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Beyond Intervention: Universals in Translation?

1 Introduction

This paper is an introduction to the panel on “Universals and Intervention” convened by the present author on the occasion of the Second International Conference of the International Association on Translation and Intercultural Communication (IATIS) on the topic of “Intervention in Translation, Interpreting and Intercultural Studies” held in July 2006 at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa.

The paper is structured as follows: In the first part I will reflect on several suggestions of universals in language, which have a long tradition in linguistics. I will here briefly refer to generative, typological and functional proposals of universals, in the case of the latter particularly those proposed in the systemic functional framework. In the second part of the paper I consider so-called “translation universals” (universal tendencies, laws or norms of translation) suggested in the literature, for instance explicitation, simplification, disambiguation, conventionalisation, standardisation and so on. I will suggest that the quest for specific translation universals is futile for several reasons, among them the undeniable fact that, since translation is an operation on language, general linguistic universals also apply to translation. In the third and final part of the paper I attempt to provide some sort of link between universals and “intervention” – the theme of this conference, and I will suggest that “intervention” be used with discretion – at present a rather heretic view.

2 Language Universals

As linguistic and cognitive phenomena, universals have a long tradition in the philosophy of language. Language is here often regarded as innately specified in every human being, and language universals are then equated with those features of language that are part of man’s genetic endowment. Medieval speculative grammarians and Renaissance Port Royal grammarians had already assumed that there exists only one grammar – the grammar of the human mind. This “mental grammar” as part of human nature was then thought to be fundamentally the same for all human beings. In other words, underneath the bewilderingly variegated “surface structures” (i.e. the actual concrete organisation of the physical signals into units of various complexity, size, sequence and arrangement) of the languages of the world, all languages are alike in their “deep structures”, i.e., the underlying abstract stratum which determines the meaning of sentences and is represented in the human mind.

Early comparative and typological scholars, though implicitly also always searching for universal features as well as scholars belonging to the European and North American structuralist tradition in the wake of de Saussure's seminal work, and of course the followers of the Humboldtian and Boas-Sapir-Whorfian hypothesis of "linguistic relativity" then pushed the quest for universals for a while into the background, giving priority to the seemingly infinite diversity of languages in their surface structures. Recent interest in universals has then started anew in the Western World in the early sixties of the last century, culminating in the famous volume by Joseph Greenberg (ed. 1963) on *Universals of Language*, where linguists, anthropologists, and psychologists mapped out generalisations about language, of a phonological, morpho-grammatical and semantic kind. On the basis of data from a 30-language sample and a "basic-order typology" that involves basic facts of word order (pre- versus post-positions, relative order of subject, verb, object in declarative sentences with nominal subjects and objects, and position of qualifying adjectives relative to the noun), Greenberg proposed his famous 45 universals, which can be both absolute universals or universal tendencies, implicational ones (of the sort: "If Language A has feature x, it will (tend to) have feature y") or non-implicational ones (of the type "All languages tend to have feature y"). Greenberg and others operating in the framework of what came to be known as the typological approach found out that an analysis of a substantial number of languages reveals not only the range of variation but also constraints on that variation, which show that languages do not vary infinitely and thus represent linguistic universals (Croft 2003: 5).

In this "empiricist universalist tradition", where systematic surveys of as many languages as possible were conducted, different explanations have been offered, such as for instance by Hawkins (1994), who suggests that certain word orders prevail because they optimise language comprehension and production processes and for instance by Bybee, Pagliuca and Perkins (1990) who attempted to link processing explanations with diachronic ones.

As regards semantic universals, Uriel Weinreich (1953/1968) – long before globalisation and internationalisation processes propelled by the revolution in information technology – proposed that through increasing contact and communication, languages consistently add to a corpus of common vocabulary (a common semantic stock), and particularly in the domain of natural science the lexica of different languages then come to share many references. However, this approach seems to be different in kind from the other universals discussed in this section. A "semantic universal" is often considered to be in the form of e.g. "If a language has a word for 'black', it will also have one for 'white'". Weinreich's suggestion might be called in present day terminology a "diachronic tendency", and one that only holds in particular semantic fields (i.e., where speech communities tend to learn from one another, not in regard to basic vocabulary).

In one influential rationalist linguistic approach which – originally as a reaction against behaviouristic psychology – rose to fame in the middle of the 20th century,

namely generative grammar, a language acquisition device as a universal language faculty (LAD) as well as basic underlying principles were proposed, and are now widely taken for granted in cognitively oriented linguistics and language acquisition studies world-wide. As opposed to the attempts by structuralists and typologists to “discover” individual universal features (“bottom-up”) through wide-ranging analysis and comparison of as many languages as possible, linguists operating in the generative tradition posit (“top-down”) linguistic universality as an a priori phenomenon, i.e. as the very basis for the general framework of their theory. Thus Chomsky and his disciples believe that it is the main task of any linguistic theory to develop an account of linguistic universals, the study of linguistic universals being equivalent to the study of the properties of generative grammars for natural language. In the generative school, substantive and formal universals were distinguished, which were of a phonological, syntactic or semantic nature. Substantive universals are certain fixed items or categories specified in the vocabulary used to describe a language, i.e., noun, verb and so on. Traditional universal grammar was basically a theory of substantive universals since it assumed the existence of certain fixed categories. Formal universals on the other hand are much more abstract: they relate to the fact that a grammar must meet specific formal conditions. On the semantic level, for instance, such a formal universal might be that certain classes of lexical items meet specified conditions, such as for example: “artefacts are defined in terms of certain human goals, needs, functions instead of solely physical qualities”.

More recently, Universal Grammar (UG) is used to explain more specifically what is universal in language, i.e., both the principles that constrain the forms of different languages (e.g. the Locality Principle, according to which grammatical operations are local, such that e.g. auxiliary inversion preposes the closest auxiliary and *wh*-movement preposes the closest *wh*-expression) and the parameters which define the binary variation they display (e.g. the *wh*-parameter which determines that a language either allows [Italian] or does not allow [German] finite verbs to have null subjects). These principles and parameters are innate, or absolute in UG theory.

In general, we can deduce that given their abstract “deep” nature, universals of language – as conceptualised in formal linguistic theorising – can never imply a surface equivalence between languages.

From a functional-typological perspective, universals are viewed in a different, less abstract way. They can be defined – for instance with Bernard Comrie – as “those properties that are necessarily common to all human languages” (Comrie 2003: 195). Here a claim is made about the human language potential, and universals are assumed to exist because of the way human beings are made, and the physical and cognitive limitations they are subjected to. Thus for example certain sounds may not fall into the realm of the possible (given the human body), and are thus universally absent from human language. These are formal explanations. The second major group of universals is related to the functions of language. The two essential functions of language – and

thus of all the many and different human languages – are to convey information and to establish and maintain social relations between human beings.

While the innate universals postulated inside the generative framework are used to deductively explain linguistic structure, the universals posited in the functional-typological approach are used to represent inductive generalisations across languages. Their explanatory potential includes general cognitive, social-interactional, processing and perceptual as well as possibly other human faculties, faculties that may well prove to be innate but are not deemed to be co-extensive with language. However, one should not construe a non-compatibility between the two approaches to universals, both are also to a certain extent similar: they are after all both “universalist”, both starting from structural analyses, both consider abstractions from their data (across languages and within languages respectively), and both explain universals by pointing to universal, biologically given human faculties (the parent disciplines being genetics for the generativists, evolutionary theory for the typologists). Thus there remain only two major differences between the generative and the functional-typological approach to linguistic universals: the emphasis in the latter but not the former on empirical cross-linguistic comparison and on the relationship between linguistic forms and language function. In the following, I want to look in some detail at one functional-typological approach, the systemic functional one, which has placed particular emphasis on the relationship between form and function, and which has proved to be most useful for the study of translation (House 1977).

About the same time as Greenberg and Chomsky came up with their suggestions of linguistic universals, Michael Halliday (1961, 1973, 1994) also suggested that language as a system of “meaning making” has a universal meaning potential, which evolved around three motifs, which he called “metafunctions”: the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual metafunction (cf. also Halliday/Matthiessen 2006). Ideationally, language reflects our human experience, our interpretation of all that goes around us, outside and inside, mapping systems of meaning into language such that human beings as language learners and users can capture and construe their individual and collective experiences of the world. Interpersonally, language is a way of initiating and maintaining social relationships, and of construing human language learners and users as personal and collective beings. Textually, language involves the creation of information: it creates discourse, the patterned forms of wording that constitute meaningful semiotic contexts. We can see that – as opposed to the two basic universal functions, informing and socialising – the textual function clearly has an enabling, facilitative force, i.e. it allows the other two to operate.

The ideational function contains a general category of process: e.g. material, mental, relational, with processes happening to, or being enacted by, human agents in time and space: past or future, real or imaginary, here or there. The interpersonal function is a mode of enacting personal relationships of different kinds, exchanges of speech roles, realising discourse functions, questions, commands, offers etc. implying systems and resources of mood and modality.

Unlike the other two, the textual function does not originate in an extrinsic context, it is intrinsic to language itself and refers to the resources any language must have for creating discourse and ensuring that each instance of text makes contact with its environment. This "environment" includes both the "context of situation" (cf. Malinowski 1935), of culture and other instances of text. The resources tapped here are potentially higher than clauses or clause complexes, setting up relationships which create not only semantic cohesion, but also contributing to the overall grammar of the clause. Typical ways of construing the clause as "message" is a combination of two perspectives: that of the speaker and that of the listener, which lead to different ways of information flow (Theme-Rheme, Given-New). All languages display some form of textual organisation of the clause. However, how far the tension between the speaker-listener perspectives are weighted one against the other in the languages of the world is far from clear. Here an empirical survey of languages in the functional-typological tradition is necessary. The textual metafunction also provides for the creation of "cohesion" of four kinds: reference (or "phora", cf. anaphoric, cataphoric, to distinguish it from reference as defined in the philosophy of language), ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion (Halliday/Hasan 1976).

To summarise, in systemic functional theorising, it is at this "deep" metafunctional level of language that we can say universality exists.

Given these two major types of proposals of universals in linguistics, the generative one and the functional-typological one, let me now turn to my second point and look at what universals – if they can be said to exist at all – might mean for translation.

3 Translation Universals

Various so-called translation universals as universal tendencies of the translation process, laws of translation and norms of translation have been suggested in the literature by Blum-Kulka (1986), Baker (1993), Laviosa-Braithwaite (1998), Toury (2001); see also the contributions to the volume on *Translation Universals – Do They Exist?* (Mauranen/Kujamäki eds 2004) and recently Malmkjær (2005). As prime candidates for translation universals the following processes, procedures or operations have been suggested: Explicitation, Simplification, Disambiguation, Conventionalisation, Standardisation, "Levelling out", Avoidance of Repetition, Over- or Underrepresentation of source or target language elements as well as the general manifestation of a so-called "third code", i.e. translation as translation in contradistinction to original non-translated texts. While Blum-Kulka and Toury have largely relied on case studies and impressionistic qualitative work, involving informed intuition and richly contextualised pen and paper analysis, all the other researchers mentioned above have relied on, and copiously praised the methodological advantages of, corpus-based qualitative and quantitative work. I deliberately said "methodological" advantages: my point is that the more important theoretical question of how useful or indeed possible and thus justifiable the positing of translation universals such as the ones

mentioned above are, has not been touched let alone recognised by all researchers in the field of translation studies. The unchallenged assumption has been simply that through the technical possibilities corpus methodology has recently afforded translation scholars, universals can be found – in the vein of the empiricist typological approach. However, I see a great difference in the two quests. I want to go on suggesting quite bluntly that the quest for translation universals is in essence futile, i.e. that there are no, and there can be no, translation universals. I will substantiate this claim pointing to at least the following five reasons:

- 1 Translation is undeniably an act that operates on language. Depending on one's preference of formal or functional-typological approaches to explaining linguistic phenomena, one can state that universals proposed in these approaches must also apply to translation. For the present author, the functional base underlying language use as suggested by Halliday and briefly presented above are a prime candidate for universalism in translation. But: these are then *not* universals of translation per se, or sui generis universals, but simply universals of language also applying to translation.
- 2 Obviously, however, translation is not identical with language as such let alone with the two linguistic systems involved in translation. Translation is no more and no less than a practical activity. It can be described as an act of performance, of parole, not of langue or competence. This is of course reflected in the nature of translation: it is inherently language-pair specific, and even if, as in some of the recent corpus studies, translations for instance from English into Finnish and Swedish, or from English into Arabic, French or Spanish are compared in the search for recurring regularities or "universals", this language-pair specificity can in my opinion not really be offset, such that even corpus-based multi-pair comparisons remain agglomerations of different pairs. In the existing studies this fact tends to be washed over by a lack of careful and detailed comparative linguistic analysis. Terms like "Explicitness", "Explicitation", "Simplification", "Conventionalisation" and so on are in my opinion far too general. They should not be used unless one is perfectly clear about how they can be precisely defined and operationalised. There is recent ongoing research at the University of Saarbrücken (under the direction of Erich Steiner, cf. Hansen-Schirra/Neumann/Steiner 2007; Steiner in press) in which for instance the concept of "explicitation" is first subjected to solid and careful linguistic scrutiny. This is a promising approach. There is also an earlier study by the present author (House 2004a) where the notion of "explicitness" is deconstructed. One should also take note of the important work by Fabricius-Hansen and her colleagues in Oslo (cf. Fabricius-Hansen/Behrens 2001, Fabricius-Hansen 2002, Behrens 2003), who subject the particular phenomena they investigate to a detailed linguistic analysis before making any claims to their universality.

- 3 Closely related to the issue of language-pair specificity in translation is the issue of directionality in translation. In the context of our discussion of universals this means that candidates of universality suggested for one particular translation direction need not necessarily be candidates for universality in the opposite direction. The present author's work (House 2004b) with a corpus of translations of children's books from English into German and German into English has clearly shown for instance that procedures of explicitation common in translations from English into German are not traceable in the opposite translation direction. In fact, a body of earlier contrastive analyses of many different genres conducted by the present author (House 1996, 2006) suggest that explicitation holds for translations into German but *not* the other way round. But even this hypothesis can be disconfirmed, as was recently done in the Hamburg project "Covert Translation" at the German Science Foundation's Centre on Multilingualism (Baumgarten/House/Probst 2004, House 2004c, Böttger 2004, Bührig/House 2004). Baumgarten (2007) for instance has shown that the German sentence initial coordinative conjunction *und* has significantly increased in German academic discourse under the influence of translations from English over the past 25 years or so, and this can also be taken as an increase of implicitness and vagueness, i.e. a decrease in explicitness – regarding this particular functional category.
- 4 Another important consideration, and one that clearly militates against an assumption of universals in translation, seems – in my opinion – to be genre-specificity. In the project "Covert translation", for instance, we are comparing English original texts, translations from English into German, French, Spanish, and comparable texts in these languages particularly with regard to how the phenomena "subjectivity" and "addressee-orientation" and their linguistic realisations are represented, and how they change over time under the influence of English as the world's dominant lingua franca. We have found – among other things – that while there is a tendency for explicitation (use of elaboration, extension and enhancement) in the German translations of popular science texts, this is not the case to the same degree for economic texts.
- 5 It is necessary to take the diachronic development of texts into account which belong to a certain genre: translations develop dynamically and they may be critically influenced by the status of the language of the source text genre which in turn may influence the nature of the translation text genre and also the nature of comparable texts in the same genre: an example are the findings of the project "Covert translation" briefly described above. For instance, the use of personal deictics has changed over the past 25 years in popular science texts, and so has the occurrence of modal particles in German translations and German comparable texts over that same period.

Compare figure 1:

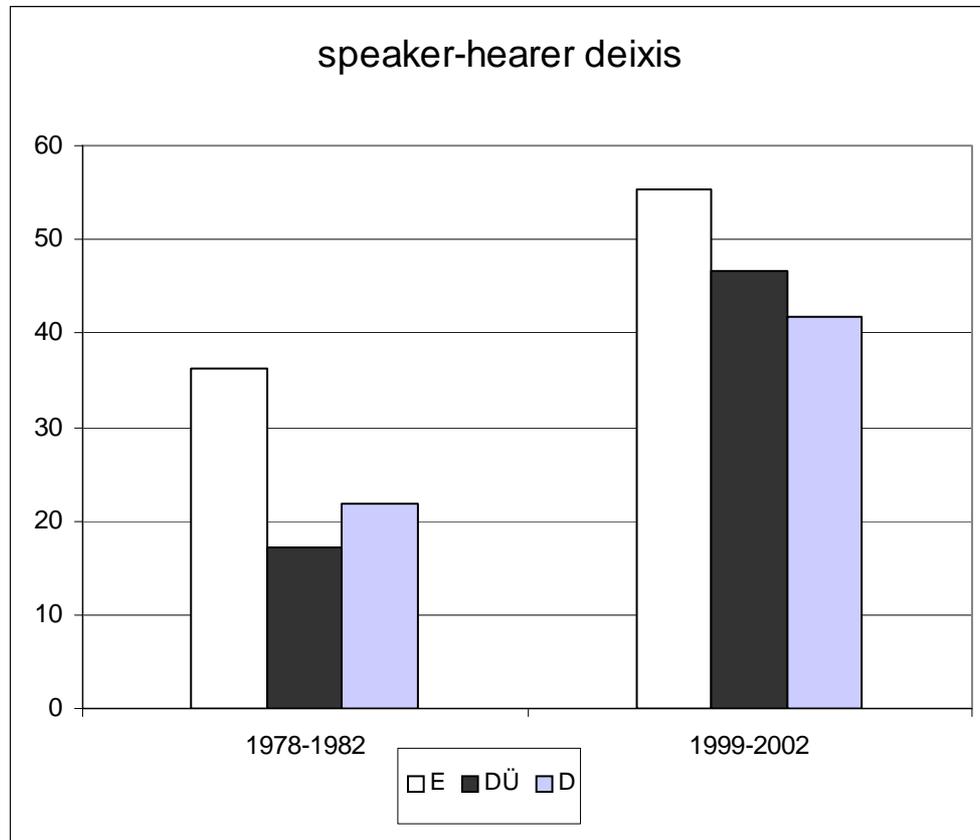


Figure 1: Frequency of speaker-hearer deixis in English popular science original texts (E), their German translations (DÜ) and German comparable texts (D) (Normalised frequencies on the basis of 10,000 words).

Interesting from a diachronic perspective is also the fact that in the popular science corpus the particularly German feature of *Modalpartikeln* (modal particles) has also increased over time in both our German corpora – possibly under the (indirect) influence of the English lingua franca.

Compare figure 2:

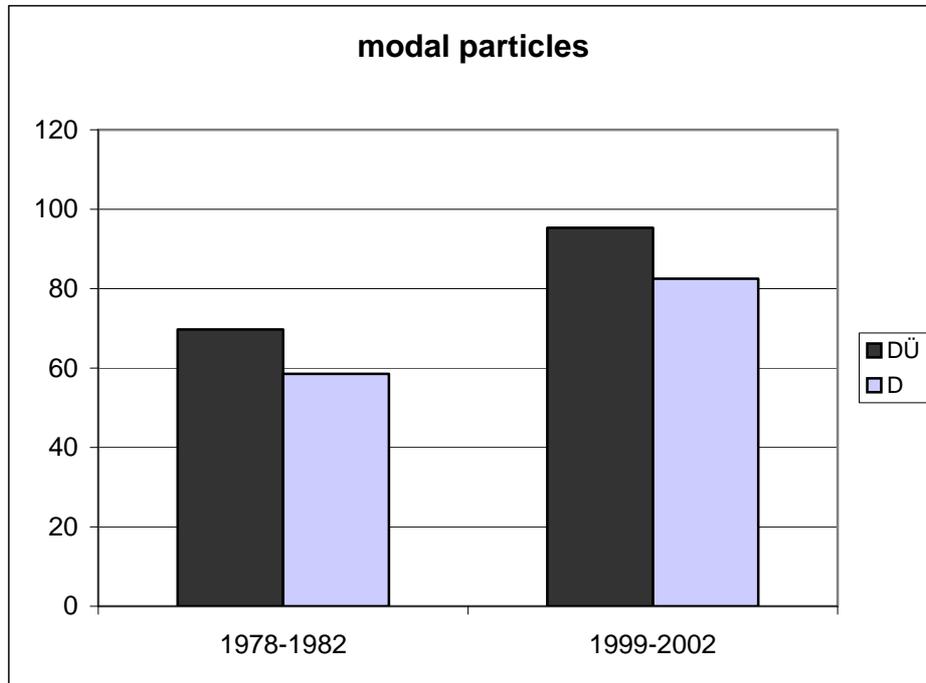


Figure 2: Frequency of modal particles in German translations (DÜ) of English popular science texts and German comparable texts (D) (normalised frequencies on the basis of 10,000 words).

This finding clearly disconfirms the claim of the universality of underrepresentation in translation of features unique to the target language – which in any case I take as nothing more than a reformulation of interference from the source language, often as a direct outcome of insuperable grammatical differences between the source and target language systems. For example, when the source language simply does not encode a feature like a certain tense marking, it will be nearly impossible for the translator to reach a target language-conform frequency and distribution of this feature in translation. This suggests that underrepresentation is indeed a normal, maybe even necessary language-pair specific and thus translational phenomenon – albeit not a universal one.

In an attempt to summarise my scepticism vis à vis the existence of translation universals, and my assumption that the postulation of universals of language which would necessarily include translation are quite sufficient, I have tried to display these ideas in the following figure 3.

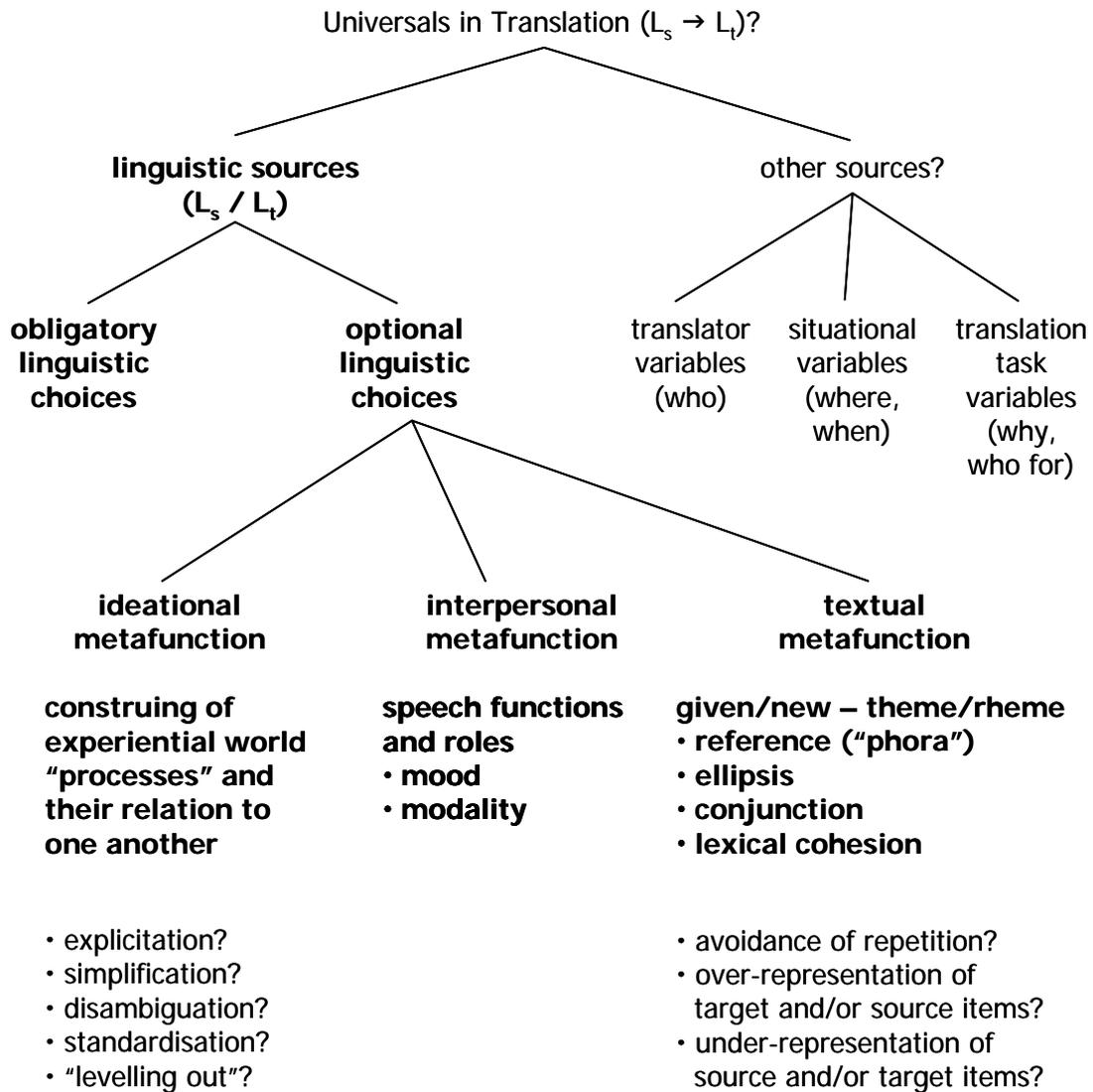


Figure 3: Universals in Translation?

Figure 3 shows the complexity of translation as a performative act. This is particularly noticeable when we consider the Node "other sources", where the consideration of the translator, the situational and the translation-task variables render the postulation of translation universals implausible. Figure 3 further illustrates the point made above about the assumptions of universals in Hallidayan systemic functional linguistics: it shows that it is at the level of the three metafunctions that translation universals might be located, but not at any "lower levels".

Let me now in my final section briefly consider the issue of “intervention” and ask whether the (potential) need of the translator to intervene in the process of translation might also be called a universal.

4 Intervention in Translation

Intervention in translation is a manipulation of the source text beyond what is linguistically necessary. If we consider the two types of translation: overt and covert translation (House 1997), it is only in processes of covert translation where such a manipulation, or “cultural filtering” or “localisation” is licensed as a means of fulfilling the expectations of the addressees of the translation. However, for a legitimate application of such a cultural filter empirical evidence that and if so how these expectations differ from the ones in the addressees of the source text is needed. If such evidence is absent, and the translator nevertheless intervenes and manipulates the function of the text, we are no longer dealing with a translation but a version.

Manipulation or “intervention” for ideological, socio-political or ethical reasons, however well-meant they may be in any individual case, are generally risky undertakings. Who is to judge that the interventions are really desirable and that addressees of a translation would not rather be confronted with an equivalent source text? How can we justify well-meant changes to a text made under the auspices of say feminist or post-colonialist thinking from chauvinistic imperialist interventions? We cannot. Personally, I have always pleaded for separating linguistic, textual considerations from social ones. In other words: as a translator (and a translation critic) one must be aware of one’s responsibility to the original author and his or her text, and one must use the power one has been given to re-textualise and re-contextualise a given text with discretion. In many – if not most – cases it might be wiser to not intervene at all.

However, the views presented in this paper are the views of the present author. In the papers following this introductory statement, papers that were presented in the panel on “Beyond Intervention: Universals in Translation?” a (healthy) variety of different views will be presented. In all these papers the question will be raised (again) whether the quest for translation universals is bound to be futile in the face of cultural filtering or other widely accepted types of intervention designed to destabilise the relationship between source and target texts. Many of the papers to follow will also ask (again) whether it is in fact possible to determine true universals and how, if this is the case, they would advance translation theory. Most of the papers will provide corpus-based evidence for or against the existence of translation universals from the analysis of both oral and written translation corpora and with reference to different languages, different genres and different linguistic-textual phenomena.

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