

Functionalist Approaches to Translation: Strengths and Weaknesses

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Abstract:

In the German-speaking countries, translation studies of the 1980's witnessed the emergence of functionalist approaches. They developed in reaction to the rather restricted focus of the earlier approaches to translation research, and were characterised by a questioning of traditional theoretical models. This study presents a brief historical overview of these approaches, and examines their strengths and weaknesses as well as their contributions to translation studies

Key words: *Functionalist approaches, Skopos theory, Translation studies*

الملخص:

في ثمانينيات القرن الماضي ، شهدت دراسات الترجمة في البلدان الناطقة بالألمانية ، ظهور المقاربات الوظيفية التي كانت بمثابة ثورة عارمة شككت في النماذج النظرية التقليدية، وخاصة اللسانية منها، وأعطت للدراسات الترجيمية مسارا جديدا بعيدا عن "سطوة" النص الأصل وضرورة التقييد به.

تقدم هذه الدراسة لمحة تاريخية موجزة عن المقاربات الوظيفية في الترجمة ، وتبحث في مواطن قوتها وضعفها ، مع التركيز على إسهاماتها في حقل دراسات الترجمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المقاربات الوظيفية، النظرية الغائية ، دراسات الترجمة

Introduction:

In the German-speaking countries, translation studies of the 1980's witnessed the emergence of a number of approaches to translation collectively termed functionalist approaches. They developed in reaction to the rather restricted focus of the earlier approaches to translation research, and were characterised by a questioning of traditional theoretical models. The new positions require a general review as well as a broadening of the concept of translation, by introducing parameters such as "Skopos" (Reiss/Vermeer:1984), "action" (Holz-Mänttari:1984) and "culture" (Vermeer:1990). These three strong points of the translation studies debate lead to a criticism of the concept of equivalence, which is either categorically rejected or strongly relativized. In the recent literature, this change of direction is subsumed by concepts such as "new orientation" (Snell-Hornby:1986), "cultural turn" (Bassnett/Lefevere:1990), or "paradigm shift" (Holz-Mänttari: 1990).

This paper examines the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches as well as their contributions to the field of Translation Studies.

Functionalist approaches to translation: A historical overview

1- Before Functionalist approaches:

Throughout history, translators, mostly of the Bible and literary texts, have asserted that translation depended or was largely determined by the situation. However, the concept of a good translation was often associated with word-for-word fidelity to the source text, although the result was often different from this theoretically proclaimed purpose.

Several Bible translators shared the view that the translation process must include both approaches: faithful reproduction of the formal characteristics of the source text and suitability for the target readers. St Jerome (347-419) and Martin Luther (1483-1546) believed that, for

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certain passages of the Bible, the translator must reproduce down to the word order. For other passages, it was more important to render the meaning (St Jerome) or to adapt the text to the needs of the target readers. (Nord, 2008: 16)

2- Linguistic - based approaches:

Jakobson (1959/2004: 138-143) introduced the term 'equivalence' in the literature and Nida (1964) in "*Toward a Science of Translating. With special reference to principles and procedures involved in Bible translating*" expands it, and makes a distinction in translation between formal and dynamic equivalence. The former emphasizing faithful reproduction of the formal elements of the source text, while the latter stresses the importance of equivalence of extralingual communicative effect:

"A translation aiming at dynamic equivalence will seek to create a totally natural expression, in order to place the recipient in front of culturally specific modes of behaviour; such a translation does not seek to have the recipient understand the cultural behaviours of the source situation in order to understand the message" (Nida, 1964, quoted in Nord, 2008: 16).

During the 1950's and 1960s, linguistics was the dominant humanistic discipline. Early experiments in the field of machine translation were based on the contrastive study of languages; and structural linguistics, developing the idea of language as code, and the concept of language universals, considered translation as a linguistic operation - which could be the subject of rigorous scientific research under the aegis of applied linguistics. All these linguistic approaches saw translation as a transcoding operation, and many definitions of translation at the time emphasized this linguistic aspect: (Catford, 1965), (Nida and Taber, 1969) and House (1977/1981).

In the early 1970's, the attention of translators and translatoologists shifted from the word and the sentence as the unit of translation to the text. Nevertheless, the dominant linguistic

orientation persisted as a basic theoretical framework for at least a decade. For example, Wolfram Wilss (1977) asserts:

"Translation starts from a text in the source language and leads to the production of a text in the target language that is as close as possible to its equivalent and that presupposes an understanding of the content and style of the original text" (wolfram wills 1977 quoted in Nord, 2008 : 19).

3- Katarina Reiss' Text typology :

Reiss' typology of texts, introduced in 1968, is based on a threefold division of greater text-types established from Bühler's communication model (K. Bühler 1934): (representative, expressive and appellative). She has previously studied the classifications proposed by ten other translators, such as those of Andrei V. Fedorov and George Mounin, and then proposed her own typology. She classified text-types into:

- Informative: (mainly employed to represent facts, information, knowledge, viewpoints, etc). Its language dimension is logical and the focus of the text is the content instead of the form.
- Expressive: (mainly used to express the sender's attitude, with an aesthetic language dimension). The text focuses are the sender and the form of the text.
- Operative (for texts that communicate content with a persuasive character) (Reiss 1971/2004:171). It is reader and effect oriented because it aims at making an appeal to the text receiver.

Katharina Reiss also introduces a notion of aesthetics through her division of the texts into three groups (Reiss: 1971). The type of each of these groups then determines the type of translation to be carried out, i.e. the translation will be either content-oriented or form-oriented. The aim of her typology is to propose a methodology for "an

objective critique of translations" in order to evaluate the quality of translations (Reiss, 2002:12).

Her method is based on this link between the type of text to be produced and the nature of the translation "the nature of equivalence" to be produced (Reiss, 2002:32). In the case of predominantly informative texts, which are texts that are focused on the subject matter they deal with, it is primarily a question of conveying the content; for expressive texts, which are sender-centred, the aesthetic concerns of the author of the original should be respected in order to convey the form as well, whereas for motivational texts, which are receiver-centred, the translator will try to provoke the same reactions in the reader of the target version as those that the source text was intended to elicit in the receiver of the original version. (Reiss, 2002:8).

4- Functionalist approaches:

Approaches in translation studies have been overturned by the theory of skopos and the theory of action. These two approaches, known as functionalist, propose a new paradigm consisting of considering the act of translating as a second act of communication in its own right (Nord, 2009:38).

Munday states that "the 1970's and 1980's saw a move away from the static linguistic typologies of translation shifts and the emergence and flourishing in Germany of a functionalist and communicative approach to the analysis of translation." (Munday, 2008:72), especially with the publication in German of Katharina Reiss and Hans Vermeer's - *Foundation for a General Theory of Translation*- and Justa Holz-Manttari's - *Translatorial Action: Theory and Method*, - both in 1984.

Reiss and Vermeer's book defines translation as an action of cultural transfer. The meaning of the translated text only becomes clear from the definition of the goal ("Skopos") of the translation action. The authors introduce the concept of "adequacy", which is defined as a

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relationship between the target text and the source text, provided that the "Skopos" is respected. Thus, the concept of equivalence is relativized as a particularity of adequacy, and translation goes beyond linguistic considerations to also involve cultural issues.

Hans J. Vermeer's skopos theory:

The Skopos theory is regarded as the most popular among the functionalist approaches, and considers that the most important thing in a translation is its purpose. It was developed in Germany by Hans Vermeer in 1978 in dissatisfaction with the linguistic-based approaches to translation "*Skopósis a Greek word meaning "purpose, aim, goal, finality, objective; intention"*". (Vermeer, 1996:4).

Vermeer takes Reiss' ideas of text function and Holz-Mänttári's translational action model to develop what is known as the Skopos Theory. According to Vermeer, the target text (TT), which is called the *translatum* by Vermeer, must be "functionally adequate", and the translator must know "why a source text (ST) is to be translated and what the function of the (TT) will be" (see Munday, 2008:122).

For Vermeer, the purpose of a translation is to mediate between members of different cultural communities. This goal, or more precisely the purpose of the interaction that takes place between parties who need to cooperate despite cultural and language barriers, will determine the choice of translation method,

"Translating is acting, i.e. a goal-oriented procedure carried out in such a way as the translator deems optimal under the prevailing circumstances. [...] In translating, all potentially pertinent factors (including the source-text on all its levels) are taken into consideration as far as the skopos of translating allows and/or demands. [...] "Circumstances" include: skopos (purpose, aim; cf. above) of translating, target-culture recipients' conditions (including habits, conventions, expectations), commissioner's cultural conditions (including habits, conventions, expectations), translator's cultural

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conditions (...!), relation of target-culture to source-culture conditions, professional arguments concerning the above factors, etc.; time, cost, research, arguments concerning the above factors, etc.; arguments referring to decision procedures and their conditions, etc. [...] There is a skopos for each translational act. Different skopoi lead to different translations of the same source-text. Different skopoi lead to translations of different kinds.(Vermeer, 1996: 13-15)

Participants in this translational interaction (i.e., the translator and the reader) are therefore guided in their decisions by the communicative intentions of the person initiating the translation process, i.e., the person commissioning the translation.

Justa Holz-Manttari's theory of translatorial action:

Justa Holz-Manttari has in the same functionalist spirit developed the concept of translation as a "translatorial action" model. It construes the process of translation as 'message-transmitter compounds' that involve intercultural transfer: [It] is not about translating words, sentences or texts but is in every case about guiding the intended co-operation over cultural barriers enabling functionally oriented communication (Holz-Manttari, 1984: 7–8)

The "translatorial action" model transforms the translator into a "messenger" and identifies all the actors in the production of a translation, by emphasizing their individual importance for the result of a finished product. The translator becomes the main and most important actor because he chooses, as an expert, the right translation for a specific text. It is thus accepted that there is not one correct "translation" but a multitude of choices available to the translator who, depending on the context and purpose, must find the correct form for the target text (Munday, 2008:79)

Christiane Nord's text-analysis model:

It is on the work of these theorists that Christiane Nord bases and develops her own method of translation. She combines the analysis of Reiss' text with the functional aspects of Vermeer, and includes the various actors around translation introduced by Holz-Mänttari. Thus, she presents a general and functionalist approach and method that must be practicable in all cases of translation (Nord, 1997: 14).

Therefore, Nord breaks down the purpose of a translation into two parts (Nord, 2009:53). On the one hand, there is the intention, seen from the author's point of view, and on the other hand the function, determined by the purpose of the text for the addressee. The more the author and the addressee belong to different cultures and have different expectations of a certain text or type of text, the more important this distinction becomes. The evaluation of translations is therefore no longer carried out in relation to the source text, but in relation to the function of the text for the recipient, its suitability. The latter is relative, insofar as it describes a quality in relation to the intended purpose.

In order to produce a suitable target text, the translator must have as much information as possible about the situation for which the translation is required (including the addressees). Ideally, this situation is defined by the client in a set of specifications.

Based on the specifications and the translator's interpretation of the source text, the translation will oscillate between two extremes: from literal translation to adaptation to the norms and conventions of the target culture. So, culture is paramount in this theory.

Unlike equivalence theories where the value of the translation is assessed on its resemblance to the source text, functional theories look first at the function of the target text. The nature and strategy of the translation (documentary or instrumental) thus depends on the function that one wishes to give to the target text. "Let your

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translation decisions be guided by the function you want to achieve by means of your translation” (Nord, 1997: 39).

To begin the translation, it is therefore not primarily the source text but the client or the person requesting the translation, who should be analysed.

For Vermeer, cross-cultural action must take into account cultural differences related to communication situations (Vermeer, 1978: 28).

A translator should be aware that he or she may be asked to produce different styles or types of translation. He/she must be able to interpret a specification and extract the necessary information from it in order to be able to produce relevant translations. The translation process is no longer linearly divided into two or three successive steps, but contains a loop between the client and the translator, since the translator receives information about the target reader before translating, by means of the specifications, and since the text, after leaving the client, will return to the client before being handed over to the reader.

Skopos theory explicitly integrates the reader since a specification takes into account the cultural and linguistic specificities of the reader, or what the sponsor, when different from the reader, assumes to be the reader's specificities.

Indeed, before the Skopos theory, the process of translation was considered by translation studies as involving three actors:

- 1- The author of the source text.
- 2- The translator
- 3- The reader of the target text.

The process was linear: in a first step S1, the translator read the source text, and then in a second step S2, the translator produced a target text for a reader. With deverbalsation highlighted, the process remains linear and a step is added. With the Skopos theory, the translation process involves a fourth actor, the commissioner; the process is no

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longer linear, since after having obtained the source text and passed it on to the translator (in addition to his or her specifications), the translator is responsible for the target text.

Controversies surrounding Functionalist approaches to translation:

Weaknesses:

Functionalist approaches to translation have received lot of criticisms, basically from the linguistic based- approaches scholars' who considers Skopos theory as an extreme position because it breaks the original link between source and target text in favour of the *translatum* (target text) - *skopos* (finality) relationship.

Peter Newmark (1991: 105-108) criticized the oversimplification of the translation process and the emphasis on *skopos* to the detriment of meaning in general. He argues that the supposed "dethronement" of the source text and the focus on the target text subverts the intrinsic meaning of the translation.

While linguistic approaches based on the concept of equivalence focused on the preservation of the characteristics of the source text in the target text, and were normative, in the sense that they presupposed that the target text that would not have the closest possible equivalence link with the source text would not be a translation, proponents of the *skopos* theory view the original as an information offer that can be either adapted or faithfully transposed, depending on the communicative needs of the receivers, with the *skopos* as the essential point of reference, the communicative goal aimed at by the target text. (Nord, 2008: 19-20, and Guid re, 2010: 72-74)

Mary Snell-Hornby (1990: 79-86) argues that literary texts, unlike pragmatic texts, could not be translated solely on the basis of *skopos*. According to her, the function of literature goes far beyond the pragmatic framework delimited by Vermeer and Reiss.

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On the other hand, Christiane Nord (1997:109-123), shows how the skopos theory can be applied to all types of texts, including literary texts, by devoting a whole chapter discussing criticisms directed to it.

It is worth mentioning that many theorists and researchers claim that despite these criticisms, Vermeer's theory remains one of the most coherent and influential conceptual frameworks in contemporary translation studies (Guid re, 2010: 72-74).

One other controversy surrounding functionalist approaches is the argument that detailed purpose analysis is not cost-effective and cannot be carried out in daily practice by the professional translator. The argument refers in particular to the seventy-six questions that Christiane Nord indicates in her model of functionalist analysis of a text for translation.

It can of course be answered that a professional translator analyses a text and its skopos (its purpose) almost automatically, or that this does not require such an effort. The detailed analysis model can rather be considered as a tool for apprentice translators during their training, but it can also be used by translators at the beginning of their career to improve the level of their translations. (Pym, 2010: 56)

Functionalist approaches to translation challenge the notion of the translator as a mediator, and consider the translator as an independent text producer who produces a new text based on criteria determined by the target receivers.

Strengths:

The Skopos theory (as well as the entire functionalist paradigm, including among others the theory of action applied on translation) in its radical version was revolutionary , and apparently ended with the paradigm of equivalence (prescriptive, normative) that dominated the

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discourse on translation for centuries, especially since the nineteenth-century German philosophers (Schleiermacher). (Pym, 2010: 63)

The functionalist paradigm recognises that the translator works in a professional situation that commits him/her to take responsibility not only for texts, but above all for people, whereas linguistic approaches, as well as traditional literary approaches, were primarily oriented towards the text to which they applied the binary notions of fidelity/freedom, serving both as theoretical concepts of description and as criteria for evaluation. According to Nord (1997:29), the translation may be free or faithful or ‘anything between these two extremes’ depending on its Skopos or the purpose for which it is needed.

Before functionalist approaches, the translator is rarely noticed. Emphasis was on the source and the target texts; no attention is paid to his identity or status in the translational process. (Venuti’s concept of the invisibility of the translator 1995).

But with the advent of functionalism, the translator is regarded as an expert in the translational process, and is no longer that “invisible”

Functionalist approaches free translation from theories that impose linguistic rules upon every decision (Pym, 2010:56). They introduce the cultural dimension to translation studies and recognise that the translation process encompasses more than the languages involved.

Proponents of the equivalence approach sometimes tend to accept non-literal translation procedures more easily in the case of pragmatic texts (instructions for use, advertising texts) than in the case of literary texts, causing a divergence of standards for the translation of different types of texts. Some translators-trainers in translation training institutions have thus begun to favour the functionalist approach over approaches based on equivalence. (Nord, 2008: 19-20)

Conclusion:

To conclude, we would like to point out that every theory has its strengths and weaknesses, and functionalist theories are no exception. Theoretical models of functional approaches certainly lead to a broader conception of translation than the classical approaches, which advocated the - impossible - ideal of absolute fidelity to the source text. Nevertheless, the translator cannot “dethrone” the source text, since doing so will negatively affect the translational process.

Further, Functionalist approaches allow justifying the existence of different possible translations of the same text depending on the addressee or the use of the translation produced.

Finally, the specifications proposed by these theories are very interesting, in the sense that they describe the purpose of a translation and provide useful extralinguistic information.

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