

# Norms and Nature in Translation Studies<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Norms have played a central role in Descriptive Translation Studies, because (Toury, 1995:61 emphasis in the original) **‘it is norms that determine the (type and extent of) equivalence manifested by actual translations’**. Equivalence is the name given to the relationship, of whatever type and extent, between a translation and its source text, and the existence of such a relationship is axiomatic in the theory (Toury, 1980b: 45).

There is a degree of theoretical tension between norms and another notion which has recently generated interest within Translation Studies, the notion of the universal. The tension between the concept of the norm and the concept of the universal arises because ‘there is a point in assuming the existence of norms only in situations which allow for different kinds of behaviour’ (Toury 1995: 55). Insofar, therefore, as the notion of the universal in translation theory implies invariable behaviour, the explanatory power of the norm concept is inversely proportional to that of the concept of the translation universal: The more variable translational behaviour can be assumed to be, the more theoretical power accrues to the norm construct; and the less variable translational behaviour can be assumed to be, the less theoretical power accrues to the norm construct.

I will begin by trying to establish what we mean by the terms ‘norm’ and ‘universal’ in Translation Studies.

## Norms in Translation Studies

The notion of norms enters the broad field of Translation Studies with Toury’s essay “The nature and role of norms in Translation Studies”, first published in *In Search of a Theory of Translation* (1980a) and reproduced in somewhat more than its entirety in his *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (1995) to which my page references will be. Here, norms are understood as socio-

cultural phenomena (1995: 62) situated between two extremes of a scale of socio-cultural constraint: Absolute rules at one end and complete idiosyncrasy at the other:

<b>Rules</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>Idiosyncrasy</b>
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A norm may be more or less close to one of these extremes and its position on the scale is subject to change, disappearance and appearance over time (1995: 54); that is, norms are basically unstable (1995: 62).

Norms are assimilated by individuals in the course of their socialisation process, and adherence to them or deviance from them has the potential to incur approval or sanction of various kinds, including positive or negative criticism (1995: 55). Norms are not directly observable, but they can be learnt and also studied through observation of patterned, recurrent behaviour, for example in talk aloud protocol studies, or through observation of the immediate results of translational behaviour, texts.

Translation scholars may consider these data in light of what is known about extra-textual factors such as translation policy, publishing constraints, socio-cultural mores and customs and so on (Toury 1995: 65) to arrive at verbalisations of the norms; but outside of theory, norms are rarely explicitly verbalised and tend to be followed by translators almost unawares.

This understanding of the norm concept does not differ substantially from that evidenced in general, socio-culturally oriented definitions of norms, such as the following:

‘Expectations of how a person or persons will behave in a given situation based on established protocols, rules of conduct or accepted social practices’.

[www.asq.org/glossary/n.html](http://www.asq.org/glossary/n.html)

‘A way of behaving or believing that is normal for a group or culture. All societies have their norms, they are simply what most people do. Deviants break norms. Some norms are enshrined in law and society punishes those who deviate from them. Breaches of unwritten norms are unofficially punished. This is important to science, because innovation is a form of deviancy science formally encourages’. (Hewitt 2005: Glossary)

‘An expected standard of behaviour and belief established and enforced by a group’.  
[www.socialpolicy.ca/n.htm](http://www.socialpolicy.ca/n.htm)

‘Shared belief that a person ought to behave in a certain way at a certain time’. (Stafford and Scott 1986: 81).

These definitions highlight both the social and the expectational nature of norms. Norms belong to social groups. They are not absolute (legislative) rules, and people are able to contravene norms as well as to adhere to them.

Although norms, in this sense, obviously relate to systems of belief among groups of people about what is appropriate behaviour at a certain time in certain circumstances, it is important to note that what people believe *should* be done may not necessarily be what even those who hold the belief *actually* do. In the social and socially applied sciences, it is customary, therefore, to distinguish between **attitudinal norms**, which have to do with “shared beliefs or expectations in a social group about how people in general or members of the group ought to behave in various circumstances” (Perkins 2002: 165), and **behavioural norms**, which have to do with “the most common actions actually exhibited in a social group” (2002:165). Attitudinal norms do not necessarily determine behaviour; as Perkins puts it (2002:165), “How most other community members believe everyone should behave and what behaviour is most common may be correlated, of course, but each component may also be somewhat distinct”. Clearly, a distinction might similarly be drawn in

Translation Studies between what people's (including translators') attitudes are to translational phenomena, which might be partially tapped by protocol and interview studies, and what some people (translators) actually do when translating. But whereas it is possible in much research in the social sciences to identify behavioural norms with certain manifestations of the behaviour in question (called normal behaviour), this is not possible in translation studies, because, like all behaviour involving language, translating behaviour is primarily mental. Its results, however important and central to the immediate aim of translation, communication, are, nevertheless, merely the outward signs of a phenomenon which, as Locke ([1690] 1977: Book Three, Chapter 2) remarked, is itself 'invisible and hidden from others'. Perkins studies college students' drinking behaviour, and the behavioural norm in this case can be established by identifying, categorising, quantifying and carrying out statistical calculations on instances of this behaviour. The relationship between the behavioural norm and its manifestations is therefore relatively simple and direct (however complicated the relationship between a drinker, his or her attitude to drinking, and his or her actual drinking behaviour may be).

Translational norms, in contrast, stand in a more complex relationship to the evidence for their operation. Even those of Toury's norm categories that are most directly related to the linguistic material that ends up constituting a translation are **guides to** the selection of this material; they are never identified with it: Operational norms in general **direct** decisions made during translating and **govern** relationships between the translation and the source text (1995: 58); the sub-class, matricial norms, **govern** the fullness of translation, distribution of material in it and its segmentation (1995: 58-59); and the sub-class, textual-linguistic norms, **govern** 'the selection of material to formulate the target text in' (1995: 59). In other words, and as indicated in the introduction above, Toury draws a clear distinction between the norms on the one hand and, on the other hand, textual material in actual translations, which, together with textual material in source texts, manifest equivalence relationships. Equivalence relationships are categorically different from norms, and linguistic material falls into an additional, separate, third category. So the relationship between (a) textual

material, which is concrete, and which is distributed across two texts that stand to one another as translation to source text; and (b) equivalence, the relationships that obtain between textual material in the translation and textual material in the source text; and (c) norms, which are socio-culturally shared psychological phenomena is extremely complex, and it is important not to slip into ways of speaking or writing which might suggest identity between translation norms and their manifestations.

Norms share this lack of identity with their manifestations with other phenomena that influence linguistic behaviour, but from which norms nevertheless differ in important respects. Consider, for example, the Gricean maxims of conversational co-operation (Grice 1975). The maxims, and the principle of co-operation itself, are vocalisations of demands for connectivity imposed on conversational behaviour by human rationality: If our talk exchanges are to be rational, they must consist of utterances that are connected to each other, and the Cooperative Principle, “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice 1975: 45), ensures that this connectedness can be maintained, sometimes – or perhaps normally -- by way of a complex conversational dance around, rather than inside spaces occupied by notions such as literalness, truth and explicitness.

The Principle ensures that conversation can be, though it does not regulate its form beyond conformation to rationality through connectedness. A person can contravene the Maxims that fall under the Principle, but not the Principle itself while still being considered rational. Undeclared, non-obvious non-adherence to a Maxim, such as for example lying or pretending to have more knowledge than one actually has, will mislead. Obvious non-adherence, such as for example saying more or less than or something different than a questioner might reasonably expect, will generate implicature, that is information that the addressee adds to what is actually being said and which reinstates the Maxim.

Norms, in contrast, (generally) regulate behaviour; but the behaviour survives, though it may be considered deviant, even if the norms are not adhered to (until perhaps non-adherence of a certain determined kind itself becomes the norm). We might encapsulate the differences between norms and maxims by saying that whereas norms are **socially** constrained, the Maxims of the Cooperative Principle are **cognitively** constrained. We could represent this on a cline of source of constraint, going from the social to the cognitive.

### **Socially constrained**

Norms

### **Cognitively constrained**

Cooperative Principle

Let us now consider the similarities and contrasts between these two notions and the notion of the universal.

### **Norms and universals**

The concept of the translation universal is not exactly new (see for example Toury, 1977), but the publication of Baker's paper, "Corpus linguistics and translation studies: Implications and applications" (1993) is generally acknowledged as the inspiration for the recent upsurge of interest in the concept (see for example Mauranen and Kujamäki, 2004a:1).

The laudable starting point of Baker's paper was to argue (1993: 234) 'that translated texts record genuine communicative events and as such are neither inferior nor superior to other communicative events in any language. They are however different'. Translation universals are introduced as a potentially identifying characteristic of this difference, defined as (Baker, 1993: 243)

'universal features of translation, that is features which typically occur in translated text rather than original utterances and which are not the result of interference from specific linguistic systems'.

If, at first sight, it seems a little odd to define something that merely occurs **typically** as 'universal', we should remember that in the case of linguistic phenomena, there is a long tradition

of doing so. On Greenberg's list (1966) of forty five universals (twenty morphological, eighteen syntactic and seven word order universals), based on the study of thirty languages, we find both **absolute universals** such as 'All languages have pronominal categories involving at least three persons and two numbers' (Universal 42), and a number of **universal tendencies**, to which there are exceptions, such as for example 'In languages with prepositions, the genitive almost always follows the governing noun, while in languages with postpositions it almost always precedes (Norwegian has both genitive orders)' (Universal 2). To qualify as a universal tendency, or, as these are also known, as a non-absolute or statistical universal, the tendency in question must, however, be demonstrably statistically significant (see Song, 2001:6), so in this tradition a universal can be defined as a property 'which must at least be true of the majority of the human languages' (Song, 2001:8). Both absolute and non-absolute universals may be either **implicational** ('if a language has feature *x* it will (tend to) have feature *y*') or **non-implicational** ('All languages (tend to) have feature *z*').

The Greenberg tradition of research into language universals allows for a number of types of explanation for the existence of universals. For example, Hawkins (1994) proposes that certain orders of word and constituent predominate because they ease language comprehension and production. Others employ diachronic explanations (Bybee *et al.*, 1990) and yet others seek to integrate processing explanations with diachronic explanations (Greenberg, 1957; Hall, 1988). In this, the typologically oriented tradition of research on universals differs absolutely from the Chomskyan.

In the Chomskyan tradition, cognition alone, in its manifestation as Universal Grammar (UG), the initial state of the language acquisition device, is used to explain what is universal in languages, both (a) the principles that constrain the forms of languages and (b) the parameters which define the binary variations which they display (Chomsky, 1981). These are considered innate and include for example the Locality Principle, which says that grammatical operations are local (so that for example auxiliary inversion preposes the **closest** auxiliary and wh-movement preposes the **closest**

wh-expression) and Parameters like the wh-Parameter which determines that a language either does (English does) or does not (Chinese does not) front wh-expressions, or the Null-Subject Parameter which determines that a language either does (Italian does) or does not (English does not) allow finite verbs to have null subjects. There are no implicational principles and parameters, and there are only absolute principles and parameters (see further Radford 2004) <sup>2</sup>. Followers of this faith tend to consider that any viable, absolute universal can be interpreted in terms of the Principles and Parameters of UG.

Given that principles and parameters are innate, they differ as absolutely from norms (see section 2 above) as it is possible to do: They are way off the rules-end of the scale of variation on which norms are situated: It is not within our power to regulate Principles and Parameters, they simply are. In fact, even the non-absolute universals of the Greenberg tradition must be precluded from the rules - norms scale, because even if it is true that some of these may be explained in terms of processing ease and/or diachronicity, they are not subject to social control, coercion or influence of the kind that may result from attitudes: We are dealing here with matters not of sociolinguistics, but of psycho- and historical linguistics.

We can, however, add the non-absolute universals to our constraint - determination scale, introduced at the end of section 2 above. Whereas norms are constrained by attitudes which individuals develop in the course of social interaction with other individuals, and whereas Principles and Parameters are features of UG and therefore cognitively **determined**, non-absolute universals arguably resemble the Cooperative Principle in resulting from cognitive **constraints** on human linguistic interaction:

<u><b>Socially constrained</b></u>	<u><b>Cognitively constrained</b></u>	<u><b>Cognitively determined</b></u>
Norms	Cooperative Principle	Principles and Parameters
	Non-absolute Universals	Absolute Universals



The question we must now ask, I think, is whether translation universals are of the kind that can be explained purely on cognitive grounds, or whether they are more like the type for which scholars in the Greenberg tradition offer processing ease and diachronicity explanations and which, therefore, may be universal simply because language users in every culture tend to find it advantageous to employ them; or neither.

### **What is the nature of translation ‘universals’**

Baker’s original formulation seems to suggest a purely cognitive source and explanation of translation universals, whereas the examples she uses to illustrate what a translation universal might be are strongly suggestive of explanation in terms of the kinds of norm that might guide translational behaviour; at most, it seems to me, the majority of these candidates for universalhood invite explanation in terms of processing ease or diachronicity, rather than in terms of innate aspects of the human cognitive apparatus.

Baker lists as candidates for the status of translation universal explicitation, disambiguation, simplification, conventionalisation, avoidance of repetition, exaggeration of features of the target language, and manifestations of the so-called “third code” (1993:243-245). Each of these, she says (1993:246), can be seen as a product of constraints which are inherent in the translation process itself and this accounts for the fact that they are universal (or at least we assume they are, pending further research). They do not vary across cultures. Other features have been observed to occur consistently in certain types of translation within a particular socio-cultural and historical context. These are the product of norms of translation which represent another type of constraint on translational behaviour.

Of course, there are two senses in which the term ‘translation process’ can be used: It can be used to refer to the cognitive or mental process or processes that take place in the minds of translating translators, including and focusing mainly on subliminal processing; and it can be used to refer to the variably social, physical and mental (but excluding subliminal) processes in which clients,

translators and a variety of implicated others consciously engage in order to produce a translation. The contrast Baker invokes with ‘other features’ which are culture specific and which are the product of normative constraints strongly suggests the cognitive-mental-subliminal understanding of ‘process’ in the quotation above, as does the reference to the translation process as a causal agent hypothesised ‘rather than’ the confrontation of specific linguistic systems, in the description of the features as (1993:243) ‘linked to the nature of the translation process itself rather than to the confrontation of specific linguistic systems’.

It seems to me that of the candidates for universal-hood proposed by Baker (1993), listed by Chesterman (2004) and discussed by Mauranen and Kujamäki (2004a), very few qualify for the status of *cognitively determined* universals. One that does qualify, though, is identified by Tirkkonen-Condit (2004).

Tirkkonen-Condit (2004) finds that clitics and verb types unique to Finnish occur more rarely in translations into Finnish than in text originally written in Finnish. Similar findings have been reported in Lykke Jakobsen’s (1986) study of (among other words) the pronoun ‘man’ and the discourse particle ‘jo’ in original writing in Danish and in translation into Danish from English, in Gellerstam’s (1986) study of translationese, which compares novels translated into Swedish with novels originally written in Swedish, and in Eskola’s (2004) study of non-finite constructions in Finnish.

Tirkkonen-Condit suggests that the phenomenon of under-representation in translation of features unique to the target language arises because such features are underrepresented in a translator’s mental lexicon while he or she is translating. Nothing in the source text is likely to trigger them. This is an excellent candidate for the status of a universal: The phenomenon receives a cognitive explanation, and similar results have been found for unrelated languages, Swedish and Danish on the one hand and Finnish on the other.

Notice that this represents a return to the idea of interference in the translation process named by Toury (1995:274-79) ‘the law of interference’. Tirkkonen-Condit’s study is carried out using the methodology proposed by Baker, which may be roughly described as follows:

Take a corpus of translations into *L* from a large number of languages and compare it with a corpus of texts originally written in *L*, looking for evidence of feature *F*. Do this for as many *L*s as possible. If it is found, for each pair of translation corpus and non-translation corpus, that evidence for *F* occurs more frequently in the corpus of translated text, then we will have cause to believe that it does so as a result of the translation process and not because of any relationship between any language pair. We may then be justified in calling *F* a translation universal (1993:245-6).

Yet, the study contradicts Baker’s understanding of a translation universal as arising from the translation process itself and, by implication, as *therefore* not having to do with the relationship between the languages or textual systems involved. Tirkkonen-Condit’s findings depend crucially on the relationship between the languages involved. But what is extremely interesting is that her study suggests that we have been looking at the question of influence or interference from the wrong end of the pole. As Toury points out (1995:275-6) interference is an inherent part of the translation process – how can it not be, given that a translation is made on the basis of another text in another language. But Tirkkonen-Condit’s study suggests that what determines the outcomes of this interference may be the **target** pole, if not alone, then as much as or more than the **source** pole, which we have tended to think of as the major determinant of the shape of the translation. Differences between translations into *L* and texts originally in *L* are determined as much, if not wholly by *L*’s unique features, rather than features of the language of the original for the translation. This, it seems to me, is among the most interesting findings to have arisen out of the search for translation universals to date. Further, it seems to me that if the concept of the universal is to retain any theoretical bite in our discipline, we would do well to reserve it for use in connection with phenomena such as this, for which it makes sense to produce a cognitively based explanation.

Many—possibly most -- other candidates for universal status would be better accounted for by the norm concept, which therefore remains to do its job relatively undisturbed within descriptive translation studies. It goes without saying, I think, that corpus studies are extremely well suited to the search for potential evidence for norms, though, equally obviously, they cannot be used to reveal the norms themselves.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is an expanded version of an article which first appeared in *SYNAPS* 16/2005, pp. 13-9. I am grateful to Ingrid Simonnæs, editor of *SYNAPS* for her initial editing of the article and to the editorial committee for permission to reproduce the article here.

<sup>2</sup> A null subject is a subject which is not physically (phonetically or graphically) present in a text, but whose grammatical and semantic presence is understood. In English, imperative structures standardly have null subjects, and some structures commonly used in speech, such as ‘Can’t find my pen. Must be on my desk at home’ display ‘null truncated subjects’ (Radford, 2004:349). A language which allows any finite clause to leave implicit a subject which would have been realised by a pronoun, is a null-subject language. For example (Radford, 2004:349) in Italian, it is possible to say simply ‘Sei simpatica’ (‘Are nice’), where English demands ‘You are nice’.

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