Norms, constraints, risks:  
A usage-based perspective on sociocognitive constructs in corpus-based translation studies (and beyond)  

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The problem of defining sociocognitive constructs

• What are we talking about when we talk about sociocognitive constructs: {norms, risk, constraints, ...}?
• Do these constructs meet the epistemological need to account for the interwoven relationship between the cognitive and the social in translation?

Three lines of critique of the norm construct:
1. Ontological and epistemological ambiguity ➔ Are norms cognitive, textual, social? Are regularities, conventions, norms the same thing?
2. Problematic and unresolved view of the translator as rational actor ➔ Are norms ‘negotiated’ or ‘emergent’?
3. Elision or backgrounding of language from the central ontological picture ➔ What do we know about normativity in language?
Critiquing recent critiques of the norm construct: Robinson (2020) and the 4EA paradigm

Framing: Econs vs. Humans (Thaler & Sunstein 2008):
‘In Thaler & Sunstein’s terms, the norm theory outlined by Toury and Chesterman is a theory of the normative behavior of translators as Econs; what I essay in this paper is a theory of the norm-formations of translators as Humans.’ (Robinson 2020, 123-124).

(Setting aside the straw-man misrepresentation of Toury’s theorisation of norms):
1. Norms are emergent from incremental adjustments of cognitive representations to experience (as also argued by Toury).
2. Embodied, situated and affective processes drive the emergence of norms.

But: (1) The difference between norms and conventions (if any) is not addressed, and (2) no attention is given to the linguistic nature of norms.
Connecting it all up: A usage-based view of normativity

- Linguistic knowledge is ‘the cognitive organization of one’s experience with language’ (Bybee 2010, 8).
- Normativity as a conventionalisation-legitimisation feedback loop (Kruger & van Rooy 2017).
- Avoids excessive focus on intentionality and conscious decision-making (Backus & Spotti 2012, 192) and gives embodiment and affect its rightful role:

‘A norm that is fully internalized (i.e. one that the individual is fully adapted to) means that what is good feels good, not just that it comes out as good when tested against an explicit mental model. The way you respond to it is part of who you are, not just an aspect of what you think.’ (Harder 2012, 298).

‘Just as you can have (more or less shared) representations of the way the world actually is, you can have representations of the way it ought to be, and the two do not have to coincide with each other, or with the way the world actually works.’

(Harder 2012, 197)

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Connecting it all up: A usage-based model of translation (norms)

Basic principle: Translators are just like other (bilingual) language users; their linguistic processing can be accounted for in the same way as in the general account. We don’t need theoretical add-ons; just attention to how different usage contexts for translators shape their linguistic processing in somewhat different ways.

Bottom-up norms-as-convention

• The degree to which rationalist actor-type decision-making drives linguistic production in translation is overstated. Much translational language production, like language production generally, is convention- and entrenchment-driven.

• The same mechanism functions for translators as for other language producers, but translators have unique types of usage experience, which will shape their cognitive representations, their embodied and affective responses, and their language and languaging, in somewhat different ways.

Top-down norms-as-legitimation

• Translators (like other language professionals) acquire particularly salient cognitive representations of ‘prescriptions’ about good writing and good translation.

• These become part of representations of particular linguistic constructions; no conscious deliberation is needed.

• They form part of the conventionalisation process by sanctioning or inhibiting particular choices.

Conclusion:
Do we need a separate theory of translation norms if we have a usage-based theory of language?

Usage-based view is parsimonious:

- It can account for translational behaviour by the same mechanisms as the linguistic behaviour of other users.
- Any differences in translational behaviour may be accounted for by the ways in which translators' experience with language is different from other groups of language users.

Normativity as both a conventionalising and a legitimising force can be straightforwardly accounted for in the model. Its ‘effects’ are captured in

1. rich cognitive representations based on embodied and affective experiences in communicative contexts and
2. the general dynamic that forms part of the ‘background’ of all human communication, defined by cooperation and intersubjective alignment.

Norms are a useful construct –
but should be theorised within a general theory of linguistic communication to avoid theoretical solipsism in TIS