Explicitness as a universal feature of translation

Josef Schmied and Hildegard Schäffler
TU Chemnitz-Zwickau

1. Universal features of translation

It is a well-known fact that translated language differs from natural authentic language in a number of respects. These specific target text (TT) features have sometimes been referred to as 'translationese', which Johansson/Hofland (1994:26) define as 'deviance in translated texts induced by the source language'. This implies that they attribute the characteristics of translated language to source text (ST) interference (cf. also Newmark 1988:285). In Schmied/Schäffler (1996), we have tried to differentiate between various subtypes of this kind of ST-induced translationese according to a distinction between language system and norm.

TT features, though, are not necessarily due to ST influence. Accordingly, Baker (1993:243), for instance, adds what she calls '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.

Such universal, language-independent features would, according to Baker, include simplification, disambiguation, avoidance of repetition and greater explicitness of TT as compared to ST.

In this paper, we would like to concentrate on one of these universal features, i.e. the hypothesis that a translated text is more explicit than its corresponding ST, in other words that a process of 'explicitation', as Blum-Kulka (1986:21) calls it, is at work in translation. Our corpus material, taken from the Chemnitz English-German translation corpus (for details see Schmied/Schäffler 1996), revealed, though, that the reverse process, namely that of condensation (for the term cf. Lipka 1987), can also be observed in translation.

What exactly do we mean by greater explicitness and condensation, respectively? By greater explicitness we mean that a TL structure shows more of the underlying elements on the surface than the ST, condensation refers to
the reverse. We have tried to differentiate between two subcategories for both processes involved.

Structural explicitness results from typological differences the two languages in question on a lexical or grammatical level. English differs from German, for instance, in that it shows a great diversity of non-finite constructions for which a German translation will in many cases have to use a more explicit, i.e. structurally more complex, relative construction. Structural condensation is the reverse process for cases in which the TL allows for lexical or grammatical structures which are less complex than corresponding SL structures.

Non-structural explicitness also leads to additional structural or semantic elements, but it is not a result of systemic structural differences between SL and TL, but of conscious or subconscious translators' choices. Accordingly, non-structural condensation means loss of structural elements or lexical features, independent of typological constraints. In the following, we would like to illustrate the two processes at work in translation and finally attempt a tentative cognitive explanation. This approach takes us from a structural to a procedural perspective, which is in line with Sajavaara's (1996) plea for developing a new type of contrastive linguistics along those lines. Sajavaara also distinguishes between universal and language-specific phenomena.

2. Structural and non-structural explicitness

2.1 Structural explicitness

2.1.1 Lexical level

At the lexical level, greater explicitness in translation is often due to contrastive language not to overlap completely. This poses a problem for translation in that in many cases a particular TL expression does not fully reflect all the semantic features of the SL word or phrase. We can therefore find examples in translations in which lexical SL expressions are 'decomposed' (Blum-Kulka 1986:21) and two equivalents instead of one are given so that contrastive differences in the structure of the lexicon are made explicit in the translation. Consider example (1):

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(1a) The intention is to stimulate a wide-ranging debate within all Member States about the future lines of social policy in the European Union. [EG-SOC/E:6]

(1b) In allen Mitgliedstaaten soll eine umfassende und eingehende Debatte über die künftige Ausrichtung der Sozialpolitik im Rahmen der Europäischen Union angeregt werden. [EG-SOC/D:6]

Wide-ranging is rendered as umfassend and eingehend, both TL-words expressing different aspects of the English original. (1b) is not only more explicit, though, in giving two translation equivalents rather than one, but umfassend and eingehend taken together also contain more information than wide-ranging. This 'double explicitation' becomes even clearer in example (2):

(2a) But Europe's continuing contribution to the search for a model of sustainable development which combines economic dynamism with social progress can only be made if the issues are openly debated and a consensus arrived at. [EG-SOC/E:7]

(2b) Zur Suche nach einem Modell einer nachhaltigen und umweltverträglichen Entwicklung, bei dem wirtschaftliche Dynamik mit sozialem Fortschritt einhergeht, kann Europa nur dann auch künftig einen Beitrag leisten, wenn diese Fragen offen erörtert werden und es zu einem Konsens kommt. [EU-SOC/D:7]

Umweltverträglich as an additional translation equivalent is somehow implied by sustainable, but nachhaltig on its own would already have been sufficient. Of course, since the semantic range of translation equivalents does not completely overlap, such an explicit decomposition as in example (2) will in some cases automatically lead to additional semantic features in the TT. In a way, then, it is difficult to decide, whether (2) constitutes a case of structural and/or non-structural explicitation

2.1.2 Grammatical level

Structural explicitness at the grammatical level generally results from differences between the two linguistic systems in question. Consider example (3):
The participial construction by giving in the English original is structurally impossible in German. The German construction will therefore have to be formally more explicit through the use of a finite clause dadurch, daß... zugedacht wird, which is inflected for person, number, mood and tense. The same is true of examples (4) and (5):

(4a) the changing socio-economic situation, reflected notably in the serious levels of unemployment, is requiring a new look at the link between economic and social policies, both at national and Community level. [EU-SOClE:6]

(4b) Die Veränderung der sozio-okonomischen Lage, die sich vor allem in besorgniserregenden Arbeitslosenquoten niederschlägt, erfordert eine neue Betrachtung der Beziehungen zwischen Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik, und zwar sowohl auf einzelstaatlicher als auch auf Gemeinschaftsebene. [EU-SOCID:6]

(5a) it is clear that analysis and proposals for action contained in the White Paper on growth will help also to shape the climate and the substance of the coming debate on how best to combine the objectives of economic success and social progress. [EU-SOClE:7]

(5b) liegt es auf der Hand, daß die im Weißbuch über Wachstum, Wettbewerbsfähigkeit und Beschäftigung enthaltenen Analysen und Vorschläge für Maßnahmen auch dazu beitragen werden, das Klima und die inhaltliche Grundlage für die anstehende Debatte über die Frage zu schaffen, wie eine bestenmögliche Verknüpfung von wirtschaftlichem Erfolg und sozialem Fortschritt erreicht werden kann. [EU-SOCID:7]

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In both cases a non-finite construction is made more explicit in the translation due to typological constraints. As can be seen in (5b), the finite verb phrase contains an explicit modal verb which is not necessarily implied in the ST.

2.2 Non-structural explicitness

2.2.1 Lexical level

Example (2) can be regarded as a borderline case between structural and non-structural explicitness at the lexical level, depending on the translator's (impression of the reader's) interpretation of the semantic features in the ST and TT. TT structures could be included in the ST or not. The latter would mean that additional information is added which is not due to differences between the lexical systems of the two languages. Example (6) illustrates such a case.

(6a) This Green Paper does not deal with the procedural implications of the new Maastricht provisions as these will be the subject of a separate Communication. [EU-SOCIE:6]

(6b) In dem vorliegenden Grünbuch wird nicht auf die Frage eingegangen, wie sich die neuen Bestimmungen des Vertrags von Maastricht auf die Verfahren auswirken werden. Dieser Aspekt wird Gegenstand einer gesonderten Mitteilung der Kommission sein. [EU-SOCID:6]

Whereas the English original reads a separate Communication, the German TT makes Communication more explicit by adding a specifying genitive der Kommission. One could argue, of course, that this is again a borderline case between structural and non-structural lexical explicitness in that the capital 'C' in Communication implies a special kind of communication, i.e. one issued by the Commission of the European Communities. Example (7) constitutes an even clearer case of additional information which has no structural origin.

(7a) Daniel Defoe, in 1725, was so impressed by this that he devotes far more space to it in his Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain than he does to the University. [TOU-CAM/6]

(7b) Daniel Defoe war hiervon so beeindruckt, daß er dieser Messe 1725 in seinem Führer 'Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain' weit mehr Platz widmete als der Universität selbst. [TOU-CAM/6]
It is a case of culture-specific vocabulary, here the title of a book, which is made more explicit by the translator who adds "Fahrer (guidebook) for the target audience. This strategy is often necessary with culture-bound expressions which need further explanation. For the ST-reader, this kind of information will be implied.

Example (8) is a similar case, where "south of the Border" is first translated literally and then explained as "aus England" (i.e. 'from England').

Example (8a) Though the abbeys themselves were destroyed by armies from south of the Border, they remain beautiful and poignant in their ruin. [TOU-SCOTIE:12]

Example (8b) Obgleich die Abteien selbst durch Armeen von 'südlich der Grenze' (d.h. aus England) zerstört wurden, besitzen ihre Ruinen dennoch eine überwältigende Schönheit. [TOU-SCOTID:12]

Baker (1992:238ff.) mentions examples which go much further than (7) and (8), e.g. a translation from English into Arabic (246f.), which is a lot more detailed than the original. She argues that this kind of explicitness could be due to culture-specific discourse conventions, which of course would not hold for languages as closely related as English and German.

2.2.2 Grammatical level

As with structural explicitness above, we can also find cases of non-structural explicitness at the grammatical level. Consider example (9):

Example (9a) The Commission considers that this situation requires the launching of a wide-ranging debate about the future direction of social policy, before it proceeds to put forward specific proposals in the form of a White Paper. [EU-SOCIE:6]

Example (9b) Die Kommission ist der Auffassung, daß angesichts dieser Situation eine breit angelegte Debatte über die künftige Ausrichtung der Sozialpolitik einzuleiten ist, bevor sie konkrete Vorschläge in Form eines Weiβbuchs vorlegen wird. [EU-SOCID:6]

Generally speaking, English is more flexible as far as certain semantic roles in subject position are concerned. In German one will often have to put in a prepositional phrase instead. In example (9), the situation is in subject position, which would have been possible in German too (as in Die Situation erfordert ...). Therefore, we cannot speak of structural constraints which lead to a prepositional rendering in German, even if a prepositional phrase constitutes a more idiomatic solution.

Example (10) has "Green Paper" as a locative in subject position, which is again translated by a prepositional phrase in German, i.e. formally and perhaps even semantically more explicitly.

Example (10a) This Green Paper does not deal with the procedural implications of the new Maastricht provisions as these will be the subject of a separate Communication. [EU-SOC/E:6]

Example (10b) In dem vorliegenden Grünbuch wird nicht auf die Frage eingegangen, wie sich die neuen Bestimmungen des Vertrags von Maastricht auf die Verfahren auswirken werden. Dieser Aspekt wird Gegenstand einer gesonderten Mitteilung der Kommission sein. [EU-SOC/D:6]

It would also have been possible to say Das Grünbuch geht nicht auf die Frage ein..., although similar constructions in German, like example (10c), are perhaps no longer very idiomatic:

Example (10c) ?Die gestern herausgegebene Presseerklärung dementiert dies.

As we have seen above, greater explicitness in translation occurs for structural and non-structural reasons. But then, of course, there are limits to such a process of explicitation. Apart from rather extreme cases of culture-specific differences in explicitness as exemplified in Baker's Arabic examples, there are other, non-linguistic constraints. In tourist brochures, for instance, both versions must have approximately the same length because of the illustrations. With EU-publications, all versions in different languages should be comparable for the purposes of simultaneous use.

3. Condensation as a reverse process of explicitation

Apart from instances of greater explicitness in TL material, the reverse process of condensation can also be found, i.e. fewer of the underlying semantic features are directly represented on the surface. Again, we may distinguish between structural and non-structural examples at the lexical and grammatical levels.
3.1 Structural condensation

3.1.1 Lexical level

Structural condensation at the lexical level could for instance mean that a verbal structure is nominalised, a process which leads to information condensation (cf. Lipka 1987). Example (11) illustrates this point.

(11) a) The premise at the heart of this Green Paper is that the next phase in the development of European social policy cannot be based on the idea that social progress must go into retreat in order for economic competitiveness to recover. [EU-SOCIE:7]
(11) b) Diesem Grünbuch liegt die Prämissen zugrunde, daß die nächste Entwicklung phase der europäischen Sozialpolitik nicht im Zeichen des Sozialabbau zur Wiederherstellung der wirtschaftlichen Wettbewerbsfähigkeit stehen kann. [EU-SOCID:7]

Social progress must go into retreat is rendered as Sozialabbau, i.e. by a compound noun in German. This TL equivalent is not only structurally condensed, but also informationally reduced in that Sozialabbau does not necessarily include the semantic feature progress. The second part of the example, i.e. in order for economic competitiveness to recover, translated as zur Wiederherstellung der wirtschaftlichen Wettbewerbsfähigkeit stehen kann, is a case of pure structural condensation. Both examples seem to be connected with a tendency in German towards nominalisation and compounding (cf. Schmied/Schäffler 1996).

3.1.2 Grammatical level

Example (12) illustrates a case of structural grammatical difference between SL and TL, i.e. an English participial construction which is not possible in German.

(12) a) The Commission has presented all of the 47 proposals involved ... [EU-SOCIE:6]
(12) b) Die Kommission hat alle 47 Vorschläge vorgelegt. [EU-SOCID:6]

One way of translating this structure would have been explicitation as discussed above. This could have lead to a rather clumsy relative clause as is illustrated in (12c):

(12c) Die Kommission hat alle 47 Vorschläge, die eingegangen sind, vorgelegt.

Of course, one could have avoided the relative clause translation by using a premodifier in German. Consider (12d):

(12d) Die Kommission hat alle 47 eingegangenen Vorschläge vorgelegt.

But since involved is semantically redundant in the ST, the translator opted for its omission, i.e. the structural reduction of the clause.

Example (13) contains progressive aspect in English. In contrast to English, which requires a choice to be made between simple and progressive aspect, such a choice is not grammaticalised in German. English aspect could be compensated for lexically, but is not in (13b).

(13) a) ... the present Social action programme is reaching its natural end. [EU-SOCIE:6]
(13) b) Das laufende Soziale Aktionsprogramm nähert sich seinem natürlichen Ende. [EU-SOCID:6]

Incidentally, the verb to reach or sich nähern happens to contain the semantic feature +PROGRESSIVE so that it would have been quite unnecessary to make the English grammaticalised aspect explicit in the translation. In a way, the English original is redundant as far as aspect is concerned, a redundancy which is reduced for typological reasons in the German translation.

Example (14) is a similar case, i.e. the English aspect is not made explicit in the translation. Again, the ST is redundant in that it contains a progressive form as well as the adverb still.

(14) a) The Commission has presented all of the 47 proposals involved and, while some of the most important proposals are still pending before the Council, the majority have been adopted;...
(14b) Zwar hat der Rat über einige der wichtigsten Vorschläge noch nicht entschieden, die meisten wurden jedoch bereits genehmigt. [EU-SOCID:6]
3.2 Non-structural condensation

Culture-specific expressions, as we have seen above, are often made more explicit, i.e. additional information is added for the TL audience. The reverse process is also possible, i.e. culture-specific words and phrases are omitted because their translation would be difficult. Consider example (15):

(15a) Enjoy Canterbury's countryside; there are pretty villages, quiet woodlands, rivers and country walks; follow blossom tours down winding lanes to cream teas and rustic pubs, historic houses and country parks. [TOU-SEAST/E:15]


_Cream teas_ is left out in (15b) because there is no ready-made translation equivalent for such a culture-specific term which lacks an extralinguistic referent in the target culture. A paraphrase would have spoilt the list and made the entire sentence unwieldy.

Other examples would be (16) and (17), which contain semantic, non-grammaticalised aspect markers, which are left out in the translation, a process which cannot be accounted for structurally.

(16a) This is reflected in the fear that the creation of a single market could open the way to a form of social dumping, that is the gaining of unfair competitive advantage within the Community through unacceptably low social standards. [EU-SOC/E:6]

(16b) So wird die Besorgnis geäußert, der Binnenmarkt könnte Wegbereiter für ein Sozialdumping sein, das es ermögliche, sich mit unfaires Mitteln - nämlich durch inakzeptabel niedrige soziale Standards - einen Wettbewerbsvorteil innerhalb der Gemeinschaft zu verschaffen. [EU-SOC/D:67]

(17a) In this context, this Green Paper, and the process of debate which it is designed to trigger, will be interactive with the discussions around the forthcoming White Paper on growth, competitiveness and employment, due to be presented to the European Council on 10 December. [EU-SOC/E:67]

4. Cognitive aspects of explicitness and condensation

As we have seen above, both greater explicitness and condensation occur in translated texts as compared to their source texts. Both processes can be due to structural and non-structural reasons. How can we account for these processes from a cognitive or information processing point of view?

Explicitness which is due to structural reasons can be explained by the difficulty of finding an appropriate structure in the target language. One would therefore assume that in cases where the 1L has structural options which the SL lacks, the translator would automatically choose the easiest option, the strategy of condensation. But this is not necessarily the case. We would argue, on the contrary, that greater explicitness, or at least structural similarity, has more psychological validity than condensation because it is easier to process in a translation situation. So even if German provides the translator with structural possibilities of nominalisation or compounding, it is quite unclear whether he will choose these options or not. This has an interesting side-effect in that the translation perhaps even 'improves' the SL by making it more explicit and therefore easier to process for the TL audience. Blum-Kulka (1986:19) supports this view by saying: 'The process of interpretation performed by the translator on the source text might lead to a TL text which is more redundant than the SL text.' This explicitation process is not likely to be restricted to beginners' translationese, but will also occur with professional translators (cf. Blum-Kulka 1986:21; Toury 1991:51).

Apart from extra-linguistic culture-bound factors, the same is true for processes of non-structural explicitness and condensation. The translator is more likely to make explicit his own process of understanding rather than reduce SL-redundancy.

Finally, two prospects for further research:

- First, the approach obviously lends itself to quantification, and we have enough translations to do that.
- Second, explicitness can be a typological feature. It possibly even distinguishes English and German (Hawkins 1986). Thus, the basic level of
explicitness may be different in the source-languages. A comparison of the
two source languages with regard to this feature could therefore shed new
light on an old controversy.

Our probings have, of course, to be expanded and compared with other
translation corpora, but even our limited analysis offers interesting insights into
an area of language processing that could be of interest to translators and
(cognitive) linguists alike.

Notes
1. This project has been pursued together with our colleagues Marie-Luise
Egbert, Barbara Fink, Diana Hudson Ettle (Chemnitz) and Kirsten
Malmkjær (Cambridge) since 1993; Elke Esders (Brussel) was very
helpful in providing some EU translation texts and the research
collaboration with our parallel projects in the Nordic countries has been
most fruitful and inspiring (cf. Aijmer/Altenberg 1996, 
Johansson/Egelund/Hofland 1996 and Lauridsen 1996); we would like to
thank them all for their support in the past - and the future. Many
interesting comparisons are possible; the case studies by Hasselgard
(1996), Johansson (1996) and Wikberg (1996) show that even closely
related languages like the Germanic sisters under investigation show
translation problems of a fascinating typological variation that need to be
further explored - and discussed.

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