

# Optimality in translation

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*Abstract. Linguistic theory and Translation Studies have a long, if somewhat turbulent, history. Even now, in some institutions Translation Studies is placed in the field of Applied Linguistics, whereas in others it is subsumed under Cultural Studies. This is perhaps a sign of something that now few would doubt: that the phenomenon of translation, in its many forms, is manifold and can (and should) be approached from a range of angles. This paper approaches the problem of analyzing source and target texts, with the aim of identifying the translator's strategy when translating, and always considering translation to be a decision-making process. To do this, it draws critically on a relatively new theory in the study of language: Optimality Theory.*

## Precedents of optimality

A reaction to preceding theories and ideas is inevitable and is part of the progress of knowledge, and our field is no different (where some say knowledge, some may say science, although that can be another dirty word in translation). Against the source-oriented approaches that preceded them, target-oriented, norm-based descriptive approaches to translation have offered many insights, placing emphasis on the role of translation in a literary system. However, in concentrating on norms as social constraints, these approaches tend at best to ignore the translator as an intelligent, thinking being: the creator of texts. Social constraints are important, but it is ultimately translators, anonymous though they may be, who make the choices and create the translations that result, whether these are final versions or texts that editors will submit to changes. The approach outlined here hopes to contribute to knowledge of how translators arrive at their translations.

The approach takes as its starting point translators: living, thinking beings who read one text and create another for a different locale. Pym describes translation competence as the following:

- The ability to generate a series of more than one viable term [...] for a transferred text.
- The ability to select one target text (TT) from this series, quickly and with justified (ethical) confidence, and to propose this TT to a particular

reader as standing for [the source text as received by the translator].  
(Pym 1992)

Thus for Pym translation competence is a matter of “generating and selecting between alternative texts” (Pym 1992). This is a simple theory with many advantages: “[It] is restrictive but not necessarily reductive. Its relative virtues include applicability to intralingual translation, recognition that there is more than one way to translate and refusal of any notion of exclusive correctness, since the criteria of speed and confidence—written into the above definition—by no means rule out disagreement between translators or future improvements by the one translator” (Pym 1992).

Pym does not, however, offer an explanation of how the translator chooses between the various candidate translations, saying that he has “absolutely nothing of importance to say about the matter” (Pym 1992). Others have approached the matter. One example is Chesterman, who places Pym’s theory within Karl Popper’s theory of knowledge acquisition and attempts to explain the process of choice, explaining translation “shifts” via “strategies” (Chesterman 1997). These strategies, however, are drawn uncritically from Vinay and Darbelnet’s famous comparative stylistics, and as such are open to the same criticism: among other things, that they are labels applied to the products of translation, and not descriptions of the translator’s state of mind when entering into the process and during the process of translation (Mason 1994).

Kiraly takes a similar approach to competence as Pym, and suggests that whereas some translation problems are handled by a relatively uncontrolled processing center, leading to more intuitive decisions, others are solved by a relatively controlled processing center, offering more consciously deliberated candidate TTs (Kiraly 1995). This would seem to suggest that stock translations exist in a translator’s brain and are applied to problems: where no stock translation exists, more deliberation is required. Anybody who has translated professionally recognizes this phenomenon, as does anybody familiar with the workings of translation memory software. It also highlights the cognitive basis of the translation process.

Furthermore, and on a related point, Holmes talks of the fact that a translation “can never be more than a single interpretation out of many of the original whose image it darkly mirrors” (1968: 30). Thus we have another base in our approach to translation: multiple translations of the same text are possible, although the translator chooses, or creates through a series of choices, an optimal translation in a given context. All possible translations and texts that are based on other texts, including critical essays and works inspired by the ST, which in Holmes’ terminology are grouped together as “metatexts”, are linked by Wittgensteinian family resemblances. In the case of verse translation, this form is distinct from other forms of text creation in that it holds a dual function: as interpretation of another text, and as a text in

its own right (Holmes 1968: 24). Koster pursues this idea, also looking at the dual role of the translator as interpreter and sender of information (Koster 2000: 35ff.), and he states that this role is revealed through ST-TT analysis. However, Koster's "Armamentarium" for text analysis is complex, and his own applications tend to focus on the use of pronouns and deictic indicators (Koster 2000: 205-230).

The roles of translator and translation are important in that neither belongs entirely to the source nor entirely to the target culture. This is a paradox visited by Pym in his work on intercultural communication (see for example Pym 1998: 181). Pym questions bipolar notions of where the translators belong, such that if we should question the role of the translator in a source/target duality, perhaps we should also question the role of texts and the notion of target-oriented and source-oriented translations. We believe that an approach grounded in the principles of Optimality Theory can help us to understand the phenomenon of translation better.

### **Optimality theory**

Optimality Theory (Prince and Smolensky 2002) is a theory of Universal Grammar that first became established in the fields of phonology and morphology, and research is now being carried out in the fields of syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Unlike Chomsky's (and Chomskyan) theories of generative grammar, Optimality Theory is not derivative: whereas in Chomskyan X-bar theory, rules are applied to an input (or underlying) structure to create and output (or surface) structure, with the consequence that there is only one possible output for an input, in Optimality Theory there are no rules: more than one output is possible.

Optimality Theory proposes that a grammar has two parts: a generating component, which generates a series of candidate outputs on the base of an input, and an evaluating component which evaluates input-output pairs to ascertain an optimal candidate out of the set. This assessment is done via a hierarchy of universal but violable constraints, constraints that are always "active", yet that can be violated in order to satisfy a more highly ranked constraint. This means that although constraints apply to all languages, their hierarchy is language-specific. Furthermore, these constraints comprise two groups: faithfulness constraints, which demand fidelity to the input, and markedness constraints, which demand unmarked outputs. In other words, faith constraints demand that things stay as they are, and markedness constraints demand change. Something must give, thus we have violability.

This basic model is applied to translation thus: The input is the text that the translator has to translate, and the process of translating is covered by the generating and evaluating candidates: the generating component produces candidate TTs, and the evaluating component assesses the problem-solution pairs. This corresponds to Pym's theory of translation competence. The

potential of this approach is that it offers a cognitive basis for the explanation of the decision-making process: candidate ST-TT pairs would be assessed according to a hierarchy of violable constraints. There are certain recurrent themes in translation studies that can be linked, and possibly explained, by this approach.

### **Universals of translation**

Since in Optimality Theory a constraint is taken to be a universal (one which is always present but not necessarily always dominant), constraint violation indicates a marked state of affairs. This basic theoretical consideration could be extremely useful in describing the so-called laws, or universals, of translation. According to Laviosa, universals of translation “are linguistic features which typically occur in translated rather than original texts and are thought to be independent of the influence of the specific language pairs involved in the process of translation” (1998: 288). This description corresponds with the notion of recurrent dominant constraints in this approach. We can propose the following definition of likelihoods in constraint hierarchies: “If X dominates the hierarchy, then the greater the likelihood of Y”. This formulation is similar to the formulation of laws proposed by Toury: “If X, then the greater/the lesser the likelihood Y” (1995: 265). Also, in saying “typically”, Laviosa indicates that these universals are not 100% sure: there seems to be a certain violability of these universals. The theoretical location of constraints themselves would be somewhere between laws and possibilities as described by Toury (1995: 260): laws are more likely to be the expression of particular constraint hierarchies. Note, however, that they are not “directives” (Toury 1995: 261) in the sense of orders to translators that they must translate in a particular way. In isolation, constraints do not tell us much about a translator’s strategy: rather it is their interaction that gives insight into the translation process.

### **Unit of translation**

The unit of translation is another recurrent area in Translation Studies that has not provided a satisfactory consensus. Text-based approaches question whether there is a single unit of translation below the level of the text itself, if a unit is taken to be a stretch of ST on which a section of TT can be mapped without anything remaining. Translators, however, intuitively feel that while translating they work with something smaller than the whole text. Unfortunately, intuition takes us no further than that, since focus is sometimes primarily drawn to syntax, sometimes to semantics, sometimes to features of prosody, sometimes even phonology and morphology, in the case of the Zukofsky’s infamous translation of Catullus. The problem is how to

define the unit of translation when the evidence seems to indicate that its material basis is so wide-ranging.

Since different constraints assess different features, they also assess different units, ultimately starting at the start of the ST-TT pairs and ending at the end, although with no guarantee that borders correspond anywhere throughout the analysis. As such, the unit of translation in this approach is a multiple concept, which at various points of the translation process tends towards one feature (constraint) or another, but is never exclusively syntactical, or semantic, or prosodic. Furthermore, and following this concept of multiplicity, when translators revise their texts they will perhaps make different choices, since they will have a more global view of the text and as such a more constant hierarchy of constraints.

### **The nature of constraints**

The basis for constraints is that faithfulness constraints demand a certain relationship between input and output features, and that markedness constraints demand a certain feature in the output, regardless of whether or not it is present in the input. Faithfulness constraints clearly prohibit the relationships that Pym identifies between textual quantity and semantic material: deletion, abbreviation, addition and expansion (Pym 1992). It must be noted though that, in context, constraints are violable (to satisfy more highly ranked constraints), and so in effect they keep these relationships under control, ensuring that there is the lowest deletion, addition etc. possible to achieve the TT's aims. Markedness constraints, on the other hand, do not explicitly provoke deletion, abbreviation, addition and expansion since these are ST-TT relationships, and markedness constraints take into account not ST features, but rather TT structures.

By their nature, constraints will need to be fairly general, that is non-language specific, and will need to analyze the possible ST-TT relationships and TT features. It would be a very lengthy and possibly infinite task to make a list of all precise factors to which translators may restrict themselves. And equally, in generalizing things detail is lost. We believe that a limited set of constraints would be manageable enough to apply to the analysis of translations and also powerful enough to offer insights into the translator's strategy—since that is what we are identifying here. Let us then look at a small corpus of translations, consider the relationships and how the constraints interact.

### **A brief case study**

The texts that we shall analyze here are all translations of the first stanza of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" into Spanish and Catalan (see Appendix). If we look solely at the TTs themselves, there are clearly similarities between

the texts: all take place at night; all are related in the first person; all contain what seems to be somebody knocking at the door; all contain direct speech. However, there are differences too: in Forteza's text the protagonist does not move after the knock at the door, whereas this is not specified in the other two texts; the repetition referring to the knock at the door does not feature in Gómez de la Serna's text. Although all are in verse, Gómez de la Serna uses shorter lines, and more of them, than Benguerel and Forteza; the two Catalan translators use regular rhyme, whereas the Spanish text does not.

If we compare this brief repertoire of features to Poe's own English text, we can see some ST-TT relationships, and some TT features that seem to have nothing to do with the ST: the use of five lines and a refrain is common to Poe, Benguerel and Forteza but not Gómez de la Serna; ditto the rhyme scheme (note that although the repetition of structures is the same, i.e. there is rhyme, the features are different); Poe's text features direct speech, and repetition of a knocking at the door; Poe's text, too, takes place at night; Forteza's reference to staying still does not have an explicit referent in Poe's text. Looking at finer detail, Poe, Benguerel and Forteza use lines whose syllable count is the same, if counted in the same manner; that is up to the final stressed syllable. However, Poe's text is written in accentual-syllabic meter, the most frequently used meter in English verse (syllables are organized into feet), whereas Benguerel's text (and Gómez de la Serna's) is in syllabic metre, the most frequently used metre in Catalan (and Spanish) verse. A distinction between Benguerel and Forteza is that the latter uses accentual-syllabic meter, like Poe, and so there is a closer relationship between Poe and Forteza regarding the physical form of meter than between Poe and Benguerel: more features are represented. This, though, means that some other ST features cannot be represented, simply because Forteza's use of meter, and the lack of tension in his verses are constraints that Benguerel does respect to the same extent. So, with "I sens moure'm del meu lloc" Forteza writes a half-line without representation in the ST, to respect constraints of rhyme and meter, while violating a faithfulness constraint demanding the representation of ST semantic material (and only ST semantic material) in the TT.

Gómez de la Serna's translation is curious in that its meter is so physically different to Poe's. This is possibly due to the fact that Spanish verse traditionally does not use lines longer than twelve syllables, and so perhaps Gómez de la Serna felt compelled to use an "acceptable" verse form, that is one from the Spanish tradition. However, since he does not use rhyme and the verses are tense (the reader is forced to make many elisions), the type and use of meter is quite distinct to Poe's. If we consider Gómez de la Serna's lines to be decasyllables, then the seven lines plus a seven-syllable refrain equals 77 syllables: equally, if Poe's lines are considered fourteeners, then five lines plus a refrain also equal 77 syllables, and here we have a link between the two. However, the syllable structure of Spanish is much simpler

than English, and as such words tend to be longer, and it is more difficult to represent the same (or similar) semantic material in the same number of syllables in Spanish as in English. This is why verse translations of Shakespeare in Spanish and Catalan tend to use alexandrines (Oliva 2002: 36). In conforming to this verse form, Gómez is thus limited in the semantic content he can reproduce, and so we see elisions such as those in the direct speech.

### Issues

This basic application hopes to demonstrate an approach to translation based on the principles of Optimality Theory and its potential. However, here we are not proposing our research as a general theory of translation, but rather as a methodology grounded in theory. Further research is needed to determine the constraint set to be used in the analysis of translations, although much can be learnt from research into translation universals given the theoretical affinity of the concepts of constraint and universal. It must avoid the trappings of too many constraints, creating a methodology that is too difficult to apply; in this respect, Kitty van Leuven-Zwart's methodology for ST-TT analysis (Leuven-Zwart 1989; 1990) and criticisms of it are useful. Nevertheless, a theory and methodology based on cognitive principles promises to be a rich field of study.

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### **Appendix: Translations of the first stanza of “The Raven”, and the ST itself**

#### *Benguere! 1944*

Temps ha, una nit desolada, feble, cansat, l'oblidada  
 saviesa meditava d'uns llibres rars, primicers,  
 i quan la son m'abaltia, em va semblar que sentia  
 un truc suau que colpia al portal del meu recés.  
 «Serà algú», vaig dir, «que truca al portal del meu recés—  
 tan sols deu ser això i res més.»

#### *Forteza 1935 [1945]*

Una trista mitja nit, que vetlava entenebrit,  
 fullejant amb greu fadiga llibres vells i antics papers  
 i em dormia a poc a poc, vaig sentir a la porta un toc.  
 I sens moure'm del meu lloc: «Qualcú ve a cercar recés  
 —vaig pensar— en aquesta hora, qualcú ve a cercar recés.»  
 Això sols i no res més.

#### *Julio Gómez de la Serna*

Una vez, en triste media noche,  
 cuando, cansado y mustio, examinaba

infolios raros de olvidad ciencia,  
mientras cabeceaba adormecido,  
oí de pronto, que alguien golpeaba  
en mi puerta, llamando suavemente.  
«Es, sin duda—murmuré—, un visitante...»  
Solo esto, y nada más.

*Poe*

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,  
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—  
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,  
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door—  
“’Tis some visiter,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door—  
Only this and nothing more.”