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SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL THESIS

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TRANSLATION UNIVERSALS IN REVISED TEXTS

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1. Introduction

One of the core research areas in translation studies seeks to determine the general linguistic features of translated texts. Several researchers find the quest for translation universals too ambitious (House 2008), caution against it (Chesterman 2004), and warn about formulating trivialities (Toury 2004). However, empirical studies have found evidence for the presence of certain linguistic features in translated texts (Laviosa 1998, 2009), which are more common in translation than in original writing, regardless of the systemic features of the language pair in question and the direction of translation. These linguistic features include simplification, the avoidance of repetitions, explicitation, transfer of textual characteristics of the source language, the unusual distribution of lexical items, conventionality, normalisation, the lack of target language specific unique items and ‘levelling out’ (Baker 1995, Laviosa 1998, 2009).

Analyses of translation universals, however, often fail to take into account that the corpora on which the research is based usually consist of revised translations, which not only exhibit traits of the translators’ strategy and their transfer operations, but also those of the revisers. This raises the question how revisers modify the translators’ operations—if they modify them at all—in the target text. It is also unclear whether the features deemed to be the result of translation i.e. the linguistic patterns characteristic of translated texts are in fact universal features unique to translated texts only, or whether they should be examined in a broader domain of communication.

While analysing translation universals I started to speculate that revisional modification that are inexplicable, controversial or often deemed unnecessary might actually be linked to the general linguistic features described above. Research in translation studies (e.g. Tirkkonen-Condit 2004, Chesterman 2010) suggest that the so called translation universals – often considered as the distinguishing features of translated texts – primarily characterise “mediocre” translations. Revisers working with translations and
seeking to correct texts by applying global strategies at macro level (Horváth 2009) while also bearing in mind the norms of the target language (Mossop 2007, Šunková 2011) might modify translation “anomalies” that translators might be unaware of. After all, these “anomalies” are not actual grammatical or spelling mistakes but linguistic features characteristic of the so-called “third code” (Frawley 1984). Thus, it is worth taking a closer look at revisers’ work to see whether they influence the dominance of universals.

2. Relevance

At the theoretical level, the results of the study described in the dissertation can contribute to the analysis of the general characteristics of translated texts, and also help to pinpoint factors influencing their occurrence (Toury 2004). Studies concerning translation universals, in particular explicitation, (Pym 2008, Becher 2010, Chesterman 2010, Heltai 2011) increasingly call for the clarification of the theoretical background behind translation-specific phenomena. The true nature of these phenomena needs to be established, since the study of translation universals has practical implications for the education and professional activities of translators.

The findings might also broaden our understanding of previously less well-known features of revision, and can contribute to the description of revisers’ work. I hope that the dissertation will contribute to the literature about revisers’ activities and serve as a starting point for future research. If we want revisers to be true professionals doing quality, conscientious work, they cannot be expected to somehow “pick up” the knowledge necessary for their profession. Theoretical and empirical research needs to be carried out, which can then serve as a basis for the training of future revisers.

The practical relevance of the study is twofold: professional translators and revisers can draw conclusions from the findings concerning their work, and instructors training future revisers will be able to determine what to focus on during translation and the revision of translated texts. After
all, universals—which can be considered the telltale signs of translation—
primarily characterise “fairly poor” translations, and as such, in theory, can
be eliminated by the conscious improvement of professional competence.

3. Objectives

The aim of the present study was to determine what happens to translation
universals during revision, i.e. whether revisers modify the—presumably—
general linguistic characteristics typical of translations while revising a text.
My research focuses on revision operations, which will be analysed to
determine whether they modify the linguistic features mentioned among
translation universals. I will not seek to ascertain whether translation
universals occur in the texts of the corpus used. As a starting point I take it
as evident that the translation phenomena discussed in the literature are, to
some extent, relevant to the analysed translated texts. Based on the transfer
operations identified during the contrastive text analysis it is possible to
speculate on the presence and dominance of translation universals in the
corpus, these, however, need to be explored in another empirical study.

4. Research questions

In view of the above, my research is primarily concerned with whether
revisers modify the linguistic characteristics typical of translations, the so-
called translation universals, while revising a text. In order to answer this,
additional research question have been formulated, and are listed below:

(1) Are there any statistically measurable differences between draft
translations and revised texts, which could point to the modifications of
translation universals?
(2) Do revisers make modifications to the text in addition to obligatory
corrections? And if they do, what are these modifications?
(3) Do revisers perform independent explicitation and implicitation?
(4) Do they change the explicitating and implicitating transfer operations performed by the translators?
(5) What is the distribution of revisers’ explicitating and implicitating interventions, and how can the most frequent operations be categorised?
(6) Do revisers modify the level of explicitness in translated texts?

5. Research hypotheses

Translation universals can be considered deviations from target language norms, since they distinguish translated texts from originals (Baker 1993, Laviosa 1998). On the other hand, revision can be regarded as conformance to the norms (Mossop 2007, Šunková 2011). Thus, we might suppose that revisers—besides checking for equivalence, spelling and grammar—make modifications in the texts to bring them closer to the target language norms, thereby reducing the dominance of the linguistic phenomena classified as translation universals. Based on the research questions, the hypothesis can be broken down to sub-hypotheses as follows:

(1) There are statistically measurable differences between draft translations and revised texts, suggesting that translation universals are modified.
(2) Revisers modify translators’ explicitating and implicitating operations, since the overuse or lack of these might result in the occurrence of translation universals.
(3) Besides making obligatory corrections, revisers modify translators’ unnecessary transfer operations and perform interventions where the translator fails to do so.
(4) Besides modifying translators’ operations, revisers perform individual explicitation and implicitation to optimise the lexical and grammatical redundancy and explicitness of translated texts.
(5) Revision has its own universal linguistic features.
6. The revisional corpus

The revisional corpus contains original English texts, their Hungarian draft translations and their edited versions. All the analysed texts belong to contemporary fiction. This genre is characterised by few constraints: its use of language is not bound by terminology, set phrases and canonical forms typical of specialised texts, or by peculiarities associated with high literature. This makes it ideal for analysing general trends. Künzli (2006) states that in the case of specialised translations, revisers get stuck at the word level, and disregard text-level problems, which is substantiated by Horváth’s (2009) research. As translation universals include text-level phenomena, I needed texts where these are likely to occur.

The texts included in the corpus were selected at random. The date of publication, however, the genre and the popularity of the Hungarian edition were taken into account, because I wanted to analyse books that had been accepted by the readers. The translators and revisers of the texts work as freelancers, so I could disregard the in-house traditions of the various publishers. Ten different pairs of translators and revisers worked on the texts. Only two translators produced more than one translation, but these were given to different revisers. The texts were provided by the publishers.

7. Research methods

The empirical research conducted for the present dissertation was based on quantitative and qualitative methods. It combines the advantages of objective, quantifiable research approaches with focused, in-depth methods, ensuring validity and reliability. Computer-aided analysis was performed on the entire revisional corpus. Shifts at text-level were sought to be identified in the whole corpus. In order to draw general conclusions, the operations causing the phenomena identifiable at text-level through computer-aided analysis were also needed to be examined.
7.1 Computer-aided analysis

The texts were provided by the publishers in digital format, which made it possible to subject them to automatic, computer-aided analysis. Since I did not use annotations in the texts, doing lexicogrammatical analysis was not feasible, but I was still able to carry out certain statistical calculations. The computer-aided analysis was aimed at finding the answer to the first research question described above, that is, whether there are any statistically measurable differences between draft translations and revised texts, which could point to modifications of translation universals. The following were performed on the entire revisional corpus: comparing the length of the texts, counting the revisional operations, determining the number of sentences and words, calculating the standardised type/token rate, establishing the unique vocabulary typical of each text, analysing lexical density, comparing the lexical profile of the texts, and determining the standard deviation of the numerical data.

Based on Szirmai’s (2005) suggestions, the analysis was carried out using version 6.0 of Wordsmith Tools, the Word Count and the Text Lex Compare function of Lex Tutor. Significance and standard deviation were calculated using SPSS 14.0, a statistical analysis program. Each version of a text—the English original, the Hungarian draft translation and the revised translation—was stored and analysed separately, which enabled the comparison of the novels and their different versions.

7.2 Contrastive text analysis

During the contrastive, qualitative analysis, I examined twenty sentences from each version of the ten separate novels. First, I performed contrastive text analysis on the draft translations and the original source texts to identify the translator’s explicitating and implicitating operations based on Klaudy’s
(1997) typology for transfer operations. Second, following Klaudy’s (1999) and En gland Dimitrova’s (2005) typology, I grouped the identified transfer operations into different categories: obligatory rule-based, optional norm-based and editorial operations. Third, I compared the draft translations to the revised versions to see how revisers modified the translators’ operations, and whether they performed any explicitation or implicitation—as well as the typology of these interventions—independent from the translators’ transfer operations. Fourth, I analysed how the categories of the different operations performed by the translators and revisers were distributed. Fifth, I calculated the shifts in the linguistic explicitness of the texts using Makkos and Robin’s (2011) index of explicitness. Finally, I collated the data and, supported by significance analysis, interpreted it to determine general trends. I ensured reliability by using double coding.

8. Summary of results

The aim of my empirical research was to find out whether revisers perform operations during their work that have the potential to modify the presumed translation universals. The quantitative and qualitative analyses suggest that revisers carry out operations in the text in addition to correcting translation, grammatical and spelling mistakes. These additional operations reduce the dominance of the phenomena classified as translation universals, that is, they lower the number of text-level “anomalies”.

Computer-aided analysis has shown that the revision process produces differences between draft translations and revised texts, albeit the contrast has not proved statistically significant in any of the examined language variables. Revision can be regarded as tertiary text composition, as the reviser does not create new text, merely modifies the translation. As a consequence of the revisers’ work, the length of the texts and the average length of sentences are generally shortened, while the number of sentences
grows. The type/token rate and the lexical density typically increases. Revised texts have a richer vocabulary and contain more unique words than translated versions. Furthermore, the ratio of frequent words to all words, and the distribution of frequent/less frequent words decreases. General revision trends therefore undermine the dominance of the universals suggested by Baker (1995), Laviosa (1998) and Tirkonnen-Condit (2004). Linguistic redundancy, the rate of lexical simplification is reduced.

It was also demonstrated, however, that the revised versions, as regards their statistical features, resembled each other even more than translated texts. The data shows levelling out, which supports Baker’s (1995) earlier hypothesis about this phenomenon in translations. The translation universal of avoiding repetitions (Toury 1991, Baker 1995) is further strengthened, not weakened in revised texts. Moreover, revisers, just like translators, split sentences to facilitate understanding (Fabricius-Hansen 1998). Thus, it can be supposed that some of the language phenomena previously considered universal to translation are in fact editing strategies, since editing a text’s redundancy and information content is an integral and often-used element of both translation and revision (Mossop 2001).

The contrastive analysis of the selected texts revealed which micro-level operations might contribute to the macro-level differences between the translated and revised versions. The analysis of the link between translators’ and revisers’ operations confirmed the conclusions of the computer-aided analysis. Besides checking for equivalence and performing obligatory corrections in grammar and spelling, revisers first and foremost employ grammatical and lexical interventions guided by editing strategies to reduce linguistic redundancy and enrich vocabulary, curbing the dominance of certain linguistic phenomena that are deemed translation universals, such as simplification, redundancy and the underrepresentation of unique target language items. These phenomena may arise from the overuse or lack of explicitating and implicitating transfer operations of translators.
Computer-aided analysis indicated increased deviation from general revision trends in texts where revisers made a significant amount of changes. The number and significance of revision operations correlated with the amount of transfer operations employed by the translators. Revisers improved the text more where translators had not carried out enough operations, and reversed the operations where necessary to prevent their excessive use. While translators primarily employed grammatical transfer operations, the ratio of grammatical and lexical operations carried out by revisers varied according to the translators’ operations and the redundancy of the translated text. Omission was the most frequently implemented change by revisers in both lexical and grammatical operations. This is hardly unexpected, as translators make a considerable amount of optional additions when transferring meaning between languages. Concretisation, generalisation and addition were also important operations employed by the revisers. These operations increase the text’s type/token rate and lexical density, and decrease its grammatical and lexical redundancy. Another operation facilitating processability apart from splitting sentences is grammatical transposition, which, however, does not produce statistically measurable results during computer-aided analysis.

In the texts produced by translators, the majority of grammatical transfer operations were rule-based or norm-based, while most lexical transfers were editorial operations. Revisers seem to prefer editorial operations in both categories. While editing the information content and redundancy of a text, translators clearly favour explicitation, which proves Blum-Kulka’s (1986) and Klaudy’s (2001) hypothesis. Revisers, on the other hand, perform more grammatical implicitation than explicitation. As far as lexical operations are concerned, revisers prefer explicitation, in particular concretisation, and overall, they employ more transfer operations for explicitation. As a result of this, the explicitness of the resulting text versions was usually increased by both translation and revision.
The differences between the data for translated and revised texts from computer-aided and contrastive analysis may vary from text to text. Certain variables might produce outliers, or they can even deviate from general revision trends depending on the peculiarities of the source text, the quality of translation and individual revision trends. Revisers therefore differentiate according to the vocabulary and linguistic redundancy of the given text. They might even go against general revision trends, and increase redundancy where necessary, limit the avoidance of repetition, decrease the extent and richness of the vocabulary used, and thus, the information burden as well. This way, they move these variables closer to the “normal” degree characteristic of the target language and the style of the source text. The differences are manifested in the texts’ changes of explicitness, and it can be stated that the stylistic characteristics and individual drafting features typical of original texts become more pronounced as a result of revision.

9. Reviewing the hypotheses

Researchers in translation studies warn that translators’ operations using explicitation or implicitation might develop into a “translators’ disease” (Levý 1965), which needs to be cured, or lead to “losses” (Blum-Kulka 1986), which need to be made up for. In the translation process this is done by the reviser, who, besides performing the obligatory corrections, provides a sort of post-operative pain management or rehabilitation by administering norm-based and editing interventions. The revisers’ aim is to make the target language text comprehensible, they improve (Mossop 2001, Martin) it to make it suitable for the target audience. Since the dominance of translation universals is linked to the lower quality of the text (Blum-Kulka 1986, Tirkkonen-Condit 2004, Scarpa 2006), I assumed that revisers employ operations that move the text closer to target language norms and reduce the dominance of the phenomena classified as translation universals. This hypothesis can be broken down into several points.
9.1 Statistical differences between translated and revised texts

The computer-aided statistical analysis sought to show whether text-level differences appear between the translated and revised versions as a result of the reviser’s work. Since researchers of translation universals (Baker 1995, Laviosa 1998) regard lexical and grammatical redundancy, simplification and the lack of unique target language elements as general characteristics of translated texts, and since these phenomena can be linked to a text’s lower quality (Tirkkonen-Condit 2004, Scarpa 2006, Rabadan et al 2009), I assumed that revised texts exhibit statistically measurable differences that point to the reduction of translation universals. The results of the analysis proved that revisers use operations that reverse the above mentioned trends. As a result of revision, the length of the texts shortens, the type/token rate increases, revised texts contain more unique words, and the ratio of frequent words to all words as well as the distribution of frequent/less frequent words decreases. Furthermore, the number of sentences grows, while the number of words drops, which facilitates understanding. Therefore, vocabulary is enriched (i.e. it shows greater variability), simplification and grammatical redundancy are restrained. Although the numerical data for the translators’ and revisers’ subcorpora did not demonstrate significant differences—after all, revision is only tertiary text composition—the results definitely point to one direction, which is indicative. Based on the above, the first hypothesis can be considered as confirmed.

9.2 Modifying translators’ operations during revision

Through the contrastive text analysis examining the correlations between translators’ and revisers’ operations I aimed to find out what operations revisers employ apart from the obligatory corrections, and whether they modify the translators’ operations. I hypothesized that revisers modify
translators’ explicitating and implicitating operations, since the overuse or lack of these can result in the occurrence of certain translation universals (Levý 1965, Pápai 2001). The results of the text analysis show that revisers do change translators’ operations. They either modify the operations—by making further explicitation or implicitation—or permanently delete them from the text, in effect, reversing certain changes. These modifications and deletions occurred most frequently in texts where the obligatory correction of translation mistakes was needed or where the translator employed great quantities of transfer operations producing explicitation or implicitation. Therefore, on account of the data, the second hypothesis can be regarded as confirmed as well.

9.3 Deleting unnecessary operations, making up for missing ones

While analysing the operations carried out by translators and revisers, another hypothesis was formulated stating that besides making obligatory, rule-based corrections, revisers modify translators’ unnecessary operations and perform transfer operations in case the translator fails to do so. The above mentioned modifications and deletions by the revisers primarily concerned texts where the number of transfer operations producing explicitation or implicitation was significantly higher than required by the original text. In these cases, the aim of the revisers with the modification or deletion of the translators’ operations was—apart from making obligatory corrections to the translation—to limit linguistic redundancy or to reverse the translators’ operations producing implicitation. When the translator made too many additions, the reviser balanced this with omissions, while ensuring the optimal level of explicitness by concretisation. By contrast, overuse of omissions were compensated for by additions. Sentences that had been unnecessarily split, were merged by grammatical contraction, moving the text closer to the original version. When the translator had not
considered the expectations of the recipient, the reviser split sentences to facilitate understanding. Similarly, norm-based sentence-level elevations producing grammatical redundancy were compensated for by lowering. So, the results of the contrastive text analysis confirm the research hypothesis about revisers curbing unnecessary operations by translators and making up for missing ones. Thus, revisers’ primary objective is to optimise linguistic redundancy and the information content of the text.

9.4 Independent interventions

During the contrastive text analysis of translated and revised texts I also sought to find out whether revisers primarily improve the translations’ use of language and information content by independent interventions or they simply modify translators’ operations. I assumed that besides modifying and deleting translators’ operations, revisers perform individual explicitating and implicitating interventions guided by editing strategies to optimise the lexical and grammatical redundancy and linguistic explicitness of translated texts. The aggregate results of the study indicate that revisers principally conduct individual operations while checking, correcting and editing texts. The hypothesis about individual interventions by revisers can therefore be considered confirmed. However, there are exceptions to the general trend in revision. In certain cases revisers’ most frequent interventions involved modification of the translators’ operations. Also, revisers sometimes deleted the transfer operations that were deemed incorrect or unnecessary, or in other instances, the number of both modifications and deletions exceeded the amount of individual interventions. In these texts, however, the number of modifications and deletions was not higher than usual. The difference was caused by the low number of individual interventions performed by the participant revisers.
9.5 Universals of revision

On the basis of Horváth’s findings and the studies published about translation universals I assumed that certain general phenomena might be observed in revision. The results of the present study contradict Horváth’s (2009) findings to some extent and suggest that apart from word-level omissions and additions, sentence-level interventions can be considered typical revisional interventions. Moreover, since revisers apply global strategies at macro level when approaching a text, they can “improve” the whole text by conducting word-level operations. During the computer-aided analysis it was demonstrated that revised texts, as regards their statistical features, resembled each other even more than their translated versions, that is, the research data indicated levelling out. The translation universal of avoiding repetitions is further strengthened, not weakened in revised texts. Revisers, just like translators, split sentences to facilitate understanding. Accordingly, it can be supposed that some language phenomena previously considered universal translation features are in fact editing strategies, and editing a text’s information content and linguistic redundancy is part of both translation and revision (Mossop 2001).

Therefore, in translation studies literature, out of the universal features deemed typical for translated texts, we should only regard certain forms of simplification as genuinely translation-related: poor vocabulary—with the lack of the unique elements characteristic of the target language—, redundancy and unusual linguistic patterns. On the other hand, editing encompasses normalisation, the avoidance of repetitions, levelling out, the push towards better comprehensibility and an increase in the explicitness of the text. Yet, these trends can also entail risks. The excessive use of some of these interventions can be “abnormal” (Tirkkonen-Condit 2004). Revisers apply global strategies when approaching the texts: when they perceive explicit saturation (Makkos and Robin 2014), they seek to optimise the text by limiting redundancy and enriching vocabulary (i.e. increasing the range
of words used). The latter phenomenon is perhaps best positioned to lay claim to the designation “universal of revision”, since the others are part of both translation and editing.

Both activities, just like written communication in general, are characterised by risk-aversion, which, according to Pym (2008), is the only genuine universal in translation. That is why translators and revisers strive for disambiguation, better comprehensibility and normalisation, almost obsessively trying to meet recipients’ expectations (Robin 2014a). But revisers, apart from being risk-averse, are first and foremost optimisers. They only split sentences when necessary and do not add extensive new information. What is more, they often employ implicitation and limit redundancy by omissions. So, they are less prone to the universal of risk-aversion, which is probably linked to competency: an experienced linguistic mediator is able to assess that risks and less afraid of losses (Klaudy 1996).

Horváth (2009) also claimed that revision moves the translated text closer to the target language. This assertion follows logically from the definition of the reviser and the reviser’s role, which state that revisers approach their work on the basis of the target language text, and that they bear in mind the target language norms. This is the main reason why revisers often find better idiomatic expressions, and enrich the vocabulary of the text with elements that are typical of the target language. The findings of the present study also seem to confirm that revisers mostly try to adjust the texts in line with the expectations of the target language audience, since they usually make individual interventions. These interventions do not serve to modify or delete translators’ operations but to adapt the text so as to satisfy the expectations of target language recipients. Nevertheless, whether revisers’ text-level interventions do indeed bring the text closer to target language norms or whether these operations reflect a special revisional norm, can only be determined by a comparative corpus-based study.
Conducting such a study was beyond the objectives of the present dissertation but my previous research results suggest (Robin 2014b) that, as regards the type/token rate and lexical density, revision adjusts the text so as to conform to the norms of the target language, although revised texts usually do not have as high scores in this respect as originals. But in the case of avoidance of repetitions, average sentence length and levelling out, an even stronger force controls these operations than target language norms, just like in the case of translations. The standard deviation of revised texts’ statistical data is lower than the corresponding values for translated texts and originals, the effect of levelling out is enhanced, sentences are split and shortened, and the aggregate ratio of the most frequent words to the less frequent ones is lower than in texts originally written in Hungarian. This phenomenon might be explained by the fact that revised translations are “edited” twice, first during translation and then during revision, while linguistic mediators try to adjust the text to the presumed expectations of the recipients. Linguistic mediators follow an editorial norm which does not necessarily coincide with the norms prevalent in texts originally written in the target language. This is again a feature characteristic of editing that is even more conspicuous in revision.

The results of the present research therefore offer no clear answer as to whether revision has universal linguistic features. During the analysis of the data I acquired, general revisional trends have been identified, which, however, only reflect the general linguistic phenomena in translations, since the number and significance of interventions by revisers is linked to the amount and significance of transfer operations employed by translators. Revisers correct mistakes made by translators and try to curb unnecessary operations, approaching the text at the macro-level. Apart from translators’s and revisers’ individual trends, the structure of the original text and its stylistic features, as well as the target language norms, revision is heavily influenced by the pursuit of optimisation based on differentiation as regards
lexical redundancy and the richness of the vocabulary. Revisers perceive when a target text’s explicitness has reached its saturation point, but this is currently merely a psychological threshold, as no empirical study has yet proven when a text’s information burden and grammatical redundancy become excessive. Therefore, it can be stated with some reservations that optimisation is one of revision’s general features applied in the case of all texts and in every revision situation. Yet, in any case, the conclusions drawn from this dissertation call for further studies in this field.
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Publications and Conference Presentations related to the Research

Publications


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Conference Presentations


