Using The Concept Of Genre To Frame Translational Practices: Stopping Short Of Translation Universals And Laws?

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Abstract. This paper wishes to propose an approach to studying translation that will attempt to strike a balance between (ethical) concerns regarding agency in translation and the need for rigour in verifying significant patterning in bodies of translated text. It is argued that operationalizing the notion of genre and genre-specific translational practices will provide the modus vivendi required. In doing so the article will trace research and lines of thought in TS with regard to translational laws and universals, while pointing to how the concept of genre can offer us ways of gaining a clearer understanding of regularities in translational practices.

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Introduction

Translation universals such as explicitation, normalization, simplification, etc., proposed by Mona Baker [1] or the "laws of translation" put forward by Gideon Toury [2], like the law of interference or growing standardisation for example, were posited at a time when we were unable to test their validity fully or in any real systematic way. Now that we can build (huge) translation corpora and have developed the software to explore such corpora systematically, it would seem only logical to do so and to go in search of evidence of such universals and possible laws. And indeed this work is being done by such scholars as Sara Laviosa and Maeve Olahan, among others. However, in the wake of the 'cultural turn' and the impact of cultural and post-colonial studies on approaches to translation, universals or any wish to discover them somehow began to smack of western imperialism and its desire for dominance. Subsequently in certain circles, searches for laws and universals have suffered a decline in popularity as possible foci of research and, along with them, general linguistic approaches to translation, which in turn were considered as being too narrow and also indicative of what is loosely and rather evasively called Eurocentrism.

This politicization of research agendas in translation proved nonetheless necessary and dynamic in that it opened up new perspectives on translation and made room for lesser known traditions in translation. At the same time, it has resulted in a degree of methodological, if not say to existential, uncertainty. In some ways this uncertainty contains traces or echoes of the crisis in the humanities, particularly in anthropology, during the nineteen eighties and nineties. At that time it was posited that research methods and agendas were conterminous with agendas of western hegemony and hence intrinsically flawed. How then can we build corpora and go in search of universals in such a climate? This leaves us with a gaping abyss of a question: on the basis of what (evidence) can we make knowledgeable pronouncements about human activities or, in our case, language use and translation in particular.

Consequently, does all of the above mean that we should not continue to search for regularities in translational patterns in given periods and given cultural spaces? Can we indeed make general remarks on the nature of translation without testing their validity by studying translation practices in society or by conducting searches in translational corpora? I believe not.

This paper wishes to propose an approach to studying translation corpora that will attempt to strike a balance between what might be called the political or, perhaps more correctly, ethical concerns regarding agency in translation and the need for rigour in verifying translational patterns in ex-

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isting bodies of translation work. Is it not so, after all, that the shifts found in translations form the basis for forms of theorisation, power-based or other, on translation, no matter how far removed such theorisations might be from each other in terms of approach and basic assumptions? This of course begs the question: what constitutes a plausible interpretation of a given translation or body of translations? How much data, and indeed what forms of data are needed to make such interpretations?

The central thesis of the paper is that a search for universals or laws of translation - if desired or desirable, even in such cases as translator training - can only be undertaken once lower levels of translational inference, ranging from the political to the linguistic, have been dealt with or at least have been taken into account. It is suggested in this respect that the notion of genre offers considerable leverage for dealing with these levels of inference.

1. Laws and Universals in Translation Studies

In positing translation laws, Toury was in fact attempting to move away from prescriptive formulations and directives and ground the rationale underlying translational behaviour in "reality rather than some kind of wishful thinking" [2, p. 259]. In this respect, he was looking for descriptive rather than prescriptive categories to circumscribe translational behaviour, in other words for empirical translational evidence from which to generalise. These generalisations came in the guise of probabilistic formulations of the type "if X then the greater/the lesser the likelihood that Y" would occur (given certain conditions). So translation laws could be discerned by formulating, testing and refining theory in order to gain an "increasingly better understanding of the ways translation and translators, as individuals and members of societal groups alike, manoeuver within the manifold constraints imposed on them and produce texts which look and function the way they do," [2, p. 266].

Toury proposes 2 exemplary laws.

1. The Law of Growing Standardization, within which Toury posits the following, inter alia. "In translation, textual relations obtaining in the original are often modified, sometimes to the point of being totally ignored, in favour of [more] habitual options offered by a target repertoire", [3, p. 268].
2. The Law of Interference: "In translation, phenomena pertaining to the make up of the source text tend to transferred to the target text", [3, p. 275].

This begs the following question: which textual relations and/or phenomena? The question will be address again below but before doing so we will first turn to the notion of laws as such. In a volume dedicated to re-examining Toury's seminal work, Anthony Pym offers us an explanation as to where these laws might lie:

> Our proposed unification has reached this point: Translators tend to standardize language or to channel interference because these are two main ways of reducing or transferring communicative risk" [4, p. 325].

This explanation interiorises or psychologises the laws in question, however, and hence bypasses translation as a social activity involving a network of actors that have a say in the final products, i.e. the very translations we are examining in search of laws. Decisions on communicative risk are not only the preserve of translators. So a fuller explanation as to where the laws might lie still remains forthcoming, it would seem.

The relation between laws and system is also challenged in the volume:

> "new concepts like those of metissage, transculturalism and transnationalism have ... induced yet another toning down, this time of the notion of "system" ... replacing it with that of "network", less rigid, more sensitive to individual usage, more open and porous to exchanges, suggesting bi-directionality or multi-directionality... In many ways, the concept of "network" seems to be to globalization what "system" was, and continues to be, to the more traditional notion of the nation-state, [5, p. 339].

But is it not so that networks predate and have always co-existed within and across nation states? Nevertheless, it is not hard to imagine the advantages, particularly in the era of "clouds" and "big data" of envisaging laws of translational behaviour as rising above or extending beyond national borders but this further complicates the issue by making them more difficult to frame and locate.

The universals posited by Mona Baker ([1] and Laviosa [6], inter alia) arose in response to a realisation of the potential of large electronic corpora. The idea was to use recently developed corpus tools to explore such corpora in search of translational universals i.e. characteristics that are typical of translated discourse in contrast to non-translated discourse:

i) *simplification:* the idea that translators subconsciously simplify the language or message or both;
ii) *explicitation:* the tendency to spell things out in translation, including, in its simplest form, the practice of adding background information;
iii) *normalisation or conservatism:* the tendency to conform to patterns and practices which are typical of the target language, even to the point of exaggerating them;
iv) *levelling out:* the tendency of translated text to gravitate around the centre of any continuum rather than towards the fringes, [1, pp. 176-177].

As was mentioned in the introduction, these formulations, though seemingly obvious and intuitively sound, were made with a view to being tested by researchers who took up Baker's challenge. As the following quote illustrates, this has indeed been undertaken in part by scholars:

> "In Laviosa's studies of simplification, some of the results (those concerning sentence length) differ according to whether the hypotheses are tested on a corpus of translated narrative [7] or of translated newspaper articles [8], which suggests that the norms may not be the same across different text types. But again, the emphasis is on what is pervasive across the genres and not on what is different and unexpected", [9, p. 40].

This work has been done despite the fact universals beg questions that are hard to answer when examining translated text alone, the translator's 'subconscious' simplification being a case in point. Other sources of data are required in conjunction with translations to obtain a fuller understanding of regularities in translational practices and these sources can only be accessed by examining translation in its full generic context. The Saldanha quote [9] also voices the concerns that this paper is attempting to articulate: "norms may not be the same across different text types". If this is so, then why look further?

In contrast, translation laws have been challenged both conceptually and from the point of view of power, and have not been researched in any systematic way, especially not to the same degree as translational norms have. This is probably understandable as evidence of normative behaviour can be more easily demonstrated and be more readily made available from analysis. To be fair, universals have also been challenged conceptually (see Pym [4], for example). It would seem that translational laws can only be discovered at a high level of abstraction, which is probably also the case for universals. One can then ask in both cases what their relevance might then be for translation scholars and possibly for translation pedagogy, which is where most translation research is operationalised.

2. Genres in Systems and Networks

As was argued at the beginning, the conceptualisation of and search for laws and universals, whether they are located in interlocking national or cultural systems or transnational or globalized networks will seriously diminish in relevance for translation scholars if the work fails to take account of one level of inference.

Genre is usually understood as belonging to the sphere of literature but can be understood in a more basic sense: "Language is realized in the form of concrete utterances (oral or written) by the participants in the various areas of human activity. These utterances reflect the specific conditions and goals of each such area ... Each sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types of these utterances. These we may call genres", [10, p. 60] or "Genres are how things get done, when language is used to accomplish them", see Refs. [11, 12, 12a].

It is argued elsewhere [13] that genres are the matrices within which text types take shape and what systems cluster around or what give networks their linguistic and other forms of sustenance and by extension their translational substance. Simple examples of such networks are: website / software localisers, poets, legal translators, etc., all of whom work within given genres across languages and cultures. Their language and translational practices are largely and primarily determined by the genres they are working in. Translators engage directly with the various elements of language and style that are typical of a given genre (legal, medical, philosophical, scientific, literary, etc.) in which they are often specialized. As translators, they participate in generic activity. They also understand how these elements play out across languages and cultures and have developed theories and articulated discourses on these matters. Looking for laws and universals while ignoring this level is probably precarious as there is probably very little we can conclude from what we might find. Take the following two illustrations for example.

1. A pharmaceutical company wouldn't be at all happy if its instructions for use manifested the Law of Interference - imagine the legal consequences.
2. On the other hand, an international law firm might be happy to discover levelling out in translations of its legal contracts, especially when it comes to consistency and regularity in the use of legal terms and concepts.

The point is that evidence of a possible law would definitely have been edited out in the first example and probably very much promoted in the case of the universal in the second, in which case it would begin to overlap with another universal namely "normalisation or conservatism". Here we may certainly witness the recent impact of translation memories (TM) and resultant normalisation or standardisation practices they may inadvertently promote or force translators to comply with.

Whether we are looking for evidence of power differentials or laws and universals, we usually reach for translational shifts as our main explanatory mainstay. Though the history of the debate on shifts is long and the body of literature large (viz. work by Catford, Vinay & Darbelnet, Nida, Van Leuven-Zwart, Munday and many others), its basic distinctions seem rudimentary at best: obligatory versus optional / system-driven versus arbitrary / Micro- and/or (resultant) macro-level shifts. These binary distinctions are broadly based on the following assumptions: that the language system and the "laws" of grammar, lexis and syntax are the first and most important obstacles facing any translator; that beyond this level translational choices become arbitrary, individual or optional. It has been shown elsewhere [14] that genre conventions have a considerable constraining effect on, if not determine, many translators' choices, especially in the case of literary translation, where they reach beyond and at times supersede grammatical or language system constraints. This of course is not case for other genres but this does not mean that these genres do not have constraining factors of their own.

The observations made here has been recognised in part by

translation scholars and have been used extensively by those working within functional approaches to translation pedagogy where the concept of text types and their related categories and features has been used for generations in training translators [15, 16]. One proviso is that linguistic or textual features cannot be conflated with text types; this has been pointed out by Chesterman, [17]. Functionalist approaches and Skopos theory in particular consider translation as a social activity in which many actors play a part. Given the interaction involved one could then ask if translation laws or universals are the sole preserve of translators at all.

Where does this leave us? Genre can be seen as a way of understanding and framing language use (including text types) and the translational activity involved. In shifting the focus away from the textual features that are usually viewed as defining genre, Hanks [18, p. 670] distinguishes three aspects of genre: orienting frameworks, interpretive procedures and sets of expectations. The texts, including translations that form the precipitate of generic activity all manifest features of that specific activity. Though much can be learned from examining genre-specific features in texts and their translations, they will not tell us everything about what has been going on. Such analyses will, however, provide a sound basis for understanding translation in all its complexity, including not just the textual and translational strategies but also the power relations involved, hence contributing towards bridging the gap between approaches to translation pointed out in the introduction. How then can we visualize Hanks's model when it comes to translating within a given genre?

1. Orienting frameworks can be understood as points of departure, skills, tools, and goals both tangible and intangible envisaged when undertaking a translation.
2. Interpretive procedures comprise understandings of the genre that are shared and indeed contested by the actors involved.
3. Sets of expectations comprise the various stages of internal and external reception, outcomes, etc., both on the part of translators and their clients.

Identifiable traits of a (translated) text in a given genre, all of which bare evidence of points 1 to 3, will then form the basis for analysis and evaluation of the success and possible ethical soundness of such translational activity. But as was argued above, analysing translated texts alone will not suffice. More contextual data and other forms of discursive data are required, i.e. a full sociological inquiry, [19]. William Hanks then goes a step further and ties genre to practice and to Bourdieu's notion of habitus:

"Genres then are key parts of habitus... Rather they embody just the kinds of schemes for practice that constitute the habitus. And like it they are unequally distributed among agents in any social world. For access to certain genres involves power and legitimacy and serves as a form of sociocultural capital", [20, p. 246]. In relation to the habitus of the translator, Daniel Simeoni has the following to say: "Indeed, norms without a habitus to instantiate them make no more sense than a habitus without norms", [21, p. 33]. Only by bringing together studies of genre-specific translations and studies of the various types of habitus and of the translators involved, i.e. engaging in contextualised studies, can we gain an understanding of the translational patterning and, moving from there, perhaps discover possible laws and universals.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to argue for the importance of genre in understanding translational practice. Translation is one point of entry into or a way of participating in genres across languages and cultures. There are other actors who participate in these genres, all of whom taken together form the local, regional, national of global networks in which translators also participate. Taken together and with their translations, translators' and others' discourses on the genres they work in form a vital step towards understanding regularities in translational behaviour.

Identifying genre-specific translational practices provides a sounder and more contextualised footing from which to go in search of laws and universals. But it is this author's firm conviction that genre-specific studies will have more explanatory power and hence provide more leverage in terms of translation research and training in the stages before discovering possible laws and universals. Now that we are on the verge of exploring 'big data', it would be interesting to bear in mind the enthusiasm that gave rise to thinking in terms of laws and universal, and build some generic filters into the evolving exploratory architecture.

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