Translation universals revisited

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According to the results of translation-based empirical research within the descriptive paradigm, transfer operations and the shifts that occur as a result of translators’ interventions are governed by norms, which represent general, standard practices built on informal social consensus (Toury 1995). Based on the scientific analysis of norms and general rules, the so-called translation universals were formulated describing the factors and qualities that distinguish translations from source texts and from authentic texts not produced through translation but originally written in the target language (Baker 1993). In the present study, I aim to summarise the theoretical conclusions drawn so far from the description of these observed translational features, as well as the results of the research into linguistic phenomena and laws that characterise translations in general, then I will synthesise and graphically represent the lessons learned in a theoretical model. Hopefully, it will provide help to understand and process the research data gained so far and in the future.

Selon les résultats des recherches empiriques menées au sein du paradigme descriptif, les opérations de transfert effectuées par des traducteurs et les changements qui se produisent à la suite des interventions des traducteurs sont régis par des normes représentant des pratiques générales construites sur un consensus social informel (Toury 1995). Sur la base de l’analyse scientifique des normes et des règles générales ont été formulés les soi-disant universaux de la traduction décritant les facteurs et les qualités qui distinguent les traductions des textes sources et des textes écrits à l’origine dans la langue cible. Dans cette étude, je tente de résumer les conclusions théoriques tirées jusqu’à présent de la description des caractéristiques de la traduction, ainsi que les résultats de la recherche sur les phénomènes linguistiques et les lois propres aux traductions en général, puis de récapituler et représenter graphiquement les enseignements dans un nouveau modèle théorique.

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1. The concept of translation universals

The endeavour to discover the general features of the ‘translational text’ (Károly 2007) started fairly early within translation studies. Jiří Levý (1965) considered it one of the main goals of translation research to determine the common linguistic features characterising translations – although he did not use the term ‘translation universal’ at the time – which called for rational, analytical evaluative methods. Widespread research into the general phenomena of translation was triggered by Mona Baker’s (1993) landmark paper, in which she deemed translation universals the basic principles of translation behaviour, regarding them as features that potentially determine the differences between translations and authentic target language texts. According to Baker, universal translation features are linguistic phenomena that typically characterise translations rather than original texts, and do not emerge in the translated text as the result of interference between the different language systems (Baker 1993, 243). Baker adds that these phenomena occur due to constraints that are inherent in the process of translation, therefore they should be considered universal (ibid., 246).

2. Phenomena categorised as translation universals

Citing the above-mentioned seminal paper by Baker (1993), Laviosa-Braithwaite, who also carried out her own corpus analyses for evaluating the general features of translation (1998; 2000), defined the characteristics typical of translations in a comprehensive entry in Encyclopedia of Translation Studies (1998) as follows:

Universals of translation are linguistic features which typically occur in translated rather than original texts and are thought to be independent of the influence of the specific language pairs involved in the process of translation. (Laviosa 1998, 288)

The author mentions the translation universals proposed by Baker (1993), namely simplification, explicitation, normalisation (conservatism in Baker) and adds the avoidance of repetitions present in the source text, Toury’s (1995) law of interference, i.e. discourse transfer, as well as the unusual distribution of target-language lexical items.

The more recent, 2009 edition of the Encyclopaedia reflects the changes and progress made in translation studies since the publication of Baker’s (1993) study.
Laviosa (2008, 306–311) first emphasises the claim made by Toury (2004) and Chesterman (2004), according to which the value of the general laws characterising translated texts lies in their explanatory power that enables them to clarify unique phenomena. In the new edition, Laviosa not only mentions Toury’s (1995) law of interference among the universals, but also presents the law of growing standardisation in detail. The author also describes Chesterman’s (2004) classification of translation universals. Chesterman believes that translation universals should be categorised based on the difference they represent compared to the source texts or compared to the characteristics of the texts originally written in the target language. Both types indicate differences as compared to benchmark texts: S-universals provide general insight into the differences between source texts and translations, while T-universals exhibit the typical differences between translations and non-translated texts.

3. The case against translation universals

Even though their existence is widely accepted, the definition of translation universals is far from being established within translation studies (Toury 2004; Chesterman 2004, 2010; Pym 2008, 2010; Malmkjær 2008). Pym (2010, 78) claims that a certain language phenomenon in translation cannot be considered universal unless it occurs always and exclusively in translations and not in other types of texts, thus in essence classifying the characteristics of translated texts among absolute linguistic universals (Greenberg 1963). However, empirical research (e.g. Puurtinen 2004; Saldanha 2004 and Becher 2011) seem to contradict the existence of features inherent in every translation, therefore the uncovered phenomena are not relevant in all text types and translation contexts (Tymoczko 1998).

Chesterman (1993, 3) calls for the formulation of probabilistic translational laws, as these cannot be considered universal for they allow for exceptions as well. He later asserts (Chesterman 2010) that it was unfortunate to refer to translational characteristic as universals in the first place, altering the original meaning of the concept, and claims that we should use the term universal in its ‘weaker’ sense with respect to the generally observable features of translation. Based on this, we seem to be dealing with the counterpart of absolute universals, i.e. statistical universals (Greenberg 1963). Thus, when talking about translation universals, we actually describe universal tendencies. We may paraphrase Englund Dimitrova’s remark about explicitation being potentially universal (2005, 40) with respect to general translation universals as follows: assuming that the linguistic features observed by researchers are universal phenomena in translation, we can only say that their potential emergence is universal, and not that they necessarily appear in each case.
Another theoretical problem that profoundly influenced empirical research is the question of the exact conceptual level where the potential translation universals should be defined. According to Pym’s (2008; 2010) interpretation, the term *universal* denotes actual, concrete linguistic phenomena that can be measured by scientific research tools. On the other hand, Toury (1995; 2004) advocates general laws, not unlike the scientific laws of nature, that can explain the behavioural tendencies of translators. Their great advantage is that, by virtue of another law, they can allow for exceptions too (2004, 29). Toury questions the point of researching concrete textual features, and warns against formulating commonplaces, e.g. that translation involves shifts (ibid., 22).

Instead of universal textual features, Klaudy talks about universal transfer operations (2004, 71) that translators perform in translation, and these may lead to general translational text features (Klaudy 1998; 2002). Pym (2008) considers risk aversion as the overall universal motivation for translation behaviour, whereas Halverson (2010) looks at translation universals as cross-linguistic influences. Thus, researchers have so far identified explanatory laws, transfer operations and textual features, motivations and influences, all of these concepts, however, obviously cannot be regarded as synonyms under the broader umbrella term of translation universals. We should rather assume a hierarchical, cause-and-effect relationship between them.

This problem is especially acute in the research into explicitation phenomena, in which case the difference and relationship between transfer operations and textual features is easily illustrated. Blum-Kulka (1986) formulated her original hypothesis about the increasing cohesive explicitness of target texts during translation from the source language, and she primarily focused on redundancy. By explicitness, Seguinot (1988) not only means redundancy, but also higher emphasis of certain linguistic items and concretisation of the target text’s information content, thereby also suggesting that this phenomenon is a textual feature. Becher (2010) distinguishes between explicitness and explicitation: he considers the former as being the expression of an information that would have been understood by the recipient anyway, and believes that the latter emerges when a certain target text is more explicit than the original text.

Baker (1993), however, regards explicitation – which can also manifest itself as an increase in the volume of texts – a general tendency among translators and a potential universal. Along these lines, based on the original definitions by Vinay and Darbelnet (1958) and Nida (1964), Klaudy (1998; 2000) interprets explicitation and its counterpart, implicitation, as super-categories of transfer operations that include various grammatical and lexical transfers, and produce generally observable textual features in the translated text: redundancy, concretisation and simplification.
Having recognised the confusion around the two terms – operation and textual feature – Pápai (2004) gives two definitions for the phenomenon of explicitation: on the one hand, she considers it an actual translational operation (*explicitation*), and on the other hand a textual feature (*explicitness*), manifesting itself in either the linguistic and extra-linguistic information added to the target text, or in content and logical links. Saldanha (2008) interprets explicitation as a strategy, which exerts a dual effect on the translated text: it increases both the redundancy, as well as the informativeness of the target language product.

Therefore, explicitation does not equal the explicitness, readability or process-ability of the target text. Empirical research analyses *explicitation* as an operation and increased *explicitness* as a textual feature – compared to source texts on the one hand, and texts originally written in the target language on the other hand – but these two terms do not mean the same. Explicitating operations do not always lead to a substantial increase in the explicitness of the translation as compared to source language texts (Øverås 1988). Yet in the research based on monolingual, comparative corpora, the increased length and explicitness of the translated text as compared to authentic texts is generally attributed to explicitation (e.g. Olohan and Baker 2000).

According to Saldanha (2008), explicitness does not necessarily indicate implicitness in the source language text, so we need to stress that the measurably increased explicitness of translations as compared to authentic target language texts might actually be the direct result of translators not performing implicitation where they could do so, which is in line with the asymmetry hypothesis put forward by Klaudy (2009), namely that translators prefer explicitation over implicitation where they have a choice. We may then consider this phenomenon – the missed opportunity to perform an implicitating transfer operation – as *pseudo-explicitation*, and similarly its counterpart, when the translator fails to undertake explicitation, as *pseudo-implicitation*. When Olohan and Baker (2000) attributed the greater explicitness of translations compared to non-translations to explicitation, they missed the fact that their results possibly reflect pseudo-explicitation, i.e. translators not omitting the reporting *that* from the source text.

While comparing Toury’s (1995) translational laws with the universals suggested by Baker (1996), Pym (2008) points out further conceptual and terminological overlaps and contradictions. He notes that Baker made no reference to Toury’s laws when formulating her universals. In addition to indicating Baker’s failure to relate to Toury’s laws, Pym mentions two further shortcomings with respect to Baker’s translation universals: first, that they all seem to describe the same phenomenon, and second, that all of them expound on Toury’s law of growing standardisation while disregarding his law of interference (Pym 2008, 321). Baker herself admits that part of the concrete linguistic phenomena classified as explicitation might also
be considered simplification. Pym, pointing out the blurred dividing line between the two universals, suggests that explicitation may actually be a subcategory of simplification, because its counterpart, implicitation can also be regarded as a form of simplification, albeit Baker does not mention this. Pym states the following:

So, we have some grounds for suspecting that all these universals are different aspects of the one underlying universal. In fact, the term “universal” here seems to be naming no more than the linguistic variables that operationalise then test the one underlying universal (which we should perhaps call a “law”?).

(2008, 230–231)

The situation is further complicated by the fact that there are not only overlaps between the individual potential universals but also contradictions; these, in fact, quite often emerge within the same universal as well. Simplification, for example, entails the shortening of sentences, which is inconsistent with the universal of explicitation, which should lead to an increase in textual length. Nevertheless, we have just seen that explicitation and simplification are overlapping categories in several respects. Pym believes that the situation of normalisation is similar. And if we consider interference, how can it be a translation universal at all, which are “independent of the influence of the specific language pairs involved in the process of translation” (Laviosa 1998, 288), when its existence is by virtue dependent on the interaction of two languages? The contradictions of the allegedly universal phenomena may be the result of the conflicting forces guiding the translation process. This might be the point at which the universal textual features suggested by Baker (1996) and Toury’s (1995) probabilistic laws interact, although they point in different directions.

The empirical research into translation universals supports Pym’s (2008) arguments that there are several overlaps and contradictions between translation- al features. For example, Laviosa (2009) discusses Toury’s (1995) law of growing standardisation along with normalisation. Laviosa believes that this unique translation phenomenon is expressed in the simplification of text structures and in disambiguation, i.e. in two other universals. Vanderauwera (1985) groups the features she examines around two conflicting poles. These features are discussed in the literature as the manifestations of explicitation and implicitation, but the author wishes to support the universals of simplification and normalisation with her results. According to Øverås’ (1998) data, the increasing cohesion resulting from explicitation approximates the highest level of cohesion in the target language norms. Pápai (2004) notes that the grammatical elements added to the text as a result of explicitation may lead to a decrease in lexical variability, thereby causing simplification. The hypothesis by Tirkkonen-Condit (2004) about the underrepresentation of ‘unique’ target language specific items is usually cited in connection with the
empirical research into Toury’s (1995) law of interference, despite the fact that Tirkkonen-Condit herself does not associate the phenomenon with direct negative interference, but suggests a passive, concealed interference and discusses it as the opposite of normalisation. According to Denver (2009), the hypothesis of ‘unique’ items overrides the hypothesis of explicitation as well. Becher (2010) points out that the results of Olohan and Baker (2000) from their corpus analysis can also be linked to the (collective) effect of alleged universals other than explicitation. While examining the avoidance of repetitions, Károly (2012) asserts that reference items are replaced in the target text with a more explicit type of repetition.

When suggesting a hierarchy of translation phenomena, Pym concludes that simplification might be the comprehensive category for universals (2008, 321), but the results of the research into universals indicate that the ‘underlying universal’ may very well be the combination of explicitation and implicitation. In line with Klaudy’s (1998; 2002) observations that the lexical and grammatical transfer operations involving explicitation and implicitation result in simplification and redundancy in the target text, we can safely say that failing to perform implicitation due to interference may also produce a target text more explicit than texts originally written in the target language (thus we may coin this failure to implicitate ‘pseudo-explicitation’), and the omission of explicitating operations may lead to the underrepresentation of ‘unique’ target language items (‘pseudo-implicitation’).

4. Revisiting translation universals

The theoretical model I will present here in an attempt to understand the formation and workings of so-called translation universals does not actually contain a lot of genuinely ‘new’ ideas. All major points necessary for highlighting the connections between the general characteristics of translated texts and for clarifying the relationship of the seemingly contradictory or overlapping phenomena have already been discussed in the previous chapters. Therefore, I will now simply synthesise and graphically present the conclusions to resolve the above discussed theoretical problems.

4.1 Toury’s (1995) two laws and gravitational pull

The so-called ‘third code’ is created as a result of the combined impact of the source text and the target language norms, though, it differs from both in its features (Frawley 1984). Halverson (2003; 2007) attempts to explain the concept of translation universals through the general characteristics of human cognitive processes
and – in line with Frawley’s (1984) earlier theory – views translation as a process between two opposing gravitational forces. The pull of these two forces may result in excessive adherence to the norms, i.e. target language pull, or the unusual distribution of certain target language elements attributed to interference, i.e. source language pull. However, the force of gravitational pull may be considerably influenced by the context of the actual translation event (2003, 221). We can represent the theory of gravitational pull in the translation process as shown below in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. The translation process at the intersection of two attracting gravitational forces (Halverson 2003)](image)

The two forces pointing towards opposing gravitational fields are clearly in accordance with Toury’s (1995) theory about probabilistic translational laws: the laws of growing standardisation and interference. In fact, even Halverson (2003, 218) draws a parallel between the two theories. The law of growing standardisation stipulates that the idiosyncratic features of the source text are frequently modified during translation in favour of the general expressive devices common in the target language (Toury 1995, 268), in line with target language gravitational pull. And according to the law of interference, translators adapt the characteristic features of the source text to the target text (ibid., 275). Such discourse transfer may be either negative or positive: interference is negative if the translated text deviates from established target language rules – thus the end result is a flawed language product. Positive interference may manifest itself in changes in the distribution of certain grammatical forms or lexical items – or even their complete avoidance – due to the influence of the source text. The latter corresponds to source language gravitational pull – as defined by Halverson (2003) –, present behind the creation of the translational text, while negative interference equals an extreme application of the law, and it results in an incorrect target language text. Nonetheless, the translation process involves both kinds of transfer, which, however, can be offset by translators, depending on their professional experience and knowledge (Toury 1995, 273).
Similarly to Halverson (2003, 221), Toury (1995, 271–278) had also pointed out that in the context of translation, the implementation of his probabilistic laws is influenced by socio-cultural, extra-linguistic factors. Among other things, Toury claims that the more peripheral translations are in the target language culture, the more translated texts endeavour to conform to the general, established practice of the system of the target language, i.e. the law of standardisation does not exert its influence on the translation process and thus on the produced text in all cases or with the same intensity. In a similar fashion, the tolerance towards interference increases when translators work from a language that has a higher prestige than the target language culture. The translation context includes several further linguistic and extra-linguistic factors that influence the process: these include the competence of the translator (Toury 1995; Klaudy 1996; Englund Dimitrova 2005; Makkos and Robin 2014); individual tendencies (Saldanha 2008); socio-physiological factors (Heltai 2002); overt or covert translation (House 1997); political beliefs (Bánhegyi 2011); the direction of translation (House 2004; Baumgarten 2007). Pym (2008) states that since we are talking about probabilistic laws depending on several factors, it is perfectly natural to observe conflicting tendencies at the level of textual features and the linguistic variables of translation (ibid., 324).

4.2 The revisited theoretical model of translation universals

The above discussed gravitational pull, dependent on the translation context, and the probabilistic laws of translation, pointing in two opposing directions, are in fact the constraints inherent in the translation process (Baker 1993), and responsible for the 'translational text' (Károly 2007) with its characteristic linguistic features. Under the influence of the laws, translators perform lexical and grammatical transfer operations (Klaudy 2003) in order to give across the meaning of the source text into the target language. Among transfer operations, lexical concretisation, division, addition, compensation and grammatical concretisation, division, elevation and addition entail explicitation, while lexical and grammatical generalisation, contraction, omission, as well as grammatical lowering entail implicitation. Transposition and replacement can be linked to both super-categories of transfer operations, i.e. to both implicitation and explicitation (Klaudy 1998; 2004). The transfer operations that entail explicitation and implicitation, in their cumulative effect, may result in simplification, redundancy and disambiguation in the translated text (Klaudy 2002; Pápai 2004). Thus, they are also responsible for the creation of the universal textual features of translations, the concrete linguistic phenomena that can be measured by scientific research tools. Figure 2 below attempts to illustrate the process for the
inception of translation universals, based on the relationship between the gravitational forces discussed above and presented in Figure 1.

Figure 2. The model for the inception of translation universals

According to House (2008, 16), the potential urge of translators to intervene while translating, through their transfer operations, might also be considered universal. This intervention may mean the manipulation of the source text beyond all linguistic necessities for the purpose of meeting the recipient’s needs. The execution of optional transfer operations entailing explicitation and implicitation is governed by higher level norms (Weissbrod 1992, 155), their use is influenced by all the factors that have an impact on the emergence of the laws guiding them. Pym (2008) assumes a motivation behind the whole process of translation that can be considered universal, and manifests itself in translators’ risk-aversion: translators perform transfer operations that eliminate the risks jeopardising successful communication. These operations, however, might cause text-level ‘shifts’ (S-universals) and ‘drifts’ (T-universals) in the translated text (Chesterman 2004) not only through their excessive use but also when translators fail to implement them (pseudo-explicitation and pseudo-implicitation), thereby creating the so-called ‘third code’.

I would like to illustrate the comprehensive model for the inception of translation universals by a characteristic linguistic phenomenon in the Hungarian language. Hungarian translators often encounter the problem of dealing with passive structures when translating from an Indo-European language into Hungarian. This structure is common in English, German and Russian, however, passive conjugation
has vanished from the Hungarian language, and it has a strange, archaic feel in contemporary language use. In cases like this, translators need to perform some sort of grammatical transfer operation. Yet, according to Klaudy (2003), this operation is far from being automatic: translators have a number of options to choose from, and they pick the appropriate linguistic form after conscious deliberation. The transfer operations available to translators include the predicative structure with an adverbial participle (Klaudy 2003), which is the most obvious way to express the passive aspect in Hungarian. Still, translators do not dare to use the adverbial participle, for it is widely considered unacceptable in stylistic terms, labelled a Germanism, and its alleged spreading is usually attributed to translators – even though it is a perfectly legitimate Finno-Ugric item of the language. So, as a result of a linguistic ‘superstition’, translators avoid this structure at all costs, even more so than the authors of authentic texts (Robin 2015). Keeping in mind the assumed needs of the target language recipients, and driven by the desire to eliminate the risk of using questionable language items, jeopardising their professional reputation, Hungarian translators, under the force of positive interference, implement grammatical elevation, raise the participle clause to the sentence level, and use linguistic forms that are widely accepted in the target language – conjugated verbs. This process contributes to the disappearance of a unique target language structure in translated texts, thus resulting in the unusual distribution of certain lexical items, simplification, redundancy and greater explicitness – all of which are considered universal textual features of the third code.

5. Conclusion and outlook

In this study, I have attempted to summarise the theoretical conclusions drawn so far from the description of generally observable translational features, as well as the results of the research into linguistic phenomena that characterise translations in general, then I synthesised and graphically represented the lessons learned in a theoretical model. Caught up in the tug-of-war between the source text and target language norms, translators aim to strike a balance between interference and the law of growing standardisation while creating the target text. Meanwhile, they perform explicitating and implicitating transfer operations, the excessive use or lack of which – due to the limited experience or knowledge of translators on the consequences of given transfer operations – may result in the universal textual features of translation. In order to offset the overuse of norm-based explicitation and implicitation, foster the processability of the translated text and meet the needs of the target language recipients, translators may perform editing procedures as well, taking into account the factors shaping the context. It has to be noted, however,
that the optional editing operations may also contribute to unnecessary redundancy and disambiguation, therefore translators need to consider the explicit saturation of the target text (Makkos and Robin 2014) and the dangers of their personal interpretations (Levý 1965; Blum-Kulka 1986).

Although the aim of descriptive translation studies is to uncover and explain the characteristics of the translation process without passing judgment, the research and studies about universals often point out the relationship between translation features and text quality. The general characteristics of the translation process are dubbed the translators’ ‘disease’ by Levý (1965, 78). In her influential work, Blum-Kulka (1986) makes similar observations while examining the shifts in coherence. She declares that the translation process necessarily entails certain changes in the target text. Nevertheless, she also asserts that the shifts in coherence often depend on the misguided decisions by translators (ibid., 30). Later studies and the empirical research also demonstrate the harmful side effects of translation universals in translated texts (see for example Tirkkonen-Condit 2004; Kujämaki 2004; Heltai 2005, 2011).

As the general characteristics of translated texts are usually mentioned when differentiating between original texts and translations, translators need to be aware of them, so that they can offset such characteristics by employing translators’ strategies when needed (Chesterman 2010). Although the transfer operations entailing explicitation and implicitation can be linked to the risk-aversion of translators, they can pose covert risks. Of course, the degree of risk depends on the type and intended purpose of the texts: excessive redundancy in a literary text is perhaps a great error, while the concretisation of a political document based on personal interpretation can also have severe repercussions. Thus, we need to call the attention of prospective and practicing translators to these risks, and in fact, we need to point them out to active revisers and also to our colleagues in reviser training, since revisers can modify the decreasing linguistic variety as well as the redundancy and unnecessary disambiguation caused by translators, and they can optimise the explicitness and coherence of the translated text through the necessary revisional interventions. The translators’ ‘disease’ (Levý 1965) needs to be cured, and the ‘losses’ (Blum-Kulka 1986) need to be offset, and this task, in addition to making the obligatory correction of translational, grammatical and spelling mistakes, eventually falls to the editors and revisers of translated texts.
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