

D-4. USING TRANSLATION CORPORA TO EXAMINE GENRE-SPECIFIC PRACTICES: STOPPING SHORT OF TRANSLATION UNIVERSALS AND LAWS?

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Translation universals such as explicitation, normalization, simplification, etc., proposed by Mona Baker or the "laws of translation" put forward by Gideon, 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 Olan, 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 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 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 of or echoes of the crisis in the humanities and 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 still 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 transla-

tion 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 existing bodies of translation work. Is it not so, after all, that the shifts found in translations form the basis for forms of theorisation 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 of body of translations? How much data and indeed what forms of data are needed to make such interpretations?

To illustrate the line of reasoning followed, the paper will draw on findings from an analysis of a parallel corpus of English poetry in Dutch translation, and, to a certain extent, extrapolate on these findings in order to make few more general comments on the importance of genre as a determining factor in translation research. At the same time, I will make a few preliminary comments on how a well-known translation tool can also be used as a research tool.

The central thesis of the paper is that a search for universals or laws of translation – if desired or desirable or 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.