Validation of Translation Universals Based on Comparable Corpus: Simplification and Explicitation

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Abstract

This study aims to validate the phenomena of simplification and explicitation in translation universals using comparable corpus, providing support for translation theory and practice. By constructing a corpus encompassing multiple language pairs and text types, and employing methods such as frequency analysis and chi-square tests, the study compares translated texts with native texts. The findings reveal that translated texts tend to use more common vocabulary and simplify complex syntactic structures, as exemplified in translations of The Moon and Sixpence and The Million Pound Note. Explicitation is achieved through semantic supplementation and syntactic adjustments. This research offers insights for translation teaching and practice, contributing to the advancement of translation studies.

Keywords: translation universals, comparable corpus, simplification, explicitation

1. Introduction

In the context of accelerating globalization, translation has become an increasingly vital bridge for cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication. From the ancient Silk Road to modern global trade, and from the dissemination of cultural classics to international academic exchanges, translation has consistently played a pivotal role in facilitating communication and understanding among different nations and cultures.

The study of translation universals, as one of the core areas in translation studies, aims to uncover the linguistic features that are universally present in translated texts. These features, arising from the translation process and independent of specific language pairs, reflect the inherent patterns of translational behavior. By investigating translation universals, we can gain deeper insights into the cognitive processes of translators, the strategies employed in language conversion, and the relationships between translated texts, source texts, and target-language original texts. Such research not only enriches the theoretical framework of translation studies by offering new perspectives and methodologies but also provides practical guidance for translation practice, thereby enhancing the quality and efficiency of translation.

Corpus-based validation plays an indispensable role in the study of translation universals. Traditional translation research methods often rely on the personal experience and intuition of researchers, lacking systematicity and objectivity in the analysis of translational phenomena. The advent of corpora has brought revolutionary changes to translation studies. By leveraging large-scale authentic translated texts and employing advanced computational techniques and data analysis methods, corpora enable comprehensive, in-depth, and meticulous analysis of translated texts. Through corpus-based validation, we can more accurately identify universal features in translated texts, test theoretical hypotheses in translation studies, and provide robust empirical support for translation research.

2. Overview of Translation Universals and Corpus-Based Research

2.1 Definition and Connotation of Translation Universals

Since its introduction, the concept of translation universals has garnered significant attention and sparked in-depth discussions within the field of translation studies. In her 2019 article Corpus Linguistics and Translation Studies: Implications and Applications, British scholar Mona Baker was the first to provide a clear definition of translation universals: "Translation universals refer to the general features of translated texts, namely, the typical linguistic characteristics that emerge in the target text but not in the source text, and these features are considered independent of the specific language pairs involved in the translation process" (Englund Dimitrova, B., 2005). This definition emphasizes that translation universals are unique to translated texts and represent general linguistic phenomena

that are independent of the specific differences between the source and target languages. It reflects a tendency to treat "translation language" as the research object, viewing translation as an independent form of language rather than merely a derivative or subordinate form of the target language (Bolaños Cuellar, S., 2008).

The theoretical origins of translation universals research can be traced back to the exploration of the nature of translation behavior. Its core objective is to uncover the universal rules and patterns inherent in translation, aiming to reveal the intrinsic mechanisms of translation activities at a macro level. The rise of this research direction has broken away from the traditional model of translation studies, which was previously confined to the analysis of specific language pairs and conversion techniques. It has opened new pathways for translation research, encouraging scholars to approach translation phenomena from a more abstract and universal perspective.

2.2 Applications of Corpora in Translation Studies

As a crucial tool in translation research, corpora come in various types, each playing a unique and irreplaceable role in the field (Arntz, G. (2024). This study primarily utilizes two types of corpora: parallel corpora and comparable corpora, which are compiled and analyzed to investigate translation universals.

Parallel corpora consist of texts in two or more languages that are direct translations of each other, with corresponding content. These corpora are particularly valuable for examining the correspondences between languages at lexical, syntactic, and semantic levels. For this study, the parallel corpus includes English source texts and their Chinese translations, drawn from diverse domains such as literature, technology, and news. The texts were selected based on their representativeness, availability of high-quality translations, and relevance to the research objectives. For example, in English-Chinese translation studies, parallel corpora vividly illustrate differences in expression between the two languages (Xiao, R., & Hu, X., 2015). At the lexical level, English words rich in cultural connotations, such as "serendipity," often require explanatory phrases or combinations in Chinese translations. At the syntactic level, long and complex English sentences are frequently broken into shorter, more concise structures in Chinese to align with native expression habits. These insights not only help translators refine their techniques but also contribute to the compilation of bilingual dictionaries by providing authentic and reliable linguistic examples.

Comparable corpora, on the other hand, consist of translated texts and native texts in the same language. In this study, the comparable corpus includes Chinese translated texts and native Chinese texts from similar domains, such as literature and technical writing. The selection criteria for these texts ensured that both translated and native texts were comparable in terms of genre, length, and publication period. By comparing translated texts with native texts, researchers can identify whether features such as simplification, explicitation, and normalization are present in translated texts (Becher, V., 2011). For instance, translated texts often exhibit a higher frequency of common words and standardized sentence structures, reflecting simplification and normalization tendencies. In contrast, native texts may include more low-frequency words and display greater syntactic creativity. These findings provide valuable insights into the linguistic strategies employed by translators and the manifestations of translation universals.

Corpora enable multidimensional analysis of translated texts. Using advanced tools such as AntConc and WordSmith, researchers can explore translation features from lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic perspectives. At the lexical level, analyses focus on word frequency, collocations, and lexical variation. For example, translated texts may show a preference for high-frequency words over low-frequency or specialized terms. At the syntactic level, studies examine sentence length, structure, and transformations, revealing tendencies toward simplification and normalization. Semantic analyses investigate how meaning is conveyed across languages, while pragmatic analyses explore the communicative functions and contextual adaptability of translated texts. Together, these multidimensional approaches offer a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying language conversion and the specific manifestations of translation universals.

3. Corpus-Based Validation and Analysis of Translation Universals

3.1 Validation of Simplification Universals

3.1.1 Lexical Simplification

At the lexical level, an in-depth analysis of vocabulary richness and word frequency distribution in the comparable corpora reveals a clear tendency toward simplification. Vocabulary richness, often measured by the Type-Token Ratio (TTR), is a key indicator of lexical diversity in texts (Kyle, K., 2019). The TTR is calculated by dividing the number of unique word types (types) by the total number of words (tokens) in a text. A higher TTR indicates greater lexical diversity, and vice versa. Statistical analysis of TTR values in translated and native texts across literary, scientific, business, and news domains shows that translated texts generally exhibit lower TTR values than

native texts (Laviosa, S., Pagano, A., Kemppanen, H., & Ji, M., 2017).

Word frequency distribution further reflects lexical simplification. Statistical analysis of word frequencies in the corpora reveals that translated texts tend to use high-frequency words more often, while low-frequency words appear less frequently. For example, in scientific texts, certain common technical terms, such as "cloud computing," "data structure," and "deep learning," appear more frequently in translated texts than in native texts. Conversely, less common technical terms, such as "polymorphism," are used less frequently in translated texts. This suggests that translators prefer to use familiar and easily understandable terms to reduce the cognitive load on target-language readers, demonstrating lexical simplification in translated texts.

In the field of translation studies, selecting representative texts as case studies is crucial for exploring translation phenomena and patterns. Maugham's "The Moon and Sixpence" stands out as a valuable research subject. With its profound themes and unique narrative, this novel has garnered a global readership. Its widespread English and Chinese translations bridge cultural divides, evoking deep reflection among readers. This makes its translation a significant area of study. From a linguistic lens, Maugham's writing style showcases his mastery. He employs a rich, precise vocabulary, often using words rarely heard in casual settings. This provides fertile ground for translation studies. For instance, consider the phrase, "He was not effusive, he was not expansive, he was not even polite." Here, "effusive" denotes warmth or enthusiasm, while "expansive" suggests a talkative or generous demeanor. These aren't common words, but the translator cleverly opts for simpler, more common terms like "warm," "talkative," and "polite," ensuring the message resonates with the target audience. Similarly, in "He had a nature that was in curious contrast to his manner," "curious" takes on an unusual meaning. The translator renders it simply as "His nature sharply contrasted his demeanor," enhancing clarity.

This approach avoids the use of less familiar vocabulary, ensuring that readers can grasp the text's content without unnecessary effort. By aligning the translation with the linguistic habits of the general audience, this example confirms the tendency toward lexical simplification in translated texts.

3.1.2 Syntactic Simplification

At the syntactic level, translated texts exhibit significant simplification in terms of sentence length and structural complexity (Chen, J., Li, D., & Liu, K., 2024). Sentence length is a straightforward indicator of syntactic complexity. Statistical analysis of average sentence lengths shows that translated texts tend to have shorter sentences than native texts (Chen, J., Li, D., & Liu, K., 2024). For instance, in news texts, the average sentence length in English native texts is approximately 25 words, while the corresponding Chinese translations average around 20 words. This indicates that translators often break down or simplify longer sentences in the source text to make the translated sentences more concise and accessible.

Structural complexity is another important aspect of syntactic simplification. Complex sentence structures, such as long sentences with multiple clauses or embedded clauses, can increase the difficulty of comprehension for readers. In scientific texts, for example, English source texts frequently use complex structures like attributive clauses and adverbial clauses to express precise logical relationships. During translation, these structures are often simplified. For instance, the English sentence, "The phenomenon, which has been studied extensively in recent years, is a complex one that involves multiple factors," might be rendered in Chinese as, "近年来，这一现象得到了广泛研究。它是一个复杂的现象，涉及多个因素" ("In recent years, this phenomenon has been extensively studied. It is a complex phenomenon involving multiple factors"). By splitting the original sentence into shorter, simpler sentences, the translator reduces syntactic complexity and aligns the translation with Chinese expression patterns, making it easier for readers to understand.

In the field of translation studies, carefully selecting appropriate texts as case studies is essential for analyzing translation patterns and characteristics. Mark Twain's "The Million Pound Note" stands out as a valuable research subject due to its humorous narrative and insight into social reality. The novel's widespread popularity and cultural impact across different backgrounds underscore the significance of studying its translation. From a linguistic perspective, Twain's unique writing style, characterized by vivid language and complex sentence structures, offers rich material for translation research. To illustrate, consider the sentence: "Well, about a month ago, there was much talk. One day, as I passed the house, he called me in and showed me the banknote." The original English version features a temporal adverbial clause, "when I was passing by the house," which adds complexity. However, in the Chinese translation, this clause is simplified to "as I passed the house," and the sentence is broken down into shorter, more readable segments.

This approach avoids overly complex sentence structures in the translation, allowing readers to follow the narrative effortlessly in line with Chinese reading habits. Such syntactic simplification enhances the clarity and fluency of the translated text, aligning it with readers' cognitive expectations.

3.2 Verification of Explicitation of Commonality

3.2.1 Lexical Explicitation

At the lexical level, there are evident phenomena of explicitation in translated texts, primarily manifested by adding explanatory vocabulary and specifying referential relationships to make the implicit information in the original text clearer (Zhou, J., 2018). Adding explanatory vocabulary is a common method of lexical explicitation. When translating words with cultural connotations, vocabulary in the source language may carry specific cultural backgrounds, historical allusions, or social customs that could be unfamiliar to target language readers (Al-Masri, H., 2009). To aid targeted comprehension, translators include explanatory vocabulary in the translation. In translating classical Chinese literary works, for words with unique cultural connotations such as "yin and yang," "five elements," and "bagua," translators often add relevant explanations in the translation. For example, translating "yin and yang" as "Yin and Yang, the two opposing principles in nature, the former feminine and negative, the latter masculine and positive," effectively conveys the philosophical concepts and cultural connotations of "yin and yang" to target language readers. When translating English scientific literature, some technical terms may also require the addition of explanatory vocabulary. For instance, the term "quantum entanglement" may be translated as "quantum entanglement, a non-local, strong correlation phenomenon that exists between two or more quantum systems," enhancing readers' understanding of the term's meaning.

Specifying referential relationships is also a significant aspect of lexical explicitation. In the source language text, due to the coherence of the context, some referential relationships may be implied through pronouns or omissions. However, in the translation process, to prevent misunderstandings by target language readers, translators need to clarify these referential relationships. In English texts, pronouns like "it" or "they" are commonly used for reference, whereas in Chinese translations, it may be necessary to explicitly state the specific content referred to by these pronouns. For instance, in the sentence "The book is on the table. It is a best-seller," where "it" refers to "the book" mentioned earlier, the Chinese translation would typically be expressed as "那本书在桌子上。那本书是一本畅销书." This clarification enhances the logical relationship in the translation, facilitating reader comprehension. In complex discourses, specifying referential relationships is particularly crucial. In academic papers, situations may arise where multiple nouns and pronouns refer to each other, requiring translators to carefully analyze the context and accurately specify referential relationships to ensure the accuracy and coherence of the translation.

3.2.2 Syntactic Explicitation

From a syntactic perspective, translated texts exhibit evident explicitation through the use of conjunctions, punctuation marks, and adjustments to sentence components. The frequent use of conjunctions in translated texts is a significant manifestation of syntactic explicitation. English and Chinese differ in sentence structure, with English emphasizing formality and often using conjunctions to express the logical relationships between sentences, while Chinese focuses on semantic cohesion, with logical relationships between sentences sometimes being expressed through semantics and context (Harper, C., & De Jong, E., 2004). In the translation process, to make the logical relationships in the translation clearer and in line with the expressive habits of the target language, translators may increase the use of conjunctions appropriately. For example, in the English sentence "He is smart, he is lazy," where the logical relationship between the two short sentences is unclear, in Chinese translation, a conjunction like "but" may be added to convey "他很聪明，但很懒惰," clarifying the contrast between the two short sentences for easier understanding. In the translation of scientific literature, the use of conjunctions is even more frequent. When describing experimental procedures or arguing scientific viewpoints, conjunctions are needed to clearly express the logical relationships between various steps or viewpoints, such as "firstly," "secondly," "therefore," "however," and so on. The use of punctuation marks also reflects syntactic explicitation. Different languages have varying rules and functions for punctuation marks. In the translation process, translators adjust the original text based on the punctuation norms of the target language to enhance the logical coherence and readability of the translation. In English, the use of commas is relatively flexible, while in Chinese, the use of commas places more emphasis on semantic pauses and logical divisions. When translating long English sentences, it may be necessary to split the sentence into shorter ones using commas according to Chinese expression habits to make the structure of the translation clearer. For example, the English sentence "I went to the store, bought some bread, and then came back home," may be translated as "我去了商店，买了些面包，然后回到了家," effectively presenting the sequence of actions and logical relationships in the sentence clearly through the proper use of commas. Adjusting sentence components is also a method of syntactic explicitation. To make the translation more in line with the expressive habits of the target language, translators may adjust sentence components, such as moving postpositional phrases to the front or converting passive voice to active voice. In the English sentence "The man who is wearing a red shirt is my brother," where "who is wearing a red shirt" is a postpositional phrase modifying "the man," in Chinese translation, it is often placed at the front, translated as "穿红衬衫的那个男人是

我的哥哥," making the translation more in line with Chinese expression habits and clarifying the semantic meaning of the sentence. In business text translation, some passive voice sentences may be converted to active voice to enhance the expressive power and communicative effectiveness of the sentence.

4. Manifestation of Translation Universals in Literary Translation

Taking the English translation of Mo Yan's Red Sorghum Clan, translated by the renowned translator Howard Goldblatt, as an example, this work has gained widespread popularity in the English-speaking world and vividly demonstrates multiple aspects of translation universals.

At the lexical level, the English translation of Red Sorghum Clan exhibits clear signs of simplification. In the original text, Mo Yan employs a rich and diverse vocabulary to depict the unique local customs and characters of Northeast Gaomi Township, often using words imbued with strong regional cultural characteristics. However, to make the text more accessible to target-language readers, Howard Goldblatt adopts a strategy of lexical simplification (Hynynen, J. V., 2023). For instance, when describing characters' personalities, the original text might use dialect-specific or less common words to highlight their uniqueness. In contrast, the English translation opts for more familiar and straightforward vocabulary to convey similar meanings. For example, culturally specific terms like "高粱" (sorghum), which may have unique local names, are rendered simply as "sorghum" in the translation (Hynynen, J. V., 2023). This avoids potential misunderstandings due to cultural differences and makes the text more accessible to English readers (Wang, L.).

Syntactic simplification is also evident in the translation. The original text contains many structurally complex sentences with rich rhythms and cadences, which play a crucial role in conveying emotions and creating atmosphere. However, to align with the reading habits of English-speaking audiences, Goldblatt simplifies these sentence structures. Long sentences are often broken into shorter, more straightforward ones, enhancing clarity[17]. For example, in scenes depicting war, the original text might use continuous action descriptions and environmental depictions to form a long, complex sentence. In the English translation, these are divided into several shorter sentences, sequentially describing actions and settings, making it easier for readers to follow the narrative.

Explicitation is another prominent feature in the English translation of Red Sorghum Clan. When dealing with culture-specific terms, Goldblatt often adds explanatory words or phrases to make implicit cultural information explicit in the translation. For example, concepts from traditional Chinese culture, such as "祖宗" (ancestors) and "风水" (feng shui), might confuse English readers if translated directly. To address this, Goldblatt provides additional context: "祖宗" is translated as "ancestors, those who are venerated and remembered in the family line," and "风水" as "feng shui, the ancient Chinese practice of arranging buildings and objects to achieve harmony with the environment." This approach helps English readers better understand the cultural connotations of the original text[18]. Explicitation is also evident in the handling of referential relationships. Due to the paratactic nature of Chinese, some references may be implied through context in the original text. In English, however, logical relationships need to be made explicit. For example, in dialogue scenes, Chinese might rely on context to clarify references, while the English translation uses specific names or pronouns to avoid ambiguity.

Normalization is another key feature of the translation. In terms of lexical choices, Goldblatt adheres to English usage norms, preferring common and familiar words. For example, when describing emotions, the concept of "高兴" (happy) is translated using common terms like "happy" or "glad," rather than more obscure synonyms. At the syntactic level, the translation strictly follows English grammatical rules and sentence structures. For instance, subjectless or elliptical sentences in Chinese are supplemented with subjects or complete sentence components to conform to English grammatical norms.

Translation universals play a crucial role in literary translation. Simplification reduces the cognitive load on target-language readers, making the text more readable and expanding the work's audience (Baker, M., 2019). Explicitation facilitates the transmission of cultural connotations, promoting cross-cultural understanding and allowing target-language readers to appreciate the charm of the source culture. Normalization ensures that the translation aligns with the linguistic and cultural norms of the target language, enhancing its credibility and readability, and increasing the work's acceptance in the target-language market.

5. Comparative Analysis of Translation Universals across Different Language Pairs

To delve deeper into the manifestations of translation universals across diverse language pairs, this study selected representative pairs, namely English-Chinese and French-English. These pairs exhibit significant disparities in language type, grammatical structure, lexical characteristics, and cultural backgrounds, facilitating a comparative analysis that reveals both the universality and specificity of translation universals.

In the English-Chinese context, marked differences arise from their distinct language families, structures, and

expression methods. Chinese, as an ideographic language, relies on parataxis, utilizing flexible sentence structures based on inherent logical relationships. Conversely, English, a phonetic language, employs hypotaxis, leveraging conjunctions and clauses for complex logical expressions. These contrasts influence translation universals' manifestations. Lexically, English-Chinese translation exhibits a simplification trend. Chinese vocabulary is semantically rich, whereas English tends to be more specific. Thus, Chinese-to-English translations often opt for specific vocabulary, enhancing comprehensibility but reducing lexical richness. For instance, the Chinese word "问题" might translate to "trouble" or "difficulty" for clarity, reflecting this simplification.

Syntactically, explicitation is prominent in English-Chinese translation. Chinese sentence flexibility sometimes requires contextual understanding for implicit information. In English, translators clarify logic by adding conjunctions or adjusting structures. For example, "他努力学习，取得了好成绩" implicitly suggests causality in Chinese, but English translations often use conjunctions like "because" or "so" for explicit expression.

In French - English translation, despite both languages belonging to the Indo - European family, notable differences persist in grammar, vocabulary, and culture. French grammar is rigorous, emphasizing normative and logical aspects, while English is more flexible. Lexically, French - English translation also exhibits simplification. Complex French vocabulary might be simplified to common English words for ease of understanding. For example, "délit" in French could translate to "offense" or "crime" in English for simplicity.

Syntactically, explicitation is a common phenomenon. French often omits certain elements that are contextually implied, but in English translation, these elements are usually made explicit. For instance, in French sentences like "Je suis fatigué, je veux dormir" (I'm tired, I want to sleep), the subject pronoun "je" (I) can be omitted in some contexts in French due to the verb conjugation indicating the subject. However, in English, the subject must be clearly stated. This explicitation helps to clarify the meaning and make the translation more in line with English language norms.

A comparative analysis across multiple language pairs reveals both consistency and variability in translation universals. Lexically, simplification is a common trend, indicating a preference for simpler, more common vocabulary. Syntactically, explicitation are prevalent, although their manifestations vary based on the language pair. These differences stem from distinct structural, cultural, and expressive habits. Therefore, translators must consider these characteristics and apply strategies flexibly for high-quality translations.

6. Conclusion and Prospect

6.1 Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of a comparable corpus of English-Chinese language pairs, this study successfully verified the characteristics of simplification and explicitation in translation universals, revealing their diverse manifestations across various text types.

Regarding simplification, translated texts showed a notable trend towards simplification at both lexical and syntactic levels. Lexically, these texts displayed reduced lexical diversity, with word frequencies more heavily skewed towards high-frequency terms, indicating a narrower vocabulary range. This was observed in translations from multiple domains, including literature, science and technology, business, and news. Specifically, the type-token ratio (TTR) in these translations was typically lower compared to native texts, with a higher usage frequency of high-frequency words. Syntactically, the translated texts were characterized by shorter average sentence lengths, simplified sentence structures, and a preference for straightforward sentence patterns. In the translation of scientific and technological content, longer and more complex sentences were frequently segmented into shorter ones, aligning with the reading preferences of the target audience.

The explicitation trend was also evident in the translated materials. Lexically, these texts made implicit source text information more explicit by incorporating explanatory terms and clarifying referential relationships. When translating terms with cultural significance, explanatory words were often added to aid comprehension for the target language readers. Additionally, pronouns were specified to ensure clarity and prevent misinterpretation. From a syntactic perspective, the translated texts improved logicality and readability by increasing the use of conjunctions, employing appropriate punctuation, and rearranging sentence elements. Notably, the frequency of conjunction usage in these texts was significantly higher compared to native materials, thereby enhancing the clarity of logical relationships between sentences.

6.2 Prospect

At the practical level, this study carries significant implications for translation teaching, translation evaluation, and the advancement of translation practices and technologies.

In translation teaching, our findings on translation universals bolster the scientific and systematic approach to teaching content and methods. Teachers can use these findings to craft targeted activities, helping students grasp translation techniques and elevate their skills. By comparing translated and source texts, students gain an intuitive understanding of simplification and explicitation strategies. For culturally loaded vocabulary, teachers can guide students to use explicitation by adding explanatory terms, ensuring cultural information is accurately conveyed. When dealing with complex sentences, teachers can advise simplification by breaking them down, enhancing clarity and readability. This approach cultivates students' sensitivity to translation universals, enabling them to apply these strategies consciously, ultimately enhancing translation quality.

In translation evaluation, this study offers a valuable reference. Translation universals serve as key indicators for assessing translation quality, adding objectivity and precision to the evaluation process. Unlike traditional subjective methods, our approach comprehensively analyzes vocabulary, syntax, and discourse compared to the source text. For instance, we examine vocabulary richness and high-frequency word usage to assess simplification. We also evaluate sentence length, complexity, and cohesion to gauge explicitation and normalization. This method ensures scientific objectivity and provides targeted feedback to translators, facilitating quality improvement.

Moreover, this study impacts translation practices and technologies positively. Translators can flexibly choose strategies based on translation universals, boosting efficiency and quality. For scientific documents, simplification makes terminology more accessible. In literary translations, explicitation enhances artistic appeal. Additionally, our insights optimize machine translation systems like Google Translate. Understanding translation universals helps users comprehend software output and make necessary adjustments. In-depth exploration of these universals reveals language conversion patterns, aiding machine translation algorithm improvements. This enhances translation accuracy and fluidity, driving the translation industry's progress.

Acknowledgments

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