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Response to Becher's Two Papers on the Explicitation Hypothesis

Abstract

Becher questions the validity of studies claiming to validate Blum-Kulka's Explicitation Hypothesis, which postulates that the translation process might universally lead to an increased incohesive explicitness regardless of linguistic and textual differences between the source language and target language. Becher believes that those studies have some methodological problems and therefore cannot support Blum-Kulka's proposition. He goes further in his other paper by calling for the abandonment of the theory. Even though Becher's works probably are considered leading in the current research of explicitation and have highlighted the need for more attention to methodological issues in explicitation research, more careful reading of Blum-Kulka's proposal shows that he has made some inaccurate observations of her concepts. With this in mind, in my point of view, it is still worth to investigate Blum-Kulka's hypothesis with some framework improvement. Prior to further study on the nature of explicitation, however, I would argue that we need to deal with the very concept of explicitation itself, which is a more urgent issue in explicitation research.

1 Introduction

Becher's two papers, "Abandoning the Notion of 'Translation-Inherent' Explicitation: Against a Dogma of Translation Studies" (Becher 2010a) and "Towards a More Rigorous Treatment of the Explicitation Hypothesis in Translation Studies" (Becher 2010b), may be considered as leading works in the current research of explicitation. Through these two articles, which were drawn from his doctoral dissertation (Becher 2011), he advances a crucial criticism regarding Blum-Kulka's Explicitation Hypothesis, which has gained a prominent status in the field. In her seminal paper, entitled "Shifts of Cohesion and Coherence in Translation", Blum-Kulka (1986/2000) defines the hypothesis as

an observed cohesive explicitness from SL to TL texts regardless of the increase traceable to differences between the two linguistic and textual systems involved.

(Blum-Kulka 1986/2000: 300, SL = source language, TL = target language)

She further postulates that the increased explicitness results from "the translation process itself", in which "the process of interpretation performed by the translator on the source text" might lead to a target text (TT), which is more "redundant" than the

source text (ST) (Blum-Kulka 1986/2000: 300). According to Blum-Kulka, such a shift may be said to be “translation-inherent” and may well be a “universal strategy” in translation (Blum-Kulka 1986/2000: 302).

Becher (2010a) proposes to abandon the translation-inherent concept, which has become the basis of numerous explicitation studies (e.g., Øverås 1998; Séguinot 1998; Olohan/Baker 2000; Pápai 2004; Puurtinen 2004). In his latter paper, Becher (2010b) insists that many studies that claimed to confirm Blum-Kulka's hypothesis suffer from methodological shortcomings and calls for a more “rigorous” treatment in the description of explicitation.

Becher's arguments demonstrate the need for more attention to methodological issues in the study of explicitation and a review of the use of Blum-Kulka's hypothesis in translation studies. These are surely critical for the direction of further studies on explicitation. However, while his proposal for the dismissal of the Explicitation Hypothesis is appealing, he has made some inaccurate observations on Blum-Kulka's concepts and the notion of explicitation. This paper aims at demonstrating those inaccuracies and argues that Blum-Kulka's hypothesis is still worth investigating with some framework improvement. However, prior to further study on this hypothesis and the nature of explicitation in translation in general, I would argue that we need first to deal with the very concept of explicitation, which is a more urgent issue in explicitation research. For this purpose, this paper will first discuss Becher's plea to give up Blum-Kulka's translation-inherent concept of explicitation in “Abandoning the Notion of ‘Translation-Inherent’ Explicitation: Against a Dogma of Translation Studies”. Thereafter, I will address his other paper, where he criticises studies supporting Blum-Kulka's hypothesis. I conclude with some recommendations for further research on the hypothesis and explicitation in general.

2 “Abandoning the Notion of ‘Translation-Inherent’ Explicitation: Against a Dogma of Translation Studies”

In this paper Becher strongly criticizes Blum-Kulka's hypothesis as “unmotivated, unparsimonious, and vaguely formulated” (Becher 2010a: 8). According to him, it is unmotivated because there is no independent proof that the interpretation process performed by the translator on the source text is the only cause to explicitation. Explicitation may also be due to other factors, such as simplification and normalisation. Becher also contends that the hypothesis does not focus on more necessary aspects related to the increase of explicitness; hence, it is against the principle of Occam's Razor that a scientific hypothesis must be economical (Domingos 1999). Finally, in Becher's view, it is also unclear what Blum-Kulka means by explicitation as a “strategy” (Blum-Kulka 1986/2000: 302), which creates different interpretations in its research (Becher 2010a). With all these in mind, Becher proposes to abandon Blum-Kulka's hypothesis altogether and advocates Klaudy's Asymmetry Hypothesis that *explicitations* in the L1 → L2 direction are not always counterbalanced with *implicitations* in the L2 → L1

direction (Klaudy 2009, as cited by Becher 2010a). Becher's proposal seems to be very compelling but he has made inaccurate accounts regarding the Blum-Kulka's hypothesis.

Firstly, his argument that Blum-Kulka's Explicitation is not motivated because explicitation may be caused by factors other than the interpretation process in translation is problematic (Becher 2010a: 7). In the first place, there is a mismatch between the categories Becher uses for the comparison. While he employs his explicitation concept as a textual product (thus he discusses explicitation as resulting from particular shifts, i.e. explicitation is not only due to the interpretation process), he treats simplification and normalisation as a process due to a conscious strategy. Using such a framework, of course, one could say that explicitation may result from a variety of shifts, including simplification and normalisation. Such a claim, nevertheless, does not apply when we only limit ourselves to normalisation and simplification simply as textual features in translated texts, which plausibly may result from the interpretation process in translation. Here the more explicit text Blum-Kulka pursues may be simultaneously simplified, normalised, but the co-occurrence of the textual features is simply a case of overlapping products since she already limits herself to shifts resulting from the translator's interpretation process. Even if this cause of shifts is ignored, there is no reason not to be able to study explicitation as a specific textual characteristic independently. Considering all this, Blum-Kulka's hypothesis is theoretically valid.

Further, it is not either true that Blum-Kulka "provides no reason for putting forward her Explicitation Hypothesis, which claims that [it] *has to be the case*" [that translation might tend to be more explicit than the source text] (Becher 2010a: 5). Although she does not mention this directly after she postulates the hypothesis, she claims that translation involves shifts "where the translator failed to realize the functions a particular linguistic system, or a particular form, plays in conveying indirect meanings in a given text" (Blum-Kulka 1986/2000: 309). As a result "what is said might become obvious and clear, while what is meant might become vague and obscure" (Blum-Kulka 1986/2000: 312). In other words, contrary to Becher's claim, Blum-Kulka has a ground for her prediction.

The second issue is concerned with Becher's argument that Blum-Kulka's hypothesis is against Occam's Razor. Becher contends that as a scientific hypothesis, Blum-Kulka's hypothesis should advocate the principle "entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity" (Becher 2010a: 7). However, according to Becher, Blum-Kulka instead attempts to explain the tendency of translated texts to be more explicit by using "a new type of explicitation," that is, the translation-inherent one. This, Becher further argues, makes Blum-Kulka's hypothesis uneconomical. While this may be true, it does not refute Blum-Kulka's prediction that translated texts may be more explicit than the source texts regardless of the languages involved, which is the more substantial element of her hypothesis. In addition, the interpretation of Occam's Razor that simplicity would help us to achieve more accuracy may cause "significant opportunities to be missed" (Domingos 1999: 1 online edition). Even though the translation-inherent

concept may be more difficult to investigate than other types of explicitation, it is theoretically plausible that it may exist. It is therefore still worth pursuing to better understand the nature of translation, although Blum-Kulka's prediction may later be proved wrong.

Apart from the issues Becher has brought up in his paper above, I agree with him that Blum-Kulka's hypothesis is somewhat vague. As Becher (2010a: 8) suggests, it is, for instance, not clear what she means by "strategy" (Blum-Kulka 1986/2000: 302). In my view, however, the more serious shortcoming in Blum-Kulka's reasoning is perhaps the fact that she just limits herself to the increase of explicitness due to the interpretation process for a phenomenon resulting from "translation per se". Translation does not only consist of meaning interpretation but also the formulation of the meanings into the target language.¹ The latter aspect should also be taken into account, given that Blum-Kulka's quest is to find out if explicitation is a common feature resulting from the translation process. All these, however, can still be amended to improve the framework in order to investigate the speculated tendency of explicitation in translation. However, prior to this, as we shall see in our later discussion of Becher's second paper, the more fundamental conceptual issues of the notion of explicitation itself have to be dealt with.

3 "Towards a More Rigorous Treatment of the Explicitation Hypothesis in Translation Studies"

In this paper, Becher advances his further criticism to Blum-Kulka's hypothesis by refuting studies that support her theory. He argues that several of them "have suffered from two methodological shortcomings" and "therefore cannot be regarded as confirming the [...] Hypothesis" (Becher 2010b: 1). According to Becher, the studies have largely failed to differentiate between the translation-inherent explicitation and Klaudy's (2008) other types of explicitation (obligatory, optional, and pragmatic). In addition to this, Becher believes that many of the studies that investigate the Explicitation Hypothesis do not have a clear concept of the term explicitation and how it operates; hence it creates biases in their findings. I could not agree more with Becher that many of the studies are somewhat problematic, but there are two issues with his arguments. First, his reason that the studies are not valid for not distinguishing translation-inherent explicitation from Klaudy's (2008) other types of explicitation² is only partly correct.

¹ This could be done while not including shifts to accommodate different audiences (reader-based shifts) because such shifts could cause biases.

² Klaudy (2008) has adopted the translation-inherent shifts/explicitation from Blum-Kulka (1986/2000) as one of her four types of explicitation. Her other three categories are obligatory, optional and pragmatic explicitations. Obligatory explicitation refers to shifts resulting from structural differences between SL and TL, while optional explicitation is due to "differences in text-building strategies [...] and stylistic preferences between languages" (Klaudy 2008: 106). Further, pragmatic explicitation results from differences in culture and world knowledge between SL and TL community (Klaudy 2008).

While in Klaudy's typology translation-inherent explicitation is separately classified (at least superficially) from all three of her other types, Blum-Kulka's is not entirely isolated from them. Second, although Becher is correct in raising the issue of vagueness surrounding the conceptual framework of explicitation, his own concept of explicitation is inaccurate. I am going to address these problems one by one.

3.1 Distinguishing Translation-inherent from Klaudy's Other Types of Explicitation

This idea departs from Becher's attempt to unify two competing hypotheses on explicitation, that is, Blum-Kulka's (1986/2000) and House's (2004, cited from Becher 2010a). Blum-Kulka believes in translation-inherent explicitation which may be a universal in translation. Contrary to this, House (2004, cited from Becher 2010a), who rejects translation universals, postulates that translational explicitation results from linguistic and stylistic differences between languages rather than translator's tendency to explicitate (cf. House 2008). In Becher's point of view, "translation-inherent (i.e., universal) explicitations" and "language pair-specific (i.e., non-universal) explicitations" are occasionally treated as "mutually exclusive" but it is "conceivable" that they "co-exist" (Becher 2010b: 2). However, he believes that they may be treated as co-existing types. This is a position that Klaudy has adopted by categorising explicitation into four types: obligatory, optional, pragmatic, and translation-inherent (Klaudy 2008). Becher suggests that it is crucial to differentiate the translation-inherent type from the rest, in order to avoid language interference from the languages involved in translation. He points out that Blum-Kulka is aware of this issue and "cautions" the need for a comprehensive contrastive stylistic study for the validation of her Hypothesis (Becher 2010a: 13, 2010b: 3).

In spite of this, Becher believes studies supporting Blum-Kulka's view fail to separate the data from shifts that may result from TL's stylistic norms, hence are inconclusive. According to him, studies suffering from this pitfall include Øverås' (1998), which is one of the most commonly cited in explicitation research, Pápai (2004), and Konšalová (2007). Becher "cannot see how data which include optional explicitations could support Blum-Kulka's assumption of a translation-inherent process of explicitation in any meaningful way" (Becher 2010b: 4).

The issue Becher has raised on language interference above is indeed paramount in Blum-Kulka's framework. Blum-Kulka herself insists that the data used to find out about her prediction should exclude obligatory and "reader-based" (pragmatic) shifts (Blum-Kulka 1986/2000: 313). However, Becher has fallen short, (1) by treating Blum-Kulka's optional shifts as equivalent to Klaudy's, and (2) by overlooking that Blum-Kulka's translation-inherent explicitation is a discourse type, which involves textual patterns rather than only a mere accumulation of shifts leading to increase of explicitness.

Firstly, Blum-Kulka's optional shift is distinct from Klaudy's optional explicitation (Klaudy 2008). Blum-Kulka's consists of "those attributable to stylistic preferences"

(Blum-Kulka 1986/2000: 312) as opposed to grammatical shifts. In other words, the shifts may be also defined as simply non-grammatical. In contrast to this, Klaudy specifically refers to shifts resulting from “differences in text-building strategies [...] and stylistic preferences between languages” (Klaudy 2008: 83). According to Klaudy, these shifts are optional “in the sense that grammatically correct sentences can be constructed without their application in the target language, although the text as a whole will be clumsy and unnatural” (Klaudy 2008: 106). In other words, Blum-Kulka’s concept of optional shifts is wider or more general than Klaudy’s. Furthermore, contrary to Becher’s belief, Blum-Kulka suggests that optional shifts be included in the data to test if translation-inherent explicitation exists. In other words, unlike Klaudy’s (2008), Blum-Kulka’s translation-inherent explicitation is not entirely isolated from optional shifts:

In considering translated texts from A to B and vice versa, only optional choices [as opposed to grammatical ones, ETM] should be taken into account, since only these can be legitimately used as evidence for showing certain **trends** in shifts of cohesion through translation.

(Blum-Kulka 1986/2000: 312, original emphasis removed, my emphasis added)

Further, that Blum-Kulka’s optional shifts consist of general stylistic shifts may be supported by the possible outcomes of translation-inherent explicitation test, which, as aforementioned, is based on optional shifts (Blum-Kulka 1986/2000: 313):

- (1) That the cohesive patterns in TL texts tend to approximate the norms of TL texts of the same register
- (2) That cohesive patterns in TL texts tend to reflect norms of SL texts in the same register, which may be due to processes of transfer operating on the translation
- (3) That cohesive patterns in TL texts are neither TL nor SL norms oriented, but form a system of their own, possibly indicating a process of explicitation.

From the above possibilities, it is clear that the test may indicate three types of norms (SL, TL and/or neither). In order to demonstrate such results, Blum-Kulka’s optional shifts must cover any stylistic shift, including those that may be influenced by language-pairs’ stylistic norms.

Secondly, Blum-Kulka (1986/2000) is concerned with shifts of cohesion and coherence in translation and such shifts take place at discourse level. In the paper on the Explicitation Hypothesis she indeed advocates the need to examine translation in terms of discourse. She is thus more interested in shifts of discourse/textual patterns rather than individual shifts resulting in increase of explicitness. This makes her inclusion of any stylistic shifts within her optional shifts acceptable, as the cohesive/coherence patterns in the TL text will only be established by looking at the overall trends of the non-grammatical shifts. An example of cohesive properties that may be pursued in such a way would be the translation of pronouns from English into Indonesian. Indonesians often prefer to specify nouns rather than replacing them with pronouns although the nouns have been previously mentioned. In order to see if there is explicitation in Blum-Kulka’s sense, one can consider the pattern(s) of the overall shifts

of the non-grammatical shifts of the use of pronouns in the source and then compare the pattern(s) with SL and TL norms in general. Given this is the case, inclusion of optional shifts (stylistic shifts in general) in a study to prove Blum-Kulka's Hypothesis is unobjectionable as long as the type of explicitation pursued is at the discourse level.

With the above in mind, not all the studies that Becher has claimed to be problematic are unaccountable for including "optional shifts" in their data, at least Øverås' (1998). This study investigates explicitation at discourse level – it "restricts its search to cohesion" and focuses on "lexical cohesion" in English-Norwegian parallel corpus of translation (Øverås 1998: 5). Unlike what Becher has claimed, the research is inconclusive not because it has completely ignored language interference by including "optional shifts" in the data, but rather because it has used information merely from "informants who often differed in opinion or in personal intuition" in her assessment (Øverås 1998: 9). Øverås, however, was aware of this inadequacy but she did not do such a stylistic study because it was "not possible" within her study limit (Øverås 1998: 9). If this is the case, the limitation of the study is not as "severe" as Becher has argued (Becher 2010a: 2, 2010b: 1). While it may not be considered to confirm Blum-Kulka's hypothesis – it may instead be treated as preliminary research on it.

3.2 Unclear Concept of Explicitation and Its Operation

Apart from the above issue, Becher also raises another methodological problem on explicitation studies. According to him, many scholars often fail to provide a clear definition of explicitation and how it operates, hence creating biases in their findings (Becher 2010b: 5-7). This issue, however, is not new and has been put forward by other scholars studying explicitation such as Englund-Dimitrova (2008), Baumgarten, Meyer and Özçetin (2008) and Krüger (2013). Blum-Kulka (1986/2000) herself does not either clearly define what she means by the term "explicitness", but she seems to refer to the lexical increase that may result in "redundancy". She states that explicitation may "[go] beyond changes in cohesive forms" (Blum-Kulka 1986/2000: 301), but she also does not elaborate the case further, and thus has nothing to say on the extent of explicitation.

Pertinent to this conceptual problem, Becher defines explicitness as "the verbalization of information that the addressee would (most probably) be able to infer from the context, her world knowledge or from other inferential sources if it were not verbalized" (Becher 2010b: 2). Explicitation, on the other hand, is defined as "cases where a given stretch of the target text is more explicit than the corresponding source text" (Becher 2010b: 2). These definitions seem to be workable but he does not seem to be able to provide a satisfying explanation when assessing Kamenická's (2008: 127, as cited in Becher 2010b: 6) example of explicitation:

ST (English): Now, before you get upset listen to me.
TT (Czech): 'Now, before you get upset you must listen to me'³

Becher refuses to qualify such a case as an instance of explicitation, as he thinks, "the existence of an addressee is part of the imperative's constructional meaning and thus does not need to be inferred" (Becher 2010b: 6). This view, however, is debatable. While it is generally true that the meaning *you* may be said to be part of the imperative form, it cannot be classified as verbally evident. Translators would still need to infer from the context to find out if it is an imperative and decide that it does not refer to *somebody* (which may also be an implied subject of an imperative, but "highly marked"), before figuring out that the subject is *you* (Wilson 2014: 30). This problem demonstrates how complex the concept of explicitness is (see also Heltai 2005). It has different aspects that lead to different understandings of "explicitation" and makes the studies examining the phenomenon difficult to compare (Englund-Dimitrova 2005; Murtisari 2011, 2013). It is unfortunate that the conceptual issue still remains a major problem on the study of explicitation although there have been numerous studies pursuing the topic. In the first place, how would one describe the extent of the "explicitation" of implicit meaning when he/she does not have any clear concept of the implicit/explicit meaning itself? I would argue that prior to any attempt to test the nature of explicitation (and its implicitation counterpart) and its translation, we need to first deal with the very concept. This would need a brave venture into the notoriously complex area of meaning interpretation, but unless this is done, the issue of explicitation would remain difficult to pin down.

4 Conclusion

In summary, contrary to Becher's claim that Blum-Kulka's hypothesis should be abandoned, it is still a valid prediction that is worth investigating. She has a ground for speculating that translation may result in explicitation at the discourse level. In spite of this, revision is necessary to clarify the vagueness surrounding it which Becher (2010a) has pointed out and its restriction to shifts of the translator's interpretation only to refer to shifts resulting from "translation *per se*", which refer to more than just meaning interpretation. For further research for validating the hypothesis, extra care should be taken to limit the investigation on explicitation of cohesion and coherence to remain faithful to the discourse level Blum-Kulka has pursued. Above all, as I have argued, the most important thing to do for explicitation research is (re)defining the underlying concepts of "explicitness" and "implicitness", which have often made explicitation studies controversial. It is difficult to conceive that we will be able to understand explicitation in significant depth unless we deal the key concepts. Finally, although some of Becher's observations are inaccurate his two papers (Becher 2010a,b), they remain a very significant contribution to the study on Explicitation Hypothesis and explicitation in

³ Unfortunately, Kamenická only provides English glosses of the Czech translations.

general, which has been a major interest in Translation Studies. The works have highlighted some of the perennial central issues in explicitation research and indeed the imperative need for a more rigorous treatment of them for further study.

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