly, these literary critics overlook the fact that a given formal feature (repetition, say) may have quite different effects on readers in different cultures, where there may be quite different rhetorical and stylistic norms.

Berman's list of what he sees as typical features of literary translation is first of all a list of descriptive hypotheses: the claim is that these features can be found in literary translations (or at least in most of them, or in typical examples); that the features characterize literary translation in general.

But Berman is actually doing more than merely describing. By calling these features "deforming tendencies" (*tendances déformantes*) he is also making a value

judgement, and implying a prescriptive statement: literary translations, he implies, *should not* have these features. His list thus represents a mirror image of the earlier prescriptive claims. The claims made by Berman and Kundera (et al.) are also covert predictive hypotheses. Their authors imply: *if* a translation has these features, which I think are nasty features, people will react by not liking the translation. At least, discerning critics will react in this way.

We can also comment on an implicit interpretive hypothesis here. By choosing to call these features “deforming tendencies”, Berman reveals his underlying metaphor, the image by means of which he interprets his observations. The features are interpreted as “deformations”, i.e. as something twisted out of its true, natural shape, as a person’s foot may be deformed at birth. Only the pure, undistorted shape seems to be acceptable, i.e. the shape given by the original work. Any change of shape is a disfigurement (rather than, for instance, a new creation, a new form, valuable as such). Thus does Berman’s choice of image force us to see his argument and his data in a certain light, rather than in some other light.

To counter-balance these widespread criticisms we can of course also mention the self-evident fact that all translations have the positive characteristics of enabling people to read texts that are otherwise not accessible to them, etc. The point of this brief section has merely been to illustrate what has been one longstanding and influential tradition of universalist thinking about translation, and to show the links this tradition has with some of the hypotheses currently being investigated in descriptive work.

Two linguistic relations

Before we turn to contemporary descriptive research, let us pause here to consider the nature of the linguistic relations upon which all statements about universals seem to be based. What we have is three sets of texts. First, we have translations. These are related to two other kinds of texts, which we can call *reference corpora*: to source texts on the one hand, and to non-translations in the target language on the other.

The first relation is usually known as the relation of *equivalence*, interpreted in various ways. The second relation has been given many labels: we have referred to it above as the quality of naturalness; another term is the relation of acceptability. We could call it the relation of *target text family fit* (following the suggestion of an anonymous referee), or *textual fit* for short. This relation concerns the degree to which the linguistic profile of a translation matches the linguistic profile of the relevant family of texts in the target language; this textual family is made up of independently produced texts (not translated from source texts) of the same kind, with the same kind of subject matter and with the same kind of function. Some scholars refer to these texts as comparable texts; others call them parallel texts; still

others call them original texts. All these terms are problematic, as they all also have other uses. We could perhaps use the term *non-translations* to describe this group.

As we can see from the prescriptive and pejorative traditions discussed above, claims about the universal features of translations are actually claims about the two relations of equivalence and textual fit. The pejorative claims, more specifically, concern *differences* between translations and the two reference corpora: either differences in equivalence (translations are not faithful) or differences in textual fit (translations are not beautiful, not like natural texts).

In descriptive research, we deal with potentially universal features of the same two relations: between translations and their source texts, and between translations and non-translations in the target language. In order to facilitate the discussion, I shall call the first kind of universals *S-universals*, because they concern the way translators process the source text; the second kind are then *T-universals*, because they concern the way translators process the target language. (I originally thought this latter type could be called P-universals, from parallel texts; however, the ambiguous usage of the term “parallel” by different scholars is misleading. Hence this change of label, and hence also my preference for the term “non-translations”.)

Descriptive universals

Descriptive research using electronic corpora is the most recent approach to thinking about possible translation universals. I call this approach “descriptive” because it does not incorporate ideas about what translations should or should not be, but about what translations (typically) *are*. One of the origins of such work has been Frawley’s notion (1984) of translations as constituting a third code in their own right, distinct from the source-language and target-language codes. Another origin has been hypotheses like that of Blum-Kulka (1986) on explicitation, and yet another has been Toury’s (1995) proposals about translation laws. We should also mention the background of work in linguistics on language universals, and in sociolinguistics on language variation. Mona Baker’s work (starting with a seminal article in 1993) has helped to make this kind of corpus-based research into one of the main paradigms of contemporary translation studies.

Below are some examples of possible S-universals and T-universals. Note that these claims are hypotheses only; some have been corroborated more than others, and some tests have produced contrary evidence, so in most cases the jury is still out. Some of these hypotheses are also more abstract than others. They are all descriptive hypotheses: they purport to describe universal features of translations. However, as we saw above, descriptive hypotheses also have predictive implications, and such hypotheses can also be tested predictively, against new translations.

Potential S-universals

- Lengthening: translations tend to be longer than their source texts (cf. Berman's expansion; also Vinay and Darbelnet 1958: 185; et al.)
- The law of interference (Toury 1995)
- The law of standardization (Toury 1995)
- Dialect normalization (Englund Dimitrova 1997)
- Reduction of complex narrative voices (Taivalkoski 2002)
- The explicitation hypothesis (Blum-Kulka 1986, Klaudy 1996, Øverås 1998) (e.g. there is more explicit cohesion in translations)
- Sanitization (Kenny 1998) (more conventional collocations)
- The retranslation hypothesis (later translations tend to be closer to the source text; see *Palimpsestes* 4, 1990)
- Reduction of repetition (Baker 1993)

Potential T-universals

- Simplification (Laviosa-Braithwaite 1996: less lexical variety, lower lexical density, more use of high-frequency items)
- Conventionalization (Baker 1993)
- Untypical lexical patterning (and less stable) (Mauranen 2000)
- Under-representation of TL-specific items (Tirkkonen-Condit 2000, 2002)

The link between S-universals and T-universals can be quite complex. Take the hypothesis about interference, for instance. This claims that some aspects of the source-text form will inevitably be carried over into the translation. How do we arrive at this hypothesis? First of all, we notice certain differences between a set of translations and a set of non-translations: the translations do not, in some way, seem entirely natural. We wonder why this unnaturalness is there. Then we notice certain formal similarities between the translations and their source texts. We assume that these similarities are evidence of interference. The existence of this interference would offer an explanation for the unnatural features that first caught our attention: the source text has exerted an influence on the translator, a pull away from completely natural target language. If we have evidence to suggest that this pull also affects other translations, and still others, we end up thinking that interference may be a universal: an S-universal, because it manifests a relation (a similarity relation) between translations and their source texts.

This example illustrates the kinds of relations we are concerned with. In the case of S-universals, we are looking at both similarities (> interference) and differences (> shifts, strategies, changes). In the case of T-universals, the focus is more on differences; similarities here would merely indicate naturalness, not universal indicators of translations as a distinct class of text.

Scope, conditions

Genuine universals are the subject of unrestricted hypotheses: these claims aim to be valid for all translations of all kinds, in all times and places, universally. Such hypotheses thus have an unrestricted scope, or range of application. Other descriptive hypotheses start off with a more restricted scope in the first place, and concern only a subset of translations (recall Berman's list for literary translation, above). These are not therefore hypotheses about genuinely universal features, but they can still bring new knowledge when they are tested. They may even turn out to have a wider scope than first thought.

Translation research has made use of various types of limiting conditions in order to narrow the scope of claims. There are claims about features of translations between particular language pairs, in a given direction, perhaps concerning particular language items (e.g. the classic Vinay and Darbelnet 1958). Or claims about translations in a particular period in a particular culture (e.g. Toury 1995: 113f. on early 20th century Hebrew norms). Or claims about a particular type of translation (characterized e.g. by a given text type or skopos type: subtitling, technical, poetry, comic strips, gist translation...). Or claims pertaining to translations done by a particular translator (e.g. Baker 2000), or by translators of a particular kind (trainees; men/women; into L1 or L2; ...). Or claims pertaining to particular conditions of the publishing or editorial process, in-house stylistics conventions and the like (e.g. Milton 2001).

Each of these scope limitations thus defines a particular subset of translations or translators. We might find that given features are typical (or not typical) of some subset; or that given features seem to be typical (or not typical) of more than one subset. We can thus make progress either by starting with a very general claim and testing it out on specific data, or by starting with a more limited claim and testing to see whether it can also apply to a wider set of data. Additionally, of course, we can generate entirely new hypotheses, e.g. as a result of a case study that yields interesting results.

Problems with descriptive hypotheses

One problem is that of representativeness. Since we can never study all translations, not even all translations of a certain type, we must take a sample. The more representative the sample, the more confidence we can have that our results and claims are valid more generally. Yet our data may still be unrepresentative in some way that we have not realized. It is not a priori obvious, for instance, what we should count as corpus-valid translations in the first place: there is not only the tricky borderline with adaptations etc., but also the issue of including or excluding

non-professional translations or non-native translations, and even defining what a professional translation is (see Halverson 1998). Should we even include “bad” translations? They too are translations, of a kind...

Related to this is the problem of universality. Claims may be made that a given feature is universal, but sometimes the data may only warrant a restricted claim, if the data are not representative of all translations. Many “universal” claims have been made that actually seem to pertain only to literary or to Bible translation. More fundamentally, though: whatever translations we study, there is always the risk that our results will be culture-bound (Tymoczko 1998). Concepts of translation itself are culture-bound, for a start; even prototype concepts may be, too. We can perhaps never totally escape the limits of our own culture-boundness, even if this might be extended e.g. to a general “Western culture”.

As regards conceptualization and terminology in this area there is unfortunately still a great deal to be clarified. I made one proposal above, about distinguishing between S-universals and T-universals. Baker’s original use (1993) of the term “universal” seems to have to refer to T-universals, since her point of comparison is non-translations; however, several of the examples of previous research that she mentions are based on evidence from a comparison with source texts, and hence concern S-universals (such as the reduction of repetition).

Some scholars prefer to refer to these claims as hypotheses, such as the explicitation hypothesis (Blum-Kulka and others) or the simplification hypothesis (Laviosa), or the retranslation hypothesis. Others speak of laws: cf. Toury’s proposed laws of interference and standardization. Chevalier (1995) writes about “figures of translation”, comparable to rhetorical figures. Still other scholars prefer to look for core patterns, or simply widespread regularities.

When it comes to the hypotheses themselves we find a plethora of abstract terms that appear at first sight to mean more or less the same thing (e.g. standardization, simplification, levelling, normalization, conventionalization). Different scholars often operationalize these abstract notions in different ways. Sometimes they are used to refer to a feature of difference between translations and their source texts, and sometimes to a feature of difference between translations and non-translations. The resulting confusion leads to much reinventing of the wheel, and makes it hard to compare different results and claims. Furthermore, some of the terms used appear to be ambiguous between a process reading (from source text to translation) and a product reading (e.g. terms ending in *-tion* in English).

A final major problem has to do with causality: universals, if they exist, presumably have both causes and effects. Here, we can currently do little more than speculate as rationally as possible. The immediate causes of whatever universals there may be must be sought in human cognition — to be precise, in the kind of cognitive processing that produces translations. Constraints on cognitive processing in translation may also be present in other kinds of constrained communication,

such as communicating in a non-native language or under special channel restrictions, or any form of communication that involves relaying messages, such as reporting discourse, even journalism. It may be problematic, eventually, to differentiate factors that are pertinent to translation in particular from those that are pertinent to constrained communication in general.

Other kinds of explanations may be sought e.g. in the nature of translation as a communicative act, and in translators' awareness of their socio-cultural role as mediators of messages for new readers (see e.g. Klaudy 1996). Translators tend to want to reduce entropy, to increase orderliness. They tend to want to write clearly, insofar as the *skopos* allows, because they can easily see their role metaphorically as shedding light on an original text that is obscure — usually unreadable in fact — to their target readers: hence the need for a translation. Their conception of their role may give a prominent position to the future readers of their texts; this may even have been emphasized in their training. Additionally, economic and technical factors may be relevant, exerting their own pressure on the translator's work process. All such potential non-cognitive factors must eventually take their effect via the translator's cognition, though — consciously or unconsciously.

Research into the effects caused by potential universals is still in its infancy. Effects on readers, on translator trainers, and on translators themselves would all be worth studying. It may be that the more we know about T-universals, for instance, the more scholars or trainers will see them as undesirable features that should be avoided — at least in translations whose *skopos* includes optimum naturalness. On the other hand, as the sheer quantity of translations grows and target-language norms become blurred, it may be that readers will become more tolerant of apparent non-nativeness; different cultures might differ considerably in this respect. One effect of knowledge about S-universals on source-text writers might be a greater concern for the clarity of the source text, in order to facilitate the translator's task and lessen the need for explicitation. This in turn could lead to greater fidelity to the original.

Patterns

The search for universals is one way of seeking generalizations. This does not mean that unique particulars are overlooked: all translations are unique in some way. All three approaches mentioned above have been interested in general patterns rather than what makes a given translation unique. But even in unique particulars we may find patterns that remind us of other patterns we have come across elsewhere: no translation is absolutely unlike every other translation. What ultimately matters is perhaps not the universals, which we can never finally confirm anyway, but new knowledge of the patterns, and patterns of patterns, which helps us to make sense of what we are looking at.

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Note

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