"Translationese" (and "post-editese"?) no more: on importing fuzzy conceptual tools from Translation Studies in MT research

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Abstract

During recent years, MT research has imported a number of conceptual tools from Translation Studies such as "translationese" or "translation universals". These notions were the object of intense conceptual debates in Corpus-Based Translation Studies (CBTS). A number of seminal publications recommended substituting them by less problematic terms, such as "the language of translation" or "typical" or "general features of translated language". This paper critically analyses the arguments put forward in the early 2000's against the use of these terms, and whether the same issues apply to current MT research using them. The paper discusses, (1) the impact of the negative or pejorative nature of the term "translationese" on the status of professional translators and translation products (2) the danger of "overgeneralizations" or overextending claims found in specific and very limited textual subsets, as well as (3) the need to reframe the search of tendencies in translated language away from "universals" towards probabilistic, situational or conditional tendencies. It will be argued that MT research would benefit from clearly defined terms and constructs for notions related to specific new variants of translated language. New terms will be proposed, such as "MT translated language" or "the language of MT", or "general features/ tendencies in MT or PEMT".

1 Introduction

During recent years, conceptual constructs that emerged in Translation Studies (TS), or more precisely in its sub-branch Corpus-Based Translation Studies (CBTS), have made their way into Machine Translation (MT) research. This paper deals with the recent adoption of the conceptual apparatus of CBTS related to "translationese" and "translation universals" in MT publications.[1] Both theoretical constructs received extensive scrutiny in TS in the early 2000's, primarily in terms of (1) their pejorative or negative connotations that could potentially impact the status of professional translators in academia and society at large, (2) the tendency to overgeneralize results obtained using limited textual subsets given the wide range of text populations, production conditions, language directions, etc., and (3) the need to reframe these "universal" terms towards probabilistic, situational or conditional tendencies. These tendencies could then be framed as more or less likely in certain textual subsets (genres, registers, domains, etc.), translation conditions (professional, non-professional, language combinations, use of technology, modality, etc.).

The paper is structured as follows. It first critically analyzes how epistemological discussions evolved in the early 2000's in TS, as well as the reasons why scholars proposed to abandon these conceptual tools in TS. It will be argued that MT research could avoid unnecessary debates over conceptual, theoretical and methodological issues if different proposed terms in CBTS were adopted, such as the "language of translation", "translated language" or the language of MT/ NMT / Post-edited MT (PEMT). In addition, the paper argues that the term "universal" represents no more than "the rebranding of the basic notion of a (widespread) tendency" (Chesterman, 2019: 19).

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[1] A Google Scholar search shows that since the emergence of NMT to date, (2016-2023), 35 papers in MT research use the term "translationese" in their title, while in TS only 25 papers use them.

Therefore, it could be reframed as "general features" or "general tendencies" in translated language (human, NMT, PEMT, etc.).

2 TS and MT research: different objectives behind the study of the "language of translation" and general tendencies

TS is often perceived as a "borrowing" discipline (O'Brien, 2013), where conceptual tools, theoretical constructs and research methodologies are imported and integrated. Nevertheless, TS is generally less of an "exporter" towards related disciplines, and its body of theoretical and applied knowledge rarely has an impact, even in areas in which TS research would be suited to do so (Gambier and Doorslaer, 2016; Zwischenberger, 2019). This is the case "translationese", a phenomenon that encompasses a number of specific features often referred to as "translation universals" in MT research. In this disciple, seminal publications by Gellerstam (1986), Baker (1993, 1996, 1999) or Toury (1995) are often cited. Nevertheless, Baker and Toury have admitted to making poor terminological and epistemological choices when formulating those terms over 20 years ago (e.g., Toury, 2004; Mauranen and Kujamäaki, 2004b). Already in 2004, Gideon Toury indicated in his seminal 2004 paper "Universals—or a challenge to the concept?" that the question that was facing the discipline was not whether "universals" existed. He proposed that studies should focus on proposing probabilistic hypotheses with clearly defined production and contextual conditions in what he referred to as "general norms" or "hypotheses". He also questioned "[…] whether recourse to the notion is in a position to offer us any new insights" (Toury, 2004: 34).

Of course, the origins of these two constructs were key to the consolidation of TS as a "scientific" discipline (Toury, 1995: 9). Both concepts emerged in TS at a time when the discipline was moving towards the so-called "empirical turn" in its descriptive branch (Ji and Oaks, 2019). Large computerized corpora had revolutionized researched methodologies, and the search from an empirical and descriptive perspective of norms-laws (Toury, 1995, 2004), hypotheses (Laviosa, 1998), general tendency of translation (Olohan, 2004), features (Chesterman, 2004a, 2004b) or "translation universals" (Baker, 1993) helped consolidate TS away from a more prescriptivist and humanistic approach, towards a more "scientific" discipline.

MT and computational linguistics, on the other hand, are consolidated disciplines with a strong descriptive and empirical foundations. Here, the objectives of pursuing research on features of translated language beyond mere description can be broadly summarized as: (1) improving training datasets to achieve higher quality and the naturalness of the output (e.g., Freitag et al, 2019, 2022), and (2) improve evaluation methods. Of course, and as Mauranen indicates while discussing these terms, "the explanatory power of any given concept is relative to a particular research programme" (Malmkjaer, 2011:87). Both disciplines have different goals and research agendas, but transferable conceptual tools between both of them would be beneficial to all.

2.1. "The language of translation", "human translated" or "MT-translated language" as distinct language varieties

One key terminological and epistemological issue in this debate is the careful delimitation of the object of study. In CBTS research, seminal papers and edited volumes from the early 2000's advocated for renaming the object of study simply as translated language or the language of translation (Baker, 1996, 1999). This language variety was considered to have specific linguistic, pragmatic and discursive features that deserve to be studied in its own right. These specific features emerge because translation is "a communicative event which is shaped by its own goals, pressures and context of production" (Baker, 1996: 175). In this context, translation, "like any kind of text production, develops in response to the pressures of its own immediate context and draws on a distinct repertoire of textual patterns" (ibid: 176). The study of these typical features did not intend to frame this variety of language as better or worse than natural language, but simply different. Similarly, texts produced using MT or PEMT have been widely acknowledged as new variants of translation (Cronin, 2013: 119; Lapshinova-Koltunski, 2015: 99), and this broad variant of language could be also framed nowadays as "the language of MT" or the "language of post-edited MT".

3 Why the notion of "translationese" was put to rest in Translation Studies

The much-maligned notion of "translationese" was originally proposed by Gellerstam (1986) while studying translated children literature. His work is consistently cited in MT literature to refer specific features of translated language (e.g., Freitag et al, 2022; Ni et al, 2022). Back then, other scholars referred to it as "third language" (Duff, 1981) or "third code" (Frawley, 1984). In an era of "human"

translation (HT), the notion of "translationese" acquired negative connotations. To some extent, it overlapped with negative perceptions of "literal translations", "interference" or "shining through", the fact that the source text or the source language patters (lexical, syntactical, discursive, etc.) made translated texts less "natural", rigid or even awkward then originally produced ones. It was defined in the 2008 "Companion to Translation Studies" as:

> A pejorative general term for the language of translation […] often indicating a stilted form of the TL resulting from the influence of ST lexical or syntactic patterning (Munday, 2009: 236).

Since the early 2000's, the notion of "translationese" was firmly rejected by CBTS scholars due to these negative connotations, even when some scholars continued to use it as a "zombie concept" (Koetze, 2023). These negative connotations even led Chesterman, in his seminal 2004 paper on the edited volume "Translation Universals: Do they Exist?" (Mauranen and Kujamäaki, 2004), to describe a trend in the study of translated language that he referred as the "pejorative route". He described this route the following way:

> all translations (or: all translations of a certain kind) are regarded as being <u>deficient</u> in some way. That is, an attempt is made to characterize a set of translations in terms of certain negative features. (Chesterman, 2004a: 36/37) [emphasis own]

This negative connotation implied that translation was perceived, received or evaluated as less natural or naturally-sounding than non-translated texts, the holy grail of fluency and naturality. As such, "translations are recognizably different from other texts […] sounding unnatural" (Chesterman, 2010: 175). The reasons why they sound less natural is that they exhibited linguistic properties that "distinguish them from texts that are not translations" (Hansen-Schirra and Nitzke, 2021: 416). Methodologically, CBTS used mostly comparable corpora, that is, comparing corpora of translated language with non-translated texts or texts that were originally produced in the target language and not the result of a translational act. "Translationese" was seen as the "deviation of translations from the TL [Target Language] originals" (Maurannen, 2004: 78) in a range of parameters or linguistic features.

All in all, with time the notion of "translationese" fell out of use in CBTS and TS and was replaced by more neutral terms due to "the criticisms of unnaturalness" of translations "made in the pejorative approach" (Chesterman, 2004a: 36). In fact, the latest edition of the "Encyclopedia of Translation Studies" (Baker and Saldanha, 2019), the "Routledge Handbook of Translation and Technology"

(O'Hagan, 2020) or the older "Handbook of Translation Studies" (Millan and Batrina, 2013) do not mention this term. The following two sections explore more in depth the arguments put forwards to eliminate the terms "translationese".

3.1 "Translationese" and translator's (and translations) status

Probably the main issue in the early 2000's was the negative connotations that could impact both translation as a profession and translations as cultural products. To understand this issue, it is necessary to go back to the parallel development of two main subfields of research with TS, CBTS and the sociology of translation. This last area "[…] comprises the cluster of questions dealing [...] with the networks of agents and agencies and the interplay of their power relations" (Wolf, 2010: 29). This field of inquiry in TS also focuses on the "social role of the translators and the translators' profession, translation as a social practice" (Chesterman, 2007: 173-174). Here, the notion of "translator status" is one important area of research. (Dam and Zethsen, 2008; Katan, 2012; Ruokonen, 2016; Liu, 2021). Collectively, studies on this area describe the self-perception of translation status as low: translators tend to be invisible and they generally perceive a lack of agency. As Ruokonen indicates: '[T]here is convincing empirical evidence that translator status is, indeed, rather low' (2013: 336). This lack of status has also been observed through the impact of translation technologies and NMT, fueling feeling of technology anxiety (Viera, 2020), disempowerment or lack of agency (O'Brien and Conlan, 2018; Moorkens, 2020).

It follows that that having a topic such as "translationese" as an object of study on a programmatic research agenda, with its negative and pejorative connotations, could help perpetuate discourses related to supposed deficiencies in the translation profession. The status of translators is an ongoing fight to achieve higher social recognition and social status. Identifying "translated language" as a flawed, unnatural language variety therefore runs contrary to this key goal of TS as a discipline. As Chesterman indicates, one of the issues with the negative or pejorative conceptualizations of "translationese" is the impact on the socio-professional status of translators:

> One highly undesirable effect of these pejorative generalizations is of course the depressing impact it has on the public perception of the translator's role, and indeed on translators' own perception of themselves, as poor creatures doomed to sin. (Chesterman, 2004a: 38).

It is hardly a surprise that NMT systems are also perceived as a "poor creature doomed to sin" (ibid), that is, doomed to produce texts with errors and with a lack of fluency. The issues at the intersection of HT and MT translations are twofold, (1) how MT research perceives HT used in the training datasets, and (2) whether "translationese" also highlights the "unnaturalness" of NMT output.

First of all, MT research using the notion of "translationese" assume the "unnaturalness" of HT. As an example, MT projects have introduced in the training data the so-called "natural language", that is, non-translation mediated texts (Freitag et al, 2019, 2022) in order to avoid biases introduced by HT language (and the bi-directionality issues flipping the translation directions in training). Here, Freitag et al (2019) define "translationese" as the skewing in the translational output caused by the MT systems. The scholars propose complementing the training data with natural language, resulting in what they refer to as "more natural" output. We see here that the translations and backtranslations in the parallel data that make up the training data produced by humans are somewhat "imperfect" (professional level or the level of competence of those who produced the training data is a different story). Nevertheless, in general it can be argued that the issue of the impact on the status of the human translator is obviously less of a concern for researchers in MT and computational linguistics. Achieving improvements in the quality, accuracy and fluency of the systems becomes the main goal. Here, MT researchers are more concerned with:

- Variation in terms of the production of differentiated language patterns for similar source text or textual materials or the introduction of the so called "translation shifts" (e.g., Popovic, 2019) based on translation being a form of multilectal mediated communication (Halverson and Muñoz Martin, 2021)

- The need to have carefully curated data for training models and NMT quality estimation.

The second issue is whether the notion of producing more or less "translationese" showcases or points excessively at the "unnaturalness" of NMT translated language (Freitag et al, 2022). Again, this unnaturalness is often framed in terms of lack of fluency or "literalness", one of the near-synonyms of "translationese" that is often found in earlier literature from a TS perspective. MT output has consistently been improving over the years, but here, the fact that output might not be of high quality or too literal is less of an issue in terms of public or social perceptions of NMT.

3.2. Overgeneralizations and the study of language subsets (Chesterman, 2004a, 2004b)

Another pressing issue widely discussed in CBTS are the dangers of overgeneralizations when datasets used only allow for very restricted claims or hypotheses. According, again, to Chesterman (2004a), the study of both general features of translation and the language of translation suffered over the years from these dangers of extending generalizations to larger textual populations. Chesterman argued for the need to always "define the scope of a generalization" (Chesterman, 2017: 309) because "sometimes the data may only warrant a restricted claim, if [it is] not representative of all translations." (Chesterman, 2004b: 10). In MT and PEMT research, this would involve attempting to extend the results obtained with a specific text, MT system or language direction subset to all possible MT translations or all PEMT texts. In earlier publications, Chesterman discussed two common approaches in descriptive research for generalizations in TS: the "high" and the "low road". The high road involves generalizations that are intended to cover all existing translations. At the time, it was meant to be only HT but now we could include the super-categories of HT, PEMT, NMT translations. Nowadays, we could even combine all of them in an umbrella category of "Translation" with capital T. Meanwhile in the low road:

> research moves in more modest steps, generalizing more gradually away from particular cases towards claims applying to a group of cases, then perhaps to a wider group, and so on. The movement is bottom-up (starting with the particular) rather than top-down (starting with the general). (Chesterman, 2004a: 40)

One main approach in the study of the language of translation is that features or tendencies observed in translated language that make up the "language of translation", are seen as probabilistic and conditional, and therefore, it is essential to determine the level of generality of the proposed tendencies or features observed. Any observed feature can be common among translation of a certain kind (be it language combination, MT engine, degree of specialization of the engine, textual genre, textual content, etc.), but it might not be frequent in all translations. As Chesterman (2017: 308) indicates:

> something may frequently occur in published translations of a certain genre, such as literary translation; or in professional translation as

opposed to amateur work; or in subtitling. There may be all kinds of conditions which affect the strength of some tendency or another.

Here, we could directly substitute in the previous citation by Chesterman any of the translation scenarios for MT-related concepts such as "engine", "MT architecture", "domain specialization", "language direction", etc., and it could be applied to existing research in MT. Consequently, it can be argued the best possible route for studying features describing a language variety is proposing well-defined restrictive descriptive hypotheses concerning specific subsets (e.g., MT subtitling or literary translations using a specific generic or specialized MT engine.) These hypotheses can subsequently be tested, and once proved or rejected, can be grounds for formulating future unrestricted descriptive hypotheses (Chesterman, 2004a: 44). In turn, these claims can lead to more general claims that will only be relative and not absolute. Similar to the proposals in TS, studies that focus on hypotheses related to "features of the language of MT or PEMT" can then "be tentatively proposed on the basis of empirical results pertaining only to a subset" (ibid, 2004a:40). Nevertheless, studies should clearly state the textual subset, or the combination of MT specificities and textual subset, together with the hypothetical nature of the proposal. In any case, as research in CBTS showed early on, identifying tendencies that are general or "universal" in human or MT language is much harder than attempting to disprove them (and hence the preference for tendencies or typical features). As Munday indicated:

> disproving a universal is very much easier than proving one and most theorists these days would accept that the number of situational variables in the translation process is so vast it would restrict an absolute theory (Munday, 2009: 10).

In time, carefully planned studies can add up to the body of knowledge confirming or rejecting specific hypotheses, given that certain features might be "typical (or not typical) of some subset of translations; or […] seem to be typical (or not typical) of more than one subset" (Chesterman, 2004a: 41).

Research in MT could possibly benefit from this nuanced approach in probabilistic terms that was part of the maturity of CBTS since the early 2000's. Careful analytical accounts of the results and discussions that confine them to the system, genre, domain specialization, and / or language combination (among others factors) are needed. This is even more so in a synthetic "unstable language variety" in constant evolution, with a large number of initiatives working towards language-pair, domain or genre specializations. Change and evolution in MT output

are the norm rather than the exception. Consequently, attempting to present a generalized picture of a highly diverse and evolving language variety appears to some extent futile.

4. From "translationese" to "post-editese" and "machine translationese": tools of the same trade?

The "language of (human) translation" has evolved in MT research into variants such as "post-editese" and "machine translationese". The first concept has been defined in MT literature as "the unique features that set machine translated post-edited texts apart from human-translated texts" (Daems et al, 2017; Castilho and Resende, 2021). It has also led to concept such as "machine translationese" (Daems et al, 2017; Loock, 2020; Vanmassenhove et al, 2021) defined as the typical "linguistic features of machine-translated texts" (DeClercq et al, 2020: np). These concepts are used in the literature as constructs in order to allow contrastive studies between different language varieties. Studies into "post-editese", for example, compare and contrast human, PE and MT translated texts as distinct subsets. In the results of the study by (Castilho and Resende, 2021:np), it is indicated that "PE versions [are] more similar to the MT output than to the HT texts"). Here, what is compared are translational language varieties, HT, PEMT and NMT. "Post-editese", therefore, can be argued to simply refer to the "distinct repertoire of textual patterns" (Baker, 1996: 176) found in these three distinct language varieties. Obviously, the description of these patters at different levels (morphological, lexical, syntactic, pragmatic, discursive, etc.), does not entail a pejorative or negative connotation. These texts are simply different, but, nevertheless and as what happens in the case of the translation of literature, HT are found to be of higher quality and provide higher narrative engagement that both PE and NMT translated ones (Guerberof and Toral, 2022).

In addition to possible issues of overgeneralizations in the descriptive studies into "post-editese", other pressing questions emerge. First, it is impossible to separate causality and effects due to human or machine intervention and, therefore, PEMT can be considered as a fuzzy "hybrid variety". In recent studies, this variety has been described as closer to MT than to HT in terms of "literalness" due to priming effects derived from working with MT suggestion (e.g., Guerberof and Toral, 2022). Second, PE presents a specific range of variation, such as light, vs full post-editing that can impact the features of translated products. Again, a more nuanced approach might be necessary.

5. Conclusions

This paper has intended to bring into MT research the reasons why the terms "translationese" and "translation universals" were abandoned in TS and CBTS. These constructs, despite their nature as "zombie concepts" that keep re-emerging in waves in TS literature and related areas (Koetze, 2023), were deemed inaccurate to serve as foundations for the research agenda on the features of translated texts. It was clear that a more fine-grained approach[2] was needed to study the large number of possible subsets under the notion of "translation" (professional, unprofessional, under time constraints, under budgetary constraints, technology assisted or not, translation competence levels, HT-MT, domain specialization, to name a few). The paper has discussed the reasons why TS has repeatedly attempted to leave behind these two concepts, such as the impact on the status of translators or the danger of overgeneralizations. To date, most MT research assumes the "high road" in Chesterman's terms (2004a), assuming that "translationese" or "post-editese" represents a wide concept that applies to a supercategory that includes all translations (be it HT, MT, PEMT, etc.). Consequently, the claims on general or "universal" features identified (or not), can be easily disproved. Given the wide variation in terms of MT output, the "low road" seems like the most appropriate. This involves more "modest steps, generalizing more gradually away from particular cases towards claims applying to a group of cases" (Chesterman, 2004a: 40).

It has been proposed to adopt the conceptual apparatus of up-to-date literature in CBTS, reframing these notions as "the language of MT", "the language of PEMT" or simply "MT language". Similarly, it has been proposed to use "translation tendencies", "features" or "hypotheses", rather than "universals", in order to deal with the conditional and probabilistic nature of language phenomena in language varieties with large amount of variation. Again, Malmkjaer (2011) indicated that the explanatory power of any given concept is relative to a particular research program, and TS and MT research into the HT, PEMT or MT translated language have clearly different goals and objectives. In fact, it has been seen that since the emergence of NMT, the notion of "translationese" is mostly used within MT research, rather than its originating discipline, TS. Nevertheless, convergence between these two areas in terms of their conceptual apparatus would benefit both fields as indicated by Tieber (2022) or Kruger

(2022). It is hoped that the proposed conceptual tools will help move forward both fields and contributes to establishing a sound foundation for cross-disciplinary studies similar to previous attempts with concepts such as "translation quality" (e.g., Moorkens et al, 2018).

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[2] In addition, CBTS could also benefit from the rigorous statistical analyses in MT research. For years, a key recommendation to move the field forward is to incorporate the latest advances in statistical advances in Corpus Linguistics research (e.g., Oakes and Ji 2012; Kruger and De Sutter 2018; De Sutter and Lefer, 2020).

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